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PIONEER IN SHORT

KHALEDA MAY BE SHIFTED TO UK

Former Bangladesh prime minister and BNP chairperson Khaleda Zia, 80, remains in critical condition at Dhaka's Evercare Hospital as her family prepares to move her to London for advanced treatment. Admitted on November 23 with a severe chest infection affecting her heart and lungs, she was shifted to the coronary care unit four days later as complications worsened. BNP acting chairperson Tarique Rahman's wife, Dr Zubaida Rahman, is expected to arrive in Dhaka to assess Zia's condition before an air transfer. Qatar has offered an air ambulance, while Bangladesh's military conducted rooftop landing tests at the hospital to facilitate evacuation. International medical teams-including specialists from China and the UK-have joined local doctors to review treatment options. Interim Government chief Muhammad Yunus and senior military leaders have visited the hospital. Meanwhile, BNP supporters nationwide are holding prayers for Zia's recovery amid renewed attention on Tarique Rahman's long exile in London.

Modi welcomes Putin as India-Russia ties shine

Russian President Vladimir Putin and PM Narendra Modi sitting inside a limousine after arriving at the Palam Air Base in New Delhi, India PTI

ASHOKE RAJ ■ New Delhi

Russian President Vladimir Putin arrived in New Delhi on Thursday — his first trip to India since the Ukraine conflict erupted in February 2022. The visit comes at a moment of global uncertainty, with both nations reassessing their roles amid escalating geopolitical competition and rapidly shifting alliances.

On his arrival, PM received President Putin at the airport and drove together to the Lutyens zone.

Soon thereafter, PM Modi hosted the Russian president for a private dinner. The duo had travelled last together during the SCO meet in China.

Sharing his thoughts on social media, PM Modi stated, "Delighted to welcome my friend, President Putin, to India. Looking forward to our interactions later this evening and tomorrow. The India-Russia friendship is a time-tested one that has greatly benefited our people."

FULL AGENDA ON DECEMBER 5

- Ceremonial welcome at Rashtrapati Bhavan
- Tribute at Rajghat, the memorial of Mahatma Gandhi
- Delegation-level talks with PM Modi
- Joint statement on outcomes of the summit
- A business forum with the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI)
- Dinner at Rashtrapati Bhavan
- Scheduled departure

EXPECTED OUTCOMES FROM THE VISIT

- Strengthening economic co-operation
- Improving trade deficit
- Increase Indian exports of pharmaceuticals, automobiles, agricultural products including marine products
- Market for Indian businesses and agriculture
- MoUs in shipping, healthcare, fertilisers
- Improving people-to-people relations, culture and scientific collaboration

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh with his Russian counterpart Andrey Belousov prior to the 22nd India-Russia Inter-Governmental Commission on Military and Military Technical Cooperation ministerial meeting, in New Delhi PTI

Rajnath, Belousov hold talks

RAHUL DATTA ■ New Delhi

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and his Russian counterpart, Andrei Belousov reviewed India-Russia defence ties on Thursday, a day before the 23rd India-Russia Annual Summit between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Vladimir Putin. The two ministers co-chaired the 22nd India-Russia Inter-Governmental Commission on Military and Military Technical Cooperation (IRIGC-M&MTC) ministerial meeting.

In an effort to further enhance operational capabilities of the armed forces, India is keen to procure more S-400 missile systems, upgrade of Sukhoi 30 fighter jets and purchasing other critical military hardware from Russia. India is also looking at procuring additional batches of S-400 surface-to-air missile systems from Russia as the weapons proved to be very effective during Operation Sindoor.

During the talks between the two defence ministers, Rajnath Singh voiced India's determination for capacity building of its indigenous defence industry. He also stressed on new opportunities for enhancing collaboration between both counties across niche technologies.

The Russian Defence Minister emphasised on deepening relationship between both the countries which is based on mutual trust. He stated that the Russian defence industry is ready to support India towards becoming self-reliant in the field of defence production. Belousov also invited Singh to visit Russia to co-chair the 23rd session of IRIC-M&MTC in 2026.

Security breach near Commissionerate Police office

Exposes serious lapses in CM convoy protocol

RAJEEV RATHAN ■ Bhubaneswar

A major security scare unfolded on Wednesday evening when a car unexpectedly entered the restricted route of Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi's convoy just a few meters from the Commissionerate Police headquarters in Bhubaneswar. The incident has triggered a wave of concern and raised critical questions about the integrity of Odisha's VVIP security arrangements.

The breach occurred at a point considered one of the most secure pockets of the capital. The security detail accompanying the Chief Minister reacted with precision and speed. The moment the vehicle crossed into the convoy's path, personnel moved in, intercepted the car and surrounded it completely. The occupants were not allowed to alight from the vehicle until the CM's convoy had safely passed. Once the convoy cleared the stretch, the driver was questioned briefly and later allowed to leave.

While police have attempted to downplay the magnitude of the breach, the incident has sparked a debate within security circles about the apparent failure of basic convoy protocols. VVIP movement, especially that of a Chief Minister, is governed by a rigorously-layered system involving advance route sanitisation, strict barricading, functioning checkpoints and coordinated communication among traffic and security units. The fact that a vehicle managed to enter the path so close to the Commissionerate office indicates that one or more of these layers did not function as intended. Security experts say the rapid action by personnel prevented the situation from escalating, but the breach itself points to deeper vulnerabilities that require immediate examination.

The government is expected to seek a detailed report on the circumstances leading to the incident and identify procedural or human lapses.

Class-IV boy chained in govt school hostel

Video circulated on social media

RAJEEV RATHAN ■ Bhubaneswar

The image of a Class-IV boy, chained by his leg with an iron shackle inside a government school hostel under Nilgiri block in Baleswar, has shaken the conscience of an entire community. The child, identified as Malaya, a student of Begunia Primary School, was allegedly tied up by the school peon Bhagwan Singh reportedly as punishment for repeated mischief. But what unfolded inside that hostel room raises disturbing questions far beyond a single act of wrongdoing.

Under India's child protection framework, such treatment is indefensible. The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 categorically states that any form of cruelty or abuse against a child in an institution is a punishable offence. Similarly, the Right to Education Act, 2009 bans corporal punishment in all schools. Yet the sight of a nine-year-old child immobilised by metal restraints reflects a collapse of safeguards that should have shielded him.

The incident might never have surfaced had Assistant Teacher Jitendra Parida not filmed the boy and circulated the video on social media. His action triggered a storm, not only public outrage but also internal tensions. School Headmaster Raghunath Bugudai admitted the incident was true but accused the assistant teacher of attempting to malign the school's reputation. Bugudai, who was away attending a Differently-Abled Fair at Sujangarh on the day of the incident, said the staffs assigned to the hostel failed in their basic duty of care.

Government officials have initiated an inquiry to establish what led to the boy being chained and who bears direct responsibility.

In Odisha Assembly

Uproar over BJP MLA's remark on Gandhiji

BJD demands unconditional apology

RAJEEV RATHAN ■ Bhubaneswar

A political firestorm engulfed the Odisha Assembly on Thursday after BJP MLA Santosh Khatua allegedly made a disparaging remark against Mahatma Gandhi triggering uproar both inside and outside the House and igniting a fierce ideological confrontation.

The remark, made during a discussion in the Assembly, provoked protests from Opposition BJD members, who stormed the Well of the House shouting slogans and accusing the ruling BJP of "insulting the soul of the nation".

Outside the Assembly, BJD senior vice-president and former minister Debi Prasad Mishra condemned Khatua's comment as "shameful, divisive and deeply unbecoming of an elected legislator". He said that uttering such a remark in the "sacred premises of the legislature" reflected a "disturbing mindset that disrespects the foundational values of the Republic".

"This crude attempt to malign the Father of the Nation has hurt the collective conscience of Odisha," Mishra said and demanded an unconditional public apology from the MLA.

Civil society groups, Gandhian organisations and student bodies also reacted sharply and called for strict action under Assembly conduct rules to prevent the House from becoming a platform for "hate-driven narratives".

Odisha, C'garh step up dialogue on Mahanadi row

Ahead of Tribunal's meeting on Dec 20

RAJEEV RATHAN ■ Bhubaneswar

Odisha and Chhattisgarh have stepped up their efforts to find a mutually-agreeable solution to the longstanding Mahanadi water dispute with both States preparing for the next round of discussions at the Joint Technical Committee (JTC) meeting scheduled for Friday, December 5. The renewed engagement comes just weeks before the matter is taken up by the Mahanadi Tribunal on December 20.

Parliamentary Affairs Minister Mukesh Mahaling informed the Odisha Assembly that six JTC meetings have already been held since August, where officials from both States discussed technical, hydrological and legal aspects of water sharing. Although the dispute is pending before the tribunal, both governments have initiated a parallel process for mutual, out-of-court settlement.

Mahaling recalled that the dialogue gained momentum after the BJP government came to power in Chhattisgarh. Chief Ministers Vishnu Deo Sai and Mohan Charan Majhi held informal discussions to break the deadlock that persisted under the previous administration. The issue also received attention during the Eastern Zonal Council (EZC) meeting chaired by Union Home Minister Amit Shah, where both Chief Ministers stressed the need for a cooperative federal approach.

Mahaling said a significant breakthrough came on August 30 when the Chief Secretaries of both States met and drafted an initial framework for resolution, identifying priority areas such as assured water flow during non-monsoon months, reservoir operation, flood management, joint monitoring mechanisms and data transparency.

Since then, the JTC has held detailed deliberations on flow patterns, catchment utilisation, upstream projects, irrigation demands, industrial requirements and the cumulative impact of existing and proposed barrages in Chhattisgarh. Odisha has sought guaranteed minimum flow in the Hirakud reservoir while Chhattisgarh has emphasised its right to meet drinking water and agricultural needs.

"The government is actively pursuing both legal and diplomatic channels," Mahaling told the House and hoped that sustained dialogue may finally set the stage for a long-term, equitable solution.

Hirakud Dam safety sparks heated debate in Assembly

RAJEEV RATHAN ■ Bhubaneswar

Concerns over long-term safety of the Hirakud Dam, one of India's largest and most critical multipurpose river valley projects, echoed through the State Assembly on Thursday. The opposition Biju Janata Dal (BJD) raised alarm over reports suggesting a significant reduction in the reservoir's water-holding capacity and inadequate maintenance.

Deputy Leader of Opposition Prasanna Acharya (BJD) said the dam's safety has become "a matter of serious concern" following an assessment conducted last year. According to the findings cited by Acharya, the reservoir's storage capacity has reportedly shrunk by 27% largely due to massive silt deposits.

Acharya cautioned that the growing sedimentation poses a deepening threat not only to Odisha but to the country in view of the dam's central role in flood control, irrigation and power generation.

The BJD leader also criticised the government's decision to allocate land for large hotel projects near the Hirakud reservoir, calling it an "ill-conceived move" that overlooks the essential safety requirements of the dam. Such commercial activity could compromise the ecological and structural sensitivities of the surrounding area.

Responding to the concerns, Revenue and Disaster Management Minister Suresh Pujari emphasised that dam safety is a matter of national priority. He reminded the House that the Dam Safety Act, 2021, enacted by the Centre, provides a legal and institutional framework for stringent monitoring, inspection and risk management of major dams across India.

Pujari said he has already discussed the matter with the Union Jal Shakti Minister. While a Japanese firm had once been engaged for large-scale silt removal, their work remained incomplete due to the unexpected presence of fully grown trees inside silted areas of the reservoir bed. The State Government has informed the Centre about these challenges.

He assured that strengthening work on the Hirakud Dam structure is underway, and all necessary measures, both technical and administrative, are being taken to ensure its long-term stability.

Odisha Public Library Conf' on Dec 7

To be hosted by OSA in Bhubaneswar

PNS ■ Bhubaneswar

The Odisha Society of the Americas (OSA), a leading global organisation of non-resident Odias, is all set to host an 'Odisha Public Library Conference 2025' at Bhanja Kala Mandap, Bhubaneswar on December 7. The event will bring together stakeholders to deliberate on the future of public libraries in Odisha and accelerate action towards a modern, community-centric library ecosystem.

While interacting with the media here, OSA officials invited collaboration of the government and all stakeholders to achieve a vision of engaging modern public libraries as a catalyst for development. Ajay Mohanty, chairman, and Nishikanta Sahoo, conference convenor of OSA Odisha Public Library Initiative (OPLI) briefed the press.

Under the initiative, the conference aims to lay foundation for a well-integrated modern public library system, including establishment of one modern library in every gram panchayat of the State and a world-class central library in Bhubaneswar.

Uma Mahadevan, Development Commissioner, Government of Karnataka, will be the keynote speaker who will present the success story on the Karnataka model of GP-level public libraries. Ministers from several departments of Odisha Government, senior government officials, educationists, technologists and leading public library professionals will grace the occasion as guests and speakers.

The conference will focus on deliberations in three crucial priority areas for Odisha's library transformation including the Karnataka Public Library Model; Sustainable Public Libraries under 'Bikasita Gaon, Bikasita Odisha' (BGBO) and Odia Asmita; and Fast-Track implementation of the Odisha Public Library Act (2001) and the MGNREGA GP Library Circular (2018) for grassroots-level expansion.

Odisha to host Global Energy Leaders' Summit

Event will serve as 'India's Energy COP': Singh Deo

NALINI SAHU ■ Bhubaneswar

Odisha is gearing up to host the Global Energy Leaders' Summit (GELS) 2025 in Puri from December 5 to 7 positioning the State at the centre of India's transition toward clean, secure and future-ready energy systems. Conceptualised as "a COP for India's energy sector," the summit will convene national policymakers, global experts and industry leaders for high-level deliberations on the country's long-term energy pathway.

Deputy Chief Minister Kanak Vardhan Singh Deo emphasised Odisha's commitment to shaping India's energy future calling GELS 2025 a pivotal platform for sharing State-level innovations and strengthening both cooperative and competitive federalism. "Odisha is proud to host a summit that brings leading voices together to support India's journey to secure, sustainable and future-ready energy systems," he said.

The summit's theme, "Powering India: Sufficiency, Balance, Innovation," reflects India's priorities of ensuring reliable and affordable energy, balancing ecological concerns with economic growth and accelerating breakthroughs in policy and technology. Modelled on international COP frameworks, GELS 2025 aims to create a robust platform for structured policy dialogue involving the Union Government, around 15 States and more than 30 national and international experts.

Principal Secretary (Energy) Vishal Dev said Odisha is fully prepared to host this milestone event. "Odisha was the first State to reform its power sector in the 1990s; by hosting the inaugural GELS 2025, the legacy continues," he said.

The summit will witness participation from a distinguished group of global leaders, including Lena Backer of the India–EU Trade Council, IRENA Deputy Director-General Gauri Singh, Tony Blair Institute's Pierre Noël, Tata Power CEO Praveer Sinha, experts from IIT Kanpur and NTU Singapore and senior advisers from IEEFA and ORF. NITI Aayog CEO BVR Subrahmanyam will deliver a special address at the closing plenary on December 7.

Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi will formally inaugurate the summit on December 6.

Odisha Art & Lit Festival from today

PNS ■ Bhubaneswar

The Odisha Art & Literature Festival (OALF) returns with its 10th edition here from December 5 to 7 bringing together leading writers, poets, artists and thinkers from India and abroad. This year's festival features eminent voices from Sri Lanka, Israel, Poland, Brussels, England, Dubai and Hong Kong, marking its strongest international presence so far.

The main festival will be held at the Guru Kelu Charan Mohapatra Odissi Research Centre with three days of readings, discussions and performances from 10 am to 6 pm.

On December 7, the OALF will simultaneously expand to Cuttack (Orissa Maritime Museum) and Puri (District Culture Centre) hosting conversations, poetry readings, cultural panels and curated heritage visits. Highlights include a special session with Booker Prize-winner Shehan Karunatilaka, multilingual poetry readings and discussions on Odisha's literary and cultural legacy.

All events are open to the public, said Manu Dash of the OALF secretariat in a press release.

Illegal sand mining thrives in Odisha

Despite allegations against CM: Congress

RAJEEV RATHAN ■ Bhubaneswar

Leading social activist and coordinator of the "Save Mahanadi" campaign Sudarshan Das, along with environmentalist Madhusmita Acharya, has raised serious concerns over rampant illegal sand mining in Odisha alleging that it continues unabated with tacit support from political and administrative authorities.

Speaking at a press conference at the Congress Bhawan here on Wednesday, Das warned that unchecked sand mining is pushing Odisha's rivers and tributaries to the brink of ecological collapse. "Due to illegal extraction, rivers are dying, biodiversity is being destroyed, and local communities are facing social upheaval," he said.

Das and Acharya highlighted that violent crimes, including murders and intimidation in villages, have escalated in areas dominated by sand mafias making Odisha the second-most crime-prone state in India in terms of illegal sand operations. They alleged that even after public accusations linking the Chief Minister to the sand mafia, no response or action has come from the government, suggesting possible complicity.

They cited examples from Kenduapada in Keonjhar district, where 32 sand quarries are reportedly operated under the supervision of local MPs. Despite government promises of zero tolerance and the issuance of SOPs in March 2025, illegal sand mining continues with no enforcement of rules regarding the transportation or extraction of sand.

Das demanded that authorities seize not just sand-laden trucks but also bring the mafias and involved administrative officials to justice and publicly reveal the names of political leaders supporting illegal operations.

Dec 6 is his death anniversary

Let's remember Ambedkar's vision of democracy

MANAS JENA

The idea of a modern democratic India is very well-reflected in the Preamble of the Constitution that is to build India as a Socialist, Secular and Democratic Republic. While remembering the principal architect of Indian Constitution Dr Ambedkar on his death anniversary on December 6, we must reorient ourselves on his great ideas of social, economic and political democracy.

Let's evaluate our progress in transforming the ideas of the Constitution into reality and critically reflect on our achievements in realizing the constitutional mandate. Ambedkar said 'democracy in India is only a top dressing of the Indian soil which is essentially undemocratic.' The contradiction between constitutional morality and prevailing social inequality continues. He further said constitutional morality is not a natural sentiment. It has to be cultivated.

However, in the path of social democracy, post independent India has witnessed a major positive change with enforcement of human rights laws supported by credible progressive social movements that immensely contributed to transformation of our social life. It has encouraged changes in occupational mobility, inter caste and inter faith marriages, appointment of Dalit priests in temples in southern States of Kerala, and women's social mobility.

But these achievements are symbolic with active Government involvement while still a vast segment of our population remains untouched. Ambedkar's idea was to make social democracy as a way of life in our family and society at large to eradicate many forms of hierarchy and exclusion. Currently, it is highly required that our lawmakers and social movement leaders must focus more on enforcement of law in building an inclusive society based on values of human dignity, liberty, equality and most importantly, fraternity, to bring all sections of people together in building our nation.

Added to the strict execution of existing laws, we are in need of many more new protective legislation arising in the present context in order to uphold individual freedom and dignity of man/women, ethnic and religious minority, communities affected by caste system. We must build our society as a space that is socially inclusive and a civilized living environment that ensures freedom of our youth to choose their life partner of choice without fear and pressure from fanatic and divisive forces executing honour killing.

India, the largest democracy of the world, must adhere to principles of Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and all other international conventions relating to human rights to become an ideal nation. The education on social democracy, especially thoughts of Ambedkar, must be discussed at our family and schools.

Social democracy is impossible without economic democracy. The economic policy of successive Governments in post-independent India have contributed in widening the rich and poor gap that is reflected in growing income and asset inequality. The gap has been increasing over the years. The socialist pattern of society can only be possible with equality in economic sphere. The first step in this regard is to fully ensure universal free quality English medium education and universal healthcare with basic amenities for all. There must be a barrier -free equal access to productive assets and markets, especially land for housing, capital and other natural resources for a decent living. The Government has to make all our youth employable.

SOCIAL CANVAS

Both Ambedkar and Pandit Nehru were in favour of rapid industrialisation and urbanisation to usher in progress. As the Minister of Labour, Power and Irrigation

in the Viceroy's Executive Council (1942-46), he led the foundation of Labour laws to recognize the dignity of labour as they are vital to all kinds of moral and material progress. It is the duty of the State to protect the working population from economic exploitation and social discrimination. There must be a decent wage for living, working hours, holiday, and social security.

But what is the reality after 75 years of constitutional governance? There is a huge disparity in wage rate and social security benefits. The Government and public sector employees are well paid in comparison to their counterparts in private sectors. The organised sector employees are in a better condition while a vast majority of workers in unorganised sector remain in distress. They are being lowly paid without social security benefits. The private sector of our country is not following any affirmative policy in matters of employment.

The idea of Ambedkar was for an inclusive public employment policy, equal wage, and universal insurance facilities for all its citizens like LIC as a model but still a vast majority of the population remains outside. It is told in the Constitution that there must not be concentration of wealth in the hands of a few families and the resources of the country should be utilised for the livelihood of the common people, but the economic policy of the Governments after the nineties are inclined towards disinvestment of public sector and uncontrolled privatisation of health, education and core industries, basic infrastructure, besides pursuing crony capitalism. This has raised valid concerns about the ongoing changes in the economic policies that contradicts the very ideas of economic democracy that is growth must be inclusive of equity.

Ambedkar said that political democracy is the key to take forward both social and economic democracy. Political power should not be in the hands of a few families . The people who are historically deprived of political power must get their due share but political power has been monopolized by a few families which need to be democratized. The family rule, use of money and muscle power in elections, caste and communal vote bank politics have been restricting the true political participation of common citizens, especially the poor and socially oppressed, who are helpless onlookers. The present electoral system, fast past the post (FPTP), in practice is not ensuring the representation of all voters in the legislature.

We need to bring electoral reforms to make each vote valuable and each vote must be converted into seats. Our democracy must be represented by all voters by adopting proportional representation (PR) system of election. It is also equally important to make our political parties accountable and transparent and the elections must be free and fair. Ambedkar always stressed on an independent Election Commission to conduct elections without pressure of ruling parties.

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Cong slams Modi as rupee crashes to historic low

Questions 'Where's the economy heading?'

RAJEEV RATHAN ■ Bhubaneswar

The Congress on Thursday attacked the Modi government after the Indian rupee has plunged to an unprecedented Rs 90.30 against the US dollar and alleged that the Centre has pushed the nation into a deepening economic crisis while masking reality with exaggerated claims of global economic dominance.

Addressing the media here, State Congress senior spokesperson Rajani Mohanty said the December 3 exchange rate marks "one of the darkest days for India's economy". "For eleven years, the Modi government has boasted about transforming India into a global economic powerhouse, but the rupee exposes the truth and the truth is failure," he said.

Mohanty pointed out that in 2014, during the Congress-led UPA regime, one US dollar was valued at Rs 61. "Since then, under BJP rule, the rupee has crashed by almost Rs 29, sinking to Rs 90.30 per dollar. This is not routine depreciation, this is a sustained collapse," he said.

Recalling Narendra Modi's 2013 speeches accusing the UPA of conspiracies behind rupee depreciation, Mohanty asked, "Now that the rupee has fallen far more drastically under Modi's own rule, who is conspiring? Is it the Prime Minister, the Home Minister, the Finance Minister or the BJP-RSS establishment that has crippled India's economic backbone?"

He further noted that despite loud proclamations of India becoming a USD 5-trillion economy, the country's nominal GDP remains around USD 3.78 trillion. The rupee has depreciated by 56% during the BJP's 11 years in power, a rate unmatched by any of the world's top 40 economies in the same period.

Mohanty warned of severe consequences spiralling fuel prices, costlier medicines and imported food items and a sharp rise in expenses for students studying abroad. "The trade deficit has already surged to USD 94.41 billion in FY 2024-25. Exports are stagnant," he said.

In State

7.9 lakh mislabelled ORS packs withdrawn

Govt sounds health alert as crackdown intensifies

RAJEEV RATHAN ■ Bhubaneswar

The Odisha Health Department has recalled 7.92 lakh units of deceptively labelled Oral Rehydration Solution (ORS) products being illegally marketed across the State, triggering a major public health alert. The crackdown, led by the Drugs Control Directorate over the past two weeks, targets beverages falsely advertised as ORS or electrolyte replacements.

The seized stock, valued at around Rs 4 crore, was collected from pharmacies and retail stores across all districts. Officials said these products, though approved under FSSAI norms, do not meet clinical or therapeutic standards required for treating dehydration.

A senior official said genuine ORS must be manufactured strictly under World Health Organisation (WHO) guidelines by licensed pharmaceutical companies. Such formulations, available in powder sachets or medically approved liquid forms, are scientifically designed to restore electrolytes in dehydration cases.

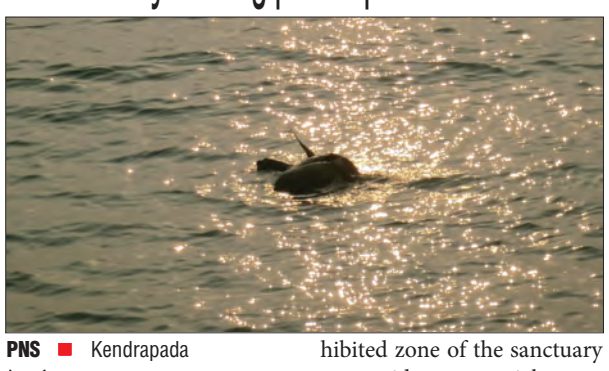
"Several liquid beverages sold under FSSAI approval are being misleadingly branded as ORS. These products are not effective for dehydration treatment," the official said, urging consumers not to rely on such substitutes, especially in cases involving children, the elderly or diarrhoeal illnesses.

The department has deployed enforcement teams to intensify inspections at drug outlets, supermarkets and wholesale hubs. Retailers have been instructed not to stock or sell misleading products, and cases will be registered under the Drugs and Cosmetics Act and other applicable laws.

Public health experts warn that misleading electrolyte drinks can delay proper treatment and worsen health outcomes, particularly during diarrhoeal outbreaks and high-temperature periods when dehydration risks rise sharply.

The department has urged citizens to purchase only WHO-compliant ORS from authorised medical outlets and report suspicious products to district drug inspectors.

Olive Ridley mating pairs spotted in G'matha



PNS ■ Kendrapada

The Forest personnel have recently sighted about a dozen of mating pairs of Olive Ridley sea turtles near Ekakula under Gahirmatha Marine Sanctuary.

It is expected that within four-five days, the Forest personnel would come across hundreds of mating pairs of the sea turtles as the endangered species' mating season has commenced in the deep sea, informed Gahirmatha Marine Sanctuary Ranger Kapilendra Pradhan.

Keeping in mind that the mating season has started, sea surveillance at Gahirmatha has been tightened in the prohibited zone of the sanctuary to provide a congenial atmosphere to the endangered marine fauna, informed Ranger Pradhan.

The Forest Department has also set up 14 onshore and two offshore camps under Gahirmatha to restrict the illegal entry of trawlers to the sanctuary.

Notably, the Marine Fishery Department has imposed a ban on fishing activities inside Gahirmatha from November 1 to May 31, 2026 in accordance with provisions of the Orissa Marine Fishing Regulation Act (OMFRA), 1982, Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 and Orissa Marine Fishing Rules, 1983.

State announces Rs 1-cr grant for Bargarh Dhanu Yatra

RAJEEV RATHAN/PNS ■ Bhubaneswar/ Baragarh

The Odia Language, Literature and Culture Department has approved a financial grant of Rs 1 crore for the world-famous Bargarh Dhanu Yatra, scheduled from December 24, 2025 to January 3, 2026. The decision was finalised during a high-level meeting chaired by Culture Minister Suryabanshi Suraj on Thursday.

The department also sanctioned an enhanced honorarium of Rs 10,000 each for nearly 200 artists who will perform in this year's Yatra, known as the world's largest open-air theatre festival.

The government will also arrange live telecast of Dhanu Yatra on LED screens across Odisha and other States. The initiative will be coordinated by the Odisha Paribar Directorate to ensure that Odias living outside the State can also witness the celebrations.

In Bargarh town, Dhanu Yatra-themed welcome gates will be constructed at all major entry points. The Tourism Department will operate special buses from Bhubaneswar and Puri for smooth travel for visitors during the 11-day festival.

A dedicated Dhanu Yatra website will be launched offering comprehensive details such as venue maps, landmarks, accommodation facilities, parking zones, videos of key performances and GPS-based navigation support. The portal will also host an online quiz for students with digital certificates issued to participants.

Minister Suraj instructed officials to ensure flawless arrangements, including security deployment, fire safety systems, sanitation, medical emergency support and inter-departmental coordination. He said Dhanu Yatra is a symbol of Odisha's vibrant cultural heritage, transforming Bargarh into 'Mathura Nagari', Ambapali into 'Gopapur' and the Jira river into the Yamuna every year.

Bargarh MP Pradip Purohit, MLAs Sanat Gartia, Nihar Mahanand, Irasis Acharya, Ashwini Kumar Sarangi and Barsha Singh Bariha, Development Commissioner Anu Garg, Department Secretary Dr Bijay Ketan Upadhyay, Special Secretary Deba Prasad Dash, Collector Aditya Goyal and several senior officials were present in the meeting.

Worker's death at K'pada

NHRC directs Labour Commissioner to submit ATR

PNS ■ Kendrapada

The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) on November 28 sought for an Action Taken Report (ATR) from the Labour Commissioner of Odisha on the matter of human rights violation at PSK construction site on NH-53 in Kendrapada, where a labourer died due to poor working condition.

The Commission passed the order on Friday, acting on a petition filed by rights activist Sagar Jena of Goldenvilla of Kajala village in Kendrapada. Jena, in his petition, brought to the notice of the Commission that rights violation was made at the PSK construction site where labourers were engaged without safety measures or adherence to labour laws. Despite repeated complaints, the company has ignored local concerns, he alleged.

Citing that a worker, Md Rajuwalla Mallik, from Chhattisgarh died due to poor working conditions, Jena requested the panel to intervene into the matter by directing the Odisha Labour Department to compensate the victim's family and submit an inquiry along with ATR within four weeks.

PPA holds Day of Persons with Disabilities

Presents mementoes to Divyang staffs, school kits

PNS ■ Paradip

The Paradip Port Authority (PPA) observed the International Day of Persons with Disabilities at Jagruty School for the differently abled children. The event focused on this year's theme, "Fostering disability-inclusive societies for advancing social progress."

