



# Stalemate in State Assembly continues

**■ Repeated adjournments fail to resolve deadlock**  
**■ Cong reiterates House Committee demand on crimes against women**



**PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR**

The Odisha Assembly remained in a state of gridlock on Friday with repeated adjournments throughout the day and no resolution to the ongoing impasse.

An all-party meeting called by Speaker Surama Padhy to resolve the deadlock also failed to produce any results as both opposition Congress and BJD staged protests over separate issues.

The House was adjourned twice early in the day, first from 10:32 am to 11:30 am and again from 11:31 am to 12:00 pm, following protests by Congress and BJD members inside the Well of the House. Speaker Padhy then convened an all-party meeting in her chamber, hoping to resolve the issues. However, despite the efforts, the situation remained unresolved, and the House was adjourned three more

times, this time from 12:01 pm until 4:00 pm. As a result, important proceedings such as Question Hour, Zero Hour and the Adjournment Motion were entirely disrupted.

The disturbances began during the Question Hour when the House convened at 10:30 am. Congress members, wearing black attire and headbands, staged a unique protest in the Well of the Assembly, beating cym-

bals and playing trumpets. Their protest was aimed at demanding formation of a House Committee to investigate the rising incidents of crimes against women in the State.

Meanwhile, the BJD joined the protest, though for a different reason, accusing the government of not sharing videos of Opposition activities in the House to the electronic media.

As the protests intensified, Speaker Padhy attempted to proceed with the question-and-answer session, inviting School and Mass Education Minister Niyanda Gond to respond to a question. However, the minister's voice was drowned out by the loud protests of Opposition members. Faced with escalating disorder, the Speaker adjourned the House at 10:32 am until 11:30 am.

After the adjournment, Congress members continued their protest outside the Assembly, marching around the premises with cymbals and trumpets, reiterating their demand for a committee to probe the rise in crimes against women.

When the House reconvened at 11:30 am, the situation did not improve, and Speaker Padhy adjourned it once again at 11:31 am for another 30 minutes. The Speaker also convened an all-party meeting, but despite these efforts, the deadlock persisted, leading to further adjournments until 4:00 pm.

In the afternoon, the Congress continued to disrupt proceedings, resulting in an adjournment until 4:31 pm and later, another 30 minutes. The stalemate in the Assembly continued with no clear resolution in sight.

the treatment, the professor later visited the police station to file a formal complaint. However, she reportedly faced further harassment and humiliation from the officer. Later, she informed the Director General of Police regarding the matter.

The DGP directed the Twin City Commissioner of Police to initiate a probe into the allegations. Consequently, Swain was immediately transferred from the Bidanasi police station.

# Misbehaviour with woman prof Bidanasi IIC shifted; probe ordered by DGP



**PNS ■ CUTTACK**

Inspector-in-Charge (IIC) of Cuttack's Bidanasi police station Yubaraj Swain has been transferred following allegations of misconduct towards a woman professor.

The action came after the professor lodged a complaint against Swain, prompting action from the Commissionerate police's higher officials.

Meanwhile, the Additional DCP has initiated an investigation into the matter. It has been indicated that if the inquiry report substantiates the allegations, disciplinary action would be taken against the IIC.

According to sources, the victim had approached the IIC regarding some grievance. Instead of addressing her grievance, the officer allegedly misbehaved and verbally abused her over phone. Distressed by

the treatment, the professor later visited the police station to file a formal complaint. However, she reportedly faced further harassment and humiliation from the officer. Later, she informed the Director General of Police regarding the matter.

The DGP directed the Twin City Commissioner of Police to initiate a probe into the allegations. Consequently, Swain was immediately transferred from the Bidanasi police station.

This is not the first instance of controversy surrounding Swain. During his previous tenure in Bhubaneswar, he was accused of misbehaving with a young woman, which also led to public outrage.

The incidents have raised serious concerns about the behaviour of police and the treatment meted out to women seeking justice.

# IT raids on liquor baron continue

**Rs 7-crore cash detected**

**PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR**

The Income Tax (IT) Department on Friday intensified its operations for a second day in a row at liquor baron Bikram Kishor Sahoo's properties in Angul district.

A sweeping investigation is being conducted across 15 different premises connected to Sahoo in an effort to probe alleged tax evasion activities.

Meanwhile, Sahoo remains in custody under tax authorities after he was detained at his residence in the Karadagadia area as part of the ongoing investigation.

As per early reports, authorities have discovered a significant amount of cash, approximately Rs 7 crore, at one of Sahoo's properties. Reports indicate that substantial sums have been unearthed at other locations also.



Sahoo is known for his diverse business interests that extend beyond the liquor industry. One of his recent acquisitions includes a prime hotel in Puri, procured just six months ago for a reported sum of Rs 35 crore. He also owns another hotel in Angul along with operations of a liquor depot and a petrol pump.

The ongoing raids span multiple locations, including Talcher, Kamakhyanager, Paralakhemundi, Puri and Bhubaneswar.

**In Brahmapur**

# Police raid illegal hookah bars, seize smoking items

**RAJEEV RATHAN ■ BRAHMAPUR**

In a major crackdown on illegal hookah bars, the Brahmapur Police conducted simultaneous raids across the city on Friday, seizing hookah pots, tobacco products and other smoking items. The operation led to the registration of seven criminal cases against restaurant owners for operating hookah bars without licences and supplying tobacco and other prohibited smoking substances to minors.

The police launched the raids following numerous complaints from concerned parents and citizens, who raised alarms about the growing number of illegal hookah bars serving minors. Five teams led by SDPO City, IIC Brahmapur Town PS, IIC Gosaninuaogaon PS, IIC Bada Bazar PS and IIC BN Pur PS conducted the raids at various hotels and restaurants.

During the operation, several minors were found smoking hookah, and the establishments failed to produce



any valid licences or authorisation for running the hookah bars. Police recovered prohibited tobacco products, chemicals and charcoal being used in hookah instruments. Many of these tobacco products were laced with harmful chemicals, increasing their intoxicating effects and posing serious health risks.

Authorities emphasised that such chemicals are dangerous to human health, with long-term exposure linked to severe diseases, including lung cancer. Police seized all hookah equipments, tobacco product packets, and related paraphernalia from these establishments.

Following the raids, seven criminal cases were registered at BN Pur PS, Town PS and Bada Bazar PS under various sections of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) and the Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Products Act (COTPA), which regulates the trade, sale and advertisement of tobacco products.

**In BBSR**

# Racket selling liquor in soft drink bottles busted



**PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR**

Excise Department officials on Friday busted a racket selling country-made liquor disguised in cold drink bottles in the Ghatikia area under the Bharatpur police station in Bhubaneswar.

According to reports, the bootleggers were packing liquor in soft drink bottles and distributing them to unsuspecting customers as 'Desi Thanda'. This unique tactic was intended to evade detection and continue the illicit trade under the guise of regular beverages.

However, acting on a tipoff, the Excise Department's enforcement team caught the smugglers red-handed while they were transporting the contraband.

During the raid, a large number of illegally packed liquor was seized. Officials have launched an investigation to trace the entire supply chain and identify the mastermind behind this innovative method of bootlegging. Authorities have warned that such illegal activities pose a serious health hazard as unregulated liquor can be contaminated and dangerous for consumption.

# Justice Tandon new Orissa HC CJ



**PNS ■ CUTTACK**

Justice Harish Tandon was on Friday appointed as the next Chief Justice of the Orissa High Court, the Union Law Ministry said.

Justice Tandon is at present a Judge of the Calcutta High Court.

The Supreme Court Collegium had earlier this month recommended the elevation of Justice Tandon as the Chief Justice of the Orissa High Court.

The office of the Orissa HC Chief Justice fell vacant in January following the retirement of Justice Chakradhari Sharan Singh.

Justice Tandon was appointed as a Judge of the Calcutta High Court in April 2010 and has been functioning there since then.

# Ex-MLA Sharma dies



**PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR**

Former Congress MLA of Aul Debendra Sharma passed away during treatment at a private hospital here on Friday. He was 66.

Sharma was an MLA from 2014 to 2019.

Eminent personalities, including Chief Minister Mohan Majhi and State Congress president Bhakta Charan Das expressed deep condolence over Sharma's demise.

# BJD joins anti-BJP bloc

**Sends delegates to Chennai for delimitation talks**

**NALINI SAHU ■ BHUBANESWAR**

The Biju Janata Dal (BJD) has officially aligned itself with the anti-BJP bloc led by Tamil Nadu Chief Minister MK Stalin, marking a significant shift in Odisha's political landscape. This move dispels the longstanding perception that the BJD maintained a tacit understanding with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) despite being its primary opponent in Odisha for over 15 years.

Two senior BJD leaders, Sanjay Das Burma and Amar Patnaik, left for Chennai on Friday to participate in a crucial meeting on delimitation scheduled for Saturday. Be-

fore their departure, they emphasised that their party would advocate for Odisha's interests, particularly in the context of the impending delimitation process, which could impact the State's political representation.

The BJD has raised concerns that while Odisha has successfully managed its population growth, a delimitation exercise based solely on population figures could place the state at a disadvantage.

Minister Krushna Chandra Patra was quick to criticise the BJD's participation in the Chennai meeting, suggesting that the party's realignment would have little long-term impact.

The gathering in Chennai is expected to see the participation of leadership delegations from eight States.

# State Cabinet approves 10 key proposals

**Including Ayushman Bharat implementation**

**NALINI SAHU ■ BHUBANESWAR**

The Odisha Cabinet, led by Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi, has approved ten significant proposals aimed at improving healthcare, infrastructure and employment in the state. The decisions were announced by the Chief Minister in the Assembly on Friday.

One of the most impactful

decisions taken by the Odisha Cabinet is the approval of the Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (AB PM-JAY) for the state. This move will bring over 3.46 crore people under the central government's flagship health insurance scheme, offering them free healthcare services.

The adoption of Ayushman Bharat represents a shift from the state's previous Biju Swasthya Kalyan Yojana (BSKY), aligning Odisha's healthcare policies with the national framework. The gov-

ernment has assured that all necessary infrastructure will be developed to ensure the seamless implementation of the program, ultimately enhancing access to quality medical treatment for economically weaker sections.

In a bid to strengthen connectivity across Odisha, the Cabinet has approved the State Road Policy. This initiative focuses on the development of both rural and urban road networks, improving transportation facilities, and fostering economic growth.

The policy is expected to play a vital role in boosting trade, commerce, and accessibility in remote areas.

The Cabinet also made amendments to the employment policy concerning the families of deceased government employees. These changes aim to provide greater job security and financial relief to affected families, ensuring they receive necessary support from the government.

Additionally, the government has decided to extend the

validity of the One-Time Settlement Scheme introduced by the Water Resources Department. This scheme, designed for the collection of water tax arrears from central and state Public Sector Units (PSUs), private, industrial, commercial and other establishments, has now been extended until May 31, 2025. This extension aims to facilitate better compliance and revenue collection while providing businesses with an opportunity to clear outstanding dues.

# Odisha at par with nat'l average in EV registration

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Transport Minister Bibhuti Bhushan Jena informed the State Assembly that Odisha's electric vehicle (EV) registration growth matches the national average. As of 2025, 1,61,338 EVs ply on Odisha roads. Khordha leads with most registrations while Phulbani records the least.

The minister said the EVs consist 1.35 per cent of the total vehicles plying in the State.

A total of 5,626 electric vehicles were registered in 2021. The registration of EVs saw a



substantial increase of 405.63 per cent in 2022 with 28,447 new EVs registered that year. The number of EV registra-

tions stood at 44,545 in 2023 and rose to 65,977 in 2024. In 2025 so far, 10,423 EVs have been registered in the

State. The minister further disclosed that Khordha district has recorded the highest number of EV registrations whereas Phulbani registered the lowest from 2021 up to March 12, 2025.

During this period, a total of 45,195 EVs were registered in Khordha district. The number of EVs registered in Cuttack, Baleswar, Puri and Sundargarh districts during the period was 19,986, 10,174, 11,287 and 10,290, respectively.

Earlier, the minister had noted that the government has provided subsidies amount-

ing to Rs 232.45 crore to the buyers of EVs since 2021 till March 5, 2025 under the Odisha Electric Vehicle Policy 2021.

The government provides subsidies for electric vehicles with amounts varying based on the vehicle type (two-wheelers, three-wheelers and four-wheelers).

Besides, the State Government employees can avail of interest-free loans for purchasing electric vehicles. The government is providing exemptions on road tax and registration fees for e-buses.

# KIIT, University of Tulsa ink MoU

To launch dual degree program  
PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

The KIIT-DU has signed an MoU with the University of Tulsa, Oklahoma, USA to establish a dual degree programme in B.Tech. The signing ceremony took place in the presence of Dr Achyuta Samanta, founder of KIIT and KISS, marking a significant step towards international collaboration in higher education.

Dr Samantaa emphasised that the MoU opens up opportunities for KIIT students to



experience education in an international context, thereby enriching their academic journey.

According to KIIT Vice-Chancellor Prof Saranjit Singh, this initiative introduces a unique 2+2 programme where students will spend two years at KIIT and two years at the University of Tulsa. Upon completion, they will graduate with

two degrees at the same level. This programme is part of KIIT's broader strategy to enhance the internationalisation of its educational offerings.

In addition to this programme, 40 students from various disciplines, including engineering and liberal studies, will participate in short courses at the University of Tulsa during the summer.

# Kalinga Literary Fest kicks off in city



Governor, Union Minister, Indonesian envoy address event  
PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

The three-day 11th edition of the Kalinga Literary Festival began here on Friday. Literary minds from across South East Asia and the world representing some 25 languages are participating in the annual festival of art, culture and literature.

Governor of Odisha Dr Hari Babu Kambhampati inaugurated the festival along with Indonesian Ambassador to India K Ina H Krishnamurthi and Union Culture and Tourism Minister Gajendra Singh Shekhawat.

Kalinga Literary Festival CEO and patron Ashok Kumar Bal presented the welcome address while festival founder-director Rashmi Ranjan Parida informed about the programmes of the three days and briefed about the contributions made by Kalinga Literary Festival in

bringing creative minds from across the South East Asian nations to celebrate the rich cultural, artistic and literary legacy of Odisha and the country.

Thought leaders, writers and visionaries from across the globe are participating in these three days' engaging sessions to discuss about literature, culture, art tradition, history and politics.

Governor Kambhampati said Odisha has a profound literary and intellectual legacy. The State has produced finest literary minds in the country.

Minister Shekhawat said the Sanatan tradition and culture is under threat by external forces, which creative minds can stop. Odisha has produced some finest literary minds from Fakir Mohan Senapati to Pratibha Ray.

Indonesian Ambassador Krishnamurthi said Indonesia is truly honoured to be the partner of the festival. "We share old and millennial friendship with Odisha as ancient Kalinga had rich business link with Indonesia," he said.

# Fugitive Land Acquisition Officer held after 17 yrs

Went absconding after 12 cases lodged by Vig  
PNS ■ CUTTACK

The Vigilance police on Friday arrested Binay Kumar Garnaik former Special Land Acquisition Officer (LAO), Lower Suktel Irrigation Project in Balangir district, who was absconding for the last 17 years.

A Vigilance team nabbed Garnaik from his village Kankadasoda under the Parjang police station in

Dhenkanal district. He was on the run from 2008 while in service, after registration of 12 cases for misappropriation and illegal payments of government money.

He kept changing locations across the State, to evade arrest. Based on inputs, a team was stationed to pinpoint his location, after which he was nabbed.

The Vigilance had registered 12 cases against Garnaik for misappropriation of government fund to the tune of Rs.38.24 lakh by preparing false bills towards

hire charges of the vehicle and by preparing false and fake bills for photo copying and lamination of land records, excess payment of land compensation in Santelapalli and Koindapalli villages in Balangir allowing pecuniary gain causing loss of government money of Rs.6.23 crore and illegal payment of land compensation to some villagers in Chudapalli village in the district allowing pecuniary gain causing loss of government money to the tune of Rs 35.22 lakh.

## VLTD operations

# Transport Dept attempts backdoor entry to firm

- Vehicle dealers allege cartelisation by manufacturers
- Allege conflict of interest, Rs 10-cr loss of Nirbhaya funds

SA ROJ MISHRA ■ BHUBANESWAR

The Odisha Vehicle Dealers' Association in a letter to Transport Department Principal Secretary Usha Padhee and Transport Commissioner Amitabh Thakur has warned about potential cartelisation by certain Vehicle Location Tracking Device (VLTD) manufacturers and the Odisha State Transport Authority effort to allow illegal backdoor entry to a firm C-DAC for operation and maintenance of 'AIS140 Mo Yatra Suraksha' VLTD project in the State.

The association stated that a letter was sent to the STA, cautioning against potential cartelisation of the VLTD

manufacturers through C-DAC, in connivance with some dishonest department officials. But no action was taken on it.

As per the guidelines of the project, the implementation agency or any of its partner, sub-contractor cannot directly or indirectly be an associate or sister concern of a VLTD manufacturer or M2M E-Sim provider.

However, the STA invited C-DAC and one Gaurav Kaushik represented and gave a presentation on behalf of C-DAC. Notably, Kaushik runs a company named 'Gps Champ' and is a partner in 'Volty IoT Solutions', an empanelled VLTD manufacturer. He is also a close friend of Roopesh Jenu

of C-DAC and has been wrongly representing and misleading the STA officials. Further Volty and another partner company of C-DAC named Fission Labs are also closely related.

It is also alleged that C-DAC official has been concealing the position of its partner Kaushik who has vested interest in the Mo Yatra Suraksha VLTD project, being associated or bearing close relationships with VLTD manufacturers like Volty and their associates like Fission Computer Labs. C-DAC has also been falsely representing across States that it works without any involvement of any third-party partner, sub-contractor, the association alleged.

There is strong evidence and disturbing patterns that suggest that C-DAC may have proposed to scrap the Mo Yatra Suraksha application and replace it with its own software 'Suraksha Mitra'. This would result in total

project disruption in the State as more than 30,000 vehicles are currently sending data to the current Mo Yatra Suraksha application and the system and mobile apps are being used by millions of the users, vehicle owners and citizens of the State. Any changes to the State backend of the project shall make all devices go offline and shall derail the whole project.

The Odisha STA has spent more than Rs 10 crores of Nirbhaya funds to develop the Mo Yatra Suraksha application and scrapping or decontinuing the Mo Yatra Suraksha application would cause a loss of 10 crores to the exchequer. Further, it would cause extreme harassment to the vehicle owners, the association said.

Notably, the STA is currently operating its Mo Yatra Suraksha backend services command centre through the BSNL and the project has been successfully running for the

past two years. There are more than 30 VLTD manufacturers empanelled with the STA and citizens (vehicle owners) have a wide choice of VLTD device to choose from.

There are strong evidences and disturbing patterns that suggest that certain VLTD manufacturers particularly from south India who are also C-DAC's system integration partners for AIS 140 project have been meeting the departmental officials and Transport Minister's office in a bid to replace the Mo Yatra Suraksha backend developed by Odisha with CDAC's application and/or take control of the AIS140 state backend of Odisha.

The association alleged that the company C-DAC has been actively involved in malpractices like exclusionary practices, price fixing and cartelisation in other States like West Bengal, Himachal Pradesh and Kerala and various complaints have been re-

ported against them and their partners. The partner companies operating behind C-DAC are all VLTD manufacturers or their associate companies like Mercydas, J-Technologies, Volty, who have vested interests in the AIS 140 project.