Deputy Conservator, PPA, Capt AC Sahoo graced the programme as chief guest. He appreciated the spirit and determination of the children and assured that the PPA will continue to support the school's overall development.

Guest of honour Chief Engineer, PPA, HS Rout also assured infrastructure development of the school. Susil Chandra Nahak CME, Paradip Ladies' Club secretary Puspanjali Sahoo, treasurer Gemima Edison, working president Kabita Nahak and member of the Ladies Club Sabita Sahu and Principal, Jagruty Nalini Mohanty also graced as guests of honour. Deputy CAO Prasanta Kumar Moharana also spoke on the occasion.

During the programme, mementoes were distributed among 51 Divyang employees of PPA. PPA also presented school kits to the children as well as staff of Jagruty School, while the Paradip Ladies Club extended financial assistance to the institution. Cultural performances by the students added warmth to the event and drew an enthusiastic response from the audience.

Welfare Officer Rama Chandra Pradhan gave the welcome speech and Seemashri Beura, offered the vote of thanks.

Chaos at BBSR airport

IndiGo cancels flights; passengers stranded

RAJEEV RATHAN ■ Bhubaneswar

Passengers at the Biju Patnaik International Airport (BPIA) here faced major inconvenience for a third consecutive day on Thursday as the IndiGo Airlines continued to cancel and delay flights amid nationwide operational disruptions. The situation led to long queues, confusion and hundreds of stranded travellers at the airport.

By 8:30 am, the Bhubaneswar-Bengaluru flight was delayed by over 30 minutes while the Bhubaneswar-Mumbai service was running behind schedule by almost an hour. Flights to Kolkata and Singapore were also delayed, and the Bhubaneswar-Dehradun flight was cancelled, airport sources said.

Officials indicated that the latest wave of disruptions stems primarily from acute crew shortages, which have affected IndiGo operations across major airports in the country. On Wednesday night, the airline abruptly cancelled two flights scheduled to depart for Hyderabad and New Delhi at 10:10 pm and 10:20 pm. The cancellations appeared on the flight information display system around 9 pm leading to chaos as passengers rushed to the airline counter seeking clarification.

Many passengers were forced to stay overnight at the terminal after being given boarding passes for rescheduled flights the next day. Flyers bound for Shirdi via Chennai also faced distress when their flight was cancelled and shifted to the next day with a new connection via Hyderabad.

Flight delays continued throughout Wednesday, including the Bhubaneswar-Mumbai service, which was affected for the second day in a row. Two IndiGo flights to Mumbai and Bengaluru, rescheduled the previous day, finally departed on Wednesday afternoon at 12:30 pm and 12:45 pm.

BPIA Director Prasanna Pradhan, however, denied delays in airport operations as of Wednesday evening.

HC order

Huika to resume as Rayagada CWC chief

PNS ■ Rayagada

The Women and Child Development (WCD) Department has directed Rayagada Collector to immediately reinstate Bidulata Huika as the chairperson of the Child Welfare Committee (CWC), Rayagada, complying with orders of the Orissa High Court and a direction by Advocate General of Odisha.

In an official communication, Additional Secretary Krutibas Rout informed the Rayagada Collector that the High Court's orders must be implemented without delay.

The High Court, while hearing the petition filed by Bidulata Huika (Bidulata Huika vs State of Odisha & Ors.), has allowed her to discharge duties as the chairperson of the Child Welfare Committee, Rayagada, until further orders or completion of her tenure, whichever comes earlier. Following this, the WCD Department has instructed the district administration to comply immediately and report back to the department at the earliest. This development marks a significant step in resolving the administrative dispute surrounding the CWC leadership in Rayagada.

It may be noted that on November 11 last year, a nine-day baby was sold off for Rs 20,000 to a couple of neighbouring Manyam district of Andhra Pradesh through an impugned affidavit. The then Collector Parul Patawari and District Child Protection Officer(I/c) Bichitra Sethi passed on the blame to the CWC for the whole episode and recommended dissolution of the Committee. On the recommendation of the Collector, the Women and Child Development Department dissolved the CWC, which Huika challenged in the apex court.

Minor raped by tutor

NHRC seeks ATR from Bhadrak DM, SP

PNS ■ Bhubaneswar

The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) has called for an Action Taken Report (ATR) within four weeks from the district Collector and the SP of Bhadrak related to the rape of a 5th class girl student by her private tutor under Chandabali police station limits in July.

The Commission passed the order on November 28, acting on a petition filed by activist Sagar Jena of Kendrapada.

Jena alleged that the accused, identified as Ajit Bhoi, was conducting a tuition session when heavy rainfall prevented other students from attending. Taking advantage of the situation, he reportedly sexually assaulted the lone girl student. The child later disclosed the ordeal to her mother.

Following the complaint filed by the family, Chandabali police registered a case. The accused private tutor was later arrested and produced before court.

Clampdown on illegal minor mineral mining

- State collects Rs 126 cr in fines
- 11 tehsils flagged as high-risk zones

NALINI SAHU ■ Bhubaneswar

The Odisha Government has taken substantial action against illegal minor mineral mining and transportation and collected Rs 126 crore in fines between 2022 and October 2025, according to a written reply by Steel and Mines Minister Bibhuti Bhushan Jena in the State Assembly on Thursday. The minister said the State has already garnered Rs 655 crore in revenue in the current financial year up to September. To curb illegal transportation, authorities have carried out 15,187 seizures across all 30 districts.

A total of 3,219 cases have been registered leading to fines amounting to Rs 126.51 crore. The government has identified 11 sensitive tehsils as hotspots for illegal sand mining: Dharmashala, Jharasuguda, Pipili, Tangi, Marshaghai, Barang, Kanihal, Jaleswar, Hindol, Purushottampur and Raghunathpur.

The Mines Department noted that Hindol, Purushottampur and Raghunathpur have recorded the highest instances of minor mineral theft, prompting intensified monitoring and enforcement in these pockets.

Officials emphasised that sustained vigilance and strict enforcement remain essential to safeguarding the State's mineral resources and ensuring that contractors and traders comply with legal norms.

Advances in freshwater aquaculture training at CIFA

21 from 8 NEH States join

PNS ■ Bhubaneswar

The ICAR-Central Institute of Freshwater Aquaculture (ICAR-CIFA), Bhubaneswar, organised a three-day national training programme on "Recent Advances in Freshwater Aquaculture" from November 26 to 28. The specialized programme was exclusively tailored for Subject Matter Specialists (SMSs) and Programme Assistants from various Krishi VigyanKendras (KVKs) functioning across the North Eastern Hill (NEH) region.

A total of 21 participants representing eight NEH States-each with unique aquaculture potentials and challenges-actively took part in the training. The programme featured 12 comprehensives and meticulously designed modules, each aimed at strengthening the technical capacities of the participants.

The modules covered a wide spectrum of contemporary freshwater aquaculture domains like freshwater fish genetics and broodstock improvement, soil and water quality assessment and management, polyculture techniques and species diversification strategies, culture practices for air-breathing fishes, catfish, importance of fish disease diagnosis, health management, and prophylactic measures including Biofloc technology for intensive aquaculture, ornamental fish breeding, rearing, use of farm-made feeds and designer pearl production techniques and value addition.

These sessions were delivered by experienced ICAR-CIFA scientists, who served as resource persons and provided both classroom-based lectures and hands-on exposure through well-structured farm visits. The field demonstrations enabled participants to closely observe scientific practices being implemented at CIFA facilities, thereby enhancing their practical understanding.

The valedictory session was presided over by Director, ICAR-CIFA, Dr PK Sahoo, who appreciated the enthusiastic participation, discipline, and active engagement of all trainees throughout the programme.

He encouraged the trainees to apply the knowledge gained during the programme in their respective KVKs to guide farmers effectively, promote sustainable aquaculture practices, and contribute to regional development.

The participants shared highly positive feedback, noting that the training substantially enriched their technical knowledge, improved their practical skills, and strengthened their ability to address field-level challenges in aquaculture.

Govt issues instructions to agencies over pollution control

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
New Delhi

The Delhi Government has issued instructions to all concerned agencies that no negligence of any kind would be tolerated in matters related to pollution control.

The Government also directed all departments to work in continuous coordination so that pollution can be controlled more effectively and consistently. The directions were made after a high-level meeting was held on Thursday at Lok Niwas (Raj Niwas) on controlling Delhi's pollution, chaired by the Lieutenant Governor Vinay Kumar Saxena and Chief Minister Rekha Gupta.

At the meeting, it was made clear that dust in the capital must be controlled under all circumstances. Multi-level efforts are already underway for this. The meeting also highlighted that waste and debris are major contributors to pollution. To address this, departments were instructed to put in greater effort towards road cleaning and related tasks.

The meeting was attended by Delhi Government's Urban Development Minister Ashish Sood, Chief Secretary Rajeev Verma, and senior officials of the concerned departments.

The DDA officials were directed to ensure that vacant land under their ownership in various parts of the capital is completely cleared of waste and debris, and to ensure that such sites are not used again for dumping. MCD officials were also instructed to conduct an intensive cleanliness drive across Delhi, along with using additional measures to tackle dust.

Providing details of the meeting, the Chief Minister said that negligence by any department or official regarding pollution control would not be tolerated. District Magistrates have been instructed to personally inspect the cleanliness and pollution-control measures being undertaken in their respective areas.

The District Magistrates are also being authorised to record the ACRs of government employees found negligent. She informed that a separate review committee headed by the Chief Secretary has been constituted, which will review pollution-control measures on a daily basis and issue orders or advisories thereafter. Compliance with these instructions will be mandatory for all departments.

The Chief Minister emphasised that the government's goal is to find a permanent solution to pollution, so that people do not suffer now or in the future. She noted that mist spray systems have been installed in the ITO area as part of this commitment, and she inspected them today. Pilot tests of the mist spray system have shown positive results. Accordingly, a detailed plan is now being prepared for their installation across all major roads in Delhi. At present, they are being installed at pollution hotspots to neutralise pollutants.

The DPCC has been directed to issue challans against government departments found negligent in pollution-control efforts or cleanliness. Additionally, FIRs will be registered against Government agencies that carry out road cutting without permission or fail to restore the roads afterwards. The CM made it clear that the head of the department concerned would be held accountable.

Air quality dips to very poor again; IMD warns of cold wave

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
New Delhi

After days of sharp rises and plunges in pollution, Delhi's air slid back into the "very poor" bracket on Thursday evening, wiping out the short-lived morning relief when the city had briefly climbed to "poor" levels.

According to the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB), the 24-hour average AQI stood at 304, placing the city firmly in the "very poor" bracket. In the morning hours, the city had shown marginal improvement with an AQI reading of 299, according to the CPCB data, before levels deteriorated again by late afternoon.

Data from the CPCB's SAMEER app showed that 27 of the 40 monitoring stations in the Capital recorded "very poor" air quality through the day, with Nehru Nagar logging the highest AQI at 362. According to the CPCB, an Air Quality Index between 0 and 50 is classified "good," 51 to 100 "satisfactory," 101 to 200 "moderate," 201 to 300 "poor," 301 to 400 "very poor," and 401 to 500 "severe.

Delhi's air quality has swung sharply through the week. The city recorded an AQI of 279 on November 30, slipped back to 304 on December 1, rose further to 372 on December 2, edging towards the "severe" mark, and stood at 342 on December 3 before Thursday's brief morning improvement and evening decline.

According to the Air Quality Early Warning System for Delhi, the city's AQI is expected to remain in the "very poor" category over the next few days. According to the Decision Support System for Delhi's air quality management, the transport sector accounted for 13.7 per cent of Delhi's pollution on Thursday, the highest among local contributors. Transport emissions are forecast to account for 15 per cent of pollution on Friday, it added.

Delhi to install 305 mist sprayers at 9 pollution hotspots, says CM

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
New Delhi

Chief Minister Rekha Gupta on Thursday said that her Government is preparing an extensive plan to deploy mist spray technology to combat air pollution in the Capital.

The Chief Minister inspected mist sprayers installed at ITO, saying work is underway to install 305 mist sprayers at nine pollution hotspots in the city.

Mist technology is being seen as an effective solution against pollution, Gupta asserted, adding that trials of mist sprayers in some New Delhi Municipal Council (NDMC) areas has shown positive results.

"We are preparing an extensive plan to cover all the roads in Delhi with mist spray machines. Mist sprayers fitted on 35 poles at ITO are showing good results," the chief minister told reporters after the inspection.

Mist technology involves use of water sprays to primarily curb dust pollution. She said said a high-level committee comprising experts from various fields is being formed to advise the Delhi Government on pollution remedies.

The panel, announced on Wednesday, will include senior officials from various Government departments besides experts from IITs and specialists in environmental sciences, officials said, adding that the committee will be granted special powers by the Government.

The Chief Minister said different departments including PWD, DSIIDC, and the DDA, among others, have been instructed to work on filling potholes, carpet roads, and plant foliage on road dividers and islands, besides undertaking other steps to curb pollution.

The CM urged people to report potholes on the Delhi Government portal.

Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs) should also distribute electric heaters to security guards in residential areas to prevent biomass burning in winters which contributes to air pollution, she added.

Padma Awardee doctors seeks urgent action on pollution

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
New Delhi

More than 80 Padma Awardee doctors have said air pollution is no longer just a concern for the winters but a continuous threat to public health in a joint national health advisory.

Doctors from across India have issued a joint national advisory, warning that air pollution is a continuous, life-threatening risk, particularly for children, pregnant women, the elderly, and those with heart or lung conditions.

Highlighting the scale of the crisis, doctors said more than one-third of all respiratory deaths in the country are linked to poor air quality, while nearly 40 per cent of stroke-related mortality is attributed to pollution exposure.

PM2.5 levels in North India often rise 20 to 40 times above World Health Organisation (WHO) safety limits, with nearly 70 per cent of the population breathing unsafe air daily, the advisory said.

The impact extends far beyond asthma and heart diseases, with pollution now

linked to cancer, metabolic disorders, neurological decline, diabetes complications, and even genetic damage through chromosomal breakages and telomere shortening.

It also flagged growing concern over microplastics and nanoplastics in ambient air, particularly around high-traffic corridors. These particles, the doctors said, contribute to chronic inflammation, endocrine disruption, cognitive decline, and developmental delays in children.

Toxic pollutants such as heavy metals, volatile organic compounds, and hydrocarbons were found to worsen cancers, hypertension, and diabetes control. The doctors issued detailed safety guidance for citizens, urging households to use HEPA air purifiers and N95 masks during high AQI periods, and to limit outdoor activity when pollution peaks.

For families without purifiers, they recommended wet mopping floors daily, avoiding incense, dhoop, camphor, and mosquito coils, ensuring proper kitchen ventilation, and using triple-layer masks. They further stressed that children should avoid outdoor play and school assemblies on high AQI days, while pregnant women, the elderly, and patients with chronic illnesses should minimise exposure and ensure pneumonia and influenza vaccinations.

The doctors called on the Government to take immediate public-health-first action, including declaring severe pollution periods as public health emergencies, correcting Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP) thresholds based on scientific evidence.

The advisory also asked the government to enforce strict controls on construction dust, industrial emissions, waste burning, and diesel generators, expand electric public transport, implement AQI-linked school protocols, launch a national microplastics monitoring programme, and strengthen hazardous waste controls.

While emphasising that individual precautions are essential, the doctors stressed that systemic reforms are non-negotiable, asserting that clean air must be recognised as a fundamental human right.

High alert in Capital amid credible threats

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
New Delhi

The national Capital has been placed under high alert ahead of the Babri demolition anniversary on December 6 and the Parliament attack anniversary on December 13.

The enhanced alert level has also been declared on December 4-5 in the wake of Russian President Vladimir Putin's visit. A multi-layered security grid has also been formed with SWAT teams, anti-terror units, snipers and quick-reaction teams stationed at sensitive points.

Anti-drone systems have been put in place and special teams deployed for aerial and signal-level monitoring of the Russian delegation. The Delhi Police have also intensified surveillance in sensitive areas. This means a multi-layer security system has been implemented in Delhi. Under this, strict surveillance is being maintained from street level to airspace.

Delhi Police, central agencies, and other security teams, along with SWAT teams, snipers, and anti-terror units, are coordinating with each other minute-to-minute to ensure immediate action can be taken in any situation.

Of the first few inner cordons, Russian forces will manage the first two layers, followed by the National Security Guard and defence personnel. The hotels in Lutyens' zone where the dignitaries are staying have been sanitised, and advanced cameras with motion detection installed.

Senior police officers said that from Putin's arrival to his departure, every movement will be tracked by multiple security units operating jointly. "Minute-to-minute coordination is underway, and all concerned agencies have been instructed to maintain maximum vigilance throughout. Over 5,000 police personnel will be deployed to maintain strict vigil," the officer said.

Top-ranking Delhi Police officers are supervising route security, traffic arrangements and area sanitisation around locations likely to feature in the Russian president's schedule. "All routes mapped for VVIP movement have been secured in advance. Traffic advisories will be issued from time to time to minimise inconvenience to commuters. Anti-drone systems will be in place," another official said.

Traffic is likely to be affected with restrictions and diversions in place on Thursday and Friday. Fuelling the tension, terror group Sikhs for Justice (SFJ) on Wednesday called to "strike the Indian Parliament" on Dec 13. SFJ chief Gurpatwant Singh Pannun stated that the group intended to celebrate Dec 13 as "Kashmir-Khalistan freedom day". SFJ also called on parliamentarians Amritpal Singh and Sarabjit Singh to raise the question directly in Parliament and "internationalise the liberation of Punjab from India".

The Capital has been experiencing enhanced surveillance since November 10, following a powerful explosion in a car near the Red Fort. The agencies and Delhi Police are scrambling to find any missing links that may lead to another similar tragedy.

NDMC spruces up Lutyens' Delhi ahead of Putin's high-profile visit

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
New Delhi

The New Delhi Municipal Council (NDMC) has spruced up Lutyens' Delhi with intensified beautification and maintenance efforts ahead of Russian President Vladimir Putin's arrival in the national Capital on Thursday for a nearly 27-hour visit.

A senior NDMC official said the civic body maintains the highest standards of cleanliness year-round, given the presence of key institutions such as the Prime Minister's Office, Parliament and various ministries in the area.

"NDMC is the number one area in the country in terms of cleanliness, as the area is of utmost importance. The NDMC area is always ready, and it is an ongoing process throughout the year, but we check all our facilities before such an important visit," the official said

Officials said the council's water-sprinkler-on-electric-poles initiative is functioning continuously to settle dust and help reduce pollution levels. "We have greenery throughout the NDMC zone. We have cleaned and checked all facilities near important buildings where meetings can take place, like Ashoka Road near Hyderabad House," another senior official said.

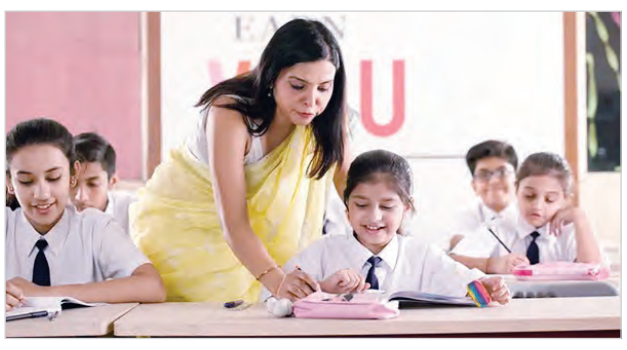
He added that new potted flower displays have been placed at key locations, including C-Hexagon, the PM House roundabout, Teen Murti roundabout and the entry point at Dhaula Kuan.

Putin's visit comes at a time of a rapid downturn in India-US relations, lending greater diplomatic weight to the 23rd India-Russia summit, during which the two sides are expected to sign several agreements, including in the area of trade.

The Russian president is likely to land in New Delhi around 6:35 pm on Thursday. PM Narendra Modi will host him for a private dinner the same evening, mirroring a similar gesture extended by Putin during Modi's Moscow visit in July last year.

On Friday, Putin will receive a ceremonial welcome at the Rashtrapati Bhavan before holding summit-level talks at Hyderabad House, where Modi will also host a working lunch for the visiting leader and his delegation. Putin is scheduled to visit Rajghat in the morning.

Women dominate teaching profession in Delhi: Report



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
New Delhi

The Delhi Government's Directorate of Economics and Statistics report titled 'Women and Men in Delhi-2025' highlighted that women are more inclined towards the teaching profession in Delhi, especially at the primary level, with 415 female teachers for every 100 male teachers recorded during the 2024-25 fiscal. The report pointed out a steady rise in the participation of women in the education sector, particularly in teaching.

At the primary level, the number of female teachers per 100 male teachers increased from 363 in 2012-13 to 415 in 2024-25, the report said. At the upper primary level, the number of female teachers per 100 male teachers increased from 214 in 2012-13 to 261 in 2024-25.

Between 2012-13 and 2024-25, the number of female teachers per 100 male teachers at the higher secondary level increased from 152 to 168. Female enrolment in higher education in Delhi also recorded a marginal improvement, increasing from 49.08 per cent in 2022-23 to 50.57 per cent in 2023-24.

According to the report, the number of female students per 100 male students rose from 98 to 106 in M Phil courses, 82 to 102 in postgraduate, 100 to 110 in undergraduate, 53 to 67 in PG diploma, and 57 to 79 in diploma programmes in the regular mode of education from 2013-14 to 2021-22. However, participation of women in the workforce continued to remain significantly lower than that of men.

According to data from the Periodic Labour Force Survey, the Worker Population Ratio (WPR) in Delhi stood at 52.8 per cent for men and just 14.2 per cent for women in 2023-24.

At the national level, the corresponding figures were 56.4 per cent for men and 30.7 per cent for women. Similarly, the Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) in Delhi was recorded at 54 per cent for the male population and 14.5 per cent for the female in 2023-24, compared to the national averages of 58.2 percent and 31.7 per cent, respectively.

The unemployment rate in Delhi remained lower than the national average for both genders. In 2023-24, the unemployment rate in the Capital was 2.2 per cent for men and 1.5 per cent for women, compared to the nationwide figures of 3.2 per cent and 3.1 per cent, respectively.

DDA's liabilities stand at ₹17,000 crore till March, LS informed

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
New Delhi

Liabilities of the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) stood at around ₹17,000 crore till March this year, the Lok Sabha was informed on Thursday.

In a written reply to a question, Union Minister of State for Housing and Urban Affairs Tokhan Sahu said that DDA informed the ministry that all liabilities were being paid timely. The minister said no mismanagement or administrative inefficiency has been observed in the land-owning agency.

According to the table shared by him, DDA's liabilities stood at Rs 16,987.98 crore till March 31, 2025. The agency also shared updated data on its housing inventory in Narela. Out of 62,801 flats constructed in the sub-city, 31,314 have been allotted so far, while 31,487 units remain unsold, he said, adding that the total number of unsold inventory of DDA flats in Delhi is 34,052.

The minister said that a total of 1,026 MIG two BHK flats in Karkardooma under DDA Towering Heights Karkardooma Housing Scheme 2025 will be offered in the current financial year.

He said that 3,666 flats, including 900 HIG (3-BHK), 1,750 MIG (2-BHK) and 1,016 EWS flats in Pocket 11, Sector A1 to A4, Narela, are also likely to be offered in this financial year.

Maternal mortality down from 0.55 in 2019 to 0.44 in 2024: Report

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
New Delhi

The Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR) in Delhi has marginally declined from 0.55 in 2019 to 0.44 in 2024. The report, 'Women and Men in Delhi-2025', issued by the Directorate of Economics and Statistics of the Delhi government is based on secondary data.

Citing the 'Annual Report on Registration of Births and Deaths in Delhi', the report said MMR in Delhi has decreased from 0.55 in 2019 to 0.44 in 2024.

The report said, according to the Sample Registration System, women's mean age at marriage in Delhi in 2022 was 24.6 years, an increase of 2.2 years from 2011. At the national level, the mean age stood at 22.7 years — an increase of 1.5 years since 2011.

The report cited National Family Health Survey (NFHS) data to highlight the improvement in accessibility of health services for women, stating that the percentage of mothers who received postnatal

care from a healthcare professional within two days of delivery in Delhi has increased from 62.3 per cent as per NFHS-4 (2015-16), to 85.4 as reported in NFHS-5 (2019-21).

At the national level, it has risen from 62.4 per cent (NFHS-4) to 78 per cent in 2019-21 (NFHS-5). As per NFHS data, institutional births at Delhi level has increased from 84.4 per cent in 2015-16 to 91.8 per cent in 2019-21.

Better ante and postnatal care and increase in births attended by skilled medical personnel is expected to bring down maternal mortality, the report noted. The NFHS reports for 2015-16 and 2019-21 also shows a rising trend in Delhi of mothers who received antenatal check-up during the first trimester of pregnancy, increasing from 63 per cent (NFHS-4) to 76.4 per cent (NFHS-5).

The report also stressed on the risk of anaemia to pregnant women. Among pregnant women, iron deficiency-linked anaemia is associated with adverse reproductive outcomes such as preterm delivery, low-birthweight infants, and decreased iron reserves for the baby, leading to impaired development.

UPSC interview process free from bias: Jitendra Singh

The interview or personality test system followed by the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) is free from any discrimination or bias, Union Minister Jitendra Singh informed the Rajya Sabha on Thursday. The UPSC has informed that candidates are randomised while being assigned to interview boards just before the commencement of interviews/personality tests for the day, he said in a written reply to a question.

Projects worth ₹5,700 crore in North East: Scindia

Over 44 projects worth about ₹5,700 crore have been sanctioned under the PM's Development Initiative for the North East Region, Union Minister Jyotiraditya Scindia has said, adding that the ministry was set to utilise the scheme outlay. Chairing a meeting of the Consultative Committee of the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region on Wednesday, the minister said the Modi Government is committed to ensuring rapid and outcome-oriented development in the region.

One nation, one election a game-changer: Ex-President

Former President Ram Nath Kovind on Thursday said the 'One Nation, One Election' concept will be a "game-changer" for the country's development and also benefit the education system as frequent polls put a great burden on teachers.

India faces 4,855 vacancies in lower courts: Government

The Government on Thursday said that there are currently 4,855 vacancies of judicial officers in district and subordinate courts as against the total sanctioned strength of 25,886. The total number of cases pending before the subordinate court as on December 1, 2025, stood at 4,80,42,720. Replying to supplementaries during Question Hours in the Rajya Sabha, Law & Justice Minister Arjun Ram Meghwal informed that the total sanctioned strength of judicial officers in district & subordinate courts is 25,886.

Govt stops foreign dignitaries from meeting LoP, says Rahul

LoP in Lok Sabha and Congress leader Rahul Gandhi (left) at the Parliament complex during the Winter session in New Delhi on Thursday PTI

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
New Delhi

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Thursday alleged that the Government tells visiting foreign dignitaries not to meet the Leader of the Opposition due to its "insecurity". His remarks came hours ahead of Russian President Vladimir Putin's two-day visit to India.

The Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha said it is a tradition that visiting foreign dignitaries meet the LoP but Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Ministry of External Affairs were not following this norm.

"Normally the tradition is that those who come from abroad have a meeting with the LoP. This used to happen during (Atal Bihari) Vajpayee ji's time, Manmohan Singh ji's time, it has been a tradition but what happens these days is that when foreign dignitaries come and when I go abroad, the Government suggests to them to not meet the LoP," Rahul Gandhi told reporters in Parliament House complex.

"This is their policy, they do this every time. They do it when I go abroad and when people come here. We get the message that they have been told that the Government has said 'not to meet you'," the former Congress president.

Highlighting the importance of such meetings, he said the LoP gives another perspective. "We also represent India, only the Government does not represent India. The Government does not want that opposition leaders to meet foreign leaders. This is a tradition (visiting foreign dignitaries meeting LoP), a norm, but Modi ji does not follow this norm, foreign ministry does not follow this norm," Rahul Gandhi said without naming Putin. Asked why the Government was doing so, he said, "It is their insecurity".

BJP REJECTS RAHUL GANDHI CLAIM ON FOREIGN DIGNITARIES MEETING LOP

New Delhi: The BJP on Thursday dismissed as a "blatant lie" Rahul Gandhi's allegation that the Government does not let foreign dignitaries meet him, the Leader of Opposition, saying he had met many foreign guests, including the prime ministers of New Zealand and Mauritius, this year.

In a social media post, BJP chief spokesperson Anil Baluni shared pictures of Rahul Gandhi from meetings with these foreign dignitaries and said, "During any visit, MEA organises meetings for the visiting dignitary with Government officials and Government bodies."

He added, "Organising meetings outside the Government depends on the visiting delegation."

The rebuttal came after Rahul Gandhi alleged that the Government tells visiting foreign dignitaries not to meet the Leader of the Opposition due to its "insecurity."

The Leader of the Opposition (LoP) in the Lok Sabha said it is a tradition that visiting foreign dignitaries meet the LoP, but Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Ministry of External Affairs were not following this norm. Baluni, a Lok Sabha MP, said Rahul Gandhi had met at least five foreign guests, including heads of state in just one and a half years.

He said Rahul Gandhi met former Bangladesh prime minister Sheikh Hasina on June 10, 2024, Prime Minister of Malaysia Anwar Ibrahim on August 21, 2024, Prime Minister of Mauritius Navinchandra Ramgoolam on September 16, 2025 and Prime Minister of New Zealand Christopher Luxon on March 8, 2025.

"The LOP also met the PM of Vietnam on August 1, 2024," Baluni said, posting pictures of the Congress leader meeting these foreign dignitaries on X.

Congress parliamentary party chairperson Sonia Gandhi and party MP Priyanka Gandhi were present with Rahul at some of these meetings, the pictures shared by the BJP leader show.

"These pictures can't be fake, Rahul Gandhi ji," Baluni said, adding, the photographs proved that the LoP is "simply lying." "However, whenever you go to foreign soil, you always end up tarnishing the image of India, India's democracy, and India's Constitution," Baluni charged.

Rajya Sabha Chairman clarifies scope of rule 267, limits debate to agenda

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
New Delhi

Rajya Sabha chairman CP Radhakrishnan on Thursday tried to set the record straight on the scope of Rule 267 in the Rajya Sabha, saying discussion under this provision can only take place on any of the items already listed on the day's agenda and not on any unrelated subjects.

Session after session, Opposition party MPs have been giving notices under Rule 267, seeking to set aside the agenda of the day to take up discussion on the subject they considered more important. But none of their notices have been accepted in over two decades.

The number of notices has risen in the last few years as the opposition MPs felt the BJP-led Government would not allow discussions, even of short duration, on the subjects they want to raise.

In the current Winter Session of Parliament, notices under Rule 267 were given, but Radhakrishnan rejected them all, saying they did not conform to the Rule.

On Wednesday, he rejected two such notices and stated that the provision is being misused through routine notices seeking to suspend the day's listed business.

The Chairman noted that such notices are now being submitted "almost daily," despite the Rule not being intended to allow discussions on issues raised at the discretion of individual members.

He stressed that Rule 267 in the Rajya Sabha cannot be equated with an adjournment motion in the Lok Sabha, which is permitted under Article 75(3) of the Constitution.

"There is no constitutional or procedural provision authorising Rajya Sabha members to give any adjournment notice under Rule 267," he said.

Under the rule, only matters already listed for the day's business can be considered for suspension, and any notice must specify the exact rule to be suspended along with a properly drafted motion. Notices seeking discussion on subjects outside the listed business are "invalid," he said.

Under Rule 267, any listed business "may be suspended only for (taking up) a matter related to the business already listed for that day," he said.

Tracing its history, the Chairman recalled that Rule 267 was amended in 2000 on the recommendation of a committee headed by then Chairman Krishan Kant and comprising senior leaders, including Manmohan Singh, Pranab Mukherjee, and Fali Nariman.

The committee had flagged misuse of the Rule to raise unlisted issues and recommended limiting it to listed business only. The House adopted these changes on May 15, 2000, he said.

Between 1988 and 2000, Rule 267 was used only three times, and only twice in full conformity with its provisions. Since the 2000 amendment, no discussion has taken place under the Rule, except on eight occasions when the House reached a consensus to allow it.

> IN THE WINTER SESSION OF PARLIAMENT, ALL RULE 267 NOTICES WERE REJECTED BY RADHAKRISHNAN FOR NON-COMPLIANCE

"Members can see that in almost four decades, this Rule, this device of Rule 267 has been invoked in the House on rarest of rare occasions," he said. "Rule 267 enables suspensions of a rule only to take up matters already listed for the day and not to introduce any unrelated subjects."

The Chairman reiterated that a valid notice must relate to an item already on the day's agenda, specify the rule sought to be suspended, present clear grounds for invoking Rule 267, and avoid seeking suspension where another rule already provides such a mechanism.

Only notices that meet these criteria and receive the Chair's prior consent will be taken up.

In view of these observations/clarification, Rule 267 notices not meeting these requirements will not be taken into consideration, he said.

"Other Parliamentary devices can raise any matter of urgent public importance; thus, the notices received under Rule 267 are not admitted."

Stating that urgent matters can be raised through other Parliamentary tools, the Chairman ruled that the two Rule 267 notices received on Monday do not meet the required parameters and therefore stand disallowed.

Leader of the Opposition and Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge said MPs give notices under Rule 267 because there is no chance of getting a short-duration or even a short notice question.

"We are not getting the opportunity to discuss important things immediately. When we raise and request you (for a discussion on an important issue), the Government is avoiding," he said.

He urged the chairman not to give a "bulldozer" ruling, as he is the supreme authority and can do away with any rule and allow any discussion.

Leader of the House and Union Minister J P Nadda said the Government has not avoided any discussion.

In the last session too, the Government agreed to discuss the issue the opposition wanted taken up, and this time electoral reforms will be discussed next week.

"So this impression should not go that the Government avoids any discussion. We are ready to discuss every topic," he added.

TMC MPs protest in Parliament complex over pending Central dues

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
New Delhi

Trinamool Congress MPs on Thursday staged a protest march to Parliament complex on the issue of pending Central dues for West Bengal. TMC MPs gathered at Vijay Chowk near Parliament complex, and took out the march while raising slogans.

"The BJP Government has not paid Rs 2 lakh crore dues which are for the people of West Bengal... We are protesting to demand that the pending amount should be paid," TMC Lok Sabha chief whip Kakoli Ghosh Dastidar said.

"The Centre owes West Bengal rightful dues under PM Awas Yojna, Jal Jeevan Mission and MGNREGA," TMC MP Mahua Moitra said.

"We are staging a protest and raising slogans because the Centre is not paying the dues", Rajya Sabha MP Dola Sen said.

The TMC has also been questioning the delay in restarting MGNREGS in West Bengal, even after the Supreme Court upheld the Calcutta High Court's order directing the Centre to resume the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) scheme in West Bengal.

The Centre had suspended funds for over three years due to allegations of corruption and irregularities.

In a written reply in Rajya Sabha on Monday, Minister of State for Rural Development Kamlesh Paswan had said release of funds to West Bengal under the MGNREGS was stopped with effect from March 9, 2022 by invoking the provisions of Section 27 of the MGNREGA, 2005, owing to continued non-compliance with the directives of the Centre by the State.

Opposition leaders protest in Parliament over Delhi air pollution

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
New Delhi

Leaders of various Opposition parties on Thursday staged a protest in Parliament complex over the issue of air pollution in the national capital, with Congress leader Sonia Gandhi asking the Government to take action.

Carrying placards, leaders of various parties raised slogans outside the Makar Dwar of Parliament asking the prime minister to stop making statements and fix the problem.

Some of the MPs also wore masks at the protest to highlight the problem of air pollution. They also carried a big banner that said 'mausam ka mazaa lijiye' (Enjoy the weather) carrying a picture of the prime minister, who had made these remarks at the start of the Winter session of Parliament.

Congress MP Gaurav Gogoi and other opposition MPs at a protest over the issue of air pollution in the national capital, during the Winter session of Parliament in New Delhi on Thursday PTI

Protesting MPs of various parties also raised slogans against the Government demanding action to tackle air pollution and carried posters that read — "Make polluters pay, not citizens', 'Air quality — action now', 'Don't choke our future', 'Clean air is a right, not a luxury'.

"It is the Government's responsibility to do something as children are dying. Old people like me are also finding it difficult," Sonia Gandhi told reporters after participating in the protest.

Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge was among the opposition leaders present at the protest. "Our question on polluted air — Why does everyone in this city seem troubled'. Modi ji's response — 'Enjoy the weather'. Our protest in Parliament against the BJP's indifference towards poisonous air," Kharge said in a social media post later while sharing a video of the protest.

Congress general secretary Priyanka Gandhi Vadra said she has been demanding a discussion and concrete action on the issue which was not political. "Air pollution is not a political issue. The Government should take concrete action, we are all with it," she said, adding that people are suffering.

Taking a dig at the prime minister for saying 'enjoy the weather', she said, "In Delhi, children and the elderly are unable to breathe."

Over 18,800 Indians deported by US since 2009, Government tells Rajya Sabha

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
New Delhi

As many as 18,822 Indian nationals have been deported by the United States (US) since 2009, including 3,258 since January 2025, the Government informed the Rajya Sabha on Thursday.

Responding to supplementaries in the Rajya Sabha, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar said state Governments and the National Investigation Agency (NIA) have also investigated cases of human trafficking, in which Punjab has the maximum number of cases.

"Since 2009, a total of 18,822 Indian nationals have been deported to India," the minister informed the Rajya Sabha in a written reply to a question.

He said 617 Indians had been deported in 2023, and as many as 1,368 were deported in 2024.

"Since January 2025, a total of 3,258 Indian nationals have been deported by the United States to India. Of these, 2,032 individuals (approximately 62.3 per cent) were deported on regular commercial flights, while the remaining 1,226 (37.6 per cent) arrived on US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) or US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) operated charter flights.

Replying to supplementaries, the minister said the NIA established some years ago an anti-human trafficking division, and it has today a mandate to cover human trafficking. State Governments have also launched investigations into human trafficking cases, he noted.

"The NIA has registered and investigated 27 human trafficking cases, resulting in 169 arrests and chargesheets against 132 individuals. The NIA arrested two important traffickers in Haryana and Punjab on August 7 and then in Himachal Pradesh, two more people on October 2," the minister informed.

Jaishankar said, as far as state Governments are concerned, "The maximum number of trafficking cases is from the state of Punjab. The Punjab Government has constituted an SIT and a fact-finding committee. As per information given by them to us, 25 FIRs have been registered against 58 illegal travel agents, and 16 accused have been arrested."

"In the case of state of Haryana, 2,325 cases have been registered and 44 FIRs have been registered and 27 people have been arrested. Also, one significant trafficker has been arrested by the state of Gujarat," he said.

Jaishankar said the Ministry of External Affairs remains engaged with the US Side to ensure the humane treatment of deportees during US ICE/CBP deportation operations.

The Ministry has strongly registered its concerns with the US Authorities on the treatment of deportees, particularly with respect to the use of shackles, especially on women and children, the minister told the house in his written reply.

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar speaks in the Rajya Sabha during the Winter session of Parliament in New Delhi on Thursday PTI

No instance of shackling of women and children has been brought to the notice of this Ministry since the 5th February deportation flight, he said.

Jaishankar said the US Authorities have conveyed that the Restraining Policy for US Deportation flights is in place since 19 November 2012 as part of the Standard Operating Procedure of the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

"They have also conveyed that their policy of shackling deportees is followed to ensure the safety and security of all passengers on these flights. In the past, they claim that there have been instances of violence by deportees against fellow deportees and supporting crew members on such deportation flights. While women and minors are generally not shackled, the flight officer in charge of a deportation flight, in the interest of the safety of the mission, has the final say on the matter.

"It is also pertinent to note that wanted criminals and gangsters who have been accused of terrorism, homicide, attempt to murder, extortion, etc, have also been removed on these deportation flights. In India's case, absconding criminals such as Lakhwinder Singh and Anmol Bishnoi, against whom lookout notices and arrest warrants have been issued by our law enforcement agencies, have been brought back on such deportation flights," the minister said in his written reply.

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

On a specific case of one Harjit Kaur (73) who was deported by US on February 25, the minister told the member that even though she was not handcuffed, she was maltreated during her detention and the matter was raised by them with the US authorities.

"Whenever any flight with deportees comes, the deportees are invariably interviewed by the officials of the Goverment of India. In this case, our immigration officers have confirmed that she was not handcuffed. We have seen reports reportaining to this.

"While Harjit Kaur was not handcuffed, she was maltreated. She was maltreated in detention before she was put on the flight. On September 26, we have officially taken up her maltreatment with the American Embassy. We have made clear our very strong concern about the manner of her treatment and have asked the American authorities to look into this matter," Jaishankar told the house.

States Focus

CENTRE BEGINS 100-DAY PUSH FOR CHILD MARRIAGE-FREE INDIA

Union Minister of Women and Child Development Annapurna Devi on Thursday said child marriage snatches childhood away from daughters and pushes them towards early maternity and "unimaginable suffering".

She was speaking at the launch of a '100-day Intensive Awareness Campaign for a Child Marriage Free Bharat', where she stressed that the country must adopt "zero tolerance" towards child marriage. The minister urged states, civil society groups, and community leaders to unite with an "unwavering commitment" to eliminate the practice. She said India had made "historic progress", but that far more remained to be done. "Even one child marriage is unacceptable for us," she said.

ODISHA GOVT SANCTIONS ₹1 CRORE FOR DHANU JATRA FESTIVAL

The Odisha Government on Thursday sanctioned ₹1 crore for Baragarh's Dhanu Jatra, during which the town transforms into an open-air theatre with the life of Lord Krishna being enacted over 11 days. The decision was taken at a meeting chaired by Odia Language, Literature & Culture Minister Suryabanshi Suraj. The festival is scheduled to be held from December 24 to January 3.

TMC suspends MLA for planning Babri Mosque replica

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ Kolkata

The Trinamool Congress (TMC) has finally suspended maverick yet, powerful party legislator and former minister from Murshidabad Humayun Kabir for trying to "communalise" the political situation by announcing his plans to construct a Babri Mosque in his district and later in all the districts of the State.

Announcing the decision senior party leader Firhad Hakim on Thursday said that despite being cautioned against making communal remarks Kabir chose to remain indifferent to the party line leading to his suspension.

"We cautioned him twice and asked him to refrain from communally sensitive remarks but he still refused to mend his ways that is why we have taken the decision to suspend him the party will have no relation with him hence forward," Hakim who besides being the Mayor of Kolkata and a senior member of Mamata Banerjee Cabinet as well as the TMC's Muslim face said.

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee during a public rally at Berhampore in Murshidabad district West Bengal on Thursday PTI

Kabir a former Congress leader was initially mentored by the then Behrampore MP Adhir Chowdhury before the both parted ways and the former joined the TMC.

Considered a leader with considerable following is an MLA from Bharatpur constituency of Murshidabad district.

"The party leadership noticed that an MLA from Murshidabad had been making unnecessary, irresponsible and communal remarks he was cautioned thrice but he would not listen then he suddenly declared that he would construct a Babri Masjid in his district which was apparently an attempt to communalise the local politics as he refused to mend his ways the party has decided to suspend him and will have no relation with him and will not be responsible for his remarks," Hakim also considered primarily a leader of the State's Urdu-speaking Muslims said.

Kabir had declared that the foundation stone for the proposed mosque would be laid at Beldanga on December 6. The suspended leader is also credited with a statement made in the run up to 2024 parliamentary elections when he threatened to cut 30 percent of the population of his district and throw them in River Bhagirathi (Ganges) triggering massive repercussions from the State BJP. Around 67 percent population of Murshidabad is Muslim and the rest are Hindus.

When asked for his response, Kabir said he would submit his resignation and launch a new political outfit. "I had told earlier that I would soon announce my formal decision to float a new political party and will field candidates in all the districts I don't believe in blank fires I am saying this with enough confidence that the Muslim people of Bengal are disgusted with the TMC and its leadership they do not want to be exploited any more...My will be a truly secular party evenly represented by all the communities now we will show what we can do," Kabir who is likely to lay the foundation stone of his proposed Babri Mosque on December 6 said.

Meanwhile, Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on Thursday said that there were some leaders who were in the payroll of the BJP and were trying to harm the secular ambience of the State. Though she would not name anyone she said, "we will not tolerate communalisation of politics by anyone or members of any community these people are being paid by the BJP to communally divide the voters" to make way for the saffron party.

Shiv Sena leader alleges theft from Karnataka bank locker

TN RAGHUNATHA ■ Mumbai

In a shocking development, Shiv Sena (Shinde) deputy leader and former MLA Krishna Hegde has lodged a complaint with the police alleging a 'theft' of valuables from his safe deposit locker in the strong-room of the Parle East branch of Karnataka Bank in north-west Mumbai.

In his complaint lodged with the Vile Parle Police Station, Hegde said he had kept in his ban locker several valuables — including his mother's jewellery, cash and some key documents — on September 19 and when he opened the locker on October 22, he found many of the items in it had gone missing.

Apart from his mother's jewellery, cash and some key documents, the other items kept in his burgled bank locker included his licensed revolver and watches. "Some of the items in my locker have gone missing," Hegde said. He however did not disclose the estimated value of the articles lost.

Following the "theft", he had taken up the matter with bank's branch manager Manish Kumar, Cluster Manager Hari Sarin, DGM Rajgopala Bhatt and others on November 27.

On the following day, he submitted a formal theft complaint with Vile Parle Police Station Senior Police Inspector Gabaji Chimte; and a probe is underway.

Accusing the bank management of delaying the internal probe and attempting him to deter him from lodging a complaint, Hegde said: "The bank officials did not act quickly on my complaint. They called a Godrej key-maker and involved the bank's internal vigilance. This was not to probe the theft, but to bury the matter and somehow deter me from filing a police complaint".

"There is utter lack of response from the Karnataka Bank's top brass. I have sent several emails to the Managing Director and CEO, Raghvendra Bhat, but I have not received a single reply from him. The only responses I have received are from the very branch where my locker was burgled".

Hegde alleged that the modus operandi behind the lock theft could be that the miscreants had made duplicate keys of mostly dormant lockers with the help of some unscrupulous locksmiths as the banks already hold the 'master key' to all lockers.

While seeking stringent action is needed against all the offenders, Hegde said that banks must modernize security and surveillance systems. Bank customers deserve protection, not excuses.

Hegde said that he had approached the ombudsman of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) for necessary action in the matter.

Ruling BJP confronts its own bureaucracy in MP

GIRISH SHARMA ■ Bhopal

Ministers and BJP MLAs in Madhya Pradesh are preparing to open a coordinated front against what they describe as an increasingly unresponsive bureaucracy. They have decided to lodge a formal complaint with the chief minister, arguing that administrative resistance is now disrupting governance and weakening the authority of elected representatives.

The latest flashpoint surfaced at the Madhya Pradesh BJP headquarters, where two ministers are stationed each day under a new coordination mechanism meant to improve interaction with party workers. Minister of State for Housing and Urban Development Pratima Bagri, who handled the outreach on Thursday, said the arrangement helps workers raise issues directly with ministers. But she stressed that the core problem lies in the functioning of the bureaucracy.

Bagri said ministers and MLAs are routinely facing situations where officials ignore their calls or fail to act on instructions. This, she said, has slowed file movement, delayed constituency work and created unnecessary pressure on elected representatives. Bagri also noted that she had recently raised a similar concern during a cabinet meeting, stating that officials "do not listen to ministers," a remark that drew attention to a widening internal governance rift.

The decision to approach the chief minister comes after months of complaints from lawmakers across regions. MLAs from Malwa, Bundelkhand, Gwalior-Chambal and tribal districts report a growing pattern of administrative officers taking unilateral decisions without political consultation. Many say district-level functioning has become excessively rigid, with approvals and clearances moving at a pace far slower than what developmental targets require.

This strain comes at a critical time. Madhya Pradesh is entering a heavy implementation cycle for infrastructure, urban development, agriculture-linked interventions and welfare expansions for 2025–26. Any breakdown in coordination between the political leadership and the administrative machinery risks delaying flagship projects and weakening service delivery in high-need areas.

Public frustration mirrors these concerns. Citizens in several districts report long delays in land records, housing approvals, ration updates, pension processing and municipal permissions. In many cases, appeals routed through MLAs or ministers have failed to accelerate action, strengthening the perception that bureaucracy — not elected representatives — is controlling governance outcomes.

The emerging confrontation has triggered internal debate within the ruling BJP. Senior leaders argue that democratic accountability must guide administrative behaviour, not the other way around.

Chaos at West Bengal CEO office as BLOs protest SIR deadlines

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ Kolkata

There quite a commotion outside the office of the State Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) when a large section of the Trinamool Congress backed booth level officers — engaged in the special intensive revision (SIR) of electoral rolls on Thursday staged a restive demonstration demanding extension of the submission of enumeration forms.

A group of 400 strong officials of BLO Protection Committee shouted slogans against the Election Commission of India (ECI) and breached the barricades trying to enter the CEO office where they were stopped by the security forces forcing them to stage a sit-in.

Accompanied by the family members of the BLOs who had died during the SIR they complained "we have been running against time and are on the verge of a breakdown. We have to attend to our duties in schools, remain awake all night to digitise the enumeration forms the ECI has not been extending the deadline despite our appeal to do so they are issuing fresh notifications and orders over WhatsApp every day," one of the agitating BLOs said.

Incidentally about 99 per cent of the enumeration forms had been digitized in Bengal which stood fourth behind Lakshwadeep, Rajasthan and Goa in terms of ditigisting the forms.

Meanwhile, Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee once again thundered from a rally in Murshidabad district accusing once again Union Home Minister Amit Shah for creating a panic of President's Rule in Bengal so as to enforce an "unplanned SIR" in two months "which is a work of two years."

She said "it was Amit Shah's trick to enforce SIR with a hidden threat of President's Rule if we had blocked SIR then they would have enforced a President's Rule," adding however that till she was there she would not allow anyone to

Tezpur University shutdown enters 6th day as proposal rejected

TONY DAS ■ Guwahati

The shutdown by students of Tezpur University in Assam entered its sixth day on Thursday over their demand for the removal of the vice-chancellor, while staffers of the varsity rejected Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma's proposal for the appointment of a pro VC.

State Congress president Gaurav Gogoi has also accused Sarma of "masking the failures" of current VC Shambhu Nath Singh by suggesting the appointment of a pro vice chancellor.

The students of the varsity have been protesting since mid-September for alleged corruption and financial irregularities, and have started the shutdown of all academic activities on the campus from November 29 for an indefinite period. A faculty member said the shutdown has been relaxed for departmental emergencies and pending work for a few hours in the morning for three days since Wednesday.

Sarma on Wednesday said he had spoken to Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan regarding the shutdown of Tezpur University and urged him to appoint a pro VC immediately, pending an impartial enquiry into the conduct of the present VC.

"The Tezpur University fraternity strongly rebuts the Assam chief minister's recent statement regarding the ongoing crisis on the campus. His suggestion to appoint a pro vice chancellor reflects a clear misunderstanding of the movement's long-standing and repeatedly communicated demand: the urgent appointment of an acting vice chancellor," Tezpur University United Forum (TUUF) said in a statement late on Wednesday.

The ongoing agitation in the central varsity in Sonitpur district is being carried out under the aegis of the TUUF.

The forum also claimed that the university has been in "turmoil" for 76 days, and during the entire period, the chief minister "chose to remain silent".

"His sudden involvement - only after the situation gained national attention - raises serious concern about whether he is acting out of genuine responsibility or political self-preservation," the TUUF questioned.

The chief minister "ignored the crisis for weeks" despite continuous protests, appeals and institutional paralysis, the forum alleged, adding that "leadership demands timely engagement, not last-minute statements".

"Our demands remain unchanged - immediate suspension of the current vice chancellor, pending enquiry, appointment of an acting vice chancellor — not a pro-VC and publication of all inquiry reports already submitted to authorities," the TUUF added.

Gogoi has also expressed his 'disappointment' with the chief minister's stand on the issues.

"Real leadership would have meant that the chief minister would have stood with the faculty, staff and students of this prestigious university. Instead, the chief minister is masking the failures of the current vice chancellor by suggesting a pro vice chancellor," he said in a post on X on Thursday.

Citing old news reports, Gogoi claimed that there were "enquiries about financial irregularities from the office of Principal Accountant General" during Singh's term as VC of Patna University in Bihar.

"It would be best that the prestige of Tezpur University should be paramount, and a new Vice Chancellor be appointed. Stop using the University of Northeast for posting controversial VCs," the Congress deputy leader in the Lok Sabha added.

All end-term examinations have been cancelled, and other activities have also stopped in the varsity.

The Tezpur University Teachers' Association (TUTA) and Tezpur University Non-Teaching Employees' Association (TUNTEA) have extended their support to the agitation.

Bijapur encounter toll rises to 18 as six more bodies of Naxaliles found

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Bijapur (Chhattisgarh)

Six more bodies of Naxalites have been recovered following an encounter with security personnel in Chhattisgarh's Bijapur district, taking the toll of cadres killed in the gun battle to 18, officials said on Thursday. Three personnel of the District Reserve Guard, a unit of the state police, were also killed in the gunfight which took place on Wednesday.

Following a prolonged intermittent exchange of fire that lasted for around 12 hours, bodies of 12 Naxalites were recovered till late Wednesday evening, Inspector General of Police Sundarraj P said.

Six more bodies were found till Thursday morning during a search in the area. With this, the toll of Naxalites killed in the encounter has gone up to 18, he said, adding that the search operation was still underway in the area.

The operation involving personnel of the DRG from Dantewada and Bijapur, and Special Task Force, both units of the state police, and CoBRA (Commando Battalion for Resolute Action — an elite unit of CRPF) was launched based on inputs about the presence of west Bastar division and PLGA company number 2 of Maoists in the area, he said.

"Our security forces bravely retaliated to the Maoists' firing, but unfortunately, our three brave jawans belonging to DRG Bijapur were martyred in the action," he said.

The IG was speaking to reporters after paying homage to the three deceased security personnel at Bijapur Police Lines.

Family members of the three killed jawans, public representatives, officials and local people were also present at the wreath-laying ceremony and paid tribute to them.

The deceased personnel head constable Monu Vadadi, constable Dukaru Gonde and jawan Ramesh Sodhi were residents of Bijapur district. Their mortal remains were sent to their native places after the people paid tributes to them.

Two DRG personnel were also injured in the incident.

One of the killed Naxalites has been identified as Modiyami Vella, while the identity of the remaining killed cadres was yet to be ascertained, the IG said.

Vella was active as commander of company number 2 of PLGA (People's Liberation Guerrilla Army) of Maoists and involved in several incidents of attacks on security forces, including the 2020 Minpa ambush (Sukma), wherein 17 security personnel lost their lives, and Tekalgudem (Bijapur) attack, in which 22 security personnel were killed in 2021, he said.

BJP MLAs walk out of Himachal Assembly over alleged lathi charge on ABVP workers

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Dharamshala/Shimla

BJP legislators walked out of the Himachal Pradesh Assembly on Thursday in protest of the alleged lathi charge on ABVP workers near the Zorawar Stadium in Dharamshala.

Raising a point of order after the question hour, Leader of Opposition Jai Ram Thakur said the sub-divisional magistrate (SDM), Dharamshala, had granted permission to the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) to organise the protest march to the Zorawar Stadium, yet the police resorted to lathi charge on the protesters.

He also accused the chief minister of misleading the House, saying Sukhu had earlier told the assembly that the ABVP had not been granted permission for the protest demonstration.

Leader of Opposition in Himachal Pradesh Assembly Jairam Thakur speaking with the media during the Winter session of the State Assembly in Dharamshala on Thursday PTI

Several people were injured following a scuffle between ABVP activists and the police at the Zorawar ground on Wednesday after workers of the RSS-affiliated students' organisation arrived in large numbers to gherao the Vidhan Sabha to press for their demands.

The ABVP workers alleged that women activists were kicked by male police personnel and demanded action against the police, specifically the suspension of station house officer, Dharamshala, for taking the ABVP workers to a community hall after the protest, and allegedly threatening and thrashing them.

As per Chief Minister Sukhwinder Singh Sukhu's statement on Wednesday, one male and three female police constables were injured in the scuffle and six people were injured due to the agitation.

During the protest, ABVP workers also misbehaved with a female constable, which the Government has taken seriously, he said.

The leader of opposition also raised the issue of Youth Congress workers burning and kicking an effigy of Prime Minister Narendra Modi outside the Raj Bhavan earlier in November.

Terming the incident as unfortunate, he questioned whether the authorities had taken any action against the Youth Congress workers responsible for this.

He then said the BJP legislative party was walking out of the House in protest of the lathi charge on the ABVP activists.

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SC asks States to provide more staff to ECI

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
New Delhi

Taking note of a plea alleging extreme work pressure faced by the Booth Level Officers (BLOs) engaged in the time-bound special revision of the electoral rolls, the Supreme Court directed the States on Thursday to consider deputing additional employees for reducing their working hours.

The court was hearing an application filed by actor Vijay's party, Tamilaga Vetri Kazhagam (TVK), seeking a direction to the Election Commission of India (ECI) not to take coercive actions under the Representation of the People (RP) Act against the BLOs for not performing the duty in a time-bound manner and pointing out that many of them have committed suicide due to the work pressure.

A bench of Chief Justice Surya Kant and Justice Joymalya Bagchi took note of the submissions made by senior advocate Gopal Sankaranarayanan, who appeared in the matter for the TVK, that some instructions are needed to be issued as many BLOs, who are either teachers or anganwadi workers, have died due to the extreme pressure exerted on them by EC officials.

Sankaranarayanan said moreover, the EC officials are also getting FIRs lodged against the BLOs if they fail to perform their duties.

The CJI said the States may consider deploying additional staff, so that the work pressure is eased. "In case they are facing hardships, including being overburdened with their routine duties as well as the additional duties assigned by the Election Commission, the State Government can obviate such hardships," the bench noted.

The States may consider the "desirability of deputing additional staff at the disposal of the EC, so that the working hours can be proportionately reduced", an order issued by the court said.

The bench said if any employee has any "specific reason" for seeking exemption from the SIR duty, the competent officer of the state can consider such requests on a case-to-case basis and replace such an employee with another.

"However, it shall not be construed or understood as if they can withdraw the employees who have been assigned the duty if their substitutes are not provided," it added.

The court further said the States where the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of the electoral rolls is underway, "shall be obligated to deploy the requisite workforce at the disposal of the EC, though the strength of such employees can be increased as explained above".

The bench disposed of the plea, saying the other prayers like seeking ex-gratia compensation for the BLOs who died during SIR duties can be revived later, either by the aggrieved persons or the petitioner, by filing another application at a later stage. During the hearing, Sankaranarayanan said FIRs under section 32 of the RP Act

have been filed by the poll panel against BLOs.

Section 32 of the Act deals with a breach of official duty by electoral officers, making it punishable with imprisonment and fines for neglecting their duties related to the electoral rolls.

The senior lawyer said BLOs are not equipped to perform the SIR duties in such a short span of time and moreover, there are internet-related issues. He said the teachers and anganwadi workers have to go for SIR duties early morning or late at night, before or after their regular work.

He said a youngster, who had to go on leave for his wedding, was denied leave and suspended.

"He committed suicide.... When you are doing this, at least show the human side. Criminal action is harsh, it should not be initiated," the lawyer said. The bench said the state Governments cannot run away from their obligation.

"If there is a difficulty being experienced, then on a case-to-case basis, the State Government can exempt employees and provide an alternative," the CJI said. "Why should the Election Commission register FIRs?" Sankaranarayanan asked. "It is not for the first time, earlier also they have been registering it," the CJI said.

Senior advocate Kapil Sibal said the pressure on the BLOs is a "harsh reality". Citing the example of Uttar Pradesh, the CJI said the election in the State is due in 2027, yet the BLOs are asked to complete the exercise in a time-bound manner.

The bench said no state has so far approached the court citing difficulties. Senior advocates Rakesh Dwivedi and Maninder Singh, appearing in the matter for the EC, said in Tamil Nadu, more than 90 per cent of the enumeration forms have been supplied.

Dwivedi said the poll panel resorted to criminal proceedings only when the BLOs showed reluctance to perform their duties. He said such arguments are used to create a particular kind of political narrative.

On November 30, the EC extended the entire schedule for the ongoing SIR exercise in nine States and three Union territories by a week, amid allegations by opposition parties that the "tight timelines" were causing problems for people and ground-level poll officials.