There is strong evidence suggesting cartelisation & connivance forming a syndicate of these VLTD manufacturers operating behind C-DAC. There are also strong evidences that these companies have formed anti-competitive agreement and such alleged cartelization and connivances shall result in detrimental impact on the innovation and would surely impact the quality of AIS 140 compliant VLTD devices which is currently available to the people at affordable and competitive prices in a fair environment, alleged the vehicle dealers association in the letter to the Transport Commissioner.

# OPS: Not mere handout, but fundamental rights denied

The Old Pension Scheme (OPS) is an essential pillar of social security in India, ensuring financial dignity for government employees after decades of dedicated service. However, a stark contradiction exists in the way Indian politicians have selectively enforced pension policies. While they have conveniently retained OPS for themselves, guaranteeing lifelong pensions funded by taxpayer money, they have imposed the uncertain and market-linked New Pension Scheme (NPS) on other government employees. The blatant double standards reflect a deeper systemic failure, where policymakers prioritise their own financial security while exposing millions of employees to post-retirement financial volatility. Such an unjust disparity must be rectified to uphold fairness and restore trust in the governance system.

## Shift from OPS to NPS: A Political Hypocrisy

The transition from OPS to NPS was initiated by the Atal Bihari Vajpayee-led NDA government in December 2003, citing concerns over the increasing pension burden and long-term fiscal sustainability.



STALIN MISHRA

While this policy shift applied to government employees recruited on or after January 1, 2004, politicians ensured that their own pensions remained under OPS, safeguarding their post-retirement privileges at the expense of taxpayers.

This move has led to widespread resentment among government employees, as NPS exposes them to market fluctuations, offering no guaranteed pension like OPS. The irony is that politicians, who serve just a few years, secure lifetime pensions, whereas employees dedicating decades to public service are denied the same security. This blatant

hypocrisy demands urgent correction to ensure fairness and reinforce public trust in the system.

## UPS: Cosmetic Rebranding to Misdirect Public Discontent

Over the years, the flaws of NPS became increasingly evident, leading to public outcry and pressure from the opposition. To mitigate discontent, the Modi government introduced a revamped version- Unified Pension Scheme (UPS). However, this was merely a cosmetic rebranding, designed to project a more appealing image of the existing flawed system rather than providing any substantial benefits.

The truth is, UPS fails to establish real social security for employees. It is akin to a sugar-coated poison-deceptively appealing at first but ultimately harmful. While UPS might appear beneficial in the short term, it fails to offer the reliability and dignity of OPS, leaving employees vulnerable to economic instability in their retirement years.

The Old Pension Scheme (OPS) is superior to the New Pension Scheme (NPS) and Unified Pension Scheme (UPS) as it ensures financial security and dignity for retirees. Unlike NPS/UPS, which are

market-linked and subject to investment fluctuations, OPS guarantees a fixed pension (typically 50% of the last drawn salary), providing lifelong financial stability. It also includes Dearness Allowance (DA) revisions, protecting pensioners against inflation, whereas NPS/UPS lack this safeguard, reducing retirees' purchasing power over time. Additionally, OPS upholds social security and post-retirement dignity, recognising the contributions of public servants, while NPS/UPS expose them to volatile markets, creating financial insecurity. A glaring political hypocrisy exists where politicians have retained OPS for themselves while enforcing NPS/UPS on government employees, raising questions about its fairness. Furthermore, NPS/UPS require that 40% of the retirement corpus be invested in annuities with low returns, restricting financial flexibility, whereas OPS provides lifelong security without such limitations, making it the more reliable and just pension system.

Several Indian states have reinstated the Old Pension Scheme (OPS) in response to growing employee demand and political com-

mitments. Rajasthan restored OPS in 2022 under the Congress government, followed by Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and Himachal Pradesh, where OPS was reintroduced. Punjab, under the AAP government, also reinstated OPS for State employees. While Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu have witnessed discussions on OPS restoration, no final decision has been made yet. Meanwhile, the Central Government continues to resist reinstating OPS at the national level, despite increasing pressure from various stakeholders.

Globally, the most developed nations prioritise social security and stable pensions for government employees, offering systems similar to India's Old Pension Scheme (OPS) rather than the market-linked New Pension Scheme (NPS). In the United States, the Social Security System provides a guaranteed pension based on lifetime earnings, adjusted for inflation through Cost-of-Living Adjustments (COLA) and funded via payroll taxes, ensuring financial stability. The United Kingdom's State Pension Scheme offers a fixed pension after a set number of contributions,

supplemented by workplace pensions with employer contributions, inflation protection, and immunity from market volatility. Canada's pension system (CPP + OAS) combines guaranteed pensions with private savings, featuring inflation-adjusted benefits and equal contributions from employers and employees. Similarly, France and Germany's public pension systems provide defined-benefit pensions (similar to OPS), ensuring government-backed retirement security and shielding retirees from financial risks. In contrast, India's NPS remains market-dependent, exposing retirees to uncertainty, whereas OPS aligns more closely with the stable, inflation-protected pension models of developed nations, offering long-term financial security and dignity in retirement.

The hypocrisy of OPS critics becomes evident in their selective outrage on public spending. While they dismiss the Old Pension Scheme (OPS) as a financial burden on the exchequer, they remain silent on extravagant, taxpayer-funded freebie schemes designed to secure electoral gains. Public funds are lavishly spent on vote-bank appeasement

through cash handouts, free electricity, and other short-term populist measures, yet when the same resources are allocated for ensuring dignified postretirement security for government employees, they are suddenly deemed unsustainable. OPS is not a handout; it is an earned right, a recognition of decades of dedicated service. If fiscal responsibility is truly a concern, why aren't these unsustainable giveaways subjected to the same scrutiny? This double standards expose the contradictions in the arguments of OPS critics and highlight the urgent need for a balanced and just approach to public spending.

In my view, restoring OPS is a matter of justice and equity. The government must reinstate OPS for all, shifting away from market-driven pension experiments that fail to ensure post-retirement dignity and financial security. Upholding the principles of fairness, justice, and social security is not merely a financial decision-it is a moral imperative and a commitment to those who have dedicated their lives to public service. (Dr Mishra can be contacted over 9343935341)

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# Rayagada BJP president accused of harassing tribal officer

RAJEEV RATHAN ■ BRAHMAPUR

The Odisha Administrative Service Association (OASA) district unit of Rayagada held an urgent meeting on Thursday to address serious allegations of harassment and humiliation faced by ADM (Revenue) Nihar Ranjan Kanhar, a tribal officer, at the hands of Rayagada district president Gopi Anand.

During the meeting, Kanhar revealed that Anand had repeatedly subjected him to derogatory and insulting behaviour, disregarding his position as a government officer. He asserted that Anand pub-

licly humiliated him on multiple occasions while he was performing his official duties.

Kanhar said he felt deeply insulted when Anand accused him of acting as a "party worker" for a particular political party labelling him as having a "BJD hangover." This comment was a deliberate attempt to undermine his credibility as a civil servant.

Kanhar has submitted a report to the Collector of Rayagada. A memo has also been sent to the SP Rayagada, ADM (General) cum President, OASA, and the State OASA leadership. Additionally, Kanhar also filed an FIR against Anand

under the provisions of the SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act, 1989 and Section 221 of the BNS.

Other government officials also raised similar complaints against Anand's behaviour. The Rayagada BDO reported that Anand had pressured him on March 17, 2025 to submit financial details of welfare schemes through verbal orders and had spoken to him in a loud, authoritative tone. The Bismacuttack Tehsildar also recounted an instance where Anand had unilaterally ordered immediate removal of hoardings, disregarding administrative protocols.

The association has de-

manded strict legal action against Anand to ensure that government officials, especially those from marginalised communities, can perform their duties without fear of humiliation or political interference.

Koraput MP Saptagiri Ulaka said, "The BJP district president of Rayagada has been openly threatening ADM, BDO, Tehsildar and SP, demanding details of all implemented projects the district. His repeated insults, abuses and intimidation against the officers, most of whom belong to tribal communities, are completely unacceptable."

# Meet State's youngest professional saxophone player

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

M Dhanishree has become one of the youngest and reportedly the only female saxophone player in the State to have also pursued playing the instrument as a career.

Currently studying in the eighth grade, the young musician has already left her mark by leaving audiences spellbound with her professional performances.

Dhanishree recalled that her love for saxophones began at the tender age of two. Showing her the way was her father, M Seemadri, a professional saxophone player himself.



Handing her daughter a saxophone at a young age, Seemadri encouraged her to study the instrument, practicing, and experiment with it, eventually turning her curiosity into an artistic passion.

"I was about two years old and it was the occasion of Rath Yatra when I found myself being interested in the saxophone and falling in love with its sound. Later, my father encouraged me to pursue play-

ing the instrument," said Dhanishree while adding that it was the harmonious sound of the instrument that drew her toward it.

The young Odia music prodigy is receiving her saxophone lessons in both online and offline forms in Kolkata and feels inspired by late eminent saxophonist Manohari Singh.

"In perhaps 2022, I started teaching her (Dhanishree) the basics of saxophone and she quickly grasped it. It was when I learned that she holds immense talent and should be encouraged," said Seemadri as a proud father.

# In Sambalpur Mall sealed for not having parking lot

NIMAI CHARAN SAHU ■ SAMBALPUR

The Sambalpur Municipal Corporation (SMC) took on Friday sealed a shopping mall located near Golebazaar for not having a parking facility for its customers.

Earlier, the civic body had issued a notice to the mall, asking it to show a designated parking space. Even the mall had been sealed previously. However, during the inspection, the mall staffs failed to provide proof of a parking lot.

Due to parking space problems in Golbazaar and other parts of the city, the SMC has started a special drive to check parking facilities of all malls to ease traffic congestion.

In another incident, a dispute occurred near Baidyanath

Chowk in Golbazaar when SMC officials went to seal a tea shop on Thursday. The shop owner reportedly resisted and manhandled two senior officers. A scuffle broke out as the officials tried to carry out their duty.

According to SMC Commissioner Vedbhushan, the tea shop had not paid rent since 2018 and had ignored three notices. The owner also issued a cheque which later bounced. A final notice had been served three days ago. The commissioner confirmed that an FIR would be filed against those who obstructed the sealing process.

Both actions are part of the SMC's larger effort to reorganise traffic and ensure compliance with city regulations.

# Delays plague Rs 362-cr Ganjam Mega Water Project

Residents disillusioned

RAJEEV RATHAN ■ BRAHMAPUR

As temperature soars with the onset of summer, residents of Ganjam are gripped by concerns over a looming water crisis. The much-anticipated Mega Water Project in Ganjam district, supposed to bring relief, continues to stagnate, raising fears of acute water shortages.

The ongoing water shortage is a pressing concern for its residents, who are desperate for an end to the perennial issue alongside the completion of a long-promised large-scale drinking water project. Residents of Digapahandi and

Sanakhemundi have expressed their frustration, as they turn on taps only to find them dry, year after year.

Initiated during the previous Biju Janata Dal (BJD) government, the ambitious project aimed to deliver accessible and clean drinking water to Ganjam's doorsteps for every household. However, delays have rendered this vision incomplete, with the slow advancement of construction work frustrating residents, especially in the regions of Digapahandi and Sanakhemundi which have suffered prolonged water distress.

Budgeted at Rs 362 crore, the project is divided into two major schemes. The first

scheme, allocated Rs 220 crore, proposes a water treatment facility at Baghalati dam to serve 16 panchayats in Chikiti block and 14 in Patrapur block. Meanwhile, the second scheme targets 25 panchayats in Digapahandi and eight in Sanakhemundi, with plans for a treatment plant at the Ghodaahada dam, supplemented by Rs 50 crore anicut in Jakamarapalli for Digapahandi NAC.

Even as the pipeline work has concluded, further progress remains stalled.

On the other hand, the Salia dam pipeline remains incomplete, further complicating the situation. Despite the foundation stone being laid by then Chief Minister

Naveen Patnaik in 2021, and a promised finish by 2024, areas such as 29 panchayats in Khallikote block and one in Beguniapada anxiously await progress.

When contacted, the Executive Engineer of the Rural Water Supply Department reassured that all efforts are being maximised to expedite the project's delivery, yet concerns persist among the local population over when their taps will finally quench their parched hopes.

"We've heard many promises, but not one has brought us water," lamented a Sanakhemundi resident, reflecting local disillusionment with the endless wait.

# In Kalinganagar 9 workers injured in steel plant blast

PNS ■ JAJPUR

Nine workers, including a woman, of the Tata steel plant at Kalinganagar in Jajpur district were injured in a blast in the melting shop of the plant at around 11: 30 am on Friday.

The injured workers were taken to Tata Steel Hospital at Kalinganagar for medical attention. The medical team attending to the injured confirmed that everyone is now out of danger, said Sarvesh Kumar, Chief, Corporate Communication, Tata Steel.

"The incident site has been barricaded and an internal in-



vestigation is underway. We are taking all necessary steps to address the situation," added Kumar.

Senior police officers rushed to the spot and cordoned off the area. Palpable tension mounted near the plant as many workers blamed the management of the plant for the accident. Police are investigating the incident, said Kalinganagar ASP Suprasanna Mallick.

# 104 killed in road mishaps: 2024 deadliest yr in J'suguda

RAJ KUMAR SHARMA ■ JHARSUGUDA

Road accidents in Jharsuguda district have reached alarming levels, with 2024 recording the highest number of fatalities in recent years.

According to official statistics, 140 people lost their lives in road mishaps last year, marking the deadliest year on record.

The National and State highways continue to witness frequent accidents, raising serious concerns about road safety.

National Highway-49 has emerged as the most dangerous stretch, with uncontrolled traffic and reckless driving posing significant risks to commuters. The trend has continued into 2025, with 17 fatalities reported in January

and 18 in February. January alone saw 36 accidents, while February recorded 25 incidents.

An analysis of accident data from 2017 to 2022 shows that 2018 had the highest number of accidents at 318, but 2024 surpassed all previous years in terms of fatalities. The Covid-induced lockdown in 2020 had briefly reduced accidents due to limited vehicle movement, but the situation has worsened post-pandemic.

Several factors have contributed to the surge in accidents, including reckless driving, illegal parking of coal trucks along highways, untrained drivers operating heavy vehicles, lack of helpers in coal trucks, speeding under the influence of alcohol, poor awareness of traffic laws, inadequate road signage, and

defects in highway construction. The rising number of heavy goods vehicles on highways has further aggravated the problem.

Despite stringent traffic enforcement, reckless driving remains widespread. Many vehicle owners, prioritizing profits over safety, continue to employ untrained drivers and fail to provide adequate support staff for heavy vehicles. This has led to persistent traffic congestion and frequent accidents, endangering countless lives.

Autorities and stakeholders must take immediate steps to address these safety concerns. Enhanced enforcement of traffic laws, better road infrastructure, and stricter monitoring of commercial vehicles are crucial to reducing the rising toll of road accidents in Jharsuguda

# Film 'SSMB29' shoot completed in K'put



Rajamouli, Mahesh Babu, Priyanka Chopra participate

PNS ■ BRAHMAPUR

Filmmaker SS Rajamouli has successfully completed a 15-day shooting schedule for

his upcoming film 'SSMB29' in the scenic landscapes of Koraput, particularly in Talamali and Deomali. The film features South superstar Mahesh Babu and Bollywood actress Priyanka Chopra in lead roles.

Before their departure for Hyderabad, a farewell ceremony was held at the shooting location on Wednesday. The event was attended by Koraput Sub-Collector Akbarma Sasya Reddy, senior police officials, administrative officers, local MLA and Congress leader Ramachandra Kadam. Rajamouli and Priyanka Chopra praised Koraput's natural beauty and expressed their admiration for the region.

The 15-day shoot involved a crew of around 500 members who worked extensively to capture all the required scenes. With the schedule now complete, the team has returned to Hyderabad for the next phase of production.

The filming of 'SSMB29' in Koraput is expected to boost the region's visibility on a global stage, drawing attention to its breathtaking landscapes and cultural heritage.

Preparations for the Jatra of Aradhya Devi Maa Budhi Thakurani, set to begin on April 3 and continue until April 28, are in full swing. Jatra chief manager Durga Prasad Desi Behera met the Ganjam district Collector, RDC and Brahmapur Sub-Collector and SP on Wednesday seeking permission for the traditional Matikhola Yatra on the other side. He also requested support from the Fire, Water and Electricity departments to ensure smooth execution of the festival.

The groundwork commenced at midnight on March 12 with an auspicious foundation laid at Desi Behera Sahi.

As part of the arrangements, sacred whip wood from Narendrapur village has been brought in, and wood-work has started under the

# Permission sought for Thakurani Jatra arrangements

RAJEEV RATHAN ■ BRAHMAPUR

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As part of the arrangements, sacred whip wood from Narendrapur village has been brought in, and wood-work has started under the

guidance of local Maharana artisans. The temporary mandap has been measured, and after the puja and rituals, the wood-cutting process will be formally communicated through an official letter.

Durga Prasad Desi Behera performed the blessings to mark the beginning of the arrangements. He stated that once permission from the district administration is granted, other necessary preparations would move forward.

Meanwhile, women of Desi Behera Sahi continue to offer daily prayers near the auspicious Khunti, accompanied by herbal water and bhog (offerings) as part of their devotion.

With formal approvals awaited, the city is gearing up for the grand Maa Budhi Thakurani Jatra, an event deeply rooted in local faith and tradition.

# In Brahmapur Strict Measures for Danda Jatra announced



RAJEEV RATHAN ■ BRAHMAPUR

The Brahmapur Mahanagar Dandanach Mahasangh held an organisational meeting on Thursday. The meeting, presided over by Mahanagar president Debi Prasad Panda, saw the participation of several key figures from the Ganjam District Dandanach Mahasangh and other temple committees.

During the meeting, a unanimous decision was made to ban obscene dance performances during this year's Danda Jatra, replacing them with social plays. It was

also decided that from 2025 onwards, stage performances featuring female actors engaging in revealing dance moves would be discontinued. Additionally, the use of vulgar language during Dhuli Danda rituals would be strictly prohibited. These measures, taken in consensus with all participating temple committees, aim to uphold the cultural sanctity of Danda Jatra and preserve its traditional values.

Nua Bus Stand Dandakali Temple Management Committee members actively participated in the discussions and extended their full sup-

port for successful execution of the festival under these new guidelines.

Among the notable attendees were Ganjam District Dandanach Mahasangh president Shibaram Pradhan, secretary Saroj Chandra Sahu, advisor Devendra Prasad Sharma, Panigrahi Pentho Dandakali Temple president Dandapani Sahu, Bijipur Dandakali Temple Officer P Nani Rao, Tarini Nayak from Pataleshwar Temple, Anand Sharani from Dandakali Temple and Chief Priest Tarini Prasad Behera of Gokarneshwar Maa Shyama Dandakali Temple.

# Space Tech Incubation Centre unveiled at NITR

AUROBINDA DAS ■ ROURKELA

Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) Chairman Dr V Narayanan virtually inaugurated the Space Technology Incubation Centre (STIC) at the National Institute of Technology (NIT), Rourkela on Wednesday.

Briefing on STIC, G Harikrishnan (Director of the Capacity Building Program Office at ISRO) said, "The STIC is designed to strengthen the academic foundation, develop high-quality human resources, and build infrastructure at academic institutions to support the Indian Space Programme. To facilitate this, an MoU between ISRO and NIT Rourkela was signed four years ago, and since then, eight projects have been underway."