The EC announced the SIR in the nine states and three Union territories on October 27. Nearly 51 crore electors will be covered in the massive voter-list cleanup exercise.

These states and Union territories are — the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Lakshadweep, Chhattisgarh, Goa, Gujarat, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Puducherry, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal.

Among these, Tamil Nadu, Puducherry, Kerala and West Bengal are scheduled go to polls in 2026. For Assam, where polls are also due in 2026, the revision of the electoral rolls was announced separately.

Order Order

HC declines to put on hold order allowing lighting of oil lamp on TN hill

The Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court on Thursday declined to stay an order of a single judge allowing the lighting of traditional "Karthigai Deepam" oil lamp at a stone pillar, meant for that purpose, on the Thirupparankundram hill, housing the Lord Subramaniya Swamy temple. A bench led by Justice G Jayachandran and Justice KK Ramakrishnan declined to interfere with the order of Justice GR Swaminathan allowing the lighting of the lamp on the hill.

On December 1, Justice Swaminathan allowed writ petitions that sought a direction for appropriate arrangements to light the Karthigai Deepam at the "Dheepathoon," which is the stone pillar. A devotee Ram Ravi Kumar approached the High Court, represented by Advocate MR Venkatesh. By lighting the lamp at Deepathoon, which is meant for that purpose, the structure of the Dargha is not in any way affected and the Dargha is located at a safe distance of not less than 50 meters away from the stone pillar, the judge had said in the order.

Ensure 30 per cent quota for women lawyers in State Bar Councils, SC to BCI

The Supreme Court on Thursday asked the Bar Council of India (BCI) to ensure 30 per cent reservation for women in the upcoming State bar council elections. The top court, while hearing a petition seeking mandatory women's representation in state bar councils, was told by the apex bar body BCI that implementing such reservation would require amendments to the Advocates Act.

"We expect that the BCI will construe the rules in such a manner that it will ensure 30 per cent reservation in State Bar Councils; such a position should also be available for some posts of office bearers," said the bench comprising Chief Justice Surya Kant and Justice Joymalya Bagchi.

When the lawyer for the BCI expressed uncertainty on whether sufficient number of women lawyers would contest, the bench referred to a workshop held by the Supreme Court Bar Association based on a survey among women lawyers. "You were not there in yesterday's workshop. 83 per cent of the women want to be members in the SCBA," the CJI said.

HC dismisses SAD leader Majithia's bail plea in disproportionate assets case

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
Chandigarh

The Punjab and Haryana High Court on Thursday dismissed the bail plea of Shiromani Akali Dal leader and former Punjab minister Bikram Singh Majithia in a disproportionate assets case, observing that the possibility of him influencing the investigation could not be ruled out. While pronouncing the order, Justice Tribhuvan Dahiya, however, directed the Punjab Vigilance Bureau to complete its probe within three months. Thereafter, the petitioner can seek his release on bail, the judge said, adding the court is conscious of the fact that the petitioner cannot be kept in custody for an indefinite period, as that would infringe upon his right to liberty.

Bikram Singh Majithia

The Punjab Vigilance Bureau arrested Majithia on June 25 in the disproportionate assets case that involved alleged laundering of ₹540 crore of "drug money". He was booked under the Prevention of Corruption Act. The FIR against Majithia stems from an ongoing probe being conducted by a Punjab Police special investigation team into a 2021 drug case. Pronouncing the order on Thursday, the court observed that the petitioner is one of the prominent political figures in the Punjab and had been a cabinet minister for over seven years.

"The investigating agency has cited about 20 material witnesses, who have been termed vulnerable. In case the petitioner is to be released from custody at this stage, the possibility of his influencing the further course of investigation, trying to cover up the questionable transactions, manipulating the record relating to the same, and influencing the concerned persons/witnesses not to cooperate with the investigating agency, cannot be ruled out," read the order. The court said the petitioner is accused of serious economic offences.

"Investigation of the case has revealed huge unaccounted money in his bank accounts, as also the setting up of a large number of companies through which the financial transactions have been carried out surreptitiously for his benefit.

"It has also come to the notice of the investigating agency that money has been routed through some foreign entities based in Singapore and Cyprus. The petitioner is directly or indirectly in control of most of these entities with immediate family members, and appears to be the key beneficiary," it said. The High Court order stated that the transactions, as well as assets accumulated by routing the money in the manner aforementioned, are being investigated, and all this has adverse ramifications for the financial health of the State.

Majithia's counsel RS Cheema contended that the companies or entities mentioned in the FIR have been thoroughly investigated by the state in the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act case, as well as in the case the vigilance bureau mentioned the alleged disproportionate assets and cash deposits in the petitioner's as well as in companies' accounts as "drug money".

Opposing Majithia's bail plea, Punjab Advocate General Maninderjit Singh Bedi and additional Advocate General Chanchal Singla submitted that the petitioner is accused of very serious economic offences. Majithia is lodged in the New Nabha jail in Patiala. A Mohali court rejected his bail plea in August.

The Vigilance Bureau filed an over 40,000-page chargesheet in the disproportionate assets case in the Mohali court on August 22. In 2021, Majithia was booked under the NDPS Act.

The action was taken on the basis of a 2018 report of the anti-drug Special Task Force. He spent more than five months in Patiala jail.

No GST on leasing out residential premises as hostel for students: SC

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
New Delhi

The Supreme Court on Thursday held that leasing out of residential premises to an entity which is using it as hostel for students and working professionals is exempted from GST.

A bench of justices JB Pardiwala and KV Viswanathan upheld the verdict of the Karnataka High Court which said that leasing out of residential premises to an entity which is using it as hostel to students and working professionals is exempt under GST.

"In the case on hand, the ultimate use of the property as residence remains unchanged. However, if 18 per cent GST is levied on this transaction between the respondent No. 1 and the lessee ie, M/s DTwelve Spaces Private Limited, the same would ultimately be passed on to the students and working professionals which would lead to a situation where the legislative intent behind granting exemption for residential use is defeated," the bench said.

The top court was hearing a plea filed by a co-owner of the residential property having 42 rooms in Bengaluru.

The petitioner along with other co-owners executed a lease deed in favour of the lessee, namely M/s D Twelve Spaces Private Limited.

The lessee leased out the aforesaid residential property as hostel for long term accommodation to students and working professionals with the duration of stay ranging from three to 12 months.

The petitioner sought clarification with regard to its eligibility to seek exemption for the renting services provided and filed an application before the Authority of Advance Ruling, Karnataka.

The AAR, Karnataka held that the renting of residential dwelling for use as residence is not covered under entry 13 and the benefit of exemption according to notification is not available.

The petitioner filed an appeal before the Appellate Authority for Advance Ruling which held that the property rented out is a hostel and cannot be termed as residential accommodation or residential dwelling and denied the benefit of exemption.

The Karnataka High Court held that the leasing out of residential premises to an entity who is using it as 'hostel' to students and working professionals is exempt under GST.

Delhi HC asks MEA to facilitate communication between Celina, her brother detained in UAE

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
New Delhi

The Delhi High Court on Thursday asked the Centre to facilitate communication between actor Celina Jaitly and her brother, a former Indian Army officer detained in the UAE for more than a year.

The court was hearing a plea filed by the actor seeking effective legal representation for her brother Major Vikrant Kumar Jaitly (retd).

The actor's application claimed that her brother has been residing in the UAE since 2016. She said that he was employed with the MATITI Group, which is engaged in trading, consultancy, and risk management services.

Major Vikrant had been "illegally abducted and detained" in the UAE on September 6 last year, the petition said.

However, despite the passage of over one year, the Ministry of External Affairs

Celina Jaitly

(MEA) has failed to secure basic information about the actor's brother, including his welfare conditions and legal status, the plea alleged.

On November 3, the court had directed the Government to file its response.

On Thursday, Justice Sachin Datta directed the MEA to inform Major Vikrant in the next consular access that his sister wished to talk to him.

Besides, Justice Dutta also asked the MEA to facilitate Celina's communication with her brother via the TAMM app (Abu Dhabi's Government services app) or by another relevant mode.

The court noted that according to the status report filed by the ministry, a nodal officer had been appointed

It, however, sought a fresh status report and posted the matter for further proceedings on December 23.

During the hearing, Celina was in tears, and her counsel submitted that the actor was unable to communicate with Major Vikrant, despite the court's earlier directions.

The advocate said Celina could not communicate with her brother through the UAE government's app as it could be used only by the country's citizens.

It was informed to the court on behalf of the centre that efforts were being made to enable Celina to communicate with her brother and that Major Vikrant had been granted consular access.

Last month, the court had directed the authorities to make attempts to ensure that contact between the actress and her brother is facilitated, in addition to ensuring contact between him and his wife.

"The respondent (Centre) shall depute a nodal officer for the above purpose and also to apprise the petitioner and other family members of the detainee as regards the status of the detainee and the legal proceedings. Let the nodal officer provide regular updates to the petitioner and other family members," the court had said.

SC asks all High Courts to submit details of pending acid attack cases in four weeks

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
New Delhi

Terming tardy trials in acid attack cases as a "mockery of the system", the Supreme Court on Thursday directed all the High Courts to submit details of such pending cases across the country within four weeks.

Mooting the idea of setting up special courts for expeditious disposal of acid attack cases, the top court also asked the Centre to consider amending the law through legislation or even an ordinance so that the survivors are formally included within the definition of persons with disabilities under the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act to avail welfare schemes. A bench comprising Chief Justice Surya Kant and Justice Joymalya Bagchi also issued notices to the Centre and the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities on a PIL filed by acid attack survivor Shaheen Malik that the victims be categorised as persons with disabilities to ensure access to welfare schemes.

Solicitor General Tushar Mehta assured the court that the issue would be taken up with "due seriousness" by the Government.

The bench termed as "national shame" the prolonged delay of 16 years in Malik's own case, which has been pending since 2009 before a Rohini court here.

Malik, who also argued personally, said that she was attacked in 2009, yet the trial has still not concluded. *'Mere saath 2009 mein attack hua tha, abhi tak trial chal raha hai'* (I was attacked in 2009; the trial is still going on)," she said. Till 2013, nothing happened in the case and the trial, which is now taking place in Rohini in Delhi, is now at the stage of final hearing, she said. Expressing surprise over the delay of over 16 years, the CJI said, "The offence is of 2009 and the trial is not completed! If the National Capital cannot respond to these challenges, then who will deal with them? It is a shame on the system! This is a national shame."

The CJI asked Malik to file an application in the PIL itself explaining why the matter has not been concluded, assuring her that the court may even take suo motu cognisance. The CJI said the trial in her case must be held on a day-to-day basis. "Issue notice. Learned Solicitor General who was present in the court has graciously accepted notice.

"He has also expressed concern about the causes raised in the instant petition. We also direct the registrar generals of all high courts to furnish the details of pending trials in the cases of acid attack victims in their respective jurisdiction," the bench ordered.

The CJI said that the aspect of pendency of cases and covering acid attack victims within the definition of persons with disabilities will be taken up after four weeks. The bench, however, said that it will take up next week the issue of the delay in the trial in Malik's case at a Rohini court here.

During the hearing, Malik highlighted the plight of victims who are forced to ingest acid, often surviving with artificial feeding tubes and severe disabilities. The CJI expressed shock and said he had heard about the incidents of acid-throwing but had never come across cases where victims were forced to consume acid. CJI Kant further remarked that these offences ought to be tried in special courts, given the gravity and the impact on survivors. "This is a mockery of the system. There should be no sympathy for such persons (accused)," he said.

The perpetrators "should meet with the same ruthlessness as done by them," the solicitor general said.

Editor's TAKE

Putin visit: Reaffirming Indo-Russian solidarity

Russian President's visit carries significance beyond ceremony, reinforcing India's strategic autonomy and its pursuit of an independent foreign policy

India and Russia have been friends since the cold war days when India refused to join the western bloc and charted its Non-aligned course. It came at its own peril as the US sided with Pakistan and was suspicious of India's intention. But the gamble paid off as India maintained its independent foreign policy without budging to the US pressure. Russia supported it in the times of crisis and the friendship endured.

In the present context too, this holds good as India has refused to bow to the US pressure and maintained steady relation with Russia. Russian President Vladimir Putin's state visit to New Delhi will go a long way in cementing this relationship as both countries need each other than ever before. For India, the visit is far more than a diplomatic formality. It is a reaffirmation of a long-standing partnership, a signal of continuity in a turbulent world, and above all, a clear articulation of India's strategic autonomy at a time when Western world continue to frown upon India's import of discounted Russian oil. The visit is packed with symbolism and substance – from a ceremonial welcome at Rashtrapati Bhavan to paying homage at Raj Ghat, and from restricted talks at Hyderabad House to the annual India–Russia Summit, every segment reflects the depth of a relationship that has withstood vagaries of time and pressure from external actors.

This is also an occasion for balancing a heavily skewed trade basket. Although bilateral trade touched $68 billion last year, driven largely by India's purchase of Russian oil, India's exports amounted to less than $5 billion. The business forum organised jointly by FICCI and Roscongress was therefore crucial. Defence cooperation, traditionally the bedrock of the partnership, is set to deepen further following the visit. Just ahead of the visit, the Russian Duma ratified the Reciprocal Exchange of Logistics Agreement (RELOS), which will facilitate the movement and support of warships, military aircraft, and personnel to India. Modeled on India's Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) with the US, Reciprocal Exchange of Logistics (RELOS) with Russia represents a modernisation of the defence relationship, enabling more joint exercises, humanitarian missions, and interoperability. Ongoing discussions over the supply of S-400 systems, Su-57 aircraft, and small modular nuclear reactors further underline Russia's continuing relevance to India's military and energy security architecture.

Besides, the geopolitical context of the visit cannot be ignored. Since the Ukraine conflict began, India has faced sustained pressure from Western countries to reduce its economic and strategic engagement with Moscow. Yet New Delhi has resisted these demands, choosing instead to prioritise its national interest. Putin's visit, therefore, is a reminder that India's foreign policy is shaped neither by the US pressure nor by ideological factors but by its national interest. With agreements spanning trade, agriculture, defence, academia, and media – one message stands out: the India–Russia relationship is evolving and is here to stay.

India's civilisational cohesion

What emerges from this long arc of history is a simple truth: India's unity has never rested on sameness, but on a civilisational ethos that embraces plurality while sustaining a shared rhythm of life

PRAFULL GORADIA

Lately, Shri Mohan Bhagwat, RSS chief, has been speaking with renewed urgency about the unity of India. His concerns are not new. In truth, questions about the cohesion of the subcontinent have echoed since the passing of Akbar. During his nearly half-century rule, Akbar ensured that the people of northern India - and indeed their very souls — breathed in a common rhythm. The south, though geographically distant, shared a civilisational bond that had endured for centuries. Yet since the end of the 12th century, this bond was never fully spontaneous. Every ruler who ascended the throne of Delhi, including the remarkable Razia Sultan, was quietly scrutinised with a single question: is this monarch a sovereign first and a Muslim second — or the other way round?

Akbar was exceptional precisely because he answered this question with unusual clarity. For him, kingship was not a secondary identity — it was the first and the last. His life offered little room for confusion. At just thirteen, he found himself in the storm of the Second Battle of Panipat.

Over the next five years, as he consolidated his power, he thought deeply about the nature of his rule. He realised that he was destined to govern an empire in which nearly 97 per cent of his subjects were Hindu. His long-term success required not merely their obedience but their goodwill. This did not mean antagonising Muslims, but it certainly meant displeasing an orthodox clergy that envisioned the empire under the Nizam-e-Mustafa, where political authority followed religious guidance. Akbar chose a different path — one that placed the stability of the realm above sectarian demands.

Most rulers of the Delhi Sultanate and later the Mughal Empire, however, presided over a realm that resembled what Tipu Sultan would later proudly call a "religious state." The consequence was a deep and often painful divide: rulers and their beneficiaries stood on one side, while the vast Hindu populace remained on the other.

Hindus were routinely called kafir — a term denoting a non-believer, but one that soon came to be understood as an insult in daily life. They were tolerated as taxpayers, artisans and the economic backbone of the empire. For military service, they were summoned when necessary, but rarely trusted with command. A sense of distance persisted, even when peace prevailed.

In medieval India, ideas such as "the souls of all citizens breathing together" to define nationality had not yet been articulated; such expressions would arise much later in Europe.

> THE GREATEST VIRTUE OF HINDUISM IS THAT IT IS RARELY AGAINST ANYONE. PRECISELY FOR THIS REASON, SWAMI VIVEKANANDA, DURING HIS VISIT TO THE UNITED STATES, CHOSE TO USE THE TERMS "VEDANTA" AND "VEDANTISM"

Yet India had its own notion of unity - dosti ki ekta, the harmony of friendship and coexistence. This unity was not spoken of daily, but it revealed itself in moments of crisis: in the long turmoil of Kashmir, or even in the occasional tensions in Tamil Nadu that could reverberate across the subcontinent. Indians instinctively sensed that unity was not a poetic abstraction but a lived necessity.

The trauma of 1947 was the most severe test of this idea of unity. One-third of the country broke away to follow Mr Jinnah's vision. Yet within twenty-four years, in 1971, more than half of Pakistan rejected that very vision, abandoning the dream of a "New Medina."

The episode demonstrated that religious identity alone cannot hold a country together. What many in the subcontinent failed to grasp — then or now — is that Hinduism, with its inductive, voluntary and internally diverse nature, forms a deeper and more enduring basis for unity than a rigid, prescriptive ideology.

The Hindu ethos, often described simply as "culture", has historically fostered an implicit unity across India's immense diversity. One example is the idea of karma.

A Hindu is taught to believe that one's circumstances are shaped by one's own past actions. Whether or not one remembers the details of past lives, the underlying philosophy encourages introspection rather than blame. A Hindu tends to hold oneself responsible for adversity, instead of attributing calamity to others or to the state. This worldview, for centuries, prevented large-scale politicisation of suffering. Had the population of western Pakistan embraced such a view, its violent break from its eastern wing might have unfolded very differently.

The greatest virtue of Hinduism is that it is rarely against anyone. Precisely for this reason, Swami Vivekananda, during his visit to the United States, chose to use the terms "Vedanta" and "Vedantism." He wanted to make it clear that Hinduism was not a negation of other faiths but a vast philosophical tradition.

Significantly, India has never witnessed a Hindu-Christian riot, even in regions like Nagercoil where conversions have been widespread. Scuffles may have occurred, but not large-scale communal violence. The more frequent historical clashes were between Hindus and Muslims, often triggered by anxieties nurtured by sections of the clergy. From time to time, religious leaders warned their communities that a relaxed attitude might allow Hindus to grow complacent — or even to grow in number. Partition, however, dramatically reduced the political potency of this rhetoric.

Across these centuries, one truth has quietly endured: the unity of India does not rest on uniformity of religion, language or ethnicity. It rests on a civilisational ethos — rooted in Hindu thought yet open to all — that absorbs difference without erasing it. Akbar sensed this. Modern India, too, must remember it.

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The Pioneer

PIC TALK

Hands that pick the world's favourite morning brew. In Assam's Nagaon district, a tea worker continues a craft handed down through generations.

PHOTO: PTI

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Gen Z inspires carefree living and confidence

ASHA IYER KUMAR

2ND OPINION
THE PIONEER

Pushing into the second half of my fifties can feel like either a renaissance after a lifetime of plodding or a slow slide into becoming a relic condemned to decrepitude. For me, navigating this terrain has taken an unexpected turn. I now find myself looking up to a generation many decades younger, with equal measures of wariness and admiration. Gen Z has me quite jazzed these days. There is something about them that intrigues me, even drawing me to emulate certain aspects of their disposition.

The criticisms laid against them by older generations are plentiful. The cavernous gap that exists between them and us manifests in many ways. There is a mutual 'sus' that pervades our interactions, and their presence invariably makes me feel like I lack the 'rizz'. Like many in my generation, I too have had qualms about the way they conduct the business of life, but I now wonder if their new ways are being misunderstood and dismissed by us rather too quickly.

Gen Z has grown up in a world that demands constant self-presentation on social media, in academics, in job markets, and in every space they inhabit. They don't have it easy anywhere. Confidence, for them, is not vanity; it is a survival skill. Even when they're unsure, they must sound sure. Older generations mistake that certitude for arrogance. That very conviction mirrors back the diffidence I carried through my youth, even in a world far less competitive than theirs. I envy the self-assurance they possess. I wish I could borrow a fragment of it now, to keep myself afloat in a world that seems to be in rush hour all day.

There are traits that mark them as products of a modern age to which we are somewhat alien. Yet they get several things right-skills that help them navigate life with striking ease. They do not glorify suffering and are unapologetic about setting boundaries. They keep toxicity at bay and walk away from manipulation without hesitation. You cannot arm-twist them; they know better. I find this deeply admirable. Gen Z has no desire to appear perfect. They are cavalier in their ways and do not take critics too seriously. Their humour and candour often mask a quiet sensitivity to self-worth. They care about how they are treated and cannot tolerate dismissal, even if it sometimes reads as haughtiness. They are less apologetic about who they are and what they want from life. It is an attitude I often wish to emulate, for remaining unbothered when judgement flies in your face is a rare liberation. There is also a breeziness in how they handle personal affairs. Permanent relationships are not assumed. They enter them knowing endings are possible. They invest, but do not chain themselves. They prioritise emotional safety over emotional endurance. They avoid deriving identity solely from relationships and steer clear of over-sentimentality. Their low-intensity connections do not break them when they end; they simply move on, letting bygones be bygones. This is not detachment but self-preservation-a clarity that helps them distinguish between being kind and being merely nice. They are not frivolous; they are cautious and self-loving. Yes, they have traits old-schoolers may disapprove of, but they also possess a knack for making the most of whatever life offers-lemons or laughter. They show me how to live with more ease, openness and a dash of flair. One day, when I am ready, I will take a leaf from the Gen Z scrapbook and learn to be carefree.

The writer is a Dubai-based author, columnist, independent journalist and children's writing coach

RUSSIA TWISTS PEACE EFFORTS TO SUSTAIN ITS IMPERIAL AMBITIONS

Russia is clearly toying with peace efforts from the West and elsewhere. Behind this lies a layered blend of strategy, politics and narrative shaping. Its core instinct remains geopolitical: Moscow views control over its neighbourhood as essential strategic depth, making any concession in Ukraine a setback rather than a diplomatic trade-off.

This outlook is further strengthened by domestic politics. The war has evolved into a tool for regime consolidation and political control at home. Economic adaptation has also inured Russia to sanctions that were expected to bite much harder.

Energy reorientation towards Asia, deeper strategic ties with China and the creation of alternative supply chains have significantly reduced the pressure on Moscow to negotiate.

Russia now believes that time favours its attritional strategy. Incremental territorial gains, fortified defensive lines and the perception of gradual advantage leave it with little incentive to alter course. China's quiet but steady support helps dilute its sense of international isolation.

At the same time, Western inconsistency, political shifts in Washington, wavering European unity and growing public fatigue reinforce the Kremlin's ideological framing.

The conflict is portrayed as a civilisational resistance to Western intrusion. For Moscow, peace has become a tactical convenience-no longer a strategic objective.

R NARAYANAN | MUMBAI

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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Ignoring soil pollution costs lives

Soil pollution has not received adequate attention. Land degradation inevitably leads to soil contamination, and chemicals released through industrial and agricultural activities are the primary culprits. Untreated waste and wastewater have already destroyed thousands of species of fish, birds, plants and other organisms. Although soil has the natural ability to filter contaminants, it can do so only to a limited extent. Remaining pollutants may seep into the atmosphere, contributing to air pollution, or into water bodies, compounding water pollution. Direct human contact with contaminated soil is also a serious possibility. As more than ninety per cent of food comes from soil, its conservation is vital for the ecological chain.

The crippling effects of soil pollution-including congenital disorders, infectious diseases and non-communicable illnesses such as cancer — have alerted health professionals to its dangers. Environmental scientists possess various remedies, such as surface leaching, bioremediation, thermal remediation, mycoremediation and phytoremediation. Nonetheless, on World Soil Day, observed on December 5, the responsibilities of individuals in preventing and eliminating soil pollution cannot be overstated.

GANAPATHI BHAT | AKOLA

Internship scheme fails to deliver

The Centre's ambitious Prime Minister's Internship Scheme has failed to attract the majority of unemployed youth, as confirmed by official data submitted to Parliament.

Harsh Malhotra, Minister of State for Corporate Affairs, informed the Lok Sabha that only 33,300 young people accepted internships during the first two rounds, of whom 6,618 dropped out midway. Companies offered 82,000 internships in the first phase and 83,000 in the second. It is worth noting that the government launched this scheme with great fanfare during the last Lok Sabha elections.

Interns were promised a one-time payment of ₹6,000 and a monthly allowance of ₹5,000 for twelve months. The government also claimed that the initiative would train ten million young people over five years, making them more employable.

The first two years' outcomes are plainly disappointing, as such superficial measures cannot address the unemployment crisis. What is needed is a fundamental shift in economic thinking, with sustained investment in the real economy and human development. Without tackling these structural issues, the government's assurances offer little substance.

ABHIJIT ROY | JAMSHEDPUR

Justice cannot be negotiated away

The recent ruling in the Sandesara case raises troubling questions about the state of our criminal justice system. Allowing fugitives to return, repay a negotiated amount and see multiple criminal proceedings erased may strengthen bank books, but it does little to strengthen public confidence.

What message does this deliver to those who have complied with the law? Banks are forced to absorb significant losses, enforcement agencies are left adrift midway through their efforts, and the perception grows that financial crime can be bargained away if one can produce a sufficiently large cheque. Even more concerning is the possibility that other absconders may now attempt similar "settlements", further straining an already burdened system.

A justice system must impose consequences for wrongdoing, not merely attach a price tag to it. Without transparent findings, proportionate penalties and a firm commitment to prosecute where culpability is clear, such outcomes risk becoming blueprints for evasion rather than models of resolution. Judicial leniency is admirable, but when it eclipses criminal responsibility, it weakens the very rule of law it is meant to uphold.

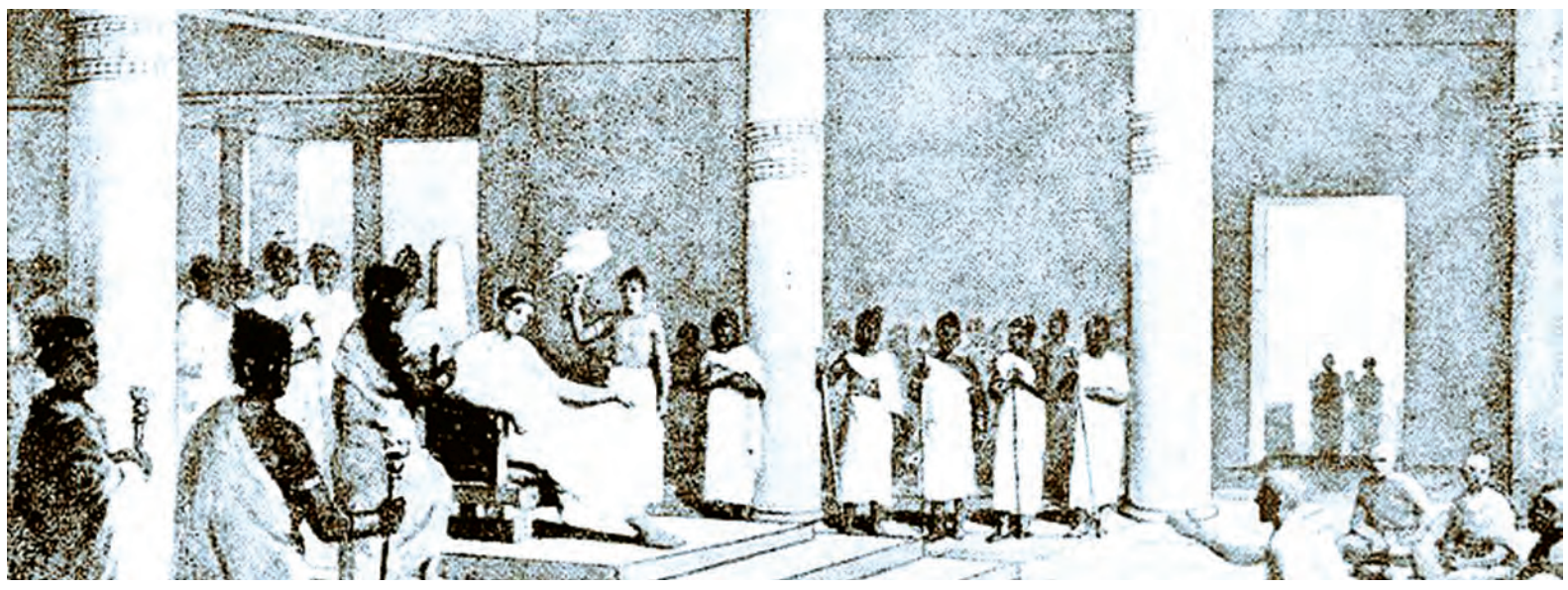
GOPALASWAMY J | CHENNAI

The lost art of ethical rule: Revisiting Milinda's inquiry

Democracy today resembles a circus, where rulers mistake spectacle for statesmanship and genuine governance remains elusive. Anarchist thought is misread as disorder, Buddhist nations drift from ethical foundations, and corruption corrodes institutions. In this vacuum, the Milinda Pañha offers a rare philosophical corrective and moral compass

FIRST Column

NILANTHA ILANGAMUWA



Most of the time, what we see in modern rulers is reminiscent of a Turkish proverb: when a clown enters a palace, he imagines he will become a king, but the palace instead turns into a circus. Democracy is ironically crumbling, yet a new form of governance has not yet emerged. The most pragmatic governance, as outlined in anarchist thought, has been grievously distorted, and the popular conception now equates anarchism with violence and disorder. However, seminal texts and contemporary interpretations by thinkers such as Noam Chomsky reaffirm that anarchism, properly understood, offers mechanisms to dismantle structural inequalities and bureaucratic apathy, enabling participatory and decentralised decision-making. Yet the gestation of a new paradigm of governance inevitably exceeds the temporality we anticipate, and perhaps only in the coming decades might an unprecedented, universal mode of administration take shape.

Meanwhile, it is lamentable to observe what has transpired in nations nominally anchored in Buddhist principles. Presently, most Buddhist-majority countries suffer from extreme corruption, with political systems that have ossified into nearly irreparable constructs. Leaders no longer trust monastic institutions; temples have transformed into quasi-financial conglomerates sustaining the ostentatious lifestyles of monks.