The new STIC facility will further expand the institute's horizons, enabling the launch



of more space technology projects he added.

M Ganesh Pillai, Scientific Secretary at ISRO, joined the event online as the guest of honour. He emphasized the importance of nurturing young talent and collaboration between academia and industry to advance space technology research. He said ISRO has estab-

lished Space Technology Incubation Centres across six regions in India, and NIT Rourkela will be the hub for the Eastern Region, covering Odisha, West Bengal, Jharkhand, Bihar, and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

Inaugurating the STIC facility Chairman of ISRO Dr Narayanan said, "This is a

momentous occasion, as we are inaugurating this STIC facility at NIT Rourkela and also celebrating the return of Sunita Williams and her fellow astronauts after their remarkable mission aboard the International Space Station. He further highlighted ISRO's ongoing missions, including the Venus Orbiter Mission,

Chandrayaan-4 and Chandrayaan-5, and the ambitious Gaganyaan mission to send Indian astronauts into space. The success of India's space programme is a collective effort, involving ISRO team, industrial partners, and academia, including institutes like IITs and NITs."

"With 20 departments, outstanding faculty, and excellent infrastructure, NIT Rourkela is the ideal place for a centre focused on space research. I urge students to embrace the opportunities at STIC NIT Rourkela and play a key role in shaping India's future in space exploration," he added.

Director of NIT Rourkela K Umamaheshwar Rao said, "It is a moment of great pride that we are inaugurating a cutting-edge space research facility at NIT Rourkela."

The event also featured a virtual address by Prof Sunil Kumar Sarangi, former Director of NIT Rourkela.

# Dhankar calls discussion on judge cash controversy

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

The matter pertaining to alleged recovery of cash from the residence of a sitting judge of the Delhi High Court was raised in the Rajya Sabha on Friday, with Chairman Jagdeep Dhankar saying he will find a mechanism for holding a structured discussion on the issue.

Raising the issue in the morning session, Congress MP Jairam Ramesh also sought the Chair's response on judicial accountability and reminded him about a pending notice regarding impeachment of a judge of the Allahabad High Court. "This morning, we have read about a shocking case of huge amounts of cash unearthed at the residence of a judge of the Delhi High Court," Ramesh said. He also pointed out that earlier, 50 members of Parliament had submitted a notice to the chairman regarding certain remarks that were made by a judge of the Allahabad High Court. Ramesh said the chairman himself has repeatedly spoken about the urgency for judicial accountability. The senior Congress member also sought to remind Dhankar that he had directed the Leader of the House on this issue.

"I request that you please make some observations on this and give necessary directions to the government to come up with a proposal for increasing judicial



Rajya Sabha Chairman Jagdeep Dhankar conducts proceedings of the House during the Budget session of Parliament in New Delhi

accountability," he added. On the issue related to alleged recovery of the cash, Dhankar said what "bothers" him is that the incident happened but did not come to light immediately.

He said if such an incident was related to a politician, a bureaucrat or an industrialist, the person concerned would have become a 'target' immediately. "And, therefore, systemic response, which is transparent, accountable, effective, I am sure will be on the way" he said.

The chairman further said he will get in touch with the Leader of the House and

Leader of the Opposition and find a mechanism for a structured discussion during course of the session. On the impeachment matter, the chairman said he had received a representation from 55 members of the Rajya Sabha.

Dhankar further informed the members that he has taken all necessary steps to get verification from the signatories to the representation.

"Most members responded positively, helping me perform my duty," he said, and appealed to the remaining members to respond to the e-mails sent to them.

# Gabbard's visit reinforces US-India ties: US official

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

US Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard's meetings in India focused on bilateral cooperation in areas of intelligence-sharing, defence, counter-terrorism, and transnational threats, an American official said.

Gabbard's visit to New Delhi highlighted the decades strong US-India relationship that is bolstered by the leadership of and friendship between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Donald Trump, a spokesperson at the office of Director of National Intelligence (DNI) said.

She arrived in the national capital early Sunday on a two-and-a-half-day trip in the first high-level visit to India by a top official of the US President Donald Trump administration.

Tulsi Gabbard held separate meetings with Prime Minister Modi, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar and NSA Ajit Doval.

"In India, the Director of National Intelligence held several bilateral engagements, including with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi," the spokesperson said.

"DNI Tulsi Gabbard's meetings in India focused on intelligence-sharing, defence, counterterrorism, and transnational threats," the official added.

Gabbard also delivered a speech at the Raisina Dialogue, focusing on Trump's

efforts on bringing peace to various conflict-ridden regions.

"President Donald Trump remains unwavering in his commitment to achieving peace through a strategy rooted in realism and pragmatism," she said.

"Securing peace through strength requires strong leadership with a clear-eyed and realistic understanding of global challenges and opportunities, a commitment to fostering cultural and economic ties that reduce the likelihood of

## US Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard's meetings in India focused on bilateral cooperation

an escalation to conflict, and a dedication to reinforcing mutual interests," she added.

In his meeting with Gabbard, Defence Minister Singh conveyed to her India's concerns over activities of Khalistani separatist group Sikhs for Justice (SFJ) on American soil and urged her to declare it as a designated terrorist entity, Indian government sources said after the talks.

Rajnath Singh also apprised Tulsi Gabbard about SFJ's alleged links with Pakistani spy agency Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) as well as its "collaboration" with Babbar Khalsa militant group, and pressed for action against it, they said.

# Compassion, harmony cornerstones of civilisation, says Murmu

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

President Droupadi Murmu on Friday emphasised that compassion, inclusivity and harmony are cornerstones of the Indian civilisation, asserting that a nation's true progress is defined by its dedication to uplifting the marginalised. Speaking at Purple Fest 2025, a cultural event organised by the Social Justice Ministry at the Rashtrapati Bhawan here with the aim to empower PwDs, she reaffirmed India's constitutional values of social justice, dignity and equality.

A country or society is not known for what it does for the privileged but for its sensitivity towards the marginalised," the President said. She said compassion, inclusivity and harmony are intrinsic to the Indian civilisation. The President highlighted the gov't's commitment to empowering PwDs through various initiatives, including the 'Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan', which focuses on both physical, digital accessibility expressed satisfaction that initiatives in skill development and entrepreneurship are equipping disabled to become equal stakeholders in India's economy.

# BJP slams Karnataka's four per cent Muslim quota

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

The BJP on Friday accused the Congress of pursuing "contract jihad" in Karnataka after the state assembly passed a bill that allows for 4 per cent reservation for Muslims in government contracts, slamming it as an infringement on the rights of OBCs, SCs and STs.

BJP spokesperson Sambit Patra claimed that Congress leader Rahul Gandhi pushed the state government's decision, alleging he was using the crutches of Muslim quota to advance his politics as he knows that he will be not be otherwise able to deliver.

Rahul Gandhi is politically unfit for social political decision and that is why he is resorting to appeasement politics, Patra said, using rhyming Urdu lines to throw several barbs at him. "Alamgir Rahul-Zeb", he said in a play on Mughal king Aurangzeb, is nursing ambition to become "jahanpanah".

The Congress government's decision in Karnataka is only a beginning and will create divide in the country, the BJP spokesperson said, adding the opposition party can give even 100 per cent quota to the minority community in pursuit of its appeasement politics. He told reporters, "This is height of appeasement politics."

He said the Siddaramaiah-led government has been taking a host of measures aimed at Muslims. It followed "land jihad" through Waqf properties and "economic jihad" by offering huge package to development of the Waqf, he said, adding "anti-national jihad" was witnessed when pro-Pak slogans were raised in the state assembly, he added.

"It is contract jihad now," he said, adding the Congress had also allied the political wing of the banned radical Islamic organisation PFI and later given

legal reprieve to many person accused of stoking social unrest.

Patra noted that the state government has proposed salary to imams, financial aid to Muslims for weddings, rebate in fee for Muslims students, and ₹1,000 Crore for the development of Muslim colonies among several decisions aimed at the minority community. The four per cent quota for Muslims contracts is from the reservation bracket meant for the Other Backward Classes, he said, calling for a united front among the OBCs, SCs and STs against this development.

## BJP accused Congress of pursuing "contract jihad" in Karnataka after the state passed a bill that allows for four per cent reservation for Muslims in government contracts

The BJP leader claimed that it is such an appeasement politics which had led to the country's division in 1947. He reiterated that the state government's decision is unconstitutional, and the BJP will take appropriate measures to counter it. State BJP leaders have said that they will legally challenge it.

Asked about questions raised by some opposition parties on the fitness of Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, who looked distracted and tried to chat with someone while the national song was being played in the latest of his gaffes, Patra said it will not be appropriate for him to comment on any leader's health. One can talk about political fitness and everyone known who is the most politically unfit leader, he said, in a swipe at Rahul Gandhi.

# One held in SDPI money laundering case

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

The Enforcement Directorate has arrested a man from Coimbatore in Tamil Nadu following fresh round of searches in a money laundering case against the SDPI, the political front of the banned Popular Front of India (PFI), official sources said Friday.

Wahidur Rahman Jainullabudeen was taken into custody under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) from Mettupalayam in Coimbatore district on Thursday, the sources said.

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) made the arrest after conducting searches at the house of Jainullabudeen, who was brought to Delhi on Thursday night, and is expected to be produced before a special PMLA court on Friday, they said. The federal probe agency carried out the first round of searches in the case on March 6 after it arrested M K Faizy, the national president of SDPI, from the Delhi airport on March 3.

The ED claimed before a court while seeking 55-year-old Faizy's custody that there existed an "organic" relation between the two outfits and that the Popular Front of India was carrying out its criminal activities through the political party (SDPI).

The Centre banned the Popular Front of India in September 2022, calling it an unlawful association which allegedly indulged in terrorist activities.

Multi-agency searches by the ED, National Investigation Agency (NIA) and various state police forces preceded the Popular Front of India ban. Founded in 2009, the SDPI is registered as a political party with the ECI.

# No one can carry out blasts now: Shah

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

No one can now dare carry out blasts and escape, unlike in the past, Union Home Minister Amit Shah said on Friday and asserted that the country was safe under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership.

Noting that blasts occurred frequently in the past, Shah also attacked previous governments for not taking action against terrorists, citing the 2008 Mumbai terror attack.

The government has zero tolerance policy towards terrorism, Shah said as he also asserted that Naxalism will end in India by March 2026. Amit Shah said this while replying to a discussion in the Upper House on the workings of the Union Home Ministry.

"There was a time when bomb blasts were routine. I want to tell the people of the country that, for the last 10 years, the series of bomb blasts have stopped. No one can now dare carry out bomb blasts. The country is safe under Narendra Modi. We are committed to uprooting terrorism," he said in the Rajya Sabha.

Referring to the 2008 Mumbai terror attack, he said terrorists earlier easily entered the country, attacked hotels and railway stations, and escaped. "But no action was taken," the home minister said.

There is peace in Kashmir, the majority of terrorists in the northeast have surrendered, and the country is moving forward under the leadership of Modi, he added. "With strong political willpower and strong management of Modi ji, the country is safe now. The opposition should not be worried. We will keep you (opposition) as well as the country safe," Shah said.

The home minister did not speak on the violence in Manipur, saying he would deliberate on the issue in detail when imposition of President's Rule in the



Union Home Minister Amit Shah speaks in the Rajya Sabha during the Budget session of Parliament in New Delhi

northeastern state would come up for discussion. He said the government fulfilled the dream of the architects of the Constitution by abrogating Article 370.

"Article 370 was the basis of separatism in Kashmir. But I also thank the architects of the Constitution, they made the provision temporary, and the way to abrogate it was also included in the Article," Shah said. "But due to vote bank politics and stubbornness, Article 370 continued. On August 5, 2019, Article 370 was totally abrogated.

The dream of the architects of our Constitution, was that there can't be two heads, two constitutions and two flags in the country," he said. Shah said the issue of terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir, left-wing extremism, and insurgency in Northeast were among the biggest challenges for India. "Around 92,000 citizens were killed in four decades.

No organised effort was done to deal

with these, and the Modi government did it," he said. Shah also said the number of deaths of civilians and security personnel in terror incidents has drastically come down, while there has been zero incidents of stone pelting in the Kashmir valley.

"There has been a 70 per cent reduction in deaths due to terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir during Modi gov't; terror incidents too fell sharply," he said.

Shah also said grassroots level democracy has been established in Jammu and Kashmir by successfully holding elections in urban and rural local bodies.

"Around 40,000 government jobs provided during 2019-24 in Jammu and Kashmir, 1.51 Lakh self employment created, skilling clubs operational," he said. The Home Minister also accused previous governments of not taking action against Naxalism. "By March 21, 2026, Naxalism will end in this country," Amit Shah said.

# Yoga gets Intelligence with Artificial perfect pose

DEEPAK KUMAR JHA ■ New Delhi

As the world embraces yoga as a path to fitness and mental well-being, a new innovation is poised to address a growing concern, incorrect postures leading to pain and injuries.

As a recent survey highlighted that nearly 36 percent of yoga practitioners face discomfort due to improper alignment during their sessions, a timely solution has stepped in as PosePerfect, an Artificial Intelligence (AI)-powered yoga pose correction system that has been developed by a passionate team of young innovators. Born out of the XR (Extended Reality) Creator Hackathon, PosePerfect uses a blend of Extended Reality (XR), Artificial Intelligence (AI), and 3D Visualisation to offer real-time feedback and guided corrections during yoga practice.

With the help of PoseNet and animated 3D avatars created using Blender, the system tracks the practitioner's movements and suggests corrections on-screen, making yoga practice not just safer, but smarter. The aim is to help users of all skill levels improve posture, avoid injuries, and achieve better results.

The team behind this innovation, Shama Kiran (Team Lead), along with Deepthi Karani, Diya Thalanki, and Kriti Bhardwaj, believes that technology can play a vital role in enhancing traditional wellness practices. Their goal is to make yoga more accessible and effective, especially for those practicing without a trained instructor. The XR Creator Hackathon, a national platform that celebrates the power of immersive technology, is an initiative by Wavelaps in collaboration with the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting



under the WAVES program. It has provided teams like PosePerfect with mentorship, technical guidance, and access to cutting-edge tools, thanks to strong support from India's leading XR communities, BharatXR and XDG.

Now, all eyes are on the Grand Finale, scheduled from May 1 to 4, 2025, at the Jio World Convention Centre, Mumbai, where PosePerfect will showcase its prototype alongside other top XR innovations from across the country.

World Audio Visual & Entertainment Summit, known by the acronym WAVES will be a key forum for promoting discussions, collaboration, and innovation in the media and entertainment industry. The

event will bring together industry leaders, stakeholders, and innovators to discuss prospects, challenges, promote trade to India, and influence the sector's future. According to the Information and Broadcasting Ministry, WAVES is a groundbreaking event designed to propel India's media, entertainment industry to even greater heights. "India is a major consumer and creator within the global entertainment landscape.

WAVES provides a platform to showcase this vibrant industry and its immense potential. It promotes knowledge exchange, dialogue, and collaboration between Indian and global stakeholders. This cross-pollination of ideas will fuel inno-

vation and diversity within the media entertainment world.

It is to connect participants with new markets, diversifies revenue streams, and paves the way for a stable and sustainable growth trajectory for the Indian entertainment and media sector," said a senior official at Ministry of I and B. As India carves a space for itself in the global XR landscape, PosePerfect stands out as an inspiring example of how technology can elevate age-old practices. On a query as what impact shall the project bring to society, in India, and the world, Shama Kiran said the project aims to bridge the gap between traditional wellness practices and modern technology.

# ADMM-Plus concludes

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

With the 14th meeting of ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) Experts Working Group on Counter-Terrorism (EWG on CT) concluding here, India and Malaysia announced work plan for the activities under their co-chairmanship of the forum for the cycle 2024-2027.

The forum announced the conduct of table-top exercise in Malaysia in 2026 and a field training exercise in India in 2027, the Defence Ministry said in a statement here on Friday.

The 14th meeting of ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) Experts Working Group on Counter-Terrorism was held in New Delhi from March 19-20.

"Delegations from ASEAN Secretariat, ASEAN countries (Lao PDR, Malaysia, Indonesia, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, Philippines and Vietnam), ADMM-Plus member states (China, USA, Russia, Australia, Japan and Republic of Korea) participated in the meeting," it said.

During 14th ADMM-Plus EWG on CT, the co-chairs, India and Malaysia, conveyed work plan for the activities planned for the cycle 2024-2027.

The discussions focused on evolving a robust and comprehensive strategy to tackle the evolving threat of terrorism and extremism.

"The meeting was aimed to share the on-ground experience of the defence forces of ASEAN countries and its dialogue partners. The meeting laid a foundation for the activities, exercises, meetings, workshops planned for the current

cycle," it said. Earlier, Myanmar and Russia, co-chairs for EWG on CT during the previous cycle for 2021-2024, handed over the co-chairmanship to India and Malaysia for the present cycle (2024-2027), the ministry said. India is hosting the maiden EWG meeting for the current cycle.

In the inaugural session, Defence Secretary Rajesh Kumar Singh had delivered the keynote address and interacted with participating head of delegations.

He said terrorism remains a dynamic and evolving challenge with threats increasingly transcending borders. Singh

## The discussions in the meeting focused on evolving a robust and comprehensive strategy to tackle the evolving threat of terrorism and extremism

highlighted India's efforts towards countering terrorism in the region, including adoption of Delhi Declaration during India's chairmanship of Counter-Terrorism committee of the UNSC in 2022, the ministry said.

Senior officials from the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), the Defence Ministry and the Indian Army's Counter-Terrorism division participated in the event.

The heads of delegations of the participating countries and Association of Southeast Asian Nations Secretariat also presented their views on adopting best practices for countering terrorism in the region, the statement said.

# Naxal-free villages to get ₹1 crore, mobile connectivity

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Raipur

In a fresh bid to eradicate naxalism, the Chhattisgarh government has announced a series of substantial incentives for village panchayats that declare themselves 'naxal-free' which includes mobile phone network connectivity, electricity, and ₹1 Crore for development works.

Additionally, the state government announced initiatives in the rehabilitation policy cleared by the cabinet aimed at encouraging naxalites to surrender and reintegrate into mainstream society.

The announcement by Deputy Chief Minister Vijay Sharma comes a day after security forces killed 30 naxals in two separate encounters in the Bastar region, highlighting the government's intensified zero-tolerance approach.

The government announced that it will launch "Elvad Panchayat Abhiyan", under which panchayats facilitating surrenders and declaring themselves Maoist-free will

receive the incentives.

"Village panchayats that facilitate the surrender of Naxalites and declare themselves free from the menace will be sanctioned construction works of ₹1 Crore, mobile phone network, and electricity," Sharma, who also holds Home portfolio, told reporters.

The recently approved Chhattisgarh naxal surrender and victim relief and Rehabilitation Policy-2025 offers comprehensive support to surrendered naxals, including free accommodation, food for three years, and monthly financial assistance of ₹10,000.

"Naxalites who have laid down arms will be provided skill development training, land, and houses under the PM housing scheme. Many other provisions, including financial aid, have been included in the new policy," Sharma said, adding the implementation of the new policy will encourage more naxals to lay down arms and join the mainstream.

Furthermore, the rehabilitation policy



Security personnel after an operation against Naxalites in Chhattisgarh's Kanker

PTI

extends to victims of naxal violence, offering financial aid, land, and other forms of support to those displaced by Maoist threats.

In a tribute to fallen security personnel, the government has allocated ₹10 Crore through the Panchayat Department for the "Veer Balidani scheme," which will fund

the installation of statues of security personnel killed in their native villages.

An initial phase will see 500-600 statues erected, fulfilling a long-pending demand from the families of the deceased.

Sharma also lauded the security forces for their successful operations in Bijapur and Kanker districts. He explained that the Naxals had gathered for a meeting during their Tactical Counter Offensive Campaign (TCOC) when they were surrounded by security forces.

While 26 Naxalites were killed in Bijapur district, four Maoists were gunned down in Kanker by separate joint teams of security personnel. A police jawan was also killed in the encounter in Bijapur.

The Deputy Chief Minister also highlighted the government's efforts to improve connectivity and infrastructure in Naxal-affected areas.

For 25 years, Pamed was only accessible through Telangana covering a distance of 250 kilometers and there was no direct connectivity from Bijapur district head-

quarters to Pamed.

Now with the efforts of security forces, Pamed is accessible from Bijapur via Tarrem and Kondapalli, covering a distance of 90 km, and one bus has started operating for the commuters on the route, he said.

Weekly markets in several remote villages, including Garpa, Pujarikanker and Kondapalli, which were shut for the last several years due to Maoist activities have been reopened. At least 577 new mobile towers have been installed in the region, he said.

The Centre has announced that the menace of Naxalism will be finished by March 31, next year.

So far this year, 113 Naxalites have been killed in encounters in Chhattisgarh. Of them, 97 were gunned down in the Bastar division comprising seven districts including Bijapur and Kanker.

As many as 104 Naxals were arrested in different parts of the country and 164 have surrendered in 2025 so far.

## Stalin slams delimitation

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Chennai

If Tamil Nadu and other states lose representation in Parliament due to the proposed delimitation, it will strike at the very foundation of federalism, erode democracy and lead to compromise of rights, Chief Minister and DMK President MK Stalin said on Friday.

In a video message on the eve of the first meeting of the Joint Action Committee (JAC), Stalin said fair delimitation is the

**If delimitation exercise is carried out based on population, our representation in Parliament will be severely affected. That is exactly why we raised our voice first. This is not just about the number of MPs. This is about our state's rights**

- MK STALIN, TAMIL NADU CM

olution was passed demanding a fair delimitation process. "More importantly, we decided to unite the other affected states and fight together." In order to take the initiative forward, the Dravidian party chief said he wrote letters to the chief ministers of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Telangana, Odisha, West Bengal and Punjab and also sent letters to the leadership of all major parties representing these states in Parliament. A party delegation comprising a Tamil Nadu state minister and one MP personally met the leaders and explained the DMK's stand.

Stalin said he personally spoke to all the chief ministers over the phone and some confirmed their participation, while others, due to prior commitments, will be sending their representatives.

He said, "This first round of discussions will be held in Chennai on March 22. Why are we organising this meeting now? If Tamil Nadu and other states we have reached out were to lose representation due to this delimitation, it will strike at the very foundation of federalism in India. It will erode the essence of democracy itself. Our voices in Parliament will be silenced. Our rights will be compromised."

Further, he said, "This is nothing short of a deliberate attempt to undermine certain states. States that have controlled their population growth, governed efficiently, and contributed significantly to national progress must not be punished by the union government."

talk of the town right now. "Why has the DMK brought this into focus? It is because by 2026, delimitation will happen. And if delimitation exercise is carried out based on population, our representation in Parliament will be severely affected. That is exactly why we raised our voice first. This is not just about the number of MPs. This is about our state's rights," he said, adding that was why a meeting of all parties in Tamil Nadu was held.

In that recent meeting, except the BJP, every other party came together and a res-

## Allahabad HC Bar opposes Justice Verma's transfer

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ Prayagraj

The Allahabad High Court Bar Association has expressed strong opposition to the transfer of Justice Yashwant Verma from the Delhi High Court (HC) to the Allahabad High Court, calling the move unacceptable.

In a strongly worded letter, the association stated, "We are not a garbage dump," voicing its displeasure over the decision of the Supreme Court Collegium.

The controversy erupted following reports that a substantial amount of cash, allegedly around ₹15 Crore, was

recovered from Justice Verma's official residence in Delhi while fire department personnel were extinguishing a blaze. The Supreme Court took cognisance of the matter, leading to his transfer to the Allahabad High Court. In a resolution passed on Friday, the Allahabad High Court Bar Association stated that it was "shocked and dismayed" by the transfer, emphasising that such decisions undermine the dignity and reputation of the judiciary in Allahabad. The association further criticised the Supreme Court Collegium, led by Chief Justice of India Sanjiv Khanna, for transferring Justice

Verma to his parent High Court in the wake of the allegations. The transfer decision has sparked intense debate within legal circles, with senior advocates arguing that judges facing controversy should not be reassigned without a transparent inquiry. The Bar Association has called for a reconsideration of the transfer and demanded clarity on the circumstances surrounding the alleged cash recovery.

As the matter unfolds, legal experts and judicial observers are closely monitoring the developments, with concerns being raised over the impact of such decisions on judicial accountability and public

trust in the legal system.

Who is Justice Verma? Born on January 6, 1969, in Allahabad, Justice Verma completed his Bachelor of Commerce (Honours) at Hansraj College, Delhi University, and obtained his LLB from Rewa University, Madhya Pradesh. He enrolled as an advocate in 1992 and practiced extensively in the Allahabad High Court, specialising in constitutional law, taxation, corporate law, and industrial disputes. He served as Special Counsel for the Allahabad High Court (2006-2014) and as Chief Standing Counsel for the State of Uttar Pradesh (2012-2013).

## Terrorist handlers trying to target security convoys in Valley

MOHIT KANDHARI ■ Jammu

After suffering huge setbacks at the hands of the security forces in recent anti-terrorist operations, the terrorist handlers have been desperately trying to register their presence by targeting the security forces convoy using Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) along their routes in the Kashmir valley.

Since March 16, as many as four Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) have been recovered and defused in Kashmir, prompting a heightened security vigil across the region.

According to official sources, these

IEDs were found in Bandipora, Pulwama, Kupwara, Kulgam, and Shopian districts of Kashmir Valley.

The Director General of Police J and K, Nalin Prabhat also rushed to Srinagar on Thursday to assess the current security situation.

During the security review meeting, DGP reiterated the 'zero-tolerance policy' against terrorism. He also directed the officers to remain on high alert. According to a spokesman of the Srinagar-based Chinar Corps, on March 19 a major terror incident, which would have threatened the innocent lives of Kashmiri citizens, was averted after a joint team of the Indian

army and Jammu and Kashmir police recovered and destroyed an IED on the critical line of communication along Bandipora-Srinagar Road, Aragam.

The busy road link is often used by security convoys for their routine movement towards the Gurez valley.

Likewise, on March 17, another IED was found in a pressure cooker in Kulgam district's Qaimoh village while another one was defused in Kupwara and Pulwama district this week.

Following the recovery of IEDs a general advisory was also issued to the politicians and protected persons to exercise extra caution and avoid changing their

travel plans without the knowledge of the security personnel deployed on security duties. A senior police officer posted in the North Kashmir district of Kupwara said, "These IED attempts by terrorists are aimed at creating panic and showing their presence even though the local cadre has significantly depleted."

According to a recent assessment, at least 59 foreign terrorists from three different terror outfits and 17 local terrorists are active in Jammu and Kashmir. Of the 59 foreign terrorists, 21 are from Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), 35 from Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and three are associated with Hizbul Mujahideen (HM).

## Ready to sacrifice power for Lord Ram: Adityanath

BISWAJEET BANERJEE/KAMLESH SRIVASTAVA ■ Ayodhya

Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, during his visit to Ayodhya, made a resolute declaration that his tenure in power is secondary to the construction of the Ram Mandir. Addressing a gathering at the 'Timeless Ayodhya: Literature and Arts Festival', he stated, "Even if I have to lose power for Ram Mandir, there should be no problem. I will be happy if I have to relinquish my seat for Lord Ram. I am here to serve people. Ram will find a new way for me."

During his speech, Adityanath underscored Ayodhya's significance as the spiritual heart of Sanatan Dharma. He described the city as more than just a historical location, calling it a "source of inspiration for religion and literature." He elaborated on Ayodhya's sacred status, stating that it was here that Lord Manu laid the foundation of human civilisation, and the land became the 'karmabhoomi' (sacred ground of action) for Lord Ram, an incarnation of Vishnu.

He also emphasised the Ramayana's unparalleled contribution to literature, calling it "the world's first epic that provided a new direction to human civilisation." He noted that generations have drawn inspiration from the values embodied in the Ramayana, making Ayodhya a timeless symbol of moral and cultural wisdom.

The Chief Minister reflected on the



Uttar Pradesh CM Yogi Adityanath at the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya

PTI

transformation of Ayodhya since 2017, when his government introduced Deepotsav (grand Diwali celebrations). He recalled how the idea faced skepticism at first, with many questioning whether such a large-scale celebration could be sustained. However, over the years, deepotsav has grown into a grand festival, attracting millions of devotees and becoming a globally recognised cultural event.

"Today, Ayodhya is witnessing celebrations instead of riots. The city, once neglected, has now become the pride of the nation. Those who once opposed the Ram Mandir are now trying to associate them-

selves with Lord Ram," he remarked.

In his concluding remarks, Adityanath expressed his vision for Ayodhya as a city that will attract pilgrims and tourists from around the world.

He reiterated that his government is working tirelessly to develop infrastructure, improve connectivity, and promote cultural tourism.

"Ayodhya is not just a city, it is the spiritual heartbeat of the nation. It has been, and always will be, a guiding light for Dharma. With the blessings of Lord Ram, this sacred land will continue to shine on the world stage," he declared.

Upon his arrival in Ayodhya, Yogi Adityanath was welcomed by senior BJP leaders and rebel Samajwadi Party MLA Abhay Singh from Gosainganj.

The Chief Minister proceeded directly to the Hanumangarhi temple, where he offered prayers before heading to the Ram Mandir.

Following his temple visit, Adityanath participated in the Art and Literature Festival, where he addressed a gathering of young entrepreneurs. He distributed cheques amounting to ₹47 Crore to 1,148 youth, encouraging them to take charge of their futures. "If there is strong willpower, then there is no dearth of opportunity. The Prime Minister has also said that the youth of India is now not just job seekers but also job providers. If Uttar Pradesh becomes self-reliant, then India will also become self-reliant," he asserted.

Adityanath's strong statements come at a time when the political climate in Uttar Pradesh is intensifying ahead of the 2027 Assembly elections. His speech not only reinforced his image as a devout leader but also sent a clear message that he prioritises faith and governance over political gains.

His remarks are being seen as a strategic move to consolidate the BJP's core voter base, particularly in the wake of Opposition parties attempting to recalibrate their positions on Hindutva.

As the temple nears completion, the role of Ayodhya in BJP's electoral strategy is expected to grow even more prominent.

## Elderly couple gets married

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ Prayagraj

In a heartwarming testament to the fact that love knows no age, 66-year-old Munnalal and 57-year-old Preetilata tied the knot at the Ram Lal Old Age Home in Agra, vowing to spend the rest of their lives together. The wedding not only marked the beginning of a new journey for the couple but also fulfilled a lifelong dream of Munnalal's 90-year-old mother, who had long wished to see her son settle down.

Tears welled up in her eyes as she watched the wedding rituals, overwhelmed with joy. "I had given up hope of ever welcoming a daughter-in-law into my life. This is a dream come true for me," she said, her voice quivering with emotion.

For Munnalal and Preetilata, both of whom had been grappling with loneliness in their later years, the marriage was a chance to rediscover companionship. "I never imagined I would find a partner at this age," Munnalal shared. "Loneliness is a painful reality of old age, but now, I have someone to share my joys and sorrows with."

Preetilata echoed his sentiments, saying, "I spent years believing that my life was meant to be lived alone. But love has its own plans. I feel like I have been given a second chance at happiness."

The celebrations at the old age home began on Wednesday with haldi and mehendi ceremonies, where fellow res-

idents joined in with enthusiasm, singing and dancing. On Thursday, the wedding procession (baraat) took place, with the elderly residents stepping into the roles of baratis. Laughter and music filled the air as they danced, clapped, and cheered for the couple.

To make the moment even more special, the president of Ram Lal Old Age Home, Shivkumar Sharma, stepped in as the bride's father, conducting the rituals with utmost care. "A wedding is not just about two people; it's about bringing families together. And here, we are all a family," he said with a smile.

The wedding received widespread appreciation from social workers and dignitaries present at the ceremony. Rajkumar Jain, President of Agra Vikas Manch, and Sunil Kumar Jain, the organization's coordinator, spoke about the importance of companionship for the elderly.

"Old age should not mean isolation. Everyone deserves love and care, regardless of their age. Munnalal and Preetilata's marriage is a reminder that companionship is a basic human need that doesn't fade with time," Rajkumar Jain said.

He also announced plans to launch a campaign encouraging the remarriage of widows and elderly individuals who struggle with loneliness. "Society often shuns the idea of remarriage in old age, but we need to change this mindset. Every person deserves happiness, no matter how old they are," he added.

## Fake DSP arrested for extorting ₹80 Lakh

PARVESH SHARMA ■ Gurugram

Gurugram Police arrested an accused for allegedly extorting ₹80 Lakh from a 15-year-old girl by threatening to arrest her by posing as fake DSP, police said. The alleged fake DSP was identified as Fardeen a resident of Nuh district in Haryana. He was arrested from Patudi area on Thursday.

During police interrogation, it was found that the accused had created a DSP ID on TRUE CALLER. After this, he got the money transferred from the victim by threatening her of arrest by posing as a fake DSP. At least six other suspects have already been arrested in the matter, police said on Friday. All the suspects were arrested for extorting ₹80 Lakh from a 15-year-old girl by threatening to leak her objectionable photos on social media, which turned out to be morphed, police had said.

Inspector Rambir Singh, station house

officer (SHO) of the Sector 10A police station, said, "The accused accomplice had provided multiple account numbers to the girl via social media platform for transferring money from her grandmother's bank account. They had spent most of the amount on parties," he said. Police had said the elderly woman had recently sold a property and received ₹80 Lakh in her account. The girl shared details about the money with her school friends, one of whom may have leaked her information to the accused, they added. The victim, a Class IX student living in Sector 10, managed her grandmother's internet banking.

The matter came to the fore on December 21, when the grandmother discovered her account had been drained of funds and approached the police.

"It was only after being confronted by her parents and grandmother that the girl disclosed the blackmailing," said SHO Singh.

## Court remands Amritpal Singh's accomplices to custody

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Amritsar

Radical preacher Amritpal Singh's seven associates were on Friday produced before a court here in connection with the attack on the Ajnala police station in 2023 and remanded to police custody till March 25.

The seven were released from the Dibrugarh Central Jail in Assam and re-arrested in another case by the Punjab Police.

All seven detainees were produced before the court in Ajnala here under tight security and sent to four-day police remand, officials said.

Police here sought the remand on various grounds, including to recover some mobile phones and weapons, and to conduct further investigations.

The Punjab government had decided not to reinvoke the NSA at the end of the detention period of Amritpal's seven associates. Punjab Police had secured their transit remand and after completing the legal transfer process from Dibrugarh Central they were brought to Ajnala.



Amritpal Singh's aide Gurinder pal Singh being released after his NSA detention period expired in Dibrugarh

PTI

A 25-member Punjab Police team had been camping in Dibrugarh for the past few days to facilitate the transfer of Singh's accomplices, who have been imprisoned along with the Waris Punjab

De (WPD) leader in Dibrugarh for nearly two years. The seven brought back are Basant Singh of Daulatpura Ucha in Moga, Bhagwant Singh alias Pradhan Mantri Bajke of village Bajke in Moga,

Gurmeet Singh Gill alias Gurmeet Bukkanwala of village Bukkanwala in Moga, Sarabjeet Singh Kalsi alias Daljeet Singh Kalsi of West Punjabi Bagh in New Delhi, Gurinderpal Singh Aujla alias Guri Aujla of Phagwara, Harjeet Singh alias Chacha of village Jallapur Khera in Amritsar and Kulwant Singh Dhaliwal alias Kulwant Singh of Rauke Kalan in Moga. All of them were released from Dibrugarh Central Jail in batches during the last few days as their detention period in the National Security Act (NSA) expired. Amritpal Singh and his associates have been in Assam's Dibrugarh jail under the NSA for the past two years.

He had fought the 2024 Lok Sabha polls as an independent and won from the Khadoor Sahib seat. The radical preacher, who styled himself after slain Khalistani militant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, was arrested in Moga's Rode village on April 23, 2023 following an over a month-long manhunt. The Khalistani sympathiser had escaped the police net in Jalandhar district on March 18, 2023 switching vehicles and changing appearances.

**Editor's TAKE**

## Countdown to reciprocal tariffs

India braces for the impact of Trump's tariffs, set to take effect on April 2

As April 2 approaches, India braces for the implementation of US President Donald Trump's reciprocal tariffs, a move poised to reshape the economic landscape between the two nations. These tariffs aim to equalise the duties imposed by countries on US exports, targeting nations with higher tariffs on American goods.

President Trump has criticised countries like India for imposing substantial tariffs on US products. He made it clear recently when he said that he believed they (India and others) are probably going to be lowering those tariffs substantially, but on April 2, and that he would be charging them the same tariffs they charge US. The reciprocal tariffs are designed to pressure countries into reducing their tariffs to match those of the United States.

The introduction of these tariffs could have several implications for India. Firstly it is going to affect India's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in a big way. Analysts predict a potential reduction in India's GDP growth by 5 to 10 basis points from the current estimate of 6.6 per cent. The key industries such as gems and jewelry, pharmaceuticals, and automobiles, which have significant export volumes to the US, may face increased duties, affecting their competitiveness and profitability. Moreover, the Indian steel sector is particularly vulnerable. With the US imposing a 25 per cent tariff on steel imports and if India lowers its steel import duties there are genuine concerns about cheaper Chinese steel flooding the Indian market and damaging the Indian steel industries.

Indian government is yet to figure out how to reciprocate as the Trump's deadline is just ten days away. The best bet is diplomatic negotiations but at the moment the US President is adamant on going ahead with his plans to wage the trade war on nations who do not comply with his dictums. Indian officials have been in talks with their US counterparts to negotiate and potentially mitigate the impact of the tariffs. India has proactively reduced tariffs on certain US goods, such as motorcycles and bourbon whiskey, to address US concerns and foster goodwill. However, lowering the import duties across the sectors would be disastrous for Indian industry.

The best bet in this scenario, as other countries are also exploring and experimenting is to find alternative markets and increase South South Cooperation (SSC). Efforts are underway to explore alternative markets for Indian exports to reduce dependence on the US and mitigate potential revenue losses. But the problem is far grave as the ripple effects of the tariffs extend beyond direct trade. Increased US tariffs could lead to uncertainty, affecting foreign direct investment inflows as investors may adopt a cautious approach.

Trade tensions can lead to volatility in currency markets, impacting the Indian rupee's value against major currencies. Higher tariffs on imported goods could lead to increased prices for consumers, affecting purchasing power and overall consumption. As the deadline approaches, India's preparedness and strategic responses will be crucial in navigating the challenges posed by the US reciprocal tariffs.

India has a strong economic foundation, and while the impact of these tariffs may be challenging, the country is well-positioned to weather this unprecedented situation.