The ethical substratum the Buddha enjoined — equanimity, compassion and selfless service — has largely vanished. As Aravind Adiga remarks in his novel The White Tiger, if the Buddha were to witness the contemporary state of his religious progeny, he would depart immediately without a backward glance. Societies that once pursued ethical coherence and dharmic governance have now become distorted caricatures of their philosophical ideals.

It is precisely here that the Milinda Pañha provides an intellectual corrective, a text of extraordinary lucidity and profundity which, while ostensibly a religious-philosophical dialogue, contains the kernel of a governance ethos that modern rulers might desperately need. The text chronicles the engagement between King Menander I, the Indo-Greek sovereign remembered in Buddhist tradition as Milinda, and the venerable monk Nagasena. Menander, who reigned c. 165-130 BCE, roughly a century after Emperor Ashoka, presided over a geographically modest realm encompassing parts of north-western India and Afghanistan. Unlike Ashoka, whose Mauryan empire was vast and centrally administered, Menander ruled a fragmented polity more reflective of Hellenistic city-state governance. His coins, with Greek inscriptions and iconography fused with Indian motifs, and surviving inscriptions attest to a sovereign both culturally syncretic and administratively shrewd. While no extant source suggests he learned directly from Ashoka, the philosophical and religious atmosphere shaped by Ashoka's dissemination of Buddhism undoubtedly influenced the intellectual milieu Menander inhabited. The Milinda Pañha thus enshrines a historic cross-cultural encounter: a Hellenistic king engaging rigorously with Indian philosophical traditions, adopting an epistemological humility and openness that modern rulers conspicuously lack.

> MENANDER'S ENGAGEMENT WITH BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY WAS NOT MERE ORNAMENTATION; IT INFLUENCED HIS GOVERNANCE ETHOS. WHILE HIS KINGDOM REMAINED SMALLER THAN ASHOKA'S, IT DISPLAYED A STRIKING PRAGMATISM INTERTWINED WITH ETHICAL DELIBERATION, A FEATURE REINFORCED IN THE MILINDA PAÑHA

The dialogues themselves exemplify a method of inquiry that parallels the Socratic and Platonic traditions. Milinda's questions are probing, sometimes sceptical, at times provocative, much like Plato's interlocutors in The Republic or Meno. Nagasena responds with meticulous reasoning, often employing analogies such as the chariot, the rope and snake, the river and the lamp. Consider the famous opening exchange: "Venerable sir, what is your name?" asks Milinda. Nagasena replies, "I am called Nagasena, Majesty. But this is only a name, a designation, a convenient expression. In the ultimate sense, there is no Nagasena here." When Milinda presses, "How can you say there is no Nagasena? Are your robes Nagasena Is your bowl Nagasena? Is your body Nagasena Is your mind Nagasena?" Nagasena elucidates, "No, Majesty. None of these is Nagasena. Yet because all these parts occur together, people use the name 'Nagasena', just as one speaks of a chariot, though no single piece is the chariot." The sophistication of this method, rooted in Buddhist epistemology and the doctrine of impermanence, mirrors the Socratic elenchus, where a proposition is deconstructed through critical questioning and dialectical reasoning.

What makes this dialogue extraordinary for contemporary governance is that it instantiates an ethos of disciplined inquiry and ethical reflection that is evidently absent in today's political apparatus. Milinda's probing mirrors the inquisitiveness that should guide a state's executive: questions not merely about power or prestige but about the self, ethical action and the consequences of policy. The text repeatedly foregrounds the impermanence and interdependence of phenomena, as exemplified in Nagasena's extended metaphors: "A fruit tree does not bear fruit the moment you plant it; it must mature. In the same way, karma ripens when conditions are right." Here, the philosophical principle of conditionality offers a remarkable lesson for policymakers: outcomes depend on the interplay of multiple variables, and rash or short-sighted interventions invariably yield unintended consequences.

Historically, Menander's engagement with Buddhist philosophy was not mere ornamentation; it influenced his governance ethos. While his kingdom remained smaller than Ashoka's, it displayed a striking pragmatism intertwined with ethical deliberation, a feature reinforced in the Milinda Pañha. By contrast, modern Buddhist-majority nations frequently conflate religiosity with ceremonial display or institutional patronage rather than ethical governance. The erosion of dharmic principles is compounded by excessive bureaucratisation, monetisation of monastic institutions and prioritisation of personal or party gain over collective welfare. A Milinda-inspired polity would not conflate the symbolic with the substantive; it would foreground reflective engagement with moral and structural consequences.

Interestingly, the questioning method in the Milinda Pañha is anticipated in earlier Buddhist texts such as the Kalama Sutta, wherein the Buddha exhorts practitioners not to rely on tradition, hearsay or authority alone, but to test teachings through reasoned analysis and direct experience. "Do not go upon what has been acquired by repeated hearing; nor upon tradition; nor upon rumour; nor upon what is in a scripture," the Buddha advises, encouraging a culture of scrutiny and empirical ethical reasoning. This same epistemological rigour underpins Nagasena's dialogues: the king is urged not merely to accept Buddhist doctrine but to interrogate it until understanding is internalised. In contemporary governance, such a principle is strikingly absent; policy decisions are rarely subjected to sustained dialectical examination or reflective critique, and when they are, incentives for superficial compliance often outweigh those for substantive analysis.

The parallels with Greek philosophical methodology deepen here. Socrates, in the Platonic dialogues, similarly interrogates interlocutors to reveal inconsistencies in their understanding of justice, virtue and knowledge. Menander, although a foreign king in a non-Greek land, essentially embodies a Hellenistic inquirer transported into the Buddhist epistemological universe. In both traditions, authority is decoupled from truth: the king's power or the interlocutor's status does not confer correctness. This detachment is precisely what is missing in today's political spheres, where charisma or inherited office substitutes for reflective ethical reasoning, and where institutional and religious oversight often becomes perfunctory or complicit. Moreover, the Milinda Pañha demonstrates that inquiry is inseparable from ethical imagination. Questions about the self, impermanence and moral causality are not abstract; they carry direct implications for governance. Policies enacted without such reflection are analogous to rulers attempting to drive a chariot without understanding its wheels or axles: the structure may move, but direction and integrity are compromised. Modern Buddhist-majority nations, by ignoring this model, have allowed corruption, patronage networks and institutional sclerosis to metastasise. Practically, this has meant temples act as financial hubs, civic oversight is subordinated to political expediency, and the teachings of the Buddha are commodified into ritualised spectacle, divorced from ethical praxis. Without the missing links of Milinda's wisdom, can modern Buddhist rulers ever move beyond a hollow performance?

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Tackling Delhi's air pollution: A Systems problem demanding a systemic reform

PRAVIN KAUSHAL

Each winter, Delhi descends into its now-familiar public health emergency. As temperatures fall and winds weaken, a heavy grey blanket settles over the NCR, pushing daily life into crisis mode — schools shut, construction halts, and citizens track AQI readings as routinely as the time of day. Yet this seasonal panic obscures a deeper truth: Delhi's pollution is not a winter anomaly but a year-round structural failure. Meteorology merely exposes what governance has failed to fix.

Having worked within the Delhi government ecosystem and now leading a data and AI centre, it is clear to me that the science of the problem and the strategy of our response remain misaligned. To move beyond temporary relief, the capital needs systems-level interventions that tackle the roots of emissions - not only their winter manifestations.

A Misdiagnosed Crisis

Much of the public discourse reduces Delhi's air problem to a single culprit: stubble burning in Punjab and Haryana. There is truth in this - data from the Ministry of Earth Sciences' Decision Support System shows that during peak episodes, crop-residue fires can contribute up to one-fourth of Delhi's PM2.5 load. But this is only a part of a much broader emissions landscape. The more uncomfortable reality is that the pollutants choking Delhi in winter are present all year. What changes in October and November is the atmosphere: cold air sinks, moisture captures particulates, and stagnation prevents dispersion. Vehicles, industries, waste burning and construction dust continue producing the same pollutants in summer and monsoon — but winter's inversion conditions magnify their impact. This is why emergency measures such as smog guns, cloud seeding or the hasty implementation of the Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP) offer limited relief. They treat symptoms, not the disease.

The GRAP Paradox

GRAP was designed as a last-mile emergency protocol, not a primary strategy. Its annual invocation signals a governance gap: if the baseline emissions were lower, winter conditions would not plunge Delhi into the "severe" category so quickly. Even when fully implemented, GRAP yields only marginal improvements. Halting truck entry or shutting schools disrupts daily life but barely shifts average air quality because the underlying emission load remains unchanged. GRAP is, at best, a tourniquet - useful during haemorrhage, but not a substitute for long-term treatment. The real work must focus on three structural sectors: mobility, industry and waste.

1. Mobility: Move People, Not Cars

Vehicles remain among the largest contributors to Delhi's internal PM2.5 load. The adoption of BS-VI fuel — reducing sulphur content dramatically — was a significant achievement. But the gains are being cancelled out by sheer volume: Delhi registers nearly 2,000 new vehicles daily, a figure that overwhelms any technological improvement. A transformative mobility strategy must include:

Fleet Replacement: A targeted, time-bound scrappage and replacement programme is essential — particularly for ageing commercial vehicles, which are big emitters. Incentivising transitions to electric, CNG or compliant engines is far more effective than periodic bans.

Public Transport Revitalisation: No city can fight pollution while expanding private vehicle dependence. Delhi's public transport — buses, metro, last-mile services - needs capacity expansion, better frequency and integration. The policy focus must shift from "restricting cars" to "enabling people to not need cars".

2. An Economics Problem

A persistent misconception is that Delhi has minimal industrial activity. In reality, the NCR's industrial belt — Ghaziabad, Faridabad, Gurugram, Bhiwadi - burns large volumes of dirty fuel. The barrier to clean energy adoption is economic, not technological. Natural gas, the cleaner alternative, becomes prohibitively expensive due to high taxation outside the GST regime. As long as dirty fuels remain cheaper, compliance will remain sporadic. Bringing natural gas under GST would be one of the most impactful policy reforms for clean air. By aligning economic incentives with environmental goals, industry will transition voluntarily instead of under coercion.

3. The Missing Scale

Crop burning persists not because farmers prefer it, but because alternatives lack the scale, infrastructure or economic reward. Technologies exist — baling, in-situ decomposition, biogasification, ethanol production - but deployment remains fragmented. Similarly, within Delhi, waste burning often continues because segregation at source remains inconsistent. Landfills routinely smoulder, and municipal systems struggle with volume.

Addressing this requires:

- Assured procurement and incentives for biomass-based fuels,
- Statewide logistics for residue collection and processing,
- Strict enforcement coupled with community-level waste segregation,
- Modern waste-to-energy and composting capacity.

Without addressing biomass and municipal waste, Delhi cannot sustainably lower its particulate load.

Lessons from Beijing

Cities like Beijing demonstrate that clean air is not an impossible aspiration. Their gains did not come from symbolic measures but from structural transitions:

- Shifting industries from coal to natural gas
- Phasing out old vehicles through aggressive scrappage schemes,
- Managing construction and road dust with strict, technology-driven enforcement,
- Creating a unified regional governance

A Systems Approach

Pollution in Delhi is not a local issue; it is a regional systems problem involving meteorology, agriculture, mobility, fuel economics and governance architecture. Solutions must therefore be structural and coordinated, not reactive.

A sustainable roadmap should include:

- A regional clean-air council integrating Delhi, Punjab, Haryana, UP and Rajasthan for unified action,
- Adaptive agricultural policies responsive to meteorological forecasts and residue-management capacity,
- Year-round mobility reforms prioritising public transport and fleet renewal,
- GST reform for clean fuels, enabling industries to switch affordably,
- Community-level participation supported by micro-monitoring and transparency dashboards.

When policy, science and public will align, Delhi's air can improve dramatically - just as other global megacities have shown.

The Path Ahead

Delhi's pollution crisis is often portrayed as inevitable. It is not. It is the result of fragmented planning, delayed decisions and reactive governance. But just as the smog reveals the consequences of inaction, it also reveals a path forward. Clean air is not a seasonal aspiration - it is a constitutional right and a collective responsibility. The transition demands structural honesty, regional cooperation and a willingness to move to systemic reform. India has the knowledge, the institutions and the civic energy to achieve this. What remains is the resolve to treat clean air not as an annual headline, but as a national mission.

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Reclaiming India's role as a global education hub

VK PAUL, SHASHANK SHAH & OSHIN DHARAP

India carries a formidable legacy as the cradle of ancient knowledge systems and universities such as Takshashila, Nalanda, Vallabhi, Vikramshila and Odantapuri. For millennia, it has sustained multidisciplinary higher learning that reached far beyond the subcontinent. Today, the global skills and talent landscape is being reshaped at a dramatic pace. This moment offers India an opportunity to reclaim its heritage as a civilisational educator and position its higher education institutions as global hubs of knowledge, research and innovation in the 21st century.

Over the last seventy-five years, India's higher education system has expanded enormously. With the launch of the National Education Policy 2020, the country has taken a decisive step towards future readiness by identifying the internationalisation of higher education-especially "internationalisation at home" — as a key driver of systemic transformation. An overwhelming 97 per cent of Indian students study in Indian institutions.

They will form the backbone of India's workforce and contribute to the global talent pool as well. Ensuring that their academic experience meets world-class standards is therefore not just a matter of educational quality but of national competitiveness. Yet, a sharp disparity persists in student mobility. Outbound student numbers have surged, with more than 13.35 lakh Indians studying abroad in 2024, predominantly in Anglophone destinations such as Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia. In contrast, India hosted only about 47,000 foreign students in 2022, nearly a third of them from Nepal. For every international student studying in India, approximately twenty-eight Indian students are enrolled abroad. This is despite regulatory provisions that allow supernumerary seats for international students and a variety of scholarships to support their education in India. The imbalance underscores both the challenge of retaining talent within the country and the difficulty of positioning India as an attractive host destination.

Several forces continue to push Indian students overseas: the appeal of immersive international exposure, the lure of post-study work opportunities and the perception of higher academic quality abroad. The financial implications of this trend are significant. Indian families spend between US$47-70 billion annually-equivalent to ₹3.8-6 lakh crore-on overseas education in tuition fees and living expenses alone. This outflow is estimated to be eight to twelve times the central government's higher education budget. Addressing this imbalance makes internationalisation at home not merely desirable but necessary, both for fiscal prudence and systemic strengthening.

Recognising this urgency, India has initiated several major reforms in recent years. The establishment of the IFSCA GIFT City framework in 2022 and the UGC's regulatory framework in 2023 paved the way for international universities to enter India. Deakin University and the University of Wollongong became the first foreign institutions to start operations in GIFT City. The University of Southampton set up the first international branch campus in Gurugram, and several more-including the University of Liverpool, University of York, University of Aberdeen, University of Western Australia, Illinois Institute of Technology and Istituto Europeo di Design — have announced plans to launch campuses in Bengaluru and Navi Mumbai's emerging International Education City.

The National Forensic Sciences University opened a campus in Jinja, Uganda, in 2023. IIT Madras and IIT Delhi have launched campuses in Zanzibar and Abu Dhabi, while IIM Ahmedabad has established a presence in Dubai and IIT Bombay in Sendai, Japan. Joint, dual and twinning degree programmes are now possible through collaborations between Indian and foreign universities, and the newly notified Equivalence Regulations 2025 offer clarity on recognising foreign qualifications. For India to evolve into a genuine global education destination, it must strengthen the larger ecosystem. This requires world-class infrastructure, cutting-edge research ecosystems, globally competitive curricula and the ability to attract and retain top faculty, including members of the Indian diaspora. Regulatory processes — from visa facilitation to qualification recognition — must be simplified, and internship opportunities for international students must become more accessible.

India must also strategically fund international research collaborations, global teaching exchanges and faculty mobility to ensure sustained knowledge flows. Equally important is a strong branding and outreach strategy that communicates India's distinctive academic strengths and showcases the achievements of global alumni who studied at Indian institutions. Tailored academic offerings — whether STEM and Bharatiya Gyan Parampara programmes for Western learners or specialised courses in agriculture, healthcare, education and digital finance for African students-can help India address diverse global needs. Looking ahead, India must aim to triple inbound international student enrolment to at least 1.5 lakh by 2030. With the right systemic reforms, regulatory coherence and institutional strategies, India has both the heritage and the capability to re-emerge as a global centre of learning-well before 2047.

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OUR TAKE

A story of boom, gloom and doom

Opposing factors will influence Indian indices and equities in 2026

Marc Faber, the stock soothsayer who is famous for his 'Gloom, Boom, Doom' report, feels that the Indian stock market is not going anywhere in 2026. This view is contradictory to those of the analysts, and brokerage houses that believe that the Sensex, the Bombay Stock Exchange index, may gain more than a quarter by December 2026. As we prepare to step into the new year, there are reasons that can be used by both sides, the bulls and bears, and optimists and pessimists. Like the Indian economy's 'Alice in Wonderland' story, the country stock markets imply another trip down the rabbit hole.

One of Faber's main concerns revolves around the value of the rupee, and its exchange rate vis-à-vis the dollar. Already, the Indian currency is below ₹90, and has shed several percentage points this year. This is why the investor-predictor claims that Indian equities gave negative returns if one considers their worth in dollars, rather than in rupees. In contrast, a few markets have registered positive returns in dollar terms. Brazil, for example, went up by 5.5 per cent. Indeed, despite the recent rise, the Indian stock market was one of the worst performers among emerging markets, and Asian peers.

Next year may not see any worthwhile changes. There is a growing fear among currency traders that the rupee may dip to ₹100-a-dollar within a year. The efforts by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) to protect the currency has not yielded results. Despite temporary upward blips, the rupee has continued its free fall. Faber feels that the returns from Indian equities in 2026 in dollar terms, largely due to the state of the rupee, may be marginally positive, or even negative. Hence, he is not enthused about them, as he is not about equities elsewhere, except for a few niche segments.

However, there are several players who think that Faber's gloom-and-doom tale is a fable. The former experts argue that there is momentum in the Indian economy, as indicated by the GDP growth in the first two quarters, low inflation, adequate space for the RBI to intervene, positive consumer sentiments, and good monsoons that will benefit agriculture. This year (2025) was a bad one for equities, but it is behind us. There will be a re-rating of the stocks, as corporate earnings perk up. Valuations are still high, but are down from their post-Covid peaks. There is bullish steam left.

Another way to see the stock market as either half-full or half-empty glass is to go beyond the overall indices, and look at the entire universe of listed stocks. A media report indicates that the bulk of the hikes in share prices is limited to the stocks that comprise the Sensex and Nifty. If one looks at the top 500 scrips by market cap, more than half are in the negative in 2025. It is not a secular uptrend. Indeed, most of the positive activity is concentrated around the large caps, with problems in midcaps, and small caps.

Of course, the die-hard optimists argue that this is how a new bull run begins. After the post-Covid frenzy, when the Sensex rose from below 30,000 in early 2020 to 85,000 now, the index took a break in 2025. It converged with the growth slowdown in GDP. As valuations have eased, and there is fresh energy and excitement in the economy, the bull run may pick up, and gather speed. This will lead to another mini-bull run in 2026, whose future will be decided by several domestic and external factors, including the India-US trade deal.

What is more immediate, and scarier than the rupee, or the secular nature of the upcoming boom or doom, is the massive exodus of money from the equity market. In the first three days of December 2025, foreign investors withdrew more money than they did in the entire month of November. Over the past two months, according to reports, Indian retail investors have turned sellers to book profits. During 2025, when foreigners largely remained net sellers, the Indians saved the day as they poured in huge sums in mutual funds, which invested in stocks. If the ongoing dual-selling trend continues, it can derail the indices over the next few months.

One of the reasons for the retail sales, apart from profit-booking, is the switch from the secondary to primary market. Suddenly, given the plateauing trends in listed stocks, IPOs (Initial Public Offerings) offer the chances to earn better returns. In the recent past, listing gains have touched 50 per cent and more, even if the stocks have subsequently languished at lower prices. This allows the risk-takers to make 30-50 per cent within a few weeks. Apart from the Indian retail investors, foreigners too have adopted these tactics. They sell in the secondary market, and queue up for the IPOs.

Given these contradictory views, Faber advises investors to stay in cash, i.e., get out of stocks, and invest the money in gold, silver, and platinum. He contends that the dollar returns from the precious metals, and bullion, are higher. For Indians, as the rupee slides against the dollar, and if this trend continues in 2026, the metals offer more attractive propositions. Apart from normal increase in prices, as gold and silver have witnessed in 2025, the returns are higher due to the rupee-dollar exchange rate. It is a double-bonanza.

Clearly, the bullion investment strategy can turn into a lot of bull, if the metal prices come down. As trade disruptions, and accompanying disruptions ease, if the Russia-Ukraine war stalls, and if China and the US agree to a more permanent truce, the yellow metal will lose its lustre. Central banks may ease off buying, as will institutional investors. In such a scenario, buying gold or silver now may be fraught with risks. Of course, if one is already invested in them, it will make sense to buy more, after selling equities.

Evidently, stock investors have two options. Either they take the risks, and push further into equities, but trade regularly, almost daily, based on domestic and global events, to reap some rewards, albeit smaller but regularly. Or they can stay away, take a break, and look at other assets, and investment options. It is almost impossible to time a market, any market. Even the best need to be lucky to achieve it. It may be better to wait-and-watch, and assess the stock market before deciding which way it plans to move.

BLASÉ CAPITAL

DEFICIT TRADE

As Russia's powerful Vladimir Putin lands in India, there is huge excitement about the potential and possibilities to further concretise the trade, cultural, social, and business links between the two nations. Media reports talk about massive deals in areas such as energy, defence, and other areas. A few days before his visit, there were reports that despite the new US and European sanctions, crude oil imports from Russia went up after a brief drop. Indians, it seems, have mastered the art and science to use grey ships, or illegal smuggling shipments to import oil. Since the global sanctions are against the exports of petrochemicals that use Russian crude, Indian refiners can use the latter to make petroproducts to cater to domestic demand. Thus, in both legal and grey areas, the partnership and friendship between the two nations is on the rise.

Yet, there are a few issues that India needs to contend with in its seemingly-blind pursuit of Putin's pacts. The first is that even as the two nations talk about increasing the annual trade between them by more than 40 per cent to $100 billion within five years, the current balance is clearly lopsided. Of the nearly $70 billion trade now, Indian exports constitute a mere seven per cent of the total. The large proportion of the value is about the goods that India imports. Indeed, most of its defence needs, despite purchases from non-Russia suppliers in the recent past, is focused on Russia. The industry and commerce minister, Piyush Goyal rightly analysed the situation, although in a slightly-garbled way, as one where "we cannot rest, we need to grow, we need to balance that." What he means is that India needs to export more goods and services to Russia.

Of course, on paper, there are several areas where India can emerge as an attractive supplier of world-class products. According to Goyal, in manufacturing, there are huge opportunities to expand the trade, and reduce the huge deficit. These include consumer goods, food products, automobiles, tractors, heavy commercial vehicles, consumer electronics, industrial components, and textiles. Similarly, there is a latent potential to push services exports. If India can sell services to the US, and Europe, and the rest of the world, why not Russia? The Russian side seconded Goyal's assessment, and talked about India can increase its current two per cent share in Russia's overall imports. However, there are several problems which, as the Indian commerce secretary, pointed out includes process simplification. The policy-makers on both sides need to sit together to ferret out solutions, which are not likely to be easy, or simple.

Let us start with agriculture and food products. This is a contentious issue, both for exports and imports. Indian policy-makers have articulated the need to increase exports to push up farm incomes. However, exports rarely help the farmers. They mostly benefit the middlemen, and industry, who buy cheap, and sell dear. The second is that as soon as India enters the market, global prices swing wildly. If India is a purchaser, prices zoom. If it is a seller, prices dip, and both happen because of the high volumes in question. Thus, the full benefit of global prices, either high or low, do not accrue to Indians. Finally, there is a strong industry lobby against exports, which invariably sways the other way for cheaper imports. In addition, the current atmosphere, where India is being pushed by America to import higher farm products, is not conducive.

Now, let us move to consumer electronics, and telecom equipment. One of the biggest exports in this area is of the smartphones, especially the iPhones. But, as most of us know, the iPhones are being shipped to the US by Apple, which is under pressure to make more of them in the US. Obviously, while Apple will continue to 'Make in India,' it will surely not export to Russia from India, given the current stalemate between Putin and America's Donald Trump. Unless Russia agrees to a ceasefire in Ukraine, the US, and other global sanctions, prevent American and European firms from trading directly with Russia. So, essentially, iPhones are out of the India-Russia trade equation, especially over the next two years. India makes some components, and assembles the Chinese phones. But China may not wish to export to Russia from India. It will want to use the factories in its country for this purpose.

Despite the cultural affinities, and cultural exchanges between India and Russia, language is a huge barrier in the services sector. Indian IT and outsourcing firms have performed well in nations that are either fluent in English, or comfortable with it. In the case of, say, Russia, and China, one needs to know the local language. Decades ago, we had several Russian-speaking Indians but the tribe has slowly vanished. Russian, since the age of economic reforms, has not been a top priority for the Indians, who wanted to acquire English skills. If the services firms wish to expand in Russia, they need to focus on the language, as well as soft skills that are specific to the Russian culture. The soft-skill training that they impart to fresh hires need to be expanded to include possible entry into Russia.

The Tech Wrecker

Censorship vs immigration

No visas for those who post anti-right wing and anti-US views

Censorship of the conservative, and right-wing views, or airing of anti-US ones can be used by the American officials to deny H-1B visas to both new applicants, and those who wish to renew them. A detailed official note has been circulated to those who process the visas to check the social media posts, and uploads, as well as other platforms of the applicants to deter those who do not agree with Donald Trump's American way of thinking. Thus, censorship of conservative ideas, which include anti-vaccine, and anti-abortion, will form a basis to reject the visas. Ironic as it seems, censorship will be used as an excuse to censure those who wish to enter the US.

This is yet another means devised by the US president to weed out elements whose thinking is not in sync with Trump's. In the domestic arena, the White House has tried to remove foreign students from the so-called liberal colleges and universities by checking on their social posts, participation in specific anti-US or pro-US-enemy protests, and allying with such organisations. Apart from the students, the universities were taken to task with the withdrawal of federal budget allocations. The case is pending in the US courts. There are efforts to eject illegal migrants, and those who do not subscribe to the American way, which in essence implies Trump's way.

For the visa seekers, this creates several problems. Social media posts that are, say, a decade old, and were uploaded during the more innocent and immature teenage years, can be used by the officials to deny visas. People will need to clean up their social media to ensure that there are no signs of any anti-US, or anti-right-wing vestiges. Even photographs, essays, blogs, vlogs, videos, podcasts, and other forms of social communication will need to be erased. The 'right to forget' may become the recourse, only if a home nation allows it in practice. Nations have laws for it, but are not implemented.

The new visa regime reminds us of an era, which we thought was gone forever, when the 'Reds' and communists were targeted. Even those who had a whiff of an association with a left-wing group or entity were dubbed guilty of spreading communism. Some, who were not guilty, were asked to name names of those who were. If the former did not, they became communist by inaction. In the case of H-1B visas, if your friend lists and contacts have the names of people who regularly oppose American policies, or air sarcastic remarks about the president, they may find themselves in trouble.

Already, Indians, who have some strong and ongoing connections with the US, are cagey about attaching themselves to seemingly-anti-US views and opinions. For example, professionals, whose family members work in the US, refuse to associate with controversial issues. Indian students in American colleges refuse to talk on the phone, even on encrypted platforms, about what is happening in that country. Parents and spouses of those living in the US refuse to engage in the so-called sensitive conversations. There is a fear to like, or even attach a thumbs up icon to social media posts.

In a recent cable that was sent to the US missions across the world, consular officers were urged, according to a media report, to see if the visa applicants, and family members who may travel with them, had "worked in areas that include activities such as misinformation, disinformation, content moderation, fact-checking, compliance, online safety, among others." The cable adds, "If you uncover evidence an applicant was responsible for, or complicit in, censorship or attempted censorship of protected expression in the United States, you should pursue a finding that the applicant is ineligible."

Although the language relates to suppression of free speech through misinformation or disinformation, its practice will have a far-reaching effect. This is because, as media reports indicate, Trump's White House defines the lack of free speech as the "stifling of conservative voices online." Given this context, if you are a liberal with left leanings, you may be suppressing the freedom of expression. The same rules will apply in practice to those who oppose the new America's opinions on social and health issues like the efficacy of vaccines. Indeed, any views contrary to Trump will be included.

In May this year, the US secretary of state threatened to ban visas for foreigners who censor speech by Americans. Now, this context offers quite a long rope to the consulars, and officials, to stop certain kinds of foreigners. In such cases, any form of anti-US, rather anti-Trump, and anti-conservative views can lad to visa bans. It may have happened years, and decades ago. But if it is still alive on the Internet, and it is difficult to kill content on the web, one can be in trouble. Thus, a thorough clean-up will be required to remove it.

Over the past few months, Trump and his allies and loyalists have even accused the former Democratic president, Joe Biden, of encouraging the suppression of free speech. In this context, the former implies the latter's attempts to counter the false claims by sections of conservatives that the Biden elections were rigged. If a former president can be charged in this manner, one can only imagine what a foreigner, whose visa is rejected, can do. The idea, it seems, is deep. It is to make America home for Americans, and those who think like Americans, or rather hardcore republicans.

There may be a deep-rooted plan, and the advisory to the consulars on H-1B visas may be a part of the larger, universal, all-encompassing strategy to increase the voter base of the republicans. Experience shows that most of the recent immigrants are democrat voters, and include huge swathes of recent foreigners. By limiting entries in universities, tech firms, and corporate America to the so-called conservative, or those with republican-like views, the future electorate will reflect this change. In a sense, most of the new voters will vote republicans, and increase the party's victory chances.

H-1B visas have become a huge target for the Trump administration, which sees all the ills and evils concentrated in the regime. Limiting and changing the regime will solve most of the existing problems, change America the way Trump's wants, and 'Make America Great Again.' A new visa system will help Americans find more jobs, restrict entry to high-skilled and highly-paid foreigners, allow mostly conservatives to enter the country, and make the US more productive. It will influence the future presidential elections.