Moreover, as other affected nations like China and Canada devise strategies to mitigate the impact, India can draw valuable lessons from their responses to navigate the evolving trade scenario.

## Leaderspeak



The delimitation exercise, if carried out, will strike at the very foundation of federalism in India. It will erode the essence of democracy. Our voices in parliament will be silenced. Our rights will be compromised. This is nothing but a deliberate attempt to undermine certain states. States that have controlled their population growth, governed efficiently and contributed significantly to national progress must not be punished by the union government.

MK STALIN, CHIEF MINISTER OF TAMIL NADU



# AI is transforming healthcare

From AI-driven diagnostic software aiding rural healthcare centers to machine-learning models enhancing radiology and pathology, technology is automating tasks once solely performed by doctors

Medical practice is based on protocols that help doctors diagnose conditions. A protocol is an algorithm and it appears that machines might be gaining an advantage in diagnosing conditions efficiently and quickly. It is increasingly being recognised that a digitally connected healthcare ecosystem can improve treatment outcomes, especially in large parts of rural India where the lack of specialists often comes in the way of timely diagnosis and medication. Software, developed by doctors and technicians at AIIMS Delhi, is a significant initiative in this respect.

The software can extend specialised diabetes consultation to primary healthcare centres (PHCs) in rural areas. Studies have suggested that India's diabetes burden, already the second highest in the world, is under-reported because half the patients, even in urban areas, are not even aware of their condition. The AIIMS software is one step towards addressing these deficits. It requires the local level healthcare professional to feed in patient data on risk factors like blood pressure, cholesterol, and blood sugar. It then uses AI to process the information to suggest the treatment or further consultation, as the case may be. All this, however, does not attenuate the significance of the attending physician. The doctor will be required to adapt the software's advice. The digital intervention's potency, therefore, is dependent on the quality of analogue care.

The country's healthcare system requires accessible PHCs run by quality professionals, empowered by digital resources. With this statement, I will talk about the shape of jobs in the field of medicine in this era of AI and GenAI. The advent of AI is posing serious concerns about jobs in future. Some people will become more productive and some roles will be replaced. I have a different take on this.

I hypothesise that AI is automating tasks, not jobs. Let us take the example of a Radiologist—he reads X-rays, sees patients, maintains machines, and mentors younger doctors. Computers analyse X-rays and other medical diagnostics more efficiently and accurately than human experts. The task of reading x-rays can be done by AI, but not the other parts of a radiologist's job. So I suggest that while identifying areas that will be impacted by AI, we need to break down a job into tasks.

We have to accept that most jobs will likely have at least some of their tasks affected by LLMs. Pathologists are receiving scanned slides of biopsies accompanied by critical data. Then the pathologist only has to focus on the



more complex issues to generate a diagnosis. The positive side of this is that speed and accuracy will increase. The downside is that if pathologists are no longer required to evaluate the basic histology elements themselves, the skill to do so will gradually be lost and ultimately they will become dependent on machines, the output of which they will not be able to even corroborate. In this context, there is a need to redefine the job profiles, and we will have to give opportunity to health workers to develop new skill sets relevant to shifting economies and labour markets. Emerging market realities call for major changes to the medical college curriculum. The advent of AI threatens to alter not only how subjects are taught but also what is taught. A recent survey reveals that 60 per cent of medical students are already using AI. However, they need to appreciate that all information given by AI is not accurate; AI and GenAI also suffer from the GIGO rule (Garbage In Garbage Out). Doctors also need to be taught where and how they should use AI and GenAI tools and apps.

There is an urgent need to revamp the medical educational architecture of our country, integrating it with modern technologies and national priorities. Software like the one developed by AIIMS can become more potent if synced with the electronic repository of the National Health Programme for Diseases. Data portability is in line with the Digital Health Mission's objective of facilitating seamless interaction between medical experts.

A second caveat: Given the asymmetrical

relationship between patients and health service providers, the system should be insulated against data confidentiality breaches. Data is crucial for AI to evolve. Machine learning is the field that trains computers through analysis of large quantities of data. There is plenty of data available in our country. This data is being acquired by seducing the public to part with it voluntarily, people are tantalised with online carrots and free to use apps and their responses are monitored, tracked and recorded. Most people happily and voluntarily give up their private data, often without realising it. The digital capitalists use several pretexts and constantly reassure the public that data collection is for their good.

For instance, in the name of developing custom diets, lots of personal medical information is being captured. Genetic data from a country's immense biodiversity is being collected as part of studies and medical collaborations with foreign organisations.

Another interesting development, COVID-19 forced physicians and their patients to use telemedicine, and the response has been universally appreciated. It might trigger your thoughts when I say that telemedicine can capture new kinds of patient data such as facial

expressions, emotional states, etc. The pandemic also accelerated the commercial availability of health and fitness wearables which facilitated doctors—supervised health monitoring, remote diagnostics, and even certain treatments. With these new kinds of data captured as well. A word of caution here—we need a techno-legal approach to unlocking data. We need to work out modalities of Confidential Data Clean Room—Sangam of data and model where secrecy is maintained. The cause of concern is that in this game one player is largely ignorant. The suppliers of digital services understand the game and play it skillfully, while most doctors are not even aware that the interests of patient may be at odds with those of the digital and pharmaceutical companies. AI has entered the medical field so rapidly and unknowingly that it seems that doctors have accepted interactions with it without due diligence or in depth consideration. They are giving away their knowledge, research and data to AI apps voluntarily. AI may be capable of outstanding performance in terms of speed and accuracy, but all of its operations are built on data, ie, knowledge derived from experts in the field ie the doctors. We should realise that while AI is essential for meaningful progress in diagnosis and understanding of disease mechanisms, keeping AI within boundaries is essential for the survival of ethics in medical profession.

(The writer is UP's Agriculture Production Commissioner. Views expressed are personal)



MONIKA S GARG

## Starliner Mission redefines space exploration

### SECOND Opinion



BIJU DHARMAPALAN

The recent record-breaking mission by NASA astronauts Butch Wilmore and Sunita Williams has captured global attention, not only for its remarkable duration but also for its implications on the future of space exploration. The mission of NASA astronauts Butch Wilmore and Sunita Williams aboard Boeing's Starliner spacecraft in July 2023 was intended to be an eight-day demonstration flight. Rather, their duration aboard the International Space Station (ISS) was extended by an extraordinary 286 days due to technical malfunctions. Even though this unanticipated mission demonstrates human resilience, it also emphasises the precarious equilibrium between ambition and preparedness in the field of space exploration.

The Starliner's propulsion system failures, including helium leaks and thruster malfunctions, exposed the dangers of deploying inadequately tested technology in the harsh space environment. While challenges are inherent in space exploration, this incident highlights a troubling trend: the rush to privatise and commercialise space travel may prioritise speed over reliability. Boeing's struggles with Starliner reflect broader concerns within the industry, where cutting corners to meet deadlines can jeopardise astronaut

safety. Future space colonisation efforts demand rigorous redundancy systems and fail-safes to ensure that no single malfunction can endanger lives millions of miles from Earth.

NASA has accumulated decades of data on long-duration missions, however, risks are exacerbated by unanticipated extensions. Over time, muscle atrophy, bone density loss, and radiation exposure accumulate, while mental health strains—such as isolation, confinement, and the stress of uncertainty—are exacerbated. Solving these issues at a large scale is necessary for the colonisation of Mars or the establishment of lunar bases. Is it possible to create artificial gravity? Protecting oneself from cosmic radiation? Psychological support systems that are reliable? The astronauts' ordeal is a living experiment, but it is one that we cannot afford to replicate indiscriminately.

The extended stay of Wilmore and Sunita Williams has yielded valuable insights into the long-term physical and psychological consequences of space travel. Although previous expeditions, such as Scott Kelly's year-long ISS stay, have provided critical data, this extended mission has significantly enhanced our comprehension. The effects of microgravity on muscles, bones, and cardiovascular systems, as well as the strains of protracted isolation, emphasise the necessity for improved medical protocols, exercise regimens, and mental health support systems for future astronauts. Colonising Mars or establishing lunar bases will require

innovative solutions—from developing artificial gravity systems to improved radiation shielding. The current ordeal has created an opportunity to refine these strategies, ensuring astronauts are better prepared for extended deep-space missions. The ISS served as a critical lifeline during the astronauts' extended mission, reinforcing the importance of private collaboration.

SpaceX's partnership with NASA has been pivotal in advancing spacecraft reliability. The Crew Dragon spacecraft's advanced life-support systems and automation capabilities played a key role in sustaining the crew. This highlights how public-private partnerships are essential for building resilient space infrastructure. As we expand our cosmic ambitions, maintaining cooperation in space exploration will be vital. Future colonies on Mars or the Moon will require shared resources, international rescue protocols, and diversified expertise. Yet rising geopolitical tensions threaten this cooperative spirit. For sustainable colonisation, global collaboration must become the foundation of our extraterrestrial endeavours. The prolonged mission of Wilmore and Sunita Williams exemplifies human creativity, adaptation, and perseverance. Their experience provides essential insights into spaceship design, astronaut welfare, and mission strategising. As mankind approaches interplanetary flight, these insights will ensure that future explorers are prepared to confront the challenges that await.

(The writer is an adjunct faculty at the National Institute of Advanced Studies. Views expressed are personal)

## Letters to the Editor

### Saliva ban lifted, spinners get a boost

Madam—Apropos to "BCCI lifts saliva ban in IPL" published on March 21, here is my response. The saliva ban was enforced during Covid pandemic because of obvious reasons and it has been five years since this ban has been in existence in international cricket.

Board of Control for Cricket in India's (BCCI) latest decision to lift the saliva ban ahead of IPL 2025 is a welcome move because it will aid fast bowlers in reverse swinging the ball.

And it will also bring some sort of equality into the context which is otherwise heavily tilted towards the batsman. Hope it will also trigger discussion at ICC level to bring this change in international cricket as well.

BCCI has also made another change of introducing two balls in second innings in night matches which is also praiseworthy because it will counter dew.

As the dew sets in it becomes really difficult for spinners to turn the ball as seams gets wet and becomes a bit grassy hence comes nicely on the bat so this change in the rule will help spinners make better grip over the ball.

Both these measures will significantly help bowlers and it is good for the game of cricket to bring some balance and hopefully fans will get to see some evenly contested matches in this IPL.

### Respect, care for parents now legal necessity

Madam—A historic decision by the Tamil Nadu High Court has empowered the dignity and rights of the elderly. The court has made it clear that if children or heirs fail to properly care for and serve their elderly parents, the elderly have the full legal right to reclaim the property they had gifted. This decision gives a new direction to the sense of duty and sensitivity towards the elderly in society.

This case involved an elderly woman who, out of love and trust for her son, transferred her property to him through a gift deed. However, after her son's death, her daughter-in-law began mistreating her and showed a neglectful attitude. Unable to bear the situation, the elderly woman approached the court. The court ruled in her favour, stating that if the children or heirs fail to fulfil their duties, the elderly have the legal right to reclaim the gifted property.

This verdict has not only provided legal protection to the elderly but also sent a strong message to society that serving and respecting parents is not only a moral obligation but also a legal duty. If love and care from children are lacking, the existence of the gift deed can be nullified. This decision will serve as a milestone in protecting the dignity and self-respect of the elderly. It reminds every individual in society that respecting and caring for parents is not just a duty but a fundamental value of life.

### Devotees' trust at stake

Madam—Telangana Chief Minister Revanth Reddy's recent allegations against the Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams (TTD) are purely politically motivated. These accusations, based on false information, seem to be a deliberate attempt to mislead devotees and tarnish Hindu sentiments. The comments were made with the intention of disregarding the services provided by TTD and spreading misinformation.

TTD has always been committed to serving devotees without any regional discrimination. The institution ensures that devotees from all states receive equal treatment, and there is no scope for favoritism.

The ₹300 special entry darshan and VIP darshan tickets are made available transparently through an online booking system, ensuring that every devotee gets a fair opportunity to have darshan of Lord Venkateswara. Every day, thousands of devotees from Telangana successfully book their tickets online and visit the temple without any hindrance.

Recommendation letters from public representatives are considered only for the VIP break darshan.

However, due to limited slots, not all recommendations can be approved. The claim that TTD has rejected Telangana leaders' recommendation letters is entirely false.

## ECONOMIC GROWTH ALONE IS NOT A GUARANTEE OF HAPPINESS

The 'World Happiness Report 2025' has shown a slight improvement in India's ranking, yet it remains unsatisfactory. India stands at 118th position among 147 countries, while Pakistan, despite its economic instability, is ranked 109th. Finland has secured the top spot for the eighth consecutive year, followed by Denmark, Iceland, Sweden, and the Netherlands. This report highlights that economic prosperity alone does not ensure national happiness, rather, a combination of social, cultural, administrative, and psychological factors shapes a truly content society.

India is one of the fastest-growing economies, but the extent to which this growth benefits its citizens remains debatable. The wealth gap continues to widen, leading to dissatisfaction and despair. In contrast, smaller European nations with limited resources offer better social security and fair economic distribution, ensuring greater happiness. India must focus on redistributing its economic

resources to make prosperity accessible to all. Social cohesion and community support play a vital role in happiness. While India has traditionally had strong family and social ties, modernisation and digitalisation have weakened these bonds, increasing isolation, stress, and depression.

Western countries emphasise mental health services, providing free counselling, community interactions, and a supportive environment. India must prioritise mental well-being through robust policies that encourage social cooperation and emotional resilience.

Healthcare accessibility and life expectancy are also crucial determinants of happiness. Despite improvements, India's healthcare system remains inaccessible to the general public. Government hospitals require urgent reform, while private healthcare remains unaffordable.

SACHIN TRIPATHI | SATNA

# Humanism and the world

The human race stands at a critical juncture, where its unchecked expansion and relentless exploitation of the natural world threaten its own survival. The pressing need to amend Protagoras' aphorism "Man is the measure of all things" has never been more urgent

FIRST Column



has increased sharply as a result of growing human population, which, currently around 8.2 Billion, is, pace UN projections, set to peak at 10.3 Billion by the mid-1980s. According to another estimate, it is expected to exceed 10 Billion by 2060. It is not just their sustenance demands that are increasing with their numbers. Market capitalism, with advertising as its cutting edge, is manufacturing demands for ever new consumer goods and leisure activity.



HIRANMAY KARLEKAR

The result is pressure on nature, resources and space. Animal habitats and forests, for example, are destroyed to make room for townships, factories and roads, and rail lines linking them. Trees are cut en masse to provide for construction, firewood and the furniture industry. Not surprisingly, Ian Johnston's report in The Independent of the United Kingdom of 31 May, 2017, cited scientists writing in a special edition of the magazine, Nature, that humans were causing the sixth mass extinction of life on earth. Chris Jasurek's piece in The Epoch Times of October 31, 2018, cites a World Wildlife Fund report as stating that humans have killed about

60 per cent of animals on the planet since 1970. The future of humans themselves is at stake. Population increase is an important cause of accelerating human activity. Referring to the soaring increase in global population under way, Desmond Morris predicts in *The Naked Ape: A Zoologist's Study of the Human Animal*, that time will come when "the densities we are now experiencing in our major cities would exist in every corner of the globe. The consequences of all this for all forms of wild animals is obvious. The effect it would have on our own species is equally depressing."

Morris adds shortly thereafter, "Long before our populations reach the levels envisaged above we shall have broken so many of the rules that govern our biological nature, that we shall have collapsed as a dominant species. Many exciting species have become extinct in the past and we are no exception." Those dismissing Morris' prediction as alarmist can argue that the human mind, which accounts not only for the survival of the species but its dominance over nature through technology, will find a way of preventing this. Nothing of the sort. Technology would remain a formulation on paper if the environment in which it has to be applied disappears.

More important, the devising and application of technologies would require continued and

serious application of the mind. Paul Shepard writes in *Thinking Animals: Animals and the Development of Human Intelligence*, "the mind and its organ, the brain, are in reality that part of us most dependent on the survival of animals. We are connected to animals by sinews that link speech to rationality, insight, intuition, and consciousness." He states that people everywhere had "a profound, inescapable need for animals" which "are used in the growth and development of the human person, in those most priceless qualities which we lump together as 'mind.' Animal images and forms play a critical role in the shaping of personality, identity, and social consciousness. Animals are among the first inhabitants of the mind's eye. They are "basic to the development of speech and thought."

The progressive extinction of species will have a devastating effect on the human mind, and a progressive decline of the mind will have its own disastrous consequences. The mind is the home of reason and consciousness. As the basis of analytical thought, reason is the cutting edge of the mind.

Its possession has enabled humankind to create a civilisation tailored to cater to its needs, fancies and craving for luxuries, and based on the exploitation of all other species, who are considered inferior as they do not have the ability to reason. The argument will, of course, be that reason would enable people to recognise the deadly consequence of their way of life and retreat from the brink of the precipice.

Such optimism is unwarranted. Reason is an instrument, and not humankind's defining attribute, and is often overpowered by passion and the urge for self-indulgence. The consequences of global warming and what is to be done to combat it are well known. Yet people are unable to overcome the growing desire for creature comforts, which is so overwhelming that they are incapable of jettisoning it. Many now join the Taliban or other groups whose obscurantist doctrines do not stand rational interrogation—as many in Nazi Germany joined the Sturm Abteilung (SA) and the Schultz Staffein (SS) steeped in Hitler's racist doctrine. If the first instance reflects the failure of rationality, the second indicates the triumph of hatred over reason. Not many today realise that their human supremacist worldview and ruthless exploitation of non-human living beings is facilitating their own extinction. Instead of killing, they need to nurture and cherish all animals, birds, fish and plants. The second amendment to Protagoras' aphorism should transform it to read, "Humankind is the preserver and protector of all beings."

(The author is Consulting Editor, *The Pioneer*. Views expressed are personal)

## Himachal factors in growth aspirations amid fiscal challenges

## Phishing scams: Protect yourself from cyber threats!

Himachal Pradesh Chief Minister Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu, who also oversees the finance portfolio, recently presented the 2025-26 state budget, aiming to balance fiscal prudence with developmental aspirations. The budget emphasises tourism expansion, green energy, and rural upliftment as key growth drivers. However, persistent financial challenges—including declining central grants, rising debt, and increasing revenue expenditure—continue to pose significant hurdles to fiscal management.

state must focus on:

- Expanding the tax base: Increasing the number of taxpayers through effective registration drives and stricter enforcement of tax laws.
- Digital tax governance: Implementing advanced digital tracking systems to monitor tax collections, curb evasion, and streamline compliance.
- Rationalising tax incentives: Reviewing and eliminating unnecessary tax exemptions that lead to revenue losses.
- Strengthening enforcement: Enhancing audit mechanisms to detect tax evasion while promoting voluntary compliance.

**Rationalising subsidies**

Himachal Pradesh bears a high subsidy burden, which, while essential for social welfare, often leads to fiscal strain when not managed effectively. A targeted subsidy framework is necessary to balance welfare with financial sustainability. Key measures include:

Identifying non-essential subsidies: Phasing out benefits that primarily aid economically well-off sections while protecting critical subsidies for health-care, education, and agriculture.

- Direct Benefit Transfers (DBT): Ensuring subsidies reach intended beneficiaries directly, reducing middlemen and leakages.
- Performance-based subsidies: Linking benefits to efficiency and sustainability, particularly in the power sector, where leakages are common.
- Encouraging alternative funding models: Exploring Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) partnerships to support social welfare initiatives.

By curbing wasteful subsidies, the government can reallocate resources to productive investments, fostering long-term economic stability.

**Monetising state assets**

Himachal Pradesh possesses vast underutilised assets in land, tourism, hydroelectricity, and public infrastructure. Monetising these resources can generate substantial revenue.

- Land monetisation: Leasing state-owned land for commercial and industrial use while ensuring sustainable development.
- Maximising hydroelectric revenue: Enhancing revenue-sharing agreements with power producers and improving efficiency in the hydropower sector.
- Revamping state properties: Converting unused government buildings into revenue-generating assets like hotels, business centers, or cultural hubs.

d) Auctioning mineral resources: Regulating and monetising mineral deposits through transparent and competitive bidding processes. Effectively utilising state assets can reduce fiscal dependence on external sources and create sustainable revenue streams.

**Seeking ecological compensation**

As a major ecological contributor, Himachal Pradesh provides critical environmental services, including carbon sequestration and water conservation. However, these contributions often go uncompensated in national financial allocations. The state must aggressively advocate for ecological compensation, estimated at ₹90,000 Crore annually, through:

Financial incentives for forest conservation: Seeking compensatory grants from the central government.

- Monetising carbon credits: Participating in national and international carbon trading markets.
- Eco-taxation: Imposing green taxes on businesses impacting the environment, with revenues directed toward conservation efforts.
- Securing environmental compensation will provide much-needed fiscal support while reinforcing Himachal's commitment to sustainability.

**Boosting tourism revenue**

Tourism is a cornerstone of Himachal Pradesh's economy, yet its revenue potential remains under-utilised. The government must focus on:

- Eco-tourism and adventure tourism: Developing sustainable resorts, trekking trails, and adventure sports facilities.
- Religious tourism infrastructure: Enhancing connectivity and amenities around pilgrimage sites.
- Cultural and heritage tourism: Restoring historical sites and promoting Himachal's unique culture and handicrafts.
- Better taxation and regulation: Ensuring proper taxation of tourism-related businesses to minimise revenue leakages.
- With strategic investments and promotional efforts, tourism-driven revenue can significantly reduce dependence on external grants.
- Himachal Pradesh stands at a critical economic juncture where strategic action is essential to overcome fiscal distress.

By diversifying revenue streams, strengthening tax governance, optimising state resources, and fostering private sector collaboration, the state can navigate financial challenges while sustaining economic growth.

A well-implemented, multi-sectoral strategy will not only bridge fiscal deficits but also position Himachal Pradesh as a model of financial resilience.

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

Imagine waking up to an urgent email with the subject line "immediate action required: your bank account has been suspended!" or "your streaming subscription has been terminated—update your payment details now!" The message no doubt looks official, with the bank's or the streaming service's logo and a professional tone, warning that your account has been compromised or your payment details need to be updated immediately.

Panic sets in. You don't want to lose access to your hard-earned money or favourite shows. Without thinking twice, you click the link in the email, which takes you to what appears to be the official website. It prompts you to enter your login credentials, bank details, or social security number. The urgency of the message makes you act fast until you realise, too late, that you have just handed over your sensitive information to cybercriminals.

This is a classic phishing scam, a deceptive tactic that is used by hackers to trick people into revealing personal and financial information by pretending to be a trusted entity. With a single click, all your accounts, confidentiality and finances could be at risk. Phishing is a cyber-attack technique where malicious actors or hackers attempt to trick people into sharing sensitive information, such as usernames, passwords, and financial details by using fake websites, emails, or messages to steal data such as credit or debit card details and login credentials. This form of social engineering exploits human psychology rather than technical vulnerabilities, making it a persistent and evolving threat in the digital age. There are numerous types of Phishing Attacks, such as:

- Whaling: A specialised type of spear phishing aimed at high-profile individuals like CEOs or government officials, often involving sophisticated social engineering tactics.
- E-mail phishing: The most common form, where attackers send fraudulent emails pretending to be reputable entities, such as banks or online services, urging recipients to click on malicious links or download harmful attachments.
- Spear phishing: A targeted attack where hackers gather personal information about their victims to create personalised, convincing messages that appear legitimate.
- Smishing and vishing: Smishing (SMS phishing) uses fraudulent text messages to lure victims, while vishing (voice phishing) involves phone calls from attackers impersonating trustworthy organisations.
- Clone Phishing: Attackers replicate legitimate emails, replacing attachments or links with malicious versions to deceive recipients.
- Website Spoofing: Fraudsters create fake websites that closely resemble legitimate ones to trick users into entering sensitive credentials.



SHAINY SHARMA

The first and foremost way to prevent yourself from being a victim is to enable multi-factor authentication (MFA), even if credentials are compromised for it adds an extra layer of security. Organisations should conduct regular cybersecurity training to raise awareness about phishing tactics for their employees. Even, the Indian government has taken several initiatives such as the Cyber Surakshit Bharat Initiative, Digital India Campaign and many more to raise awareness about phishing and enhance cybersecurity among citizens, businesses and government institutions. The Indian Government regularly posts cybersecurity tips and scam alerts through platforms like Twitter (@Cyberdost) and Facebook and the Cyber Crime Helpline 1930 allows victims to report phishing attacks quickly as a few initiatives that aim to guide how to detect and avoid phishing attacks and educates users about common phishing tactics used especially in digital payments, banking frauds and fake emails.

As a safety concern, it would be beneficial to install and update antivirus and anti-phishing tools to detect malicious content. Before entering any personal information, one must ensure the website's URL begins with "https://" and is authentic, as attackers often use slight variations of legitimate domains. It is crucial to look for red flags such as poor grammar, urgent requests and generic greetings that indicate phishing attempts.

If you fall victim to a phishing scam, act quickly to minimise damage and protect your personal and financial information. You may:

- Immediately turn off your Wi-Fi or unplug your internet connection to prevent malware from spreading or further data theft. Report the attack to the relevant authorities or IT departments.
- If you entered your login credentials on a phishing site, then change the password of the compromised account immediately, followed by updating other accounts that use the same or similar passwords.
- If you entered banking details or made a payment, then call your bank or credit card provider immediately explain the situation, and Request to block or freeze your account if necessary.

There is no denying that phishing remains a prevalent cybersecurity threat, but with vigilance and proactive measures, individuals and organisations can mitigate risks. As cybercriminals refine their techniques, staying informed and implementing robust security practices is essential to safeguard personal and professional data from phishing attacks. Taking the mentioned steps immediately after falling victim to a phishing scam can help minimise financial and data loss while preventing further damage.

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

### Pathways to financial stability

Himachal Pradesh's fiscal crisis calls for a multi-pronged approach to revenue generation, ensuring financial stability while maintaining developmental momentum. Given the state's heavy reliance on central grants and borrowings, the government must diversify its revenue streams through effective taxation policies, asset monetisation, tourism expansion, and private sector participation. Below are key areas requiring focused action:

### Enhancing tax compliance

Improving tax compliance and minimising revenue leakages are crucial for fiscal recovery. The

# Travel disrupted as fire shuts down Heathrow Airport

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ London

A large fire near London's Heathrow Airport knocked out power on Friday to Europe's busiest flight hub, forcing it to shut and disrupting global travel for hundreds of thousands of passengers. Heathrow said it didn't know when power would be restored — raising the possibility that the shutdown would last longer than just the day, as previously expected.

At least 1,350 flights to and from Heathrow were affected, flight tracking service FlightRadar 24 said, and the impact was likely to last several days as passengers try to reschedule their travel and airlines work to get planes and crew to the right places. Authorities do not know what caused the fire but so far found have no evidence it was suspicious.

Residents in west London described hearing a large explosion, followed by a fireball and clouds of smoke, when the blaze ripped through the electrical substation near the airport. Some 120 flights were in the air when the closure was announced, with some turned around and others diverted to Gatwick Airport outside

London, Charles de Gaulle Airport near Paris or Ireland's Shannon Airport, tracking services showed. Lawrence Hayes was three-quarters of the way to London from New York when Virgin Atlantic announced they were being diverted to Glasgow.

"It was a red-eye flight and I'd already had a full day, so I don't even know how long I've been up for," Hayes told the BBC as he was getting off the plane in Scotland. "Luckily I managed to get hold of my wife and she's kindly booked me a train ticket to get back to Euston, but it's going to be an incredibly long day."

Heathrow is one of the world's busiest airports for international travel. It had its busiest January on record earlier this year, with more than 6.3 million passengers, up more than 5 per cent from the same period last year. Still, the disruption on Friday fell short of the one caused by the 2010 eruption of Iceland's Eyjafjallajökull volcano, which spewed clouds of ash into the atmosphere and created trans-Atlantic air travel chaos for months.

**Unclear what caused the fire but foul play not suspected:** It was too early to determine what sparked the huge blaze about 2 miles (3 kilometers) from the air-



This photo provided by London Fire Brigade, shows a fire at the North Hyde electrical substation, which caught fire Thursday night and led to a closure of Heathrow Airport in London, on Friday

port, but there's "no suggestion" of foul play, Energy Secretary Ed Miliband said.

The Metropolitan Police force said counterterrorism detectives were leading the investigation because of their ability to find the cause quickly and because of the location of the electrical substation fire and its impact on critical national infrastructure. Miliband said the fire, which took seven hours to control, also knocked out a backup power supply to the airport. Heathrow said in a statement that it had no choice but to close the airport for the day. "We expect significant disruption over the coming days, and passengers should not travel to the airport under any circumstances until the airport reopens," the airport said.

The fire's widespread impact on travel led to criticism that Britain was ill prepared for disaster or some type of attack if a single blaze could shut down Europe's busiest airport. "The UK's critical national infrastructure is not sufficiently hardened for anywhere near the level it would need to be at to give us confidence this won't happen again," said Alan Mendoza, the executive director of the Henry Jackson Society, a security think tank.

"If one fire can shut down Heathrow's primary systems and then apparently the backup systems, as well, it tells you something's badly wrong with our system of management of such disasters."

Tom Wells, a spokesperson for Prime Minister Keir Starmer, acknowledged that authorities had questions to answer and said a rigorous investigation was needed to make sure "this scale of disruption does not happen again".

Heathrow — where the UK government plans to build a third runway — was at the heart of a shorter disruption in 2023 when Britain's air traffic control system was hit by a breakdown that slowed takeoffs and landings across the UK on one of the busiest travel days of the year.

**Disruption could last days:** Though the fire has been brought under control, the airport said in a statement it does not have "clarity on when power may be reliably restored". It said it expects "significant disruption over the coming days and passengers should not travel to the airport under any circumstances until the airport reopens".

Heathrow earlier said the airport was not expected to reopen until Saturday.

## Sudan military says it has retaken Khartoum's Republican Palace

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Cairo

Sudan's military said on Friday it retook the Republican Palace in Khartoum, the last heavily guarded bastion of rival paramilitary forces in the capital, after nearly two years of fighting.

The seizure of the Republican Palace, surrounded by government ministries, represents a major symbolic victory for Sudan's military against the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces. However, it likely doesn't mean the end of the war as the RSF holds territory in Sudan's western Darfur region and elsewhere.

Social media videos showed its soldiers inside giving the date as the 21st day of Ramadan, the holy Muslim fasting month, which corresponds to Friday. A Sudanese military officer wearing a captain's epaulettes made the announcement in the video, and confirmed the troops were inside the compound.

The palace appeared to be partly in ruins, with soldiers' steps crunching broken tiles underneath their boots. Soldiers carrying assault rifles and rocket-propelled grenade launchers chanted: "God is the greatest!"

Khaled al-Aiser, Sudan's information minister, said the military had retaken the palace in a post on the social platform X. "Today the flag is raised, the palace is back and the journey continues until victory is complete," he wrote.

**Palace's fall a symbolic and strategic moment:** The fall of the Republican Palace, a compound along the Nile River that was the seat of government before the war erupted and is immortalised on Sudanese banknotes and postage stamps, marks another battlefield gain for Sudan's military. It has made steady advances in

recent months under army chief Gen. Abdel-Fattah Burhan.

It means the rival Rapid Support Forces, under Gen. Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo, have been mostly expelled from the capital, Khartoum, after Sudan's war began in April 2023. Sporadic gunfire could be heard throughout the capital Friday, though it wasn't clear if it involved fighting or was celebratory.

Brig Gen Nabil Abdullah, a spokesperson for the Sudanese military, described its troops as holding the palace, surrounding ministry buildings and the Arab Market to the south of the palace.

Khartoum International Airport, only some 2.5 kilometers (1.5 miles) southeast of the palace, has been held by the RSF since the start of the war.

The RSF did not immediately acknowledge the loss, which likely won't stop the fighting as the paramilitary force and its allies still hold territory elsewhere in Sudan. Late Thursday, the RSF claimed it seized control of the Sudanese city of al-Maliha, a strategic desert city in North Darfur near the borders of Chad and Libya. Sudan's military has acknowledged fighting around al-Maliha, but has not said it lost the city.

Al-Maliha is around 200 kilometers (125 miles) north of the city of El Fasher, which remains held by the Sudanese military despite near-daily strikes by the surrounding RSF. The head of the UN children's agency has said the conflict created the world's largest and humanitarian crisis. The war has killed more than 28,000 people, forced millions to flee their homes and left some families eating grass in a desperate attempt to survive as famine sweeps parts of the country. Other estimates suggest a far higher death toll.

The Republican Palace had been the seat of power during the British colonization of Sudan. It also saw some of the first independent Sudanese flags raised over the country in 1956. It also had been the main office of Sudan's president and other top officials. The Sudanese military have long targeted the palace and its grounds, shelling and firing on the compound.

**Sudan has faced years of chaos and war:** Sudan, a nation in northeastern Africa, has been unstable since a popular uprising forced the removal of longtime autocratic President Omar al-Bashir in 2019. A short-lived transition to democracy was derailed when Burhan and Dagalo led a military coup in 2021. The RSF and Sudan's military then began fighting each other in 2023.

Burhan's forces, including Sudan's military and allied militias, have advanced against the RSF since the start of this year. They retook a key refinery north of Khartoum. They then pushed in on RSF positions around the capital itself. The fighting has led to an increase in civilian casualties.

Al-Bashir faces charges at the International Criminal Court over carrying out a genocidal campaign in the early 2000s in the western Darfur region with the Janjaweed, the precursor to the RSF. Rights groups and the UN accuse the RSF and allied Arab militias of again attacking ethnic African groups in this war.

Since the war began, both the Sudanese military and the RSF have faced allegations of human rights abuses. Before US President Joe Biden left office, the State Department declared the RSF are committing genocide. The military and the RSF have denied committing abuses.

## Indonesia's Mount Lewotobi Laki Laki volcano erupts, prompting alert level to be raised

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Jakarta

The Mount Lewotobi Laki Laki volcano in south-central Indonesia erupted three times into Friday, sending an ash column 8,000 metres (26,200 feet) high and prompting authorities to expand the danger zone around the volcano.

The volcano on the remote island of Flores in East Nusa Tenggara province has had hundreds of earthquakes and visible volcanic activity has significantly increased in the last seven days. After the three eruptions late Thursday and early Friday, the volcano was quiet during the day. Seismic activity monitored from the observation post in Wulangitang showed a decline.

Authorities raised the eruption alert to the highest level and expanded the danger zone from 7 kilometres (4.5 miles) to 8 kilometres (5 miles) from the crater. No new evacuations were immediately reported. Several airlines cancelled flights between Australia and Indonesia's tourist island of Bali due to the eruption, while other international and domestic flights to the island have been delayed.

Residents were warned to be vigilant about heavy rainfall triggering lava flows in rivers originating from the volcano, Indonesia's geology agency said in a statement. An eruption of Mount Lewotobi Laki Laki in November killed nine people and injured dozens. The 1,584-metre mountain is a twin volcano with Mount Lewotobi Perempuan in the Flores Timur district. Indonesia is an archipelago of 270 million people with frequent seismic activity. It has 120 active volcanoes and sits along the "Ring of Fire," a horseshoe-shaped series of seismic fault lines encircling the Pacific Basin.

## North Korea tests new missiles as it threatens strong steps against US-S Korea drills

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Seoul

North Korea said on Friday it test-launched new anti-aircraft missiles, as its military threatened unspecified grave steps against the US and South Korea over their joint military drills that it views as an invasion rehearsal. The official Korean Central News Agency said that leader Kim Jong Un oversaw the tests Thursday and called the missiles involved "another major defense weapons system" for North Korea.

The missile launches, North Korea's sixth weapons testing activity this year, occurred on the same day that the US and South Korean militaries concluded their annual Freedom Shield command post exercise. The 11-day training was the allies' first major joint military exercises since the inauguration of President Donald Trump in January, and the two countries held diverse field training exercises alongside the Freedom Shield drills.

US and South Korean officials describe their combined military drills as defensive in nature, but North Korea slams them as a major security threat. Hours after this year's Freedom Shield training began on March 10, North Korea fired several ballistic missiles into the sea.

On Friday, the North Korea's Defence Ministry alleged the recent US-South Korean drills involved simulations to destroy underground tunnels in the North to remove its nuclear weapons. An unidentified ministry spokesperson said the US and South Korea would face consequences if they perform similar provocative actions again. "The accumulated reckless military moves of the US and the ROK, seized with the daydream that they can jeopardize the sovereignty and security of a nuclear

weapons state, can undoubtedly bring the gravest consequences they do not want," the spokesperson said in a statement carried in KCNA. ROK is the Republic of Korea, South Korea's official name.

North Korea often churns out warlike rhetoric and threats of attacks when the US and South Korea militaries conduct big drills. South Korea's Unification Ministry on Friday warned North Korea not to use its defensive drills with the US as a pretext to launch provocations.

Trump has said he's willing to reach out to Kim to revive their nuclear diplomacy, but North Korea hasn't made any public responses to Trump's overture. Many experts say Kim, now preoccupied with his support of Russia's war efforts against Ukraine with supply of troops and conventional weapons, won't likely embrace Trump's outreach anytime soon, but could seriously consider it when the war ends.

Kim and Trump met three times in 2018-19 to discuss North Korea's possible nuclear disarmament, but their diplomacy eventually fell apart due to disputes over US-led economic sanctions on North Korea. Russian state news agency Tass reported Friday that Russian Security Council Secretary Sergey Shoigu has arrived in Pyongyang and plans to meet with Kim. It gave no further details.

In 2023, when Shoigu, then a defense minister, traveled to North Korea, Kim gave him a personal tour of a North Korean arms exhibition in what outside critics likened to a sales pitch. In September 2024, Shoigu, then with the new security council post, went to North Korea again for a meeting with Kim, and the two discussed expanding cooperation, according to North Korea's state media.

## Turkiye opposition urges peaceful protests over Istanbul mayor's arrest despite bans

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Istanbul

The leader of Turkey's main opposition on Friday renewed a call on supporters to take to the streets for peaceful demonstrations against the arrest of Istanbul's mayor and top rival to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, even as authorities widened a ban on protests and criticized the call as irresponsible.

Mayor Ekrem Imamoglu was arrested in a dawn raid on his residence on Wednesday over alleged corruption and terror links, escalating a crackdown on opposition figures and dissenting voices. Several other prominent figures, including two district mayors, were also detained.

Many view the arrest as a politically driven attempt to remove a popular opposition figure and key challenger to Erdogan from the next presidential race, currently scheduled for 2028. Government officials reject claims that legal actions against opposition figures are politically motivated and insist that the courts operate independently.