Biogas essential for India's clean energy transition, says MNRE minister

ABHI SINGHAL / ABHINAV KUMAR JHA
New Delhi

Setting an ambitious tone for global collaboration in biogas, Union Minister Sripad Yesso Naik on Thursday said India is on the threshold of what we proudly call the Decade of Biogas. "Our goal is clear and consistent: from a national vision to global leadership. We aim to position India as the world's hub for Biogas policy innovation, investment, and scalable business solutions," said Naik, addressing the gathering on the concluding day of India Congress 2025, organised by World Biogas Association in the national Capital.

Naik, who holds the Ministry of Power and Ministry of New and Renewable Energy portfolio as Minister of State, also emphasised that Biogas is becoming essential for India's clean energy transition, energy security, waste management, and industrial decarbonisation. He noted that it "sits exactly at this intersection" of national priorities and that India is "already aligned and advancing on both fronts" through accelerated programmes and global partnerships.

Naik highlighted that Biogas and Biomethane are transforming agricultural residues, municipal waste, and industrial effluents into clean energy, organic fertiliser, and green jobs, calling it "the circular economy in action."

He expressed that village-level and community Biogas systems strengthen waste management, increase access to clean cooking, and enhance local energy security, describing the transition as "a rural development revolution" and "a pathway to a resilient local economy". He praised the NDDB-WBA MoU for promoting global standards, training, and operational excellence in India.

The day advanced into parallel policy and technical tracks like Biogas Beyond Borders: Global Dialogue; Strategic Vision for Biogas & Biomethane — Margin to Mainstream; Small and Medium Scale Biogas Plants — Challenges and Opportunities.

The day wrapped up with a rich set of discussions that brought global and Indian perspectives together. Speakers shared how international cooperation can speed up Biogas growth, while MNRE outlined a clear vision for taking the sector mainstream. Sessions explored the role of small and mid-scale plants, the promise of Biomethane for transport, fresh avenues for private financing, policies to tap industrial organic waste, and India's push to scale Biogas from early pilots to a nationwide, socially inclusive, job-creating ecosystem.

The second day of the WBA event saw industry leaders, policymakers, and technology experts discussing how to tackle the roadblocks, or how boldly the targets to be met and that India cannot unlock its Biogas potential unless it solves how biomass is collected, stored, priced, and delivered.

The gap between policy ambition and ground-level reality also surfaced. While the government's SATAT scheme promises up to 50 per cent financial aid for new plants and assures off-take through oil marketing companies, the physical challenge of connecting these plants to consumers remains stiff.

Technology experts pointed to another silent risk: plant safety and design quality. Flávio Ascenco of the World Biogas Association said mistakes in basic engineering could trigger catastrophic failures. "A small error like closing a breather valve and creating negative pressure can collapse a digester three times," he warned. He stressed the need for proper HAZOP studies and stronger automation, pointing to European sites that run with a single worker monitored by safety systems adapted from the oil and gas industry.

(L-R) Dr Pradeep Monga, Senior Advisor & Policy Director, World Biogas Association (WBA), UK; Ms Charlotte Morton OBE, Chief Executive Officer, WBA, UK; Mr Shripad Yesso Naik, Union Minister of State, Ministry of New & Renewable Energy, and, Ministry of Power, Government of India; Mr Prashant Tewari, representing The Pioneer, at the WBA India Congress 2025

NTPC's Amit Kulshrestha outlined how digestate can be turned into biochar using torrefaction. He said Biogas could also support electricity during peak hours if NCR's biopulp is used to produce CBG and injected into existing pipelines. IndianOil Adani Venture CEO Atul Kharate spoke about the early challenge of convincing customers to switch from LPG and liquid fuels to CBG, requiring pressure-flow modifications and new firing mechanisms.

Others focused on the long-term environmental case. Kevin Houston of Carbon Masters called CBG one of India's strongest climate solutions because it produces both clean fuel and soil-restoring fertiliser. "The soil carbon issue is huge. If we don't fix it in the next 20 years, India will end up with just dirt," he said.

Falling rupee makes imports costlier, fuels inflation: Experts

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
New Delhi

A depreciating rupee will help exporters and the IT sector, but make imports costlier, thus fuelling inflation, according to experts.

As the rupee plunged below 90-mark to a US dollar, opposition parties raised concern over its impact on common citizens. The matter was also raised in Parliament.

The rupee rebounded from its all-time low levels and appreciated by 19 paise to close at 89.96 against the US dollar on Thursday, on softness in the US dollar index and on reports of the Reserve Bank of India's supposed intervention.

Forex traders said the greenback fell after ADP non-farm payroll data came in sharply below the forecast, and the softness in the US dollar index supported the rupee at lower levels.

The rupee opened weak earlier in the day and touched an all-time low of 90.43 amid selling pressure from foreign investors and rising crude oil prices. The delay over the announcement of the India-US trade deal has also weighed on the rupee.

"The rupee's fall below 90 against the dollar brings mixed consequences. While export sectors like IT and textiles gain competitiveness, higher import costs for crude and raw materials will squeeze margins and widen the trade deficit," said Rajeev Sharan, Head, Criteria, Model Development & Research, Brickwork Ratings.

He also said that rising inflationary pressures could dampen consumer demand and corporate profitability, while firms with unhedged foreign borrowings may face financial stress.

Prodigy Finance, an international student lender, said students who are going for higher studies abroad in 2026 will run into a tougher reality.

The combination of a weakening rupee, rising overseas living costs and underestimated budgets is creating a financial risk that families can no longer ignore, it said.

When tuition fees, deposits, and day-to-day living costs abroad are priced in dollars, pounds, or euros, an Indian rupee (INR) loan becomes heavier with every movement in the exchange rate. What looks manageable today can turn into an unexpected financial strain by the time repayments begin. "The one piece of advice I always give is simple: do not pledge your home or land as collateral. You never know what the market will look like back home," said Sonal Kapoor, Global Chief Business Officer at Prodigy Finance.

Meanwhile, a report by DBS Bank said that in the past fortnight, the central bank's strong presence across spot, forwards and the NDF markets had prevented a break in the USDINR past 89.00, drawing a de facto line in the sand.

Rupee rises 19 paise to close at 89.96/USD

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
New Delhi

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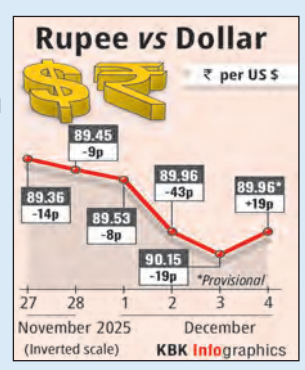
At the interbank foreign exchange market, the rupee opened at 90.36. It slipped further to a record low of 90.43 against the greenback in initial deals, registering a loss of 28 paise from its previous closing level.

At the end of Thursday's trading session, the rupee was quoted at 89.96 (provisional), up 19 paise over its last close.

On Wednesday, the rupee breached the 90-a-dollar level for the first time to settle at a fresh all-time low of 90.15 against the greenback.



Meanwhile, Chief Economic Adviser V Anantha Nageswaran on Wednesday said the falling rupee is not affecting inflation or exports.

A falling rupee helps outward shipment but makes imports costlier.

Import-dependent sectors such as gems and jewellery, petroleum and electronics may see lower benefits due to a rise in input costs, putting pressure on inflationary expectations, he said at an event on Wednesday.

Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading 0.01 per cent lower at 98.84. Brent crude, the global oil benchmark, rose 0.22 per cent to USD 62.81 per barrel in futures trade.

"We expect the rupee to trade with a negative bias on continued selling pressure from FIIs and a weak tone in the domestic markets. Elevated crude oil prices may also pressurise the rupee," said Anuj Choudhary, Research Analyst, Mirae Asset ShareKhan.

Forex traders said multiple pressures, like foreign fund outflows from equities and lingering uncertainty over the Indo-US trade deal, are keeping investor sentiment fragile.

However, weakness in the US dollar amid a disappointing jobs report and rising odds of a rate cut by the Fed in December may support the rupee at lower levels, Choudhary said.

Fitch ups India's FY'26 GDP growth forecast

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
New Delhi

Fitch Ratings on Thursday raised India's GDP growth forecast for the current fiscal to 7.4 per cent, from 6.9 per cent, on increased consumer spending and improved sentiment boosted by GST reforms.

It said falling inflation gives the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) room for one more policy rate cut in December to 5.25 per cent, following 100 bp of cuts in 2025 so far. Fitch said GDP growth accelerated further in the July-September quarter to 8.2 per cent, from 7.8 per cent in the April-June quarter.

"Growth will ease over the remainder of the financial year 2025-26 (to end-March), but we have raised our full-year growth forecast to 7.4 per cent, from 6.9 per cent in September," Fitch said in its Global Economic Outlook report for December.

Private consumer spending is the main driver of growth this year, supported by strong real income dynamics, increased consumer sentiment, and the impact of recently implemented goods and services tax (GST) reforms.

Effective September 22, GST on about 375 items has been slashed, making over 99 per cent of consumption items cheaper. Fitch expects GDP growth to slow to 6.4 per cent in FY'27.

It projected private investment to pick up in the second half of the next fiscal (2026-27) as financial conditions loosen.

Consumer price inflation fell to an all-time low of 0.3 per cent in October, driven by lower food and drink prices.

"We expect falling inflation should give the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) room for one more policy rate cut in December to 5.25 per cent, following 100bp of cuts in 2025 so far, and a series of reductions in the cash reserve ratio (from 4 per cent to 3 per cent)," Fitch said.

Crypto, stablecoins being used to fund drug, gold smuggling: DRI

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
New Delhi

The use of cryptocurrency for illicit payments and transfer of proceeds of crime particularly in drug and gold smuggling cases has surged in recent years, with stablecoins like USDT increasingly replacing traditional hawala networks, a DRI report said on Thursday.

The Smuggling in India report 2024-25 by the Directorate of Revenue Intelligence (DRI) said unlike traditional financial channels, cryptocurrencies enable rapid, hard-to-trace international transfers, bypassing formal financial oversight.

This growing trend poses significant challenges to law enforcement agencies, necessitating the adoption of advanced blockchain forensics, inter-agency intelligence sharing, and specialised analytical tools to trace illicit flows and to combat associated illicit activities, it said.

"Cryptocurrency has emerged as a potent tool for smuggling syndicates due to its decentralised, pseudonymous, and borderless nature. DRI has observed a rise in the use of digital assets for illicit payments and transfer of proceeds of crime, particularly in narcotics trafficking and gold smuggling cases," the report said.

In gold and narcotics smuggling, sale proceeds are either hawala-transferred or sent as cryptocurrency to masterminds abroad, it added.

Crypto wallets, often anonymous and accessible via VPNs, facilitate off-the-book illicit payments, including for under-invoiced and misdeclared imports allowing smugglers to evade customs duties and taxes, and other regulatory requirements.

"The pseudonymous nature of cryptocurrencies such as Bitcoin allows fraudsters to conceal their identities, hindering detection and enforcement," it added. The DRI's application of blockchain analytics to trace cryptocurrency transactions marks a significant step in combating crypto-enabled crime.

However, the evolving nature of digital assets demands stronger regulatory frameworks, enhanced Anti Money Laundering (AML) compliance, and advanced forensic tools, supported by global cooperation to curb cryptocurrency misuse, the report said.

Narcotic smugglers exploiting courier, e-comm: CBIC chief

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA New Delhi

Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs (CBIC) Chairman Vivek Chaturvedi on Thursday said with transnational syndicates exploiting couriers and e-commerce shipments, the threat from narcotics smuggling remains persistent in India.

Addressing the Directorate of Revenue Intelligence (DRI) on the 68th Foundation Day, he asked the officers to renew their resolve to stay ahead of emerging threats and continue to use advanced data analytics to anticipate smuggling patterns.

During last year, DRI seized 65 kg of cocaine, 225 kg of methamphetamine and almost 9 tonnes of ganja, Chaturvedi said, adding DRI has been working to dismantle the drug smuggling network.

"The threat from narcotics remains persistent for our country. Transnational syndicates continue to engage in a cat-and-mouse game by exploiting couriers and e-commerce shipments, as well as maritime routes to push synthetic drugs into the country," Chauturvedi said.

Between April-October, DRI and Customs officials have seized 3,029 kg of narcotics valued at about ₹3,365 crore.

With regard to gold smuggling, Chaturvedi said it continues to be an evolving issue with syndicates coming out with new concealment methods by misusing access within the airport, as well as the cargo handling ecosystems.

The CBIC chief said DRI is targeting these networks, including those using the maritime routes and offshore supply chains.

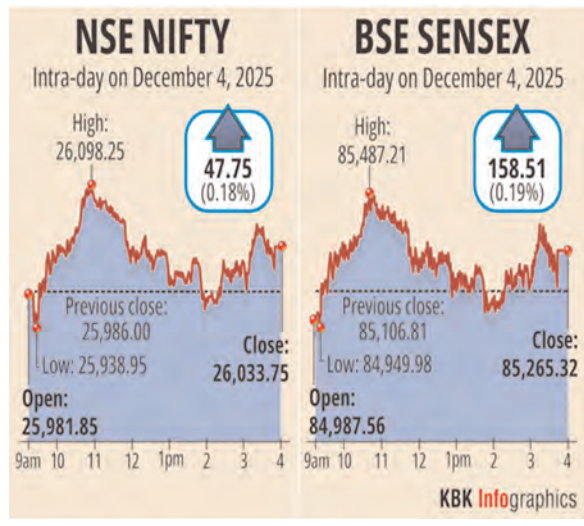
In the last fiscal, DRI seized 1,072 kg of gold valued at ₹785 crore.

In the current fiscal between April-October, about 260 kg of gold valued at over ₹254 crore was also seized in 461 cases.

Stock markets bounce back

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
Mumbai

Snapping the four-day losing run, benchmark stock indices Sensex and Nifty rebounded on Thursday on buying in tech and IT shares.



The 30-share BSE Sensex edged higher by 158.51 points or 0.19 per cent to settle at 85,265.32. During the day, it rose by 380.4 points or 0.44 per cent to 85,487.21.

The 50-share NSE Nifty climbed 47.75 points or 0.18 per cent to 26,033.75. Sensex dropped around 613 points or 0.72 per cent while Nifty shed nearly 230 points or 0.8 per cent in four straight sessions to Wednesday.

Tata Consultancy Services, Tech Mahindra, Infosys, HCL Tech, Bharti Airtel, Sun Pharma, Bharat Electronics and Trent were the major gainers among Sensex scrips.

However, Maruti, Eternal, Kotak Mahindra Bank and Titan were among the laggards.

Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth ₹3,206.92 crore on Wednesday, while Domestic Institutional Investors (DIIs) bought stocks worth ₹4,730.41 crore, according to exchange data.

"Domestic markets closed flat amid mixed global cues and caution ahead of the RBI policy. Early value-driven gains were restrained by a record-low rupee and persistent FII outflows. However, lowered expectations of an RBI rate cut supported a mild currency rebound, helping indices stabilise towards the close," Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Investments Limited said.

In Asian markets, South Korea's Kospi, Shanghai's SSE Composite Index settled lower, while Japan's Nikkei 225 index Hong Kong's Hang Seng index ended in positive territory.

Post-govt ban on real-money gaming, Dream11 bets on sports entertainment

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
Mumbai

With a major part of the business impacted by the government's ban on Real Money Gaming, Dream11 on Thursday announced sports entertainment to be its next bet.

The top management also said that none of its 1,200 employees has been laid off as a result of the ban on real money gaming.

"We are moving away from the gaming piece altogether. We are pivoting hard," the company's co-founder and chief executive, Harsh Jain, told reporters.

It is launching a service which lets users 'watch along' a sporting event with someone seated elsewhere and makes sport-watching less lonely.

"People want to scream, shout or banter while watching a fixture. The problem we are focusing on is the loneliness of watching a match alone," he said, adding that Dream11 will be the second screen which a user will sit with.

As a concept, the watchalong service exists on YouTube but this is the first time a dedicated platform for such engagement is being launched in India.

Globally, there are platforms like Twich offering such engagement for sports viewing, he said, pointing out that it is a USD 10 billion opportunity with 1 billion potential users internationally.

Jain said the new business will primarily depend on advertising and also in-app purchases to be done through pre-bought virtual coins.

Marketing spends will be negligible, he said, adding that efforts will be made to draw as many of the 250 million users already registered on Dream11 to try and taste the new offering.

Over 20 million users are still active in fantasy gaming, even with the money element being taken off, Jain said.

The company is not facing any pressure from its investors, Jain said, replying to a query on whether the pressure to exit may lead to any changes.

It is sufficiently capitalised for now and does not see any need for money for the next few years, Jain said.

Creating the new platform has not been capital expenditure intensive and the company has deployed its existing workforce to create the platform.

The new business will only require 200 employees, he said, adding that the remaining ones have been distributed across eight separate verticals, including Horizon, Fancode, Dream Sports AI and Dream Set Go.

Jain said each of the eight units is working like a startup and may be in the seed funding to Series A stage.

Initially, it will be signing up with influencers or creators, Jain said, adding that over two-thirds of the revenue will be shared with them as per the global norms.

He said the company will initially start with cricket and add more sports gradually. It will be watching the retention figures very closely, and the next six months will be crucial for the business.

FROM THE WORLD

CHILE

Phones in schools banned

Chile has passed a bill outlawing the use of mobile phones and other smart devices during classes at elementary and middle schools. The new law will take effect next year, making Chile the latest country to restrict smartphone use among young students to reduce its harmful effects and curb classroom distractions. Other nations with various levels of restrictions on smartphone use at schools include France, Brazil, Hungary, the Netherlands and China. "We are advancing a cultural change for children and adolescents who today, more than ever, need to see each other's faces again, socialise during recess, and regain concentration to further boost learning," Education Minister Nicolás Cataldo wrote on social media after the decision.

PAKISTAN

Afghan militant killed in raid

Security forces on Thursday killed an Afghan militant belonging to the banned Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan in northwestern Pakistan's restive Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, police said. The deceased militant was killed in an intelligence-based operation carried out in the Loi Mamond area of Bajaur district of the province, an official added. According to the security sources, the militant was an Afghan national belonging to Afghanistan's Nangarhar province and was involved in many disruptive activities in Bajaur. Pakistan continues to reel under terrorism with a surge of 25 per cent terror incidents in 2025 compared to the previous year, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa being the worst hit province, according to a report by Islamabad-based Centre for Research and Security Studies on Wednesday.

Putin rejects key US proposal on Ukraine

ASSOCIATED PRESS
■ Moscow

Russian President Vladimir Putin says some proposals in a US plan to end the war in Ukraine are unacceptable to the Kremlin, indicating in comments published Thursday that any deal is still some ways off.

US President Donald Trump has set in motion the most intense diplomatic push to stop the fighting since Russia launched the full-scale invasion of its neighbour nearly four years ago. But the effort has once again run into demands that are hard to reconcile, especially over whether Ukraine must give up land to Russia and how it can be kept safe from any future aggression by Moscow.

Trump's special envoy, Steve Witkoff, and son-in-law Jared Kushner are set to meet with Ukraine's lead negotiator, Rustem Umerov, later Thursday in Miami for further talks, according to a senior Trump administration official who wasn't authorised to comment publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity.

Putin said his five-hour talks Tuesday in the Kremlin with Witkoff and Kushner were "necessary" and "useful," but also "difficult work," and some proposals were unacceptable.

Putin spoke to the India Today TV channel before visiting New Delhi on Thursday. Before the full interview was broadcast, Russian state news agencies Tass and RIA Novosti quoted some of his remarks in it. Tass quoted Putin as saying that in Tuesday's talks, the sides "had to go through each point" of the US peace proposal, "which is why it took so long."

"This was a necessary conversation, a very concrete one," he said, with provisions that Moscow was ready to discuss, while others "we can't agree to."

Trump said Wednesday that Witkoff and Kushner came away from their marathon session confident that he wants to find an end to the war. "Their impression was very strongly that he'd like to make a deal," he added. Putin refused to elaborate on what Russia could accept or reject, and none of the other officials involved offered details of the talks.

"I think it is premature. Because it could simply disrupt the working regime of the peace effort, Tass quoted Putin as saying.

European leaders, left on the sidelines by Washington as US officials engage directly with Moscow and Kyiv, have accused Putin of feigning interest in Trump's peace drive. Russian barrages of civilian areas of Ukraine continued overnight into Thursday. A missile struck Kryvyi Rih on Wednesday night, wounding six people, including a 3-year-old girl, according to city administration head Oleksandr Vilkul.

The attack on Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's hometown damaged more than 40 residential buildings, a school and domestic gas pipes, Vilkul said. A 6-year-old girl died in the southern city of Kherson after Russian artillery shelling wounded her the previous day, regional military administration chief Oleksandr Prokudin wrote on Telegram.

The Kherson Thermal Power Plant, which provides heat for over 40,000 residents, shut down Thursday after Russia pounded it with drones and artillery for several days, he said.Authorities planned emergency meetings to find alternate sources of heating, he said. Until then, tents were erected across the city where residents could warm up and charge electronic devices.

Russia also struck Odesa with drones, wounding six people, while civilian and energy infrastructure was damaged, said Oleh Kiper, head of the regional military administration. Overall, Russia fired two ballistic missiles and 138 drones at Ukraine overnight, officials said. Meanwhile, in the Russia-occupied part of the Kherson region, two men were killed by a Ukrainian drone strike on their vehicle Thursday, Moscow-installed regional leader Vladimir Saldo said.

Terror attacks increased in Pakistan: Report

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
■ Karachi

Pakistan continues to reel under terrorism with a surge of 25 per cent violence-related incidents in 2025 compared to the previous year, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa being the worst hit province, a think tank report has said .

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan together accounted for over 96 per cent of all 3,187 fatalities and 92 per cent of all incidents of violence recorded through January to November 2025, according to the Islamabad-based Centre for Research and Security Studies (CRSS).

"Till November, an overall surge of 25 per cent was observed in violence, which resulted in 3,187 deaths in comparison to 2,546 casualties in 2024, a rise of around 20 per cent," the report, published on Wednesday, by CRSS, a non-profit, independent think tank, said.

In 2024, 2,546 deaths and 1981 injuries were reported. The figures include civilians, security personnel, and militants killed in anti-terror operations. The fatalities reported were from 1,188 recorded incidents of violence, including terror attacks and counter terrorism operations, mainly concentrated in the northwestern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan provinces.

After clashes and tense relations with Afghanistan, violence has been at its peak in recent months in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, observed the report by CRSS, founded by civil society activists to monitor the security landscape in the country.

The Pakistan Government accuses the banned terror outfit Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) of carrying out terror attacks after its ceasefire deal ended in November 2022. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa was the worst hit region with around 68 per cent (2,165) of the total deaths, and over 62 per cent (732) of the incidents of violence, followed by Balochistan, accounting for over 28 per cent of the total fatalities (896) and over 30 per cent of the incidents reported (366).

> CLASHES AND TENSE RELATIONS WITH AFGHANISTAN, VIOLENCE HAS BEEN AT ITS PEAK IN RECENT MONTHS IN KHYBER PAKHTUNKHWA

The remaining regions of Pakistan — Sindh, Punjab, Pakistan-occupied Kashmir and Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT) — collectively experienced 90 incidents, with 126 lives lost, constituting just 4 per cent of all fatalities, the report said.

The CRSS said on average there were approximately 15 casualties per day throughout the reporting period. It also said that counter terrorism operations by security forces were impactful in the first 11 months of 2025, resulting in 1,795 militant fatalities — approximately 30 per cent more than the 1,392 lives lost in terrorist attacks.

However, in Balochistan, terrorist attacks by mainly banned insurgent groups were responsible for 517 fatalities among security forces personnel and civilians, outnumbering the militants killed in security operations by 36 per cent.

UN warns of new wave of atrocities in Sudan's Kordofan region

ASSOCIATED PRESS
■ Cairo

The UN's top human rights official issued a stark new warning on Thursday about Sudan, saying he fears "a new wave of atrocities" amid a surge in fierce fighting in the Kordofan region.

UN Human Rights Chief Volker Turk urged "all states with influence over the parties to take immediate action to halt the fighting, and stop the arms flows that are fueling the conflict." Fighting between the paramilitary group the Rapid Support Forces, also known as the RSF, and the Sudanese military, who have been at war for over two years, has recently shifted to the oil-rich Kordofan region after the paramilitary group took over el-Fasher in Darfur.

According to the UN, the conflict in Sudan has killed 40,000 people — though some rights groups say the death toll is significantly higher — and has created the world's worst humanitarian crisis with over 14 million displaced. The RSF's takeover of el-Fasher, the Sudanese military's last stronghold in Darfur, was marked by the executions of civilians, rapes and sexual assaults. Over 100,000 people have fled el-Fasher since October, and thousands are feared trapped or believed to have been killed along the way, according to rights groups. The RSF has had major gains since then. "It is truly shocking to see history repeating itself in Kordofan so soon after the horrific events in el-Fasher," Turk said

"We must not allow Kordofan to become another el-Fasher," he said. He said over 269 people were killed in the town of Bara in North Kordofan in aerial strikes, artillery shelling, and summary executions since the end of October, but that the numbers could be higher because telecommunications and internet outages have made numbers hard to verify. He called for "the restoration of telecommunications to facilitate lifesaving assistance and to allow essential information to flow to civilians."

His statement said an RSF drone strike on November 3 killed 45 people, mostly women, in a tent in el-Obeid in Kordofan, and that Sudanese military aerial strikes killed at least 48 people, mostly civilians, in Kauda, South Kordofan.

Critically ill former Bangladesh PM Zia to be taken to London: reports

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
■ Dhaka

Family of former Bangladesh prime minister Khalada Zia, who remains in a critical condition here, is preparing to transfer her to London, where her son and BNP acting chairperson Tarique Rahman lives, media reports said Thursday.

Zia, the 80-year-old Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) chairperson, was admitted to a private hospital on November 23 when she developed a chest infection that affected both her heart and lungs.

Four days later, the three-time prime minister was shifted to the coronary care unit (CCU) after several of her health complications worsened. BBC Bangla Service and Ittefaq newspaper said Zia's son and BNP's self-exiled acting chairperson Tarique Rahman's wife Zubaida Rahman, a doctor herself, is expected to arrive in Dhaka soon to oversee the transfer of her ailing mother-in-law. "After arriving in Bangladesh, Zubaida Rahman will take her to London (after) assessing Zia's physical condition," at the Dhaka hospital, the BBC Bangla reported saying, several BNP leaders confirmed the decision without mentioning their names.

Qatar, meanwhile, said it is ready to provide an air ambulance for Zia for taking her to London even as two military and air force helicopters on Thursday staged landing tests at the rooftop of Dhaka's Evercare Hospital, where she is admitted.

"If madam's (Zia) health is suitable for travel, we plan to take her to London tomorrow morning. It all depends on her health," Zia's adviser Enamul Haque Chowdhury told The Daily Star newspaper. A four-member Chinese medical team, comprising doctors Chi Jiang Fang, Yan Xin, Zhong Yuhui, and Meng Huang Wu, arrived at the Evercare Hospital late on Wednesday night and met with the medical board to review treatment options for the BNP chairperson, the state-run BSS news agency reported. BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir met the specialists upon their arrival and discussed Zia's treatment with them, according to news portal bdnews24.Com.

The Chinese doctors joined a four-member UK specialist group led by Dr Richard Buell that had arrived earlier in the day to help chart an advanced treatment plan. The team's arrival marked the second batch of Chinese doctors, who had arrived earlier this week.

Flood death toll in Asia surpasses 1,500 as calls grow to fight deforestation

ASSSOCIATED PRESS
■ Padang

Deaths from last week's catastrophic floods and landslides in parts of Asia surged past 1,500 Thursday as rescue teams raced to reach survivors isolated by the disaster with hundreds of people still unaccounted for across the region.

The tragedy of so much death and destruction was compounded by warnings that decades of deforestation caused by unchecked development, mining and palm oil plantations may have worsened the devastation.

Calls grew for the Government to act. "We need the Government to investigate and fix forest management," said Rangga Adiputra, a 31-year-old teacher whose home in West Sumatra was swept away. The hills above his village on the outskirts of Padang city had been scarred by illegal logging. "We don't want this costly disaster to happen again," he said.

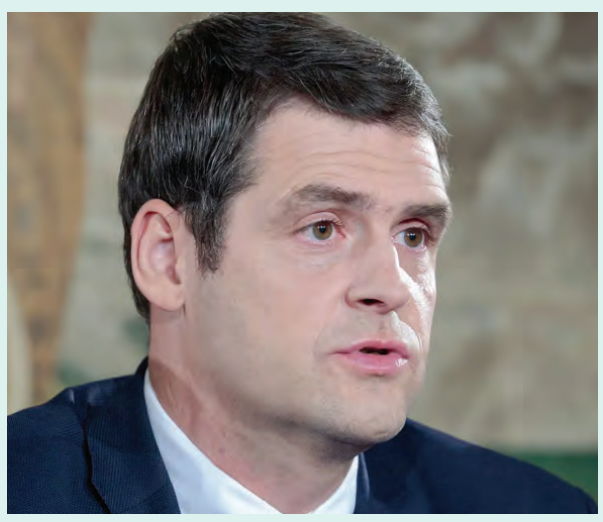
Authorities said 837 people were confirmed dead in Indonesia, 479 in Sri Lanka and 185 in Thailand, as well as three in Malaysia. Many villages in Indonesia and Sri Lanka remained buried under mud and debris, with 861 people still unaccounted for in both countries. Thousands reportedly faced severe shortages of food and clean water in cut off areas. The floods and landslides washed away roads and bridges and knocked out telecommunications, leaving many communities inaccessible.

Indonesian television showed images of huge amounts of felled timber carried downstream in North Sumatra, West Sumatra and Aceh provinces. The leading Indonesian environmental group WALHI said that decades of deforestation — driven by mining, palm oil plantations, and illegal logging — stripped away natural defences that once absorbed rainfall and stabilised soil. "The disaster was not just nature's fury, it was amplified by decades of deforestation," said Rianda Purba, an activist with the group.

"Deforestation and unchecked development have stripped Sumatra of its resilience." The group recorded more than 240,000 hectares (nearly 600,000 acres) of primary forest were lost in 2024 alone, leaving Sumatra's small river basins dangerously exposed.