Since Imamoglu's arrest, thousands of people have gathered at Istanbul's city hall for night-time rallies, and clashes have erupted between demonstrators and police in Istanbul, the capital, Ankara, and Turkey's third largest city, Izmir.

The most violent clash took place at Ankara's Middle East Technical University, where police deployed tear gas and water cannons to disperse the demonstration and students claimed rubber bullets were used. The government has denied the use of the bullets. On Friday, authorities in Ankara and Izmir announced a five-day prohibition on demonstrations, following a similar ban imposed earlier by the Istanbul governor's office. The bans came after the country's justice minister acknowledged people's right to demonstrate but said street protests amid ongoing judicial investigations were unacceptable.

## Russian drones strike Ukrainian city of Odesa

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Kyiv

Russian drones pummelled the Ukrainian Black Sea port city of Odesa, injuring three people and sparking massive fires, officials said on Friday, an attack that underlined Moscow's intention to pursue aerial attacks even as it agreed to temporarily halt strikes on energy facilities.

The strike came shortly before Czech Republic President Peter Pavel visited Odesa early Friday morning and held meetings with the city's leaders and officials from other southern regions.

"This is another reminder to the whole world: the war continues and Ukraine continues to fight," the head of the Odesa region, Oleh Kiper, said in a statement. He reported blazes at at least three locations after the attack late Thursday. "Civilian infrastructure, commercial facilities are on fire, cars damaged," Kiper said.

Over 70 people and 20 fire engines were involved in extinguishing what the emergency services called "massive fires".

In another attack, Russian glide bombs

injured at least six people, including a child, in the Zaporizhzhia region overnight Thursday to Friday. Regional head Ivan Fedorov published photos showing fire fighters extinguishing flames at multiple damaged residential buildings. The Ukrainian air force reported that Russia fired 214 exploding drones and decoys in the latest wave of attacks. It said 114 of them were intercepted and another 81 were jammed. Russia's Defence Ministry said air defences shot down 43 Ukrainian drones, 34 of them over the Volgograd region and others over Rostov, Kursk and Belgorod regions. The authorities didn't report any casualties or significant damage.

Meanwhile, a massive blaze at an oil depot in the Krasnodar region has continued to rage since it was hit by a Ukrainian drone attack late Wednesday.

Ukraine and Russia agreed in principle Wednesday to a limited ceasefire after US President Donald Trump spoke with the countries' leaders this week, though it remained to be seen what possible targets would be off limits to attack.

After a roughly hourlong call with Trump on Wednesday, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy told reporters that "technical" talks in Saudi Arabia this weekend would seek to resolve what types of infrastructure would be protected from attack under the agreement.

The three sides appeared to hold starkly different views about what the deal covered. While the White House said "energy and infrastructure" would be covered, the Kremlin declared that the agreement referred more narrowly to "energy infrastructure". Zelenskyy said he would also like railways and ports to be protected.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov emphasized on Friday that the agreement reached between Trump and Putin referred only to energy facilities, adding that the Russian military is fulfilling Putin's order to halt such attacks for 30 days. "The Russian military are currently refraining from strikes on Ukraine's energy infrastructure in accordance with the agreement reached between Russia and the United States," Peskov said in a conference call with reporters.

## Army captain, 10 terrorists killed in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Peshwar

A Pakistani Army captain and at least 10 terrorists associated with a banned outfit were killed during a gunfight in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Dera Ismail Khan district, the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) has said.

The intelligence-based operation (IBO) was conducted on Thursday following reports of the presence of terrorists in the area, a statement from the military's media wing said. It said that during the intense fire exchange, Captain Hasnain Akhtar fought gallantly and made the ultimate sacrifice, leading his troops from the front.

"Hasnain was a brave officer and renowned for his courage and bold and daring actions during previous operations," it said. The ISPR said weapons and

ammunition were seized from the killed terrorists who were involved in numerous attacks against law enforcement agencies as well as target killing of innocent civilians. It further said, "A sanitisation operation is being conducted in the area and the security forces are determined to wipe out the menace of terrorism from the country. Such sacrifices of brave young officers further strengthen our resolve."

The country has been reeling under increased terrorist attacks especially targeting law enforcers and security forces since the Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan in 2021, particularly in the bordering provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan.

The country witnessed a surge in terror attacks in January 2025 — an increase of 42 per cent compared to the previous month — according to data released by the

Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (PICSS), a think tank.

The data revealed that at least 74 militant attacks were recorded nationwide, resulting in 91 fatalities, including 35 security personnel, 20 civilians, and 36 militants. Another 117 individuals sustained injuries, including 53 security forces personnel, 54 civilians, and 10 militants. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa remained the worst-affected province, followed by Balochistan. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's settled districts, militants carried out 27 attacks, resulting in 19 fatalities, including 11 security personnel, six civilians, and two militants.

The tribal districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (erstwhile Fata) witnessed 19 attacks, resulting in 46 deaths, including 13 security personnel, eight civilians, and 25 militants.

## Top Russian official visits North Korea to meet Kim

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Seoul

A top Russian security official travelled to North Korea on Friday to meet leader Kim Jong Un, after North Korea recently reportedly sent additional troops to Russia to support its war against Ukraine. A brief dispatch by Russia's state-run news agency Tass reported that Sergey Shoigu, Russia's Security Council secretary, had arrived in Pyongyang, the North Korean capital, and plans to meet top North Korean officials including Kim. It gave no further details including what Shoigu would discuss with Kim.

North Korea's official Korean Central News Agency confirmed the arrival of a Russian delegation led by Shoigu but didn't provide details on the purpose of their visit. Shoigu's visit comes after Ukraine and Russia agreed in principle Wednesday to a limited ceasefire after President Donald Trump spoke with the countries' leaders, though it remained to be seen when it might take effect and what possible targets would be off limits to attack.

North Korea has been supplying a vast amount of conventional weapons to Russia, and last fall it sent about 10,000 to 12,000 troops to Russia as well, according to US, South Korean and Ukraine intelligence officials. In late February, South Korea's spy agency said North Korea appeared to have sent additional troops to Russia. South Korean media put the number of newly sent North Korean soldiers at about 1,000 to 3,000. South Korea, the US and others suspect North Korea is receiving economic and military assistance from Russia in return for providing weapons and troops. Many experts say North Korea will likely ramp up its support of Russia to win as much benefits as possible from Russia before the war ends. Shoigu's trip could be related to Kim's possible trip to Russia, some observers say.



This photo provided by the North Korean government shows Russia's Security Council secretary, Sergey Shoigu, right, who arrived at Pyongyang Airport being greeted by Party Secretary Park Chung-cheon on Friday, March 21, 2025

In June 2024, Russian President Vladimir Putin visited Pyongyang and signed a major mutual defense treaty with Kim. At the time, Putin invited Kim to visit Moscow.

In 2023, when Shoigu, then a defense minister, traveled to North Korea, Kim gave him a personal tour of a North Korean arms exhibition in what outside critics likened to a sales pitch. In September 2024, Shoigu, then with the new security council post, went to North Korea again for a meeting with Kim, and the two discussed expanding cooperation, according to North Korea's state media.

Earlier Friday, KCNA said Kim oversaw the test-launches of new anti-aircraft missiles the previous day. It cited Kim as calling the missiles "another major defense weapons system" for North Korea.

The missile launches, North Korea's sixth weapons testing activity this year, occurred on the same day that the US and South Korean militaries concluded their annual training that North Korea views as an invasion rehearsal.



## Unregistered advisors a menace: Narayan

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Mumbai

Markets regulator SEBI, in consultation with social media platforms, has removed 70,000 misleading handles and posts since the implementation of the influencer framework last year, said its whole-time member Ananth Narayan G on Friday.

Amid concerns over foreign portfolio investors selling equities, the SEBI's whole-time member said the overall flows are not as bad as one would imagine and stressed that they "remain invested" in India.

The unregistered investment advisors and research analysts are a "menace" who

are cashing in on the rising interest in investments, he said.

"Since October 2024, SEBI has worked with social media companies to bring down over 70,000 misleading handles/posts," he said while addressing an event organised by registered investment advisors here.

He sought the advisors' help in ensuring compliance and mentioned the UPI 'Payright' handle to help identify Sebi-registered entities and the optional Centralised Fee Collection Mechanism as SEBI's efforts in the direction.

Narayan, a commercial banker-turned-regulator, also offered a nuanced take on the FPI outflows, stressing that the situa-

tion is not as bad, but added that we should not be complacent as India needs foreign savings.

"Notwithstanding recent trends, overall, FPI flows have not been as bad as one might perhaps imagine today," Narayan said.

As of February 2025, FPIs held ₹62 Lakh Crore or over USD 700 Billion of Indian equities, and about ₹5.9 Lakh Crores or USD 68 Billion in debt, he said.

The last five years have seen USD 54 Billion of foreign flows into equity and debt, which is much higher than the USD 19 Billion in the prior five years, he said.

The onus is on us, and we will need to deliver sustained growth, stable macros,

and governance to keep their interest, he said. "We are working with all stakeholders, including FPIs, to enhance their investment experience in our country," he added.

Lauding the surge in domestic flows, especially from the mutual funds, he said the supply of quality investment options is essential, and pointed out that in FY24, there was only ₹2 Lakh Crore of equity issuances against flows of ₹5 Lakh Crore by MFs and FPIs.

"Adequate supply of fresh paper, in line with the demand for such paper, spurring fresh businesses and economic activity, is crucial for sustained capital formation and stable markets," he said.

## Minister Sirsa meets CTI officials, discusses reforms

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ New Delhi

Delhi's Food and Supplies Minister Manjinder Singh Sirsa met officials from the Chamber of Trade and Industry (CTI) to discuss key reforms, including a new food policy, cloud kitchen regulations, and streamlining multiple food licences.

The meeting focused on implementing a single-window system to improve the Ease of Doing Business in the food sector.

During the discussion on Thursday, Sirsa highlighted the need for a dedicated cloud kitchen policy in Delhi and simplification of food licence procedures, as per a statement. He said these measures would not only create more jobs but also provide greater convenience to the public. Additionally, he proposed setting up food trucks at 20 public locations where food and water would be available 24/7.

According to the statement, CTI officials suggested organising food fairs similar to those held in other countries to boost the industry.

CTI Chairman Brijesh Goyal highlighted the urgent need for a revamped food policy and the promotion of nightlife in the capital. "Delhi operates 24 hours a day with travellers arriving by train, bus and flights, yet there is a lack of quality food options after midnight, as most hotels and restaurants close early," Goyal said.

Traders raised concerns about the licensing process and said vendors selling sweets and snacks must obtain an FSSAI licence, yet a separate health licence from the Delhi Municipal Corporation is also mandatory, it stated.



Delhi food and supply minister Manjinder Singh Sirsa

They argued that this duplication is unnecessary and fosters corruption, the statement added. "These outdated requirements should be abolished, as they only lead to 'harassment' by inspectors. Additionally, some dry fruit and mixtures items attract 12 per cent GST while others are taxed at 18 per cent, which needs to be rationalised," the traders stated.

In response, Sirsa assured traders that he would take up their concerns with the GST department and the Chief Minister. He said the cloud kitchen policy would be properly implemented and promised that there would be no 'inspector raj' in Delhi, it stated.

The meeting was attended by Virendra Jain, President of the Federation of Sweets and Namkeen Manufacturers, along with traders, including 40 leading food industry brands, it added.

## Ola Electric shares surge over eight per cent, market valuation jumps ₹1,914 Crore

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ New Delhi

Shares of Ola Electric on Friday jumped more than 8 per cent after the company said sales were strong and it remains focused on clearing all backlog by the end of March.

The stock surged 8.40 per cent to settle at ₹56 apiece on the BSE. Intra-day, it zoomed 10 per cent to ₹56.85.

On the NSE, it rallied 8.25 per cent to ₹55.98 per share.

The company's market valuation climbed ₹1,914.31 Crore to ₹24,700.65 Crore.

Ola Electric on Friday sought to address sale discrepancies saying the backlog in February, caused due to vendor negotiations, has been 40 per cent cleared and the remaining will be fully addressed by the month-end.

The company had previously said it sold 25,000 electric scooters in February but the data on the government's Vahan portal showed only 8,651 scooter registrations.

As of March 20, the company's registrations stood at 11,781 on the Vahan portal.

"Our sales remain strong, and the temporary backlog in February was due to ongoing negotiations with our vendors responsible for vehicle registrations."

"This backlog is being rapidly cleared, with daily registrations exceeding 50 per cent of our three-month daily sales average. About 40 per cent of the February backlog has already been cleared, and the remaining will be fully resolved by the end of March 2025," the company said.

On the discrepancies in its sales claim and data on Vahan portal, Ola said, "This is a straightforward case of a temporary registration backlog" and yet it was "deliberately misrepresented as a regulatory issue through misinformation and smear campaigns" by "vested interests."

## DP World, Reliance partner on rail solution

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ New Delhi

DP World and Reliance Industries have partnered to launch an innovative logistics solution for the petrochemicals industry, shifting product transport from road to rail, significantly cutting carbon emissions.

The Dubai-based logistics operator in a statement said the new solution connects Reliance Industries' Jamnagar plant in Gujarat to DP World's inland container depot (ICD) in Ahmedabad and onward to the port of Mundra.

Previously, the Mundra-Jamnagar-Mundra round trip involved approximately 700km of road transport for each container, it added.

"With the new solution, the Ahmedabad-Jamnagar-Mundra route, also approximately 700km, has been converted to rail," the statement said, adding that this transition eliminates the environmental and operational challenges associated with long-distance road transport while maintaining the same coverage.

The statement said the integrated rail service enables the transport of up to 1,260 tonnes of cargo and consolidates up to 45 containers in a single movement, streamlining logistics and reducing the need for multiple trailers and drivers.

By reducing over 700 km of road transport per container, the rail solution significantly reduces carbon emissions and

contributes to Reliance's environmental goals, it added.

DP World Marine Services Global Chief Operating Officer Ganesh Raj said this innovative approach not only aligns with Reliance's sustainability commitments but also ensures greater efficiency, seamless coordination, and timely exports to support their growing operational demands.

Reliance Industries Ltd - Petchem head SCM operations Ravikumbar Nair said the shift from road to rail has streamlined our operations, reduced carbon emissions, reduced road exposure by eliminating 45 road trailer movement, and reinforced our commitment to responsible and efficient supply chain practices.

## Adani Energy wins ₹2,800 Crore transmission project in Gujarat

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ Ahmedabad

Adani Energy Solutions Ltd (AESL), India's largest private transmission and distribution company and part of the globally diversified Adani portfolio, today said it has won a power transmission project in Gujarat, which will supply green electrons for manufacturing Green Hydrogen and Green Ammonia in Mundra, Gujarat.

The project which will cost ₹2,800 Crore, will be delivered to the nation in 36 months. This project "Transmission System for Green Hydrogen and Ammonia Manufacturing Potential in Mundra, Gujarat" involves upgrading the Navinal (Mundra) electrical substation by adding two large 765 per 400kV transformers. Additionally, a 75 km long 765kV double-circuit line will be constructed to connect this substation to the Bhuj substation.

The project will see the addition of 150 cKM of transmission lines and 3,000 MVA of transformation capacity to AESL's overall transmission infrastructure, taking them to 25,928 cKM and

87,186 MVA, respectively. AESL won the project under the Tariff Based Competitive Bidding (TBCB) mechanism and PFC Consulting Limited was the bid process coordinator. The project SPV was formally transferred to AESL on March 20, 2025.

This is AESL's 6th order win this fiscal year, taking its orderbook to ₹57,561 Crore. AESL, part of the Adani portfolio, is a multidimensional organisation with presence in various facets of the energy domain, namely power transmission, distribution, smart metering, and cooling solutions. AESL is the country's largest private transmission company with a cumulative transmission network of 25,928 ckm and 87,186 MVA transformation capacity.

In its retail electricity distribution business, as on AESL serves approximately 13 million consumers in metropolitan Mumbai and the industrial hub of Mundra SEZ.

AESL is ramping up its smart metering business and is on course to become India's leading smart metering integrator.

## SEBI relaxes 'skin in game rule' for AMC's employees

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ New Delhi

With an aim to address concerns about the "skin in the game" rule for designated employees of mutual funds, including CEO, CIO, and fund managers, markets regulator SEBI on Friday reduced the mandatory investment percentage, with the requirement now based on specific salary brackets.

Earlier, AMC-designated employees were required to invest 20 per cent of their annual salary and perks in the mutual funds they manage. This amount is locked in for three years. The new framework will come into effect from April 1, 2025, SEBI said in a circular.

Apart from easing regulatory framework pertaining to reduction of minimum investment amount, SEBI has reduced frequency of disclosure, lowered lock-in period for employees who have resigned, empowered Nomination and Remuneration Committee to verify compliances by designated employees and relaxed requirements for employees managing liquid funds.

On investment requirements of designated employees, SEBI said such employees are required to invest a per-

centage of their salary or compensation (after tax and statutory deductions) in mutual fund schemes where they have oversight.

The required investment percentage is determined by their gross annual compensation. Employees with a compensation below ₹25 Lakh are not required to make any investment. For those earning

**SEBI has reduced frequency of disclosure, lowered lock-in period for employees who have resigned, empowered Nomination and Remuneration Committee to verify compliances by designated employees**

above ₹25 Lakh, a minimum of 10 per cent of their salary (or 12.5 per cent if employees stock options or ESOPs are included) must be invested.

Further, employees with compensation between ₹50 Lakh and ₹1 Crore must invest at least 14 per cent of their salary (or 17.5 per cent with ESOPs), while those earning above ₹1 Crore are required to

invest a minimum of 18 per cent (or 22.5 per cent with ESOPs).

For employees managing liquid funds, up to 75 per cent of their required investment can be in riskier schemes, while the rest must be in liquid funds, SEBI said. With regards to lock-in period for investments, SEBI said if an employee retires, they can redeem their mutual fund units after a lock-in period, except for close-ended schemes, which remain locked until the scheme's tenure ends. If an employee resigns or leaves before retirement, the lock-in period for their investment will be reduced to one year from their last employment date.

If a designated employee violates the code of conduct or engages in fraud or gross negligence, the AMC's Nomination and Remuneration Committee is required to investigate and recommend actions to SEBI. SEBI has asked AMCs to disclose the total compensation invested in mutual fund units by employees on the stock exchange website within 15 days after each quarter.

The move is aimed at aligning the interests of AMC employees with those of the mutual fund unitholders.

## Rupee jumps 36 paise to close at 86 against US Dollar

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Mumbai

Rising for the sixth straight session, the rupee appreciated 36 paise to close at 86 (provisional) against the US Dollar on Friday on a sharp rise in the domestic equity markets and fresh foreign capital inflows. At the interbank foreign exchange, the rupee opened at 86.26, then touched an intraday high of 85.93 and a low of 86.30 against the greenback.

The unit ended the session at 86 (provisional) against the dollar, registering a gain of 36 paise from its previous closing level. On Thursday, the rupee stayed almost flat and appreciated just 1 paise to close at 86.36 against the US Dollar.