Another environmental group, Global Forest Watch, has said the flood-inundated Indonesian provinces of Aceh, North Sumatra and West Sumatra have since 2000 lost 19,600 sq km (7,569 square miles) of forest, an area larger than the state of New Jersey.

"Unless restoration begins now, more lives will be lost," Purba warned. Massive piles of neatly cut timber lay scattered among the debris across Parkit Beach, a sight that stunned emergency crews deployed to the area.



Lithuanian court convicts leader for antisemitic speech

ASSOCIATED PRESS ■ Vilnius

A Lithuanian court on Thursday convicted the leader of one of the parties in the country's coalition Government for making antisemitic comments and fined him 5,000 euros (about $5,800). The district court in the capital, Vilnius, found that Remigijus Žemaitaitis incited hatred against Jews, grossly downplayed Nazi Germany's crimes and grossly minimized the Holocaust in an offensive and insulting manner. The punishment fell short of prosecutors' call for him to be fined 51,000 euros (around $60,000) and ordered to pay into a fund for victims of crimes. The case relates to social media posts and public statements from May and June 2023 in which, among other things, he wrote: "Apparently, for our journalists and local Lithuanian Jews, the demolition of schools in Palestine is yet another pastime?!"

One dead in targeted shooting in Washington

ASSOCIATED PRESS ■ Oxon Hill

A man was killed in a targeted shooting at the food court at MGM National Harbor hotel and casino in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, police said. Detectives were working to determine the circumstances, and Prince George's County Police Chief Chief George Nader said at a news conference that they are searching for the shooter, who was captured on video. Officers responded to the shooting just before Wednesday noon and found one victim, a man, who died, Nader said. The shooting was not random, he said. The shooter went to the food court to find the victim, who was ordering food when the suspect appeared and opened fire, he said. The shooter and victim did not exchange any words before the shooting.

Thai worker's remains returned from Gaza

ASSOCIATED PRESS
Jerusalem

Remains that militants in Gaza handed to Israel as part of the first phase of the ceasefire deal were those of a Thai agricultural worker, Israeli and Thai officials said Thursday. The return of Sudthisak Rinthalak's remains leaves just one more hostage to be returned under the agreement.

Sudthisak was an agricultural worker who had been employed at Kibbutz Be'eri, one of the hardest-hit communities in the attack. Israeli officials said the 42-year-old was killed on October 7, 2023, during the Hamas-led attack in Israel that triggered the Israel-Hamas war and that his body was taken by the militant group Islamic Jihad.

He was officially declared dead on May 16, 2024. Sudthisak's remains were returned on Wednesday, a day after militants handed over remains that didn't match either of the last two hostages. Thai Foreign Ministry spokesperson Nikorndej Balankura said Sudthisak's family has been notified and thanked the Israeli Government for assistance that led to the release of all 31 Thai hostages taken at the start of the war. Of those, 28 were returned alive, and three were dead.

Thais were the largest group of foreigners to be held in captivity. The Thai Foreign Ministry has said that, in addition to the hostages, 46 Thais have been killed during the war. Israeli Ran Gvili is now the last hostage whose remains have yet to be returned. Gvili was an Israeli police officer who helped people escape from the Nova music festival during the Oct. 7 attack and was killed fighting at another location.

Since the October 10 start of the ceasefire, 20 living hostages and the remains of 27 others have been returned to Israel. In exchange, Israel has released the bodies of hundreds of Palestinians to Gaza. Most remain unidentified.

The return of all the hostages is an essential element of the first phase of the US-brokered ceasefire that began in October, which both Hamas and Israel have accused the other of breaking. In exchange, Israel has been releasing Palestinian prisoners.

The plan is still in the early stages, and many questions linger over its implementation. The plan to secure and govern the territory authorises an international stabilisation force to provide security, approves a transitional authority to be overseen by US President Donald Trump and envisions a possible future path to an independent Palestinian state.

Hamas hand over a body bag believed to contain the remains of a deceased hostage to the Red Cross for transfer to Israeli authorities, in Beit Lahiya, in the northern Gaza Strip AP

More violence reported in Gaza

In Gaza, the Kuwait Speciality Hospital in Rafah said on Thursday it had received the bodies of five people, including two children, following an Israeli airstrike in the south of the strip late Wednesday.

Another 32 people were treated for wounds sustained in the strike on the town of Muwasi, the hospital said. Israel said it launched an airstrike targeting a Hamas militant in retaliation for an attack earlier in the day that wounded five Israeli soldiers. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Hamas violated the ceasefire when, according to the army, militants emerged from a tunnel and attacked Israeli soldiers in an area under their control.

Relatives angry at ceasefire violation

Relatives of the dead Palestinians wept and wailed over their loved ones' bodies being transported in white body bags through the city of Khan Younis on Thursday.

All five of the dead belong to the same family. Blood stains still marked the mattresses on the floor of a tent encampment that was struck.

Some relatives voiced their outrage that people are still being killed during what's supposed to be a cessation of fighting. Aisha Abu Jazar, a woman living near where the Palestinians were killed, said she was shocked to hear "unusually intense fire" by Israelis overnight.

"They fired a missile at a tent made of cloth, plastic, and wood. The children were asleep. What did the children do to deserve being torn apart in their sleep? What did they do to deserve this?" she said. "We were supposed to be in a ceasefire," she added.

Israel names new spy chief

Netanyahu appointed his military secretary, Maj. Gen. Roman Goffman, as chief of the country's Mossad spy agency, the prime minister's office said in a statement Thursday. Goffman replaces outgoing agency boss David Barnea, whose five-year term ends in June 2026. The appointment will be put to the Advisory Committee for Appointments to Senior Positions for ratification. Goffman served as commander of several Israeli army brigades, battalions and divisions before leading the country's National Ground Training Centre and the Government Operations Headquarters in the Territories, the statement said.

Netanyahu believes Goffman is the most worthy and capable candidate who possesses "exceptional professional abilities" and demonstrates "creativity, initiative, cunning, deep knowledge of the enemy, absolute discretion and secrecy," the statement said. Gaza's Health Ministry says 366 Palestinians have been killed there since the start of the ceasefire. Israel still carries out strikes in response to what it has called violations of the truce, and bodies from earlier in the war are being recovered from the rubble.

The war began with a Hamas-led attack on southern Israel on October 7, 2023, in which around 1,200 people were killed, and more than 250 others were taken hostage. Almost all of the hostages or their remains have been returned in ceasefires or other deals. The Palestinian death toll has surpassed 70,100 |since the war began, according to Gaza's Health Ministry, which operates under the Hamas-run Government.

It is staffed by medical professionals and maintains detailed records viewed as generally reliable by the international community.

Mexican farmers protest new water law proposal

ASSOCIATED PRESS
Mexico City

Dozens of farmers drove their tractors in a caravan to Mexico City and blocked an entrance to Mexico's Congress to protest a new national water law that imposes stricter controls on water use. The farmers amassed outside the congressional chamber on Wednesday to protest the General Water Law proposal, which they say will take water away from the countryside and re-allocate it for discretionary use. They say the proposal threatens their livelihoods and chips away at their fundamental right to water. "If it affects the countryside, it affects the city!" read a banner hanging from two tractors. "We are protesting against the imposition by the federal Government of a new water law, a reform that puts at risk the ownership of our lands," said Jorge Robles, a farmer from the northern state of Chihuahua. The proposal backed by Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum is being discussed in the Chamber of Deputies, where the president's Morena Party has a majority. The law aims for the federal Government to impose stricter penalties for water-related crimes and regulate water concessions – a sector plagued by high-profile corruption cases.

The farmers brought their demonstrations to the country's capital less than a week after they and groups of truck drivers lifted road and highway blockades in at least seven of the country's 32 States.

EU's former chief diplomat quits amid fraud probe

ASSOCIATED PRESS
Brussels

The European Union's former foreign policy chief resigned on Thursday as head of a prestigious institute of European studies after becoming embroiled in a fraud investigation over a training programme for junior diplomats. Federica Mogherini said she was stepping down as Rector of the College of Europe, based in the Belgian city of Bruges, and as of the European Union Diplomatic Academy.

Mogherini's statement gave no reason for the resignation, saying only that she had done so "in line with the utmost rigor and fairness with which I always carried out my duties.""I am proud of what we have achieved together, and I am deeply grateful for the trust, esteem, and support that students, faculty, staff, and Alumni of the College and the Academy have shown and are showing to me," she said. As the EU's top diplomat from 2014 to 2019, Mogherini was responsible for supervising the Iran nuclear talks, leading efforts to improve long-strained relations between Serbia and Kosovo, and a host of other foreign policy and security issues.

The arrest and resignation of the former Italian foreign minister could tarnish the EU's image on the world stage as it seeks to assert influence in negotiations aimed at ending the war in Ukraine. The bloc has been urging Ukraine to tackle rampant corruption. Mogherini was detained for questioning Tuesday, along with a senior college staff member and a senior official from the European Commission, after authorities in Belgium raided the offices of the EU diplomatic service in Brussels and the college in Bruges.

Massive power outage hits Cuba

ASSOCIATED PRESS
Havana

A blackout hit Havana and the rest of the western half of Cuba on Wednesday, leaving millions of people without power on an island struggling with chronic outages blamed on a crumbling electric grid.

Lázaro Guerra, general director of the Ministry of Energy and Mines, said the massive outage was caused by a failure on a transmission line that connects two major plants.

The power grid was operational once again by Wednesday afternoon, but the Government warned that the restoration of electricity would not be immediate and that generation deficits persisted.

The nearly 12-hour blackout snarled activities in the capital and beyond. In Havana, dozens of police officers tried to direct traffic while many students who were already in school were sent back home. Small businesses that have generators resumed their sales, especially of food.

Some areas had intermittent internet service, so many residents were left wondering what had happened. "There's no connection. No one knows why the power is out. They're not saying anything; it's all silence," grumbled Raúl Calderón, an 82-year-old retiree, as he waited to hear official reports on the radio. The outage followed two days of peak-hour power shortages across the island.

A total blackout hit Cuba in September, with officials blaming aging infrastructure and fuel shortages at power plants. The ongoing outages also affect water service and impact the island's fragile business sector. "Things are bad. The power plants are breaking down a lot. I have two children, and food is hard to come by," said Liubel Quintana, a 47-year-old cafe owner. "It's very tough everywhere you look."

Cuba is going through a severe economic crisis that deepened during the coronavirus pandemic, which paralysed the key tourism sector, and was exacerbated by an increase in US sanctions and a failed internal financial reform to unify the currency.

Meanwhile, thermal power plants have been operating for over 30 years and receive little maintenance, which is expensive for Cuban budgets.

Trump administration orders H-1B, H-4 visa applicants to make social media profiles public

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
New York/Washington

The US Government has expanded screening and vetting measures for H-1B visa applicants and their H-4 dependents, directing them to keep the privacy settings on all their social media profiles set to "public".

In a new order issued Wednesday, the State Department said beginning December 15, a review of the online presence for all H-1B applicants and their dependents will be conducted. Students and exchange visitors were already subject to such scrutiny, which has now been extended to include those applying for H-1B and H-4 visas.

"To facilitate this vetting, all applicants for H-1B and their dependents (H-4), F, M, and J nonimmigrant visas are instructed to adjust the privacy settings on all of their social media profiles to 'public'," the State Department said.

Underscoring that a US visa is a privilege and not a right, the department said it uses all available information in screening and vetting to identify visa applicants who are inadmissible or pose a threat to America's national security or public safety. "Every visa adjudication is a national security decision," it said.

The department said the US "must be vigilant" to ensure applicants do not intend to harm Americans and that all visa applicants credibly establish eligibility and intent to comply with the terms of their admission.

The directive is the latest in a series of steps by the Trump administration to tighten immigration rules.

The administration has launched a massive crackdown to check abuse of the H-1B visa programme, used largely by US technology companies to hire foreign workers. Indian professionals, including tech workers and physicians, form one of the largest groups of H-1B visa holders.

In September, US President Donald Trump issued a proclamation, titled 'Restriction on Entry of Certain Nonimmigrant Workers', imposing a one-time $100,000 fee on new H-1B work visas, an order that could significantly impact Indian workers seeking temporary employment in the US.

Pak lifts ban on festive kite flying after 20 years

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
Lahore

Amid pressure from artists and civil society members, a ban on kite flying during the Basant festival has been lifted in Pakistan's Punjab province after 20 years.

The decision by Maryam Nawaz led the administration has evoked widespread excitement across cities and villages in the province of 13 million people.

Celebrated towards the end of winters to mark the arrival of spring (Basant) season, the Basant festival has been an occasion for community celebrations across the province.

Kite flying during Basant festivities was an integral part for centuries but was banned about two decades ago. Announcing the details of the decision made on Wednesday, Punjab's Minister for Information and Culture Azma Bokhari said on Thursday that there will, however, be several restrictions and fines for those violating new rules regarding the same.

"After 20 years, the joy of Basant has finally returned to Punjab. But this time, it comes under strict safety regulations. No one will be allowed to break the law during the festival," Bokhari said in a statement.

In 2005, the Government imposed the ban on kite-flying following several deaths, especially of motorcyclists and children, in accidents when the kite's sharp glass-coated strings got entangled around their necks leading to serious injuries.

Azma added that children under 18 will not be allowed to fly kites.

Trump hosts leaders of Congo, Rwanda to sign key deal for peace in eastern Congo

ASSOCIATED PRESS
Washington

US President Donald Trump will host the leaders of the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda on Thursday for a deal-signing aimed at ending the conflict in eastern Congo and opening access to the region's critical minerals for the US Government and American companies.

The moment provides Trump — who has repeatedly and with a measure of exaggeration boasted of brokering peace in some of the world's most entrenched conflicts — another chance to tout himself as a dealmaker extraordinaire on the global stage and make the case that he's deserving of the Nobel Peace Prize. The US leader hasn't been shy about his desire to receive the honour. Trump is welcoming Presidents Felix Tshisekedi of Congo and Paul Kagame of Rwanda, as well as several officials from other African nations travelling to Washington to witness the signing, in the same week he contemptuously derided the war-torn country of Somalia and said he did he did not want immigrants from the East African nation in the US.

> CONGO HAS BEEN BATTERED BY FIGHTING WITH ARMED GROUPS, THE MOST POTENT BEING THE RWANDA-BACKED M23

Lauded by the White House as a "historic" agreement brokered by Trump, the pact between Tshisekedi and Kagame follows monthslong peace efforts by the US and partners, including the African Union and Qatar, and finalises an earlier deal signed in June. But the Trump-brokered peace is precarious. The Central African nation of Congo has been battered by decades-long fighting with more than 100 armed groups, the most potent being the Rwanda-backed M23 rebels.

The conflict escalated this year, with M23 seizing the region's main cities of Goma and Bukavu in an unprecedented advance, worsening a humanitarian crisis that was already one of the world's largest, with millions of people displaced.

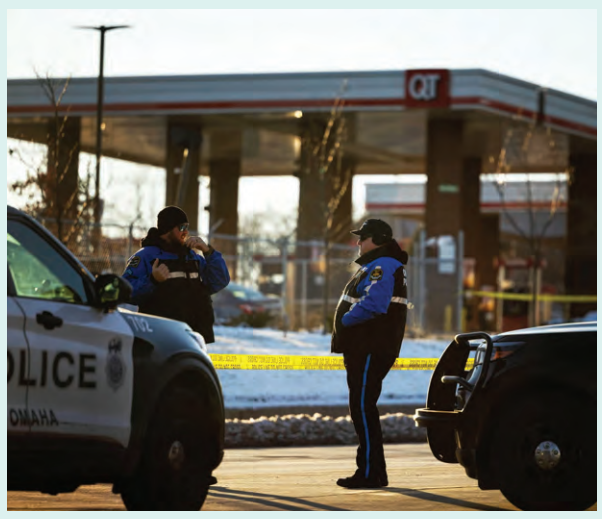
Fighting, meanwhile, continued this week in the conflict-battered region with pockets of clashes reported between the rebels and Congolese soldiers, together with their allied forces. Trump, a Republican, has often said that his mediation has ended the conflict, which some people in Congo say isn't true. Analysts say deal also isn't expected to quickly result in peace. A separate peace deal has been signed between Congo and the M23.

"We are still at war," said Amani Chibalonza Edith, a 32-year-old resident of Goma, eastern Congo's key city seized by rebels early this year. "There can be no peace as long as the front lines remain active." Pact will also build on a Regional Economic Integration Framework that officials have said will define the terms of economic partnerships involving the three countries

Pilot safely ejects before F-16 crashes in US

ASSOCIATED PRESS Trona

A fighter jet with the Air Force's elite Thunderbirds demonstration squadron crashed in the Southern California desert, but the pilot managed to eject safely, the military said. The pilot was being treated at a hospital for injuries that were not life-threatening, according to the San Bernardino County Fire Department. The F-16C Fighting Falcon crashed around 10:45 am on Wednesday during a training mission "over controlled airspace in California", according to a statement from Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada. The fire department said it had responded to an "aircraft emergency" near Trona, an unincorporated community in the Mojave Desert about 180 miles (290 kilometers) north of Los Angeles. In 2022, a Navy F/A-18E Super Hornet crashed near Trona, killing the pilot.



Officers wounded, suspect killed in US shooting

ASSOCIATED PRESS Omaha

Three Omaha police officers have been wounded and a suspect killed in an exchange of gunfire at a gas station. The suspect, a man in his 20s, had earlier shot a 61-year-old man several times in the chest about noon at a grocery store, Police Chief Todd Schmaderer said. Officers obtained a license plate number from the scene and followed the suspect's car to the gas station, he said. The officers watched the suspect get out and enter a restroom on Wednesday. He then left the room and began firing on the officers, the chief said.Two officers were hit, and a third was hit by shrapnel. The officers returned fire, and the suspect was killed. "This is a very dangerous day involving this suspect in the city of Omaha," Schmaderer said. The officers suffered non-life-threatening injuries and were taken to a local hospital.

PROSPECT

Assam CM Himanta Biswa Sarma at the inauguration of the newly constructed 'Kendriya Palnam Than' of Eksaran Bhagawati Samaj at Kaliyabor, Nagaon

Aurobindo Society unveils charter for Indian knowledge systems in schools

Aurobindo Society has initiated a nationwide movement to embed Indian Knowledge Systems into school education, hosting the first International Conference on Integrating IKS in School Education. At the event, the Society unveiled India's first IKS Charter, a national framework providing guidelines for responsible, research-backed and classroom-ready integration of IKS. The Charter outlines principles, curriculum pathways, age-appropriate modules, assessments and teacher-preparation approaches.

Speaking at the event, Sambhrant Sharma said the movement aims to bring India's civilisational wisdom into the core of schooling in a practical and future-ready manner. Chief Guest Bajrang Bagra (VHP) praised the Charter as an essential guideline for safe and effective implementation. The event was organised inpartnership with Maharishi International University (USA), Lal Bahadur Shastri National Sanskrit University, *Bhartiya Shiksha* Board, and Future Icons.

Campaign AOTY 2025: Raj Kamble wins top leadership award

Raj Kamble, founder and chief creative officer of famous innovations, has been honoured with one of the highest individual recognitions at the campaign agency of the year awards 2025. He was named "agency head and growth leader of the year", marking his fourth win – a record achievement that makes him the only independent agency head to receive this distinction. Past recipients include industry veterans such as Piyush Pandey, Prasoon Joshi and Ashish Bhasin.

The accolade places Kamble among India's most influential leaders in advertising and marketing. The category acknowledges professionals who have successfully built high-performing agencies, delivered noteworthy business results for brands, and set new benchmarks in creativity and growth.

His Holiness Dalai Lama launching the book titled 'Forest Resources in India' co-authored by Himachal Pradesh Environment Secretary Sushil Kumar Singla, retired Indian Forest Service officer Rakesh B Sinha and Solan University former scientist Krishna Kumar Raina published by National Book Trust

PM Modi grand architect of new and resurgent NE: Sonowal

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
New Delhi

Sarbananda Sonowal

The Union Minister for Ports, Shipping and Waterways Sarbananda Sonowal said Prime Minister Narendra Modi has emerged as "the grand architect of a new and resurgent Northeast," transforming a region once neglected for decades into a major driver of India's growth, connectivity and national pride.

Speaking on the development outcomes achieved over the last decade, Sonowal said the Northeast has transitioned "from the margins of policymaking to the mainstream of national priorities," reflecting the prime minister's commitment to infrastructure expansion, economic reform, cultural revival and long-term peace-building.

"The Northeast suffered seven decades of under-representation and under-investment," Sarbananda Sonowal said. "Under Modi ji, the region is recognised as the *Ashtalakshmi* of India — not just a border region but a new engine of national growth. From railway capital connectivity and airports to highways, power, digital networks and inland waterways, the transformation has been historic." The Union Minister Sarbananda Sonowal said connectivity has been the cornerstone of the prime minister's roadmap. All major gauge conversion work in the region has been completed, with Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura, Manipur and Mizoram connected to the broad gauge network and goods and passenger trains reaching the region's interiors for the first time.

The Bogibeel rail-cum-road bridge — completed in 2018 and the commissioning of the Bhairabi – Sairang link in June 2025 have expanded access across Assam and Mizoram.

Four capital connectivity rail projects — Nagaland, Manipur, Sikkim and Meghalaya — are underway, while the India – Bangladesh Agartala – Akhaura rail link was inaugurated jointly by the prime ministers of both nations in November 2023.

On roads, more than 11,000 km of upgraded national and strategic highways have been taken up in the last decade.

Major corridors include the Shillong – Nongstoin – Tura section, the Nechipu – Hoj NH–13 project and the capital connectivity highways to Kohima, Itanagar and Gangtok, several of which are nearing completion in 2025. Air connectivity has undergone what Sarbananda Sonowal described as "a revolution." From nine airports in 2014, the Northeast now has 19 operational airports.

Greenfield airports at Pakyong and Hollongi, along with the upgraded Tezu, Rupsi and Agartala terminals, were operationalised under the UDAN scheme.

A network of heliports and water aerodromes has been added to extend links to remote districts.

Born in the highlands, destined for honour

TONY DAS
Alo,West Siang

The Indian Army's continuous outreach and mentoring efforts in the remote areas of West Siang have yielded yet another proud milestone. Three young aspirants from the Aalo region — Jari Bagra, Toni Doji and Yumper Nada — have successfully cleared the Agniveer selection process and will now proceed to the Recruiting Office, Jorhat on 04 December 2025 for enrolment into the Assam Regiment.

These youths, hailing from the villages of Along and Basar, overcame geographical isolation and limited access to resources through sheer determination and disciplined preparation. Their achievement reflects the impact of the Indian Army's sustained guidance, structured training support, and its commitment to empowering deserving talent from far-flung areas of Arunachal Pradesh.

To honour their remarkable accomplishment and encourage them as they step into a life of service and responsibility, a felicitation ceremony was conducted on 03 December 2025 to celebrate their hard work and inspire other young individuals across Arunachal to pursue their dreams with similar resolve.

The Indian Army remains dedicated to nurturing potential in border communities, ensuring that opportunity reaches even the most remote corners. The success of these three youths stands as a testament to what courage, mentorship and persistence can achieve.

PM to visit Assam from December 20, Himanta reviews preparations

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
Guwahati

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma chaired a meeting to review the preparations for Prime Minister Narendra Modi's proposed two-day visit to the State from December 20.

Sarma said the PM, during his visit, will "herald a new wave of development" in the state. "Assam is all set to welcome Adarniya Shri @narendramodi ji on 20th December as he will herald a new wave of development in the State," the chief minister posted on X on Wednesday.

"Reviewed preparations for his welcome and the marquee events which will take place during the visit," he added.

The prime minister, during his visit, will inaugurate the new terminal building of the *Lokapriya Gopinath Bordoloi* International Airport and also unveil a statue of Bordoloi, Assam's first chief minister, at Borjhar. Modi is also scheduled to address a public meeting at Guwahati.

He will also lay the foundation stone for a new brownfield ammonia-urea complex of 12.7 lakh metric tonnes annual capacity at Namrup and address a public meeting there.

The chief minister, during the meeting, reviewed the preparations for both the programmes of the prime minister scheduled to be held in Guwahati and Namrup, an official statement said.

He directed senior officials to ensure that both events were conducted smoothly for their resounding success.

Minister of Industries, Commerce and Public Enterprises Bimal Bora, BJP MLA from *Naharkatia Taranga Gogoi*, district commissioners of Kamrup and Dibrugarh, and the managing director of Assam Valley Fertiliser and Chemical Company Limited, SP Mahanta, participated in the meeting virtually.

Chief Secretary Ravi Kota, Director General of Police Harmeet Singh and several other senior officials were present in the meeting, the statement added.

CM Sarma presents seed capital under MMUA at Tamulpur

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
Guwahati

Empowering the *Nari Shakti* of Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR), Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on thursday handed over ₹10,000 seed capital each to 35,199 women beneficiaries uder *Mukahya Mantri Mahila Udyamita Abhiyan* at a programme held at Tamulpur.

Speaking on the occasion, Chief Minister Sarma said that MMUA has given a new fillip to strengthening women-led enterprise and livelihoods across the region, which has led to a new awakening among the women of the State.

He observed that from ancient times, the women of Assam exceptionally led several fields and *Sati Joymati* and *Mulagabharu* showed this with fine examples. Although, instead of income-generating works, most women in the State stayed engaged in household tasks, a few women got themselves engaged in different business activities.

In this backdrop, the transformational movement of self-help groups began in the state and as a result, the number of enterprising women kept rising. He said that through various business initiatives, women in the State have started to earn their own income.

The Chief Minister said that Prime Minister Narendra Modi trusts the strength and capacity of women and he aims to help three crore women in the country grow into *Lakhpati Baideus*. The goal is to build a new force of women who can earn more than ₹1 lakh in a year through entrepreneurial activities. In Assam, forty lakh women now work with self-help groups. The Chief Minister said that many women have already used bank loans and their own savings to run businesses and have joined the ranks of *Lakhpati Baideus*. He said that more than eight lakh women in the State have now become *Lakhpati*.

Dr Sarma said that earlier women in the State wanted to run businesses but the lack of capital held them back. He said that after long discussion, the present Government decided to support each member directly to encourage entrepreneurship. Under the *Mukhyamantri Mahila Udyamita Abhiyan*, the State arranged to give ₹10,000 to each of the forty lakh self-help group members. He said that the State Government would spend ₹4000 crore for this purpose.

Commenting on the cheque distribution event held in Tamulpur, he said that the State Government has already covered 45 assembly constituencies and 10 lakh women have been benefited.

Catering to the needs of these 45 constituencies proves that the State Government fulfils its promises. Speaker Assam Legislative Assembly Biswajit Daimary, CEM BTC Hagrama Mohilary, Cabinet Ministers Jayanta Mallabaruah and Charan Boro, Tamulpur MLA Jalen Daimary, several BTC executive members, Mission Director Assam State Rural Livelihood Mission Kuntal Moni Sarma Bordoloi, along with a host of other dignitaries were present on the occasion.

President awards for empowerment of persons with disabilities

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
New Delhi

A society that embraces every individual's abilities becomes stronger, more humane and more prosperous": President of India at National Awards for Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities 2025.

The President of India, Droupadi Murmu, today inspired the nation with a powerful message at the National Awards for Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities 2025, affirming that "a society that embraces every individual's abilities becomes stronger, more humane and more prosperous."

Addressing the gathering at *Vigyan Bhawan* on the International Day of persons with disabilities, she reminded the country that inclusion, dignity and equal opportunity are the true measures of national progress.

She emphasised that the day carries immense significance as it "reminds us of our collective responsibility to build a society that is just, inclusive and enabling for every citizen, especially our *Divyangjan*." The President highlighted India's long-standing commitment to honouring excellence and empowering Persons with Disabilities, noting that the Awards not only recognise extraordinary achievements but also inspire compassion, responsibility and action.

She lauded the courage and leadership of the 32 awardees, describing them as "shining examples of India's commitment to dignity, equality and inclusion." Recalling the transformative impact of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, the President underscored India's shift to a rights-based framework that guarantees accessibility, reasonable accommodation, legal safeguards, and enhanced representation in education and public service.

She specifically praised the Divyang children who, despite their disabilities, excelled in their abilities. Many initiatives are being undertaken for Divyangjan at the President's House, and a Purple Fest was also organised there.".

Addressing the gathering, Union Minister for Social Justice and Empowerment, Dr Virendra Kumar, said that under the leadership and vision of the Hon'ble Prime Minister, the Government considers *Divyangjan* as invaluable human capital and remains firmly committed to ensuring equal opportunities.

Dr Kumar also underlined the success of UDID, accessible infrastructure initiatives, ADIP Scheme distribution to nearly 33 lakh beneficiaries. He said on the occasion that When the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, speaks of making the nation self-reliant through '*Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas*, and *Sabka Prayaas*,' the contributions and efforts of our Divyangjan are also an important part of this vision."

In her welcome address, V Vidyavathi, Secretary, Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities, extended heartfelt greetings to all the awardees and highlighted the impressive nationwide response to this year's National Awards.

She shared that 2,423 applications were received through the *Rashtriya Puraskar* Portal, reflecting growing awareness and confidence among persons with disabilities. She reaffirmed the Government's commitment to accessible infrastructure, early intervention services, capacity-building institutions and technology-driven reforms that are shaping a more equitable and barrier-free India.

Congratulating the awardees, she noted that their achievements serve as a beacon of inspiration for millions across the country.

Dr Rajib Mukhapadhyay honoured with ET young leaders award 2025

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
New Delhi

Dr Rajib Mukhapadhyay, Country Head and Director (Finance) at SkyPower Global and Co-founder of the social welfare organisation Le Rythme. has been honoured with the prestigious ET Young Industry Leaders 2025 Award.

The award, which recognises excellence in social impact, inclusive growth, and nation-building, was presented by acclaimed Bollywood actress Taapsee Pannu at an exclusive ceremony held at The Grand, New Delhi.

The evening brought together distinguished industry leaders, policymakers, and transformative social change agents.

A highly respected academic and global finance leader, Dr Mukhapadhyay is an alumnus of IIM Kolkata and a Fellow Member of The Institute of Cost Accountants of India.

With over 30 years of international leadership experience, he has significantly influenced the financial frameworks of global multinational organisations.

His deep expertise covers multi-billion-dollar project financing, treasury operations, mergers and acquisitions, enterprise risk management, and long-term financial planning.

During his tenure as Regional Treasurer at Alstom, Dr Mukhapadhyay oversaw treasury and governance across 15 countries, driving operational efficiency and financial compliance at a global level.

Earlier, at GAIL (India) Limited, he spearheaded one of India's pioneering digital finance initiatives — implementing the nation's first 100 per cent corporate electronic banking platform, a milestone that modernised the company's financial systems and set a precedent for digital transformation in the public sector. Beyond his corporate accomplishments, Dr Mukhapadhyay is profoundly dedicated to social development. As Co-founder of Le Rythme, an organisation established in memory of his late wife, he has championed large-scale initiatives aimed at empowering marginalised communities through skill development, livelihood generation and vocational training.

BRIEFLY

GAGANJEET BHULLAR BAGS THIRD IGPL TITLE IN STYLE

Gaganjeet Bhullar, who modestly began the week, closed it in a masterly fashion to become the first player to win three times on the IGPL Tour.

Bhullar, who opened the week with a round of 1-under 71, which included a hole-in-one, added solid rounds of 67-67 on the last two days to total a winning 11-under.

The highly talented 21-year-old Raghav Chugh gave it all, but with three pars in the last three holes, he fell one short and ended a creditable sole second.

Chugh shot 4-under 68 and totalled 10-under for the week. Three internationals, Filipino Justin Quiban, Mexican Santiago de la Fuentes and Indian-American Manav Shah, all hoping to become the first international to win on the IGPL, were thwarted at the finish and ended tied third at 8-under.

SANDHU LEADS BY THREE SHOTS IN JAIPUR

Indian golfer Yuvraj Sandhu carded an impressive third-round score of four-under 66 to establish a three-shot lead with a total of 16-under 194 at the Jaipur Open here on Thursday.

Sandhu (65-63-66), who was in second place and one shot off the lead at the start of round three, produced an eagle, four birdies and two bogeys during his 66 to take control in the penultimate round.

Sandhu is in pursuit of his sixth PGTI title this season. If Yuvraj does go on to bag his sixth win of 2025, he would match the PGTI record for most titles in a season set by Manu Gandas in 2022.

Nikita overcomes tragedies to win gold in KIUG

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
Jaipur

Young women's hockey player Nikita Toppo stands out not just for her exploits in the midfield but also for her resilience in overcoming tough times and a career-threatening injury early in her playing career.

The 22-year-old skipper played a pivotal role in helping Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology (KIIT) clinch the women's hockey gold in the institution's maiden appearance at the Khelo India University Games here.

Nikita lost her parents when she was five years old, while one of her elder brothers died in an accident when she was on her way to U-23 Five-Nations Cup in Ireland three years ago. A year later, she suffered a career-threatening injury and soon after her other brother met with an accident and suffered a skull injury from which he hasn't completely recovered yet.

But instead of getting bogged down by the series of setbacks, Nikita found solace in hockey.

"Before this (success at the KIUG), we would not clear our zone as there are many good university teams in Odisha. But from last year onwards, me and my coach have been working on building a strong team by getting good players to take admission in our university. "Before we came here, we were determined to win the title here," Nikita said after her team defeated ITM University, Gwalior, to take the top spot.

Nikita controlled the pace

of the game in the final in the defensive midfielder's role and ensured the ITM players could not penetrate her team's citadel.

However, it's not just Nikita's hockey skills but the clarity of thought and resilience that set her apart.

"I believe what happened, happened, and we can't change it. I focus on the present and accept the situation. I remain strong for my team and my family, or what's left of it, and I don't shed a tear because I don't want my insecurities and unfortunate incidents to take over me and cloud my mind," she said about her personal setbacks.

"What happened to my brother in 2022 was heartbreaking. But I didn't let it pull me down, and I didn't want my team to suffer because of me. No matter how much I miss him, he won't come back," added Nikita, who could not even attend his last rites. The Indian team then won a silver medal in the U-23 Five-Nations Cup.

Nikita, whose hockey career started when she joined the Government Sports Hostel in Panposh, Rourkela, in 2016, was also part of the Indian U-21 team that won four matches and drew one during their South Africa tour in 2023.

But a ligament tear during a Khelo India Youth Games training camp in 2023 and an accident to her other surviving brother meant that she took almost a year to recover both physically and mentally to start performing on the field again.

Won't ask Piastri for F1 title help: Norris

ASSOCIATED PRESS
Abu Dhabi

Lando Norris says he won't ask his McLaren teammate Oscar Piastri to give up a place to favour him in the three-way Formula 1 title fight with Max Verstappen at the season-ending Abu Dhabi Grand Prix.

Norris has a 12-point lead over Verstappen going into Sunday's race, with Piastri four points further back.

If Verstappen is far ahead of both McLarens, its possible Piastri could be in a situation where he can't take the title himself but can aid Norris' title bid. If Verstappen wins on Sunday, a top-three finish would be enough for Norris.

"Honestly, I mean, I would love it, but I don't think I would ask it because it's up to Oscar if he would allow it. I don't think it's necessarily down to me," Norris said, sitting alongside Piastri and Verstappen at a pre-race news conference on Thursday.

Norris added he believed

he would help out Piastri if the roles were reversed, but said they hadn't discussed any such situations within the team.

"Personally, I think I would, just because I feel like I'm always like that and that's just how I am, but this, it's not really up to me," Norris said. "I'm not going to ask it. I don't want to ask it because I don't think it's necessarily a fair question."

Piastri left the issue open. "It's not something we've discussed," he said. "I don't really have an answer until I know what's expected of me."

Norris had the chance to wrap up the title at last week's Qatar Grand Prix, but a pit strategy blunder by McLaren handed Verstappen the win to boost his title defence chances.

Italy receives Olympic flame for Milano Winter Games

ASSOCIATED PRESS
Athens

The Olympic flame for the Milan Cortina Winter Games was formally handed to Italian organisers on Thursday in the all-marble stadium in central Athens, where the first modern Olympics were held nearly 130 years ago.

From Athens, the flame will travel to Italy, where it will begin a 63-day, 12,000-kilometre relay through all 110 Italian provinces before reaching Milan's San Siro Stadium for the opening ceremony on February 6. Italy will host the flame for the first time in 20 years, and 10,000 torchbearers have been organised.

"To stand here in this historic stadium provides an inspiring reminder of the honour we have been granted and the precious treasure we will carry home with us," Milan Cortina organising committee president Giovanni Malago said before receiving the flame.

A forecast of severe rainstorms in Athens kept large crowds away and led organisers to announce the ceremony would be shortened. But the rain held off until the very end, a weak sun filtering through the heavy black clouds, and the few hardy spectators who turned up were able to enjoy a performance featuring Greek and Italian singers and a children's choir in the stadium, which staged the first modern Games in 1896.

After spending the night burning in a cauldron outside the 5th century BC. Parthenon temple atop the Acropolis, Greece's most famous landmark, the flame was carried into the Panathenaic stadium by Greek water polo player Elena Xenaki, who lit another cauldron in the stadium along with Greece's women's national water polo team.

The flame was lit on November 26 in Ancient Olympia, the site of the ancient games which inspired the modern Olympic movement.

Kalikesh begins first full term as NRAI president

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
Mohali

Kalikesh Narayan Singh Deo began his first full four-year term as president of the National Rifle Association of India (NRAI) after he was elected unopposed during its general body meeting here on Thursday.

Pawan Singh, a well-known administrator and technical expert of the precision sport, was elected as the new secretary general as the results of the sports body's elections were officially declared.

The elections were conducted by Justice (Retd) Nirmaljit Kaur, who was the returning officer. The elections also put in place a new executive committee and a new governing body.

Sharing his first reactions, Singh Deo said, "Indian shooting has currently seen it's most successful phase in history over the last couple of years, both in terms of

success and popularity and that increases our responsibilities manifold.

"I wholeheartedly thank the entire general body for restoring faith in my team and me, and we promise to leave no stone unturned to accelerate this growth momentum even further and to maximise the potential that our extremely talented shooting athletes possess.

"With the flag paramount in our thoughts, let us all work together to make India number one in the world in our beloved sport." Odisha's Singh Deo has been in charge of the federation since former president Raninder Singh completed his three terms in the post.

Pawan Singh said, "All the functions in the NRAI are already online, from registration to results, and now the next step is to use technology efficiently. We want to leverage AI and performance data to identify talented shooters across the country.

"My focus will be on using technology to find and nurture promising athletes from every corner of India."

Gayatri-Treesa's reclaim their beat at Syed Modi

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
New Delhi

The title defence at Syed Modi International has done more than just place another trophy on Gayatri Gopichand and Treesa Jolly's shelf. It has restored the rhythm the duo had been searching for through a fragmented season.

The two-time All-England semifinalists opened 2025 in promising fashion, reaching the All England quarterfinals and then the Swiss Open semifinals. But by June, a persistent shoulder issue caught up with both, forcing them to step off the circuit after the Macau Open.

Gayatri and Treesa returned in style, winning in just their second event at Lucknow, something which has given the young Indian pair the clarity and confidence as they prepare for a physically demanding 2026, when their first aim will be to regain their place in the top echelons of women's doubles.

"For me, Syed Modi felt like a reward for staying patient and trusting the process," Gayatri told PTI in an interview. "I just started playing again, and it gave me a lot of confidence that my game is moving in the right direction."

A painful shoulder injury was followed by a long rehabilitation phase, and Gayatri said the mental grind was equally demanding.

"Even before Macau, it was there, and it was still hurting. After Macau, it was a proper two-month break... It has been a tough, challenging situation," Gayatri said.

"You focus on rehab, stay positive, lean on coaches, physios, family... Mentally, if I stay strong, that helps me."

Her father, former All England champion and national chief coach Pullela Gopichand, remains her anchor. "He talks about his injuries and tells me what to look at... It's a huge confidence for me," she said.

A five-week block to rebuild power

With just a month to go for the next season, Gayatri and Treesa know physical prepa-

ration will shape results more than appearances. "Strength wise I have to build a lot of strength, endurance as well. We've got a good five-week time now, so it's a good time to build strength, agility, endurance — all of that. It's an upward journey," Gayatri said.

The Indian pair was ranked world Number 9 for 13 weeks earlier this year, and they see 2026 as the season to reclaim that zone. "I think our biggest goals are to break into the top bracket of world doubles, win more world titles, and perform well at world championships. And of course, work towards Olympic qualification as well," Gayatri said. "And yeah, I think improving consistency is a big thing for us right now."

Treesa's doubles stint added new dimension

While Gayatri was rebuilding, Treesa, who recovered in two months, kept herself match-ready through mixed doubles, partnering Hariharan Amsakarunan and winning the Turkiye International Challenge in October.

"Yeah, mixed doubles actually... When Gayatri was injured, I just wanted to get a tournament feel," Treesa said. "That's how I started playing mixed doubles. I can say I'm really enjoying it."

But she admits scheduling could get complicated once the bigger tournaments begin. "We don't really have any world ranking right now to get entries for 1000s and 750s. That's why I'm a little bit confused... How to manage mixed doubles also."

Yet the stint helped her sharpen net play, anticipation and rotation awareness — elements that were visible in Lucknow. The win in Lucknow showcased Gayatri and Treesa's improved clarity in rotations.

"On court, we've developed a good understanding of each other's strengths," Gayatri said. "I know when Treesa is taking charge, and she knows when I'm going to move in. We're comfortable discussing anything, which helps us stay united through tough phases."

While the title defence signals readiness, the 21-year-olds know well that building deeper consistency at the highest level will be the key.

Marseille's prolific attack faces in-form Lille in Ligue 1

ASSOCIATED PRESS
Paris

The two highest scoring teams in Ligue 1 face off on Friday when nine-time champion Marseille travels north to take on Lille.

Marseille missed the chance to move to the top of the standings last weekend after being held to a home draw. On a four-match unbeaten run across all competitions, it has another opportunity to take the lead with a win. Roberto De Zerbi's Marseille sits third in the table, two points behind leader Lens. Lille is in fourth place, five points off the pace.

With 35 goals in 14 matches, Marseille boasts one of the best attacking records in Europe this season and its highest tally at this stage in the French top flight since 1970. Lille is also enjoying positive momentum, having won its past three matches across competitions.

Key matchups

Leader Lens plays at Nantes on Saturday on the back of a 2-1 win at Angers that moved the club to the top of the standings for the first time in 21 years. Following its second loss of the season at Monaco, second-placed Paris Saint-Germain is at home against Rennes before a trip to Athletic Bilbao in the Champions League next week.

Players to watch

Florian Thauvin's flair and efficiency have been crucial assets for Lens.

The 2018 World Cup winner is enjoying a revival since his return to the league from Italian side Udinese this summer. The 32-year-old

winger has four goals, including a brace last weekend, and produced two assists.

His performances have earned him a recall for France following a six-year absence. If he continues to impress there are good chances he will be playing at another World Cup next summer.

"What is new today is being top of the league," Thauvin said. "But it is way too early to get carried away. Will we be able to compete with PSG? We'll see."

Who's out?

PSG said on Thursday that goalkeeper Lucas Chevalier is still nursing a right ankle injury. Chevalier was injured in the loss against Monaco after a violent tackle from Lamine Camara. PSG is also missing Désiré Doué, Nuno Mendes, Achraf Hakimi and Lucas Beraldo.

Off the field

Nice made headlines for the wrong reasons this week after shocking acts of violence from its fans. After a sixth consecutive loss across all competitions on Sunday, players and staff were assaulted when they returned to the club's training and academy centre.

Toyota moves further into partnership for 2026 with Haas Formula 1 team

ASSOCIATED PRESS
Tokyo

The Haas Formula 1 team will get a new name next season, further showcasing its relationship with Japanese automaker Toyota.

In a statement Thursday, the team said its name in 2026 will be TGR Haas F1 Team. The TGR stands for Toyota Gazoo Racing, which is the racing division of the Toyota Motor Corporation.

Taking over the title sponsorship means Toyota is now more involved in F1 than at any time since it pulled its team out after the 2009 season.

Haas and Toyota entered into the first stages of this technical partnership a year ago and the Haas car has been carrying Toyota's branding since.

The partnership involves design and technical services but does not include a Toyota engine. Haas will run next year with Ferrari power, but it does move the company ever deeper into Formula 1.

Toyota ran a team in F1 until the end of the 2009 season. It failed to win a race despite spending heavily.

This move does not appear to mark a return to that level of involvement.

"It's naturally a privilege to deepen our relationship with TGR through this new title partnership agreement," Ayao Komatsu, team principal of Haas, said in a statement from Haas.

Root's century outshines Starc's wickets as England wins day 1

ASSOCIATED PRESS ■ Brisbane

Joe Root posted a long-awaited first Ashes century in Australia to give England the honors on Day 1 of the second cricket test despite Mitchell Starc's six wickets.

Starc removed Ben Duckett and Ollie Pope to have England reeling at 5-2 in the third over Thursday.

That's when Root went to the crease and set about restoring the England innings, and confidence, following the series-opening eight-wicket loss in Perth.

His unbeaten 135 led England to 325-9 at stumps, with No. 11 Jofra Archer at a career-best 32 in an unbroken 61-run last-wicket stand.

Zac Crawley, who helped Root get England's revival going in a 117-run third-wicket stand, described his teammate's century as a "phenomenal knock."

"He played brilliantly," Crawley said. The ball "was doing plenty when he first came in and he was so calm and he was so clear as well about how he wanted to go about it."

Opener Crawley, who was coming off two ducks in Perth, scored 76 from 93 balls and was outscoring Root before he attempted an extravagant pull shot and got an under edge through to the keeper just after the first interval.

Starc then returned to dismiss Harry Brook, giving him his 415th career wicket to surpass Pakistan great Wasim Akram (414 from 104 tests) as the most successful left-arm fast bowler in test cricket.

"He's still still the pinnacle of left-armers," Starc said of Wasim. "It's nice to be spoken of up around that but I'll just try to keep churning a few out." Brook was caught at slip slashing outside off stump and falling for 31 from 33 balls to end a 54-run fourth-wicket partnership with Root just as the sun was going down. Root's highest test score in 15 previous Ashes tests in Australia was 89, and the local media had taken every chance in recent weeks to remind him of his missing milestone.

England's Joe Root celebrates his century during the second Ashes cricket test match between Australia and England in Brisbane PTI

Playing his 160th test, Root was 88 not out at the drinks break midway through the night session. He moved into the 90s for the first time in Australia with a boundary off Brendan Doggett. He hit another boundary next ball to go to 96.

The rest is history.

Momentum swings The first two sessions — in the afternoon and the evening — had an element of symmetry with England scoring 98 and Australia taking two wickets in each.

So the night session started with England at 196-4.

Root and Ben Stokes appeared to be coasting before a brilliant run out by Josh Inglis mixed things up again.

Stokes (19) pushed a ball into the covers and took off for a single, only for Root to send him back as Inglis raced in and threw down the stumps from side on.

Three balls later, Scott Boland bowled Jamie Smith (0) between bat and pad to make it 211-6.

Root was on 79 when he was joined by Will Jacks. The pair put on 40 before Jacks played an expansive shot to Starc and was well caught. Starc (6-71) then picked off Gus Atkinson and Brydon Carse in quick time and England, suddenly, was 264-9. Expectations of Australia batting on Day 1 deteriorated, though, as Root and Archer went on the attack.

Still, Starc believed the day was evenly split.

"If you take the last partnership of the day out, I think we'd sit here and say it was a pretty good day's bowling," Starc said. "They blazed away a little bit and probably evened the day out — and Joe batted really well throughout the day."

No Lyon

The most contentious selection of the series so far was Australia's choice to recall Neser in a five-man pace attack at the expense of spinner Nathan Lyon, who missed out for only the second time on home soil since his debut in 2011.

Bhuvneshwar, Rizvi shine in UP's win over Chandigarh

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
■ Kolkata

His days as one of India's leading seamers may be well past him but Bhuvneshwar Kumar continues to deliver handsomely in domestic cricket, evidence of which was his impressive outing in Uttar Pradesh's 40-run win over Chandigarh in the Syed Musthtaq Ali Trophy here Thursday.

The 35-year-old seasoned bowler returned excellent figures of 3/23 in four overs to help his side restrict Chandigarh to 172 for eight after UP posted a competitive 212 for seven in their allotted 20 overs at the Eden Gardens.

Sameer Rizvi top-scored for UP with a blistering 70-run knock that came off just 42 balls and contained six fours and three sixes.

Opener Madhav Kaushik struck a brisk 67 off 41 balls, and found the fence seven times seven times while clearing it twice in the Group B game.

Rizvi and Kaushik were involved in a third wicket partnership of 86 runs, which laid the foundation for UP's total in excess of 200.

Siddarth Yadav looked in great touch until he was run out by Nehal Pajni for a quick-fire 12-ball 28 with three fours and two sixes.

After the dismissal of Rizvi and Kaushik, India's T20I specialist Rinku Singh blazed away to a 10-ball 24 to help prop up the UP innings after Chandigarh opted to bowl first.

Rajasthan Royals seamer Sandeep Sharma was the most successful bowler for Chandigarh, finishing with fine figures of 4/26, including taking the wickets of Kaushik and Rinku.

In reply, Chandigarh were off to a disastrous start as they lost two wickets with just 19 runs on the board, Bhuvneshwar removing Pajni for a nought.

However, opener Manan Vohra kept Chandigarh in hunt with his explosive batting that fetched him 61 runs from only 35 balls, and which contained six boundaries and three sixes.

But Kartik Tyagi removed him at a crucial juncture to leave Chandigarh at 100 for three in the 11th over.

Wicketkeeper Nikhil Thakur (32 off 28 balls) and Amrit Lubana (30 off 23 balls) carried on the fight, but their team fell short by plenty of runs in the end.

Brief scores:

Uttar Pradesh 212/7 in 20 overs (Sameer Rizvi 70, Madhav Kaushik 67; Sandeep Sharma 4/26) beat Chandigarh 172/8 in 20 overs (Manan Vohra 61; Bhuvneshwar Kumar 3/23) by 40 runs.

Jammu and Kashmir 112 all out in 19.3 overs (Shubham Khajuria 35; Nitin Sai Yadav 3/17, Milind 3/31) lost to Hyderabad 115/6 in 15.1 overs (Tanay Thyagarajan 50; Murugan Ashwin 2/16, Yudhvir Singh Charak 2/18) by 4 wickets.

Bihar 180/7 in 20 overs (S Gani 60, Vaibhav Suryavanshi 46, Akash Raj 40; Deepraj Gaonkar 4/38) lost to Goa 184/5 in 19.5 overs (Suyash Prabhudessai 79, Kashyap Bakhale 64; Suraj Kashyap 3/24) by 5 wickets.

Shami puts Bengal on top of points table with easy win versus Services

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
■ Hyderabad

Out-of-favour India veteran Mohammed Shami continued his impressive show in domestic circuit with match-winning figures of 4 for 13 as Bengal cruised to a seven-wicket victory over Services in a Group C match of the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy here on Thursday.

This was Bengal's fourth win in five games and, with 16 points, Abhimanyu Easwaran's men now lead the points table and look good to make the cut for the knock-out stages.

Easwaran, who himself is appearing for IPL auction auditions, did his cause no harm with a 37-ball 58 in Bengal's walk-in-the-park chase of 166 which was completed in just 15.1 overs.

Delhi Capitals star Abhishek Porel (56 off 29 balls) also did his bit in a second-wicket stand of 93 in only 8.2 overs which set up the chase nicely.

But this was possible only because of 'Player of The Match' Shami (4/13 in 3.2 overs) and current India international Akash Deep (3/27), who kept the Services down to a manageable 165 in 18.2 overs.

Shami got two wickets in his first spell, removing openers Gaurav Kocchar (0) and Ravi Chauhan (26 off 9 balls). While comeback man Mukesh Kumar (0/53 in 3 overs) was hammered all around, off-spinner Writtick Chatterjee (2/32 in 4 overs) and Akash Deep got crucial middle-order wickets before Shami polished off the tail in his final spell.

Hardik takes 1/16 in Baroda's easy win over Gujarat

In another high-profile group league game, Hardik Pandya, after a swashbuckling knock against Punjab in his comeback, bowled tightly to finish his four-over spell with 1 for 16 in Baroda's comfortable eight-wicket victory against Gujarat in a low-scoring game.

Gujarat were dismissed for just 73 in 14.1 overs with only two players reaching double digits. Hardik accounted for the CSK danger man Urvil Patel (7), who offered a return catch. Former India U-19 seamer Raj Limbani took 3 for 5. Baroda knocked off the runs in just 6.4 overs although Hardik's returns with the willow was a mere 10 off 6 balls.

The all-rounder will now fly off to Cuttack on December 6 to link up with the Indian T20I squad for the five-match series starting December 9.

Asif takes 5 wickets as Kerala shock defending champions Mumbai in SMAT

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Lucknow

A five-wicket haul by pacer KM Asif, who is having his best domestic season, helped underdogs Kerala earn a shock 15-run victory against defending champions Mumbai in a Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy Group A match here on Thursday.

Mumbai, who suffered their first defeat in five games in the T20 tournament, though continue to lead the group with 16 points, while Kerala moved to third spot with 12 points -- the same as Andhra who are in second place -- following their third win in the five-team pool.

Kerala are marginally behind Andhra on net run rate.

The star-studded Mumbai side, led by India pacer Shardu Thakur and having the likes of national T20 skipper Suryakumar Yadav and Shivam Dube in their ranks, crumbled to 163 all out in 19.4 overs while chasing 179.

Kerala made 178 for five.

It was India keeper-batter Sanju Samson, who recently completed the move from Rajasthan Royals to Chennai Super Kings in the biggest deals ahead of the IPL 2026 season, who set the tone for Kerala by smashing a 28-ball 46 after opening the innings.

The Kerala skipper's blazing innings, studded with eight boundaries and a six, gave his team a flourishing start.

But two wickets in quick succession -- of Rohan Kunnummal (2) and Samson -- left the southern state struggling at 58 for 2 in the seventh over.

Samson took majority of the strike, giving his opening partner just five deliveries as the India top-order batter negotiated the star Mumbai bowlers early on.

Samson's dismissal slowed down the scoring rate as one-down batter Vishnu Vinod took 40 balls for his unbeaten 43, which included just three boundaries.

However, Vinod's 63-run stand with Mohammed Azharuddeen (32) and pacer Sharafuddeen's cameo of 35 not out off 15 balls did give Kerala a fighting total in the end.

Mumbai were off to a confident start as, after losing Ayush Mhatre (3) early, Rahane (32 off 18 balls) and Sarfaraz Khan (52 off 40 balls) were involved in an 80-run stand for the second wicket.

At 99 for three in the 12th over, the defending champions looked comfortable. But the tables turned in the 18th over bowled by Asif (5/25), who grabbed the wickets of Sairaj Patil (13), Suryakumar (32) and Shardul (0), to send Mumbai reeling at 149 for seven.

He returned to bowl the final over to take out tail-enders Shams Mulani and Hardik Tamore to end Mumbai's innings.

Lucknow has turned out to be a happy hunting ground for the 32-year-old Asif as he now has 13 wickets in four SMAT matches at the venue this season.

Brief scores:

Kerala 178 for 5 in 20 overs (Sanju Samson 46, Vishnu Vinod 43; Shardul Thakur 1/34, Shivam Dube 1/18) beat Mumbai 163 in 19.4 overs (Sarfaraz Khan 52, Ajinkya Rahane 32, Suryakumar Yadav 32; KM Asif 5/24, Vignesh Puthur 2/31)by 15 runs.

Assam 175 for 7 in 20 overs (Abdul Kuraishi 57, Nihar Deka 52; Yash Thakur 3/36) beat Vidarbha 117 in 17.5 overs (Mukhtar Hussain 3/36, Akash Sengupta 3/12) by 58 runs.

Chhattisgarh 158 for 6 in 50 overs (Amandeep Khare 44, Shashank Singh 46; Prithvi Raj 2/35, KV Sasikanth 2/36) lost to Andhra 159 for 2 in 18.5 overs (Ashwin Hebbar 50, Shaik Rasheed 59 not out) by 8 wickets.

Rizwan eyes big bash success to make comeback in Pakistan T20 squad

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
■ Lahore

Pakistan's seasoned wicket-keeper-batter Muhammad Rizwan is hoping to use the Big Bash platform in Australia to claw his way back into the national T20 squad for next year's World Cup.

Rizwan, a former captain of the ODI and T20I squads, has not been picked to play in the shortest format by the national selectors since December 2024, but he sees the Big Bash League (BBL) as a big opportunity to regain his spot back.

"I am confident of performing well in the Big Bash and in Australia if you are successful everyone takes notice of you," Rizwan told the media.

"I have always enjoyed playing the most in Australia because the competition level is very high and the Australians play their cricket in a very different manner. The level is so high that if a player does well in Australia he knows he can perform anywhere else," he added.

Rizwan is set to leave for Australia with Babar Azam, Shaheen Shah Afridi, Shadab Khan, Haris Rauf and Hasan Ali to play in the Big Bash this week for Melbourne Renegades.

Pakistani selectors tried out young wicketkeeper-batter Muhammad Haris this year but then dropped him for poor form and recalled Usman Khan who got some good scores against Sri Lanka and Zimbabwe in the recent tri-series. But Usman is not considered as good a wicketkeeper as Rizwan.

The 33-year-old Rizwan, who has an impressive average of 47 from 106 T20Is with one century and 30 half centuries, was dropped because of his low strike rate of 125 despite forming a reliable opening pair with Babar Azam.

Babar, also sidelined from the format because of his inability to improve his strike rate, is now back in the team but at the number three spot.

Rizwan, who was removed as ODI captain in October to be replaced by Shaheen Shah Afridi, said like every other player he was also keen to get a chance to play for the country in the World Cup.

"I am focussing a lot on my batting and adding new strokes to my range and the Big Bash is the best platform for me to show my worth again," he said.

All-rounder Shadab Khan is another player whose performance would be closely followed by the selectors in the Big Bash. Having recovered from a shoulder injury, he is also in line for a comeback to the Pakistan squad.

GOVERNMENT OF ODISHA
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INVITATION FOR BIDS (IFB) [e-Procurement]

B-787

TENDER CALL NOTICE

Bid Identification No. SC (R&B)-GM-II-21/2025-26 No. Dated.27.11.2025

1) The Superintending Engineer, Ganjam [R&B] Division No.II, Berhampur on behalf of Governor of Odisha invites **percentage rate bid** in single cover system to be received in **ONLINE MODE** only for the work as detailed below:

2) Nature of Work : Electrical work
3) No. of work : 02 Nos.
4) Tender Cost : Rs.6,000/-
5) Class of Contractor : HT of registered with the ELBO Authorized HT License
6) Availability of bid documents in the website : From 05.12.2025 10.00 AM to 16.12.2025 4.00 P.M.
7) Date of opening of Bid : 17.12.2025 at 11.30 A.M.
8) The Bidders have to participate in ONLINE bidding only. Further details can be seen from the website https://tendersorissa.gov.in

(Sd/- S. Panigrahi)
Superintending Engineer
Ganjam (R&B) Division No.II

OIPR-34080/11/0038/2526

GOVERNMENT OF ODISHA
OFFICE OF THE SUPERINTENDING ENGINEER
P.H. DIVISION, BHANJANAGAR AT CHATRAPUR
E-mail – eephchpr@gmail.com

C-1670

NATIONAL COMPETITIVE BIDDING THROUGH e-Procurement

	Bid Identification No.	58/ 03 / SPH(C) / 2025-26 dt. 03.12.2025
1	Name of the work	4(Four) nos of works
2	Estimate cost	5.35 lakh to 17.63 lakhs
3	Date & time of availability of bid document in the portal	From 11.00 AM of 06.12.2025 to 5.30 PM of 15.12.2025
4	Last date / time of receipt of bid in the portal	5.30 PM of 15.12.2025
5	Date and time of opening of bids	1.00 P.M. on dated.16.12.2025
6	Name and address of the Officer inviting the bid	Superintending Engineer, P.H. Division, Bhanjanagar at Chatrapur

Further details can be seen from the e-procurement portal. https://www.tenderorissa.gov.in

Additional Chief Engineer
P.H. Division, Bhanjanagar
at Chatrapur

OIPR-13013/11/0044/2526