This is the sixth straight session of gain for the rupee, during which it has added 123 paise. "We expect the rupee to trade higher on strength in the domestic equities and fresh FII inflows. However, positive crude oil prices may cap sharp gains. USDINR spot price is expected to trade in a range of 85.80 to 86.25," said Anuj Choudhary — Research Analyst at Mirae Asset Sharekhan. Meanwhile, the Dollar index, which gauges the greenback's



strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading 0.19 per cent higher at 104.04. Brent crude, the global oil benchmark, fell 0.29 per cent to \$71.79 per barrel in futures trade. In the domestic equity market, the 30-share BSE Sensex surged 557.45 points, or 0.73 per cent, to settle at 76,905.51, while the Nifty advanced 159.75 points, or 0.69 per cent, to close at 23,350.40 points.

Foreign institutional investors (FIIs) purchased equities worth ₹3,239.14 crore on a net basis on Thursday, according to exchange data.

## BLS launches Aadhaar enrolment service in Punjab

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ New Delhi

BLS International Services on Friday said it has received a mandate from the Department of Food and Civil Supplies, Punjab for Aadhaar enrolment and update services in the state.

This initiative is designed to assist children, individuals with disabilities, bedridden patients, senior citizens, and other vulnerable groups who face challenges in visiting Aadhaar enrolment centres, a release said. BLS International Services Limited is the parent company of BLS E-Services.

BLS E-Services officials will visit homes of people who are unable to visit the centre, set up mobile enrolment stations, and guide them through the necessary procedures. Residents are required to submit a duly filled Aadhaar Enrolment or Update Form along with original supporting documents, which are verified and returned immediately, the release said.

## 1.91 Lakh circuit km transmission lines to be added by 2032

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ New Delhi

Union Power Minister Manohar Lal on Friday said that India has planned to add about 1.91 Lakh ckm (circuit kilometre) of transmission lines and 1274 GVA of transformation capacity by 2032. Addressing a meeting of the Parliamentary Consultative Committee of Members of Parliament for Ministry of Power on Thursday evening he stated that power is a critical component in achieving the goal of a developed India by 2047.

He said that the National Electricity Plan provides the details of transmission system required to be added in the country during the period 2023 to 2032, commensurate with the generation capacity addition and growth of electricity demand in the country.

He also said that the optimal utilisation of generating capacity can be ensured with availability of adequate transmission system, which is the requirement of a reliable power system.

As per the NEP - Transmission, about 1.91 Lakh ckm of transmission lines and 1274 GVA of transformation capacity is

planned to be added during the ten-year period (2023 to 2032), he stated. National Electricity Plan - Transmission covering transmission plan till the year 2031-32 has been prepared by CEA (Central Electricity Authority).

The Plan has been released in October, 2024. As per Section 3 of the Electricity Act, 2003, Central Electricity Authority (CEA) has to prepare the National Electricity Plan in accordance with the National Electricity Policy.

In the meeting issues related to RoW (Right of way), new technologies in transmission, Cyber Security were also discussed. Members of Parliament provided several suggestions concerning various initiatives and schemes.

They also commended the initiatives and efforts of the power ministry in expansion of the transmission network in the country. Lal concluded the meeting by expressing gratitude to the participants for their valuable contributions.

He further directed officials to take appropriate actions to incorporate the suggestions made by Members of Parliament and prioritise the welfare of the people.



## Gold declines ₹400 to ₹91,250 per 10 grams

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ New Delhi

Gold prices decreased ₹400 to ₹91,250 per 10 grams in the national capital on Friday due to profit-taking and a subdued trend in the global markets, according to the All India Sarafa Association.

The precious metal of 99.9 per cent purity had settled at ₹91,650 per 10 grams on Thursday. Gold of 99.5 per cent purity went lower by ₹400 to ₹90,800 per 10 grams. It had concluded at ₹91,200 per 10 grams.

"Gold prices fell...due to profit-taking by the traders and a recovery in the US dollar." "The precious metal is taking a break in response to the US Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell's comments about slowing US growth and higher inflation," Saumil Gandhi, Senior Analyst of Commodities at HDFC Securities, said.

Extending the losses for the second straight day, silver prices also declined by ₹1,700 to ₹1,00,300 per kg from Thursday's closing level of ₹1.02 Lakh per kg. Meanwhile, gold futures contracts for April delivery on the Multi Commodity Exchange depreciated by ₹493 to ₹88,213 per 10 grams. Chainwala said markets remain on edge as Trump recently said both broad reciprocal tariffs and certain additional sector-specific tariffs would come into force on April 2. In the international markets, spot gold slipped by \$12.15 to \$3,032.75 per ounce.

## Reclaiming India's agricultural, water sovereignty: A call to action

Binod Anand

Brothers and sisters, let us pause for a moment and reflect-who truly controls the destiny of our farmers? Who decides how we grow our food, manage our water, and secure our future? While our ancestors tilled this sacred land for generations, a quiet but sinister force is at work, attempting to hijack our agricultural policies, control our resources, and turn our farmers into mere pawns in a global game played by corporate giants and foreign think tanks.

Today, as we mark World Water Day 2025, we must recognise that the theme-"Glacier Melting and the Emerging Threats to the Global South"-is not just an environmental issue, but a political one.

It is yet another attempt to manipulate climate change narratives to push policies that weaken our sovereignty. Make no mis-

take-this is a direct assault on Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision of 'Viksit Bharat@2047'.

And at the heart of this attack lies the shadowy influence of global entities like George Soros' Open Society Foundations (OSF), which, under the guise of research and philanthropy, are working to disrupt India's cooperative model of agriculture and water management.

For years, Indian farmers have relied on the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) for guidance, innovation, and indigenous solutions. But today, underhanded funding mechanisms and collaborations with international institutions like the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) are being used to infiltrate our policies. OSF-backed research promotes genetically modified crops, patent-heavy seed regulations, and reliance on multina-

tional agrochemical companies-effectively making our farmers dependent on foreign corporations. NGOs funded by Soros-backed networks are positioning themselves as "experts" on water scarcity and climate change-slowly shifting control of water policy from local farmers to international bodies.

By undermining age-old farming techniques and forcing farmers into contract-based, corporate-dominated models, they are ensuring that control over India's food supply slips from our hands.

Our forefathers built civilisations on rivers like the Ganga, Yamuna, Brahmaputra, and Narmada. Today, our enemies are using fearmongering tactics around glacier melting and water scarcity to push policies that will privatise water management, take power away from local communities, and open the floodgates for Western corporations to take over our irri-

gation systems. This is a direct attack on Modi's Jal Shakti Abhiyan, Atal Bhujal Yojana, and the larger vision of Viksit Bharat@2047. By controlling access to water, these organisations hope to dictate what Indian farmers grow, how they grow it, and who they sell it to.

We do not need foreign-backed policies to solve our problems. India already has the solution-Cooperative Economic Frameworks! Local farmer-led organisations must have the power to govern their own water resources without interference from foreign-funded NGOs. Our traditional rainwater harvesting, community irrigation models, and organic farming methods must be protected and promoted.

Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs) must be empowered to control supply chains, dictate pricing, and ensure fair markets for Indian-grown produce. The gov-

ernment must legally restrict foreign influence in agricultural policymaking, ensuring that research remains independent and farmer-centric.

India's fight for agricultural and water sovereignty is not just about food-it is about our freedom, our future, and the very soul of Bharat.

If we do not wake up now, tomorrow may be too late. We must reject the foreign-funded think tanks that claim to know what's best for our farmers. We must embrace cooperative-led development, indigenous agricultural wisdom, and local governance over our water and land. Our ancestors fought for India's independence from colonial rule. Today, the battle is different, but the stakes are just as high. Will we let foreign corporations dictate our future, or will we rise to defend Viksit Bharat @2047? The choice is ours.

Jai Kisan, Jai Bharat!

## SHADOWS OF A DISTANT HOME

An artistic journey through home, migration, and identity, where cinema and visual arts converge, writes **SAKSHI PRIYA**

Kabir Khan, Imtiaz Ali, Mithu Bhowmick (Producer of My Melbourne) and artist Ajaysingh Bhadoriya exploring the art exhibition



### FINDING ART THROUGH HOME

As the festival drew to a close with *Five Films for Freedom*, an online celebration of LGBTQIA+ narratives, it was clear that this was an invitation to engage, challenge, and rethink the spaces we inhabit, both physically and emotionally.

Standing amid these artistic expressions, whether in the dark of the screening hall or the luminous glow of an art installation, there was a shift. This Festival served as reminders that in the chaos of borders, histories, and identities, storytelling remains our most powerful way of finding home.

Art and cinema are powerful forms of expression that capture human emotion, identity, and the stories we tell ourselves to make sense of the world. Walking into the 'I View World Film Festival' at Travancore Palace, curated by Myna Mukherjee, felt like entering a living canvas, where each frame, each brushstroke of storytelling, attempted to grasp the elusive, shifting meaning of home, migration, and belonging. This was part of something much larger: **Desh Pardesh**, a multidisciplinary art exposition exploring history, displacement, and identity.

Art exposition that explores notions of home, migration, gender, race, and memory across mediums and aesthetics. Bringing together several projects from micro solos by artists, designers, and architects to group shows, film festivals, and performances, in a range of mediums and scales, that respond to the complex notion of 'home' that occupies the central place in the imagination of both the local, global, and Diasporic deliberations in the global south today.

This series of parallel exhibitions allows a creative articulation of Diasporic self and space, desire, dilemmas, discontent, and delight. It uses the genre of creative representation and productions of Diaspora to ascertain the extent to which these representations and productions collapse the distinction of home and abroad and create a new global-local South Asia, highlighting that the history of modern art is a history of global turmoil, migration, and transnational exchange.

### AT HOME IN THE WORLD

While the festival showcased cinematic brilliance, with auteurs like Imtiaz Ali, Kabir Khan, Onir, and



Rima Das telling stories of the marginalised and misunderstood, it was the accompanying art exhibitions that gave the event its depth. Future-Past Continuous, a group show, featured paintings, installations, and visual provocations that whispered stories of migration and memory.

The connection between cinema and art was undeniable. Take *The Shameless*, the festival's centerpiece, which unfolded like a haunting painting - dark, visceral, and poetic. Anasuya Sengupta's award-winning performance pulled audiences into the story of Renuka, a woman navigating the violence of survival and the longing for freedom. It was a moving portrait of resilience, much like the evocative works displayed at *Desh Pardesh*, where the idea

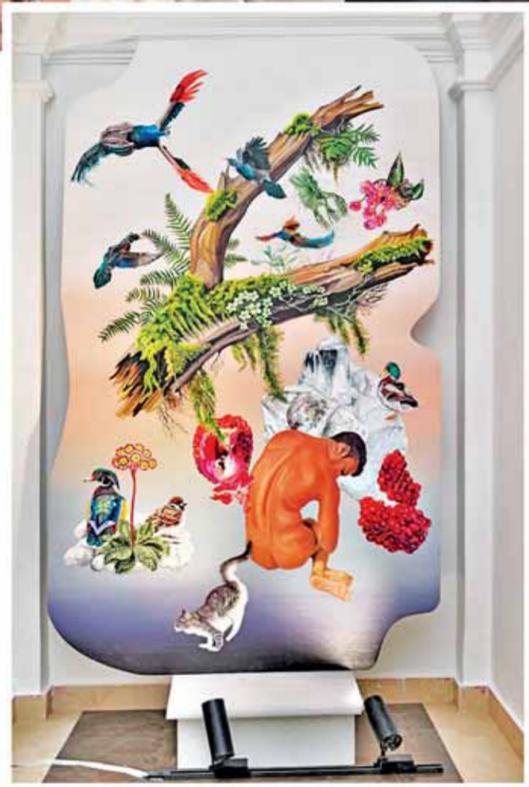
of 'home' was not just a place, but an aching question. The city premiere of *Puratwan - The Ancient* added another layer to this exploration of time and memory. With the legendary Sharmila Tagore marking her return to Bengali cinema, the film became an introspective mirror, reflecting how history, family, and unspoken truths shape us.

*Desh Pardesh* extended beyond paintings and film. Dance and performance became another medium of storytelling, none more powerful than, performed by *Nrityagram*. The piece captured the feeling of *Hiraeth*, a Welsh word for a deep, unfulfilled longing for something lost. It was a wordless narrative, told through movement, of memories fading and reappearing like ghosts.

At *Bikaner House* and *Stir Gallery*, micro solos and queer art shows expanded this dialogue. The exhibition questioned not just where we belong, but how identity is constructed in an ever-changing world. Do we carry home with us, or does it remain a distant echo?

The visual arts segment featured over 55 artists from across the country, each responding to the themes of migration and belonging through diverse artistic mediums. From painting and sculpture to new media art and interactive installations, the exhibition showcased how contemporary artists engage

with the evolving landscapes of home and identity. The selection of artworks highlighted both personal narratives and broader socio-political concerns, reflecting the fluidity and fragmentation of cultural memory in a rapidly changing world.



## Lost in Ragas, found in Ruhaniyan's Soul

PHOTOS: PANKAJ KUMAR



Experiencing the magic of Sufi music and poetry, says **SAKSHI PRIYA**

Some evenings stay with you long after they are over. *Jahan-e-Khusrau's* 25th edition was one such evening and curated by Muzaffar Ali, has completed 25 years, yet it remains as timeless as the poetry it celebrates. The festival, brought together voices, rhythms, and poetry that felt like something ancient yet deeply relevant. On the opening evening, *Naara-e-Mastana* by Kanwar Grewal set the tone. His voice, raw and unfiltered, carried the weight of longing that defines Sufi music. There was no hurry, just a quiet surrender to the music.

The second evening belonged to the mesmerising *Saiyaan Sajilay, Torey Naina*

*Rasilay*, where Manjari Chaturvedi's Kathak met the qawwali of Danish Husain Badayuni and Gufran Aslami Khairabadi. There was something hypnotic about the way dance and music intertwined, each responding to the other, neither overpowering nor retreating. *Yaad-e-Kanhaiya* by Malini Awasthi followed, her voice bringing a thumri-inspired touch to the intensity of the night. On the final day, *Raqs-e-Junoon* saw Shivani Varma's dance meet the melodies of Sina Fakhroddin and the Tehran-Delhi Music Ensemble. Their performance felt less like an act and more like a prayer. Later, *Ruh*, a poetry and storytelling session by Murad Ali, wove together words and whirling dervishes in a way that made time slow down, just for that moment.

The night ended with a qawwali, voices rising, claps growing louder, the energy filling every corner of the venue. No one was in a hurry to leave. Music had done what it always does, brought people closer, made everything else fade away for a while.

"Ishq likhne baithe toh har lafz mehka mile..."  
"Jahan-e-Khusrau sirf mehfil nahi, ek manzar mile."  
The festival may have drawn to a close, but its presence remains, much like the verses of a Sufi poet, growing louder in memory, until they become a part of you.



## PALETTE OF POSSIBILITIES

PHOTOS: PANKAJ KUMAR

BY SAKSHI PRIYA

**D**elicate Sanjhi papercuts cast intricate shadows, Kalamkari paintings unfold mythological tales in rich detail, and the textured patterns of Lippan art shimmer under the lights, each piece at *Art for Hope* - Season 4 carried a story waiting to be discovered. Organised by Hyundai Motor India Foundation. This exhibition was a platform where creativity intersected with tradition, innovation, and social change.

The event brought together 50 talented artists and collectives from across India, each presenting work that reflected personal and cultural narratives. The visual experience was enriched by performances that embodied movement and expression - Lavani, Ottan Thullal, Theyyam, and Yakshagana dancers brought age-old traditions to life, their vibrant costumes and rhythmic gestures captivating the audience. A special musical performance by differently-abled artists demonstrated the transformative power of art, proving that creativity knows no boundaries. Accessibility and inclusivity were at the heart of the exhibition. Tactile artworks, braille descriptions, and sign language tours ensured that vis-

itors of all abilities could fully engage with the displays. This thoughtful curation extended to discussions and workshops that explored themes of sustainability and representation in art. Sessions on 'Art from Waste' and 'Inclusivity in Design and the Arts' provided insight into how artistic practices can address contemporary issues while preserving heritage.

Every artwork, every performance and every discussion at exhibition reinforced the idea that art is a living, breathing entity, it carries memories, challenges norms and shape the cultural landscape.



# New rules, saliva ban reversal as IPL kicks off

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Kolkata

New rules and new captains will be in focus but the razzmatazz will be pretty much the same when the 18th Indian Premier League kicks off here on Saturday with defending champions Kolkata Knight Riders taking on perennial underachievers Royal Challengers Bengaluru amid a looming threat of rain.

There is plenty to look forward in the league. Among the most prominent rule changes is the lifting of saliva ban. For the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic, bowlers will be allowed to use it to shine the ball.

The BCCI lifted the ban after receiving a majority consensus from IPL captains in a landmark decision taken at the captains' meeting in Mumbai.

The International Cricket Council had made the saliva ban permanent in 2022, but the IPL operates under its own regulations and the latest move could set a precedent for the global game.

The 18th season will also witness tactical innovations, including a major change to counter dew's impact.

The second innings of evening matches will see a fresh ball introduced from the 11th over, provided the on-field umpires deem the dew factor significant as the trend of high-scoring games is likely to continue.

However, this rule will not apply to afternoon games.

Additionally, the Decision Review System has been expanded to include

height wides and off-side wides, ensuring a fairer adjudication of deliveries. Despite debates about its influence on the game, the Impact Player rule remains in place.

### Captain's corner

As many as seven teams will start IPL 2025 under new leadership, although some of them will be a stop-gap arrangement due to varied reasons.

The most surprising of them all is Rajat Patidar, who is yet to play a T20I for India, leading the RCB team that features megastar Virat Kohli.

Axar Patel takes charge of Delhi Capitals to lead, among others, his Team India senior KL Rahul, who would be aiming to shake off the disappointment of a turbulent stint with Lucknow Super Giants in 2024.

Shreyas Iyer, fresh off leading KKR to glory in 2024, will don the captain's armband for Punjab Kings with Ajinkya Rahane replacing him in the Kolkata team.

Rajasthan Royals will start the season with Riyan Parag as interim captain for the first three matches due to Sanju Samson's recovery from a finger injury taking longer than expected.

Mumbai Indians will be led by Suryakumar Yadav in their away opener against Chennai Super Kings on Sunday, as Hardik Pandya serves a suspension for an over-rate violation from last season.

### Pant's redemption arc

Rishabh Pant is set to begin a crucial new chapter in his career after his resolute comeback from a life-threatening accident



became part of cricketing lore.

The IPL's most expensive player in history — acquired by Lucknow Super Giants for a record INR 27 crore — will be eager to silence his critics.

Despite making the squads for the Champions Trophy and the T20I series against England, he was not given a single match.

Now, he has a point to prove, particularly in the T20 format, where he has struggled to cement his place in the Indian team.

Pant's explosive batting style and leadership skills have long been debated, and this season presents an opportunity for him to not only justify his hefty price tag but also send a strong message to the selectors ahead of future international assignments.

There are changes in the support staff line-ups too. Ricky Ponting has moved from Delhi Capitals to Punjab Kings as head coach. Hemang Badani has replaced Ponting as Delhi Capitals' head coach. Kevin Pietersen has joined Delhi

Capitals as mentor, while Rahul Dravid returns to Rajasthan Royals as head coach, his first IPL coaching stint after leading India to the T20 World Cup title last year.

CSK veteran Dwayne Bravo will be KKR mentor, replacing Gautam Gambhir, who is now India's head coach.

### Bumrah's fitness

A major question mark hangs over Jasprit Bumrah's fitness.

The pacer, back at the National Cricket Academy in Bengaluru, is undergoing

assessments to determine his readiness for the IPL. Mumbai Indians coach Mahela Jayawardene remains optimistic but cautious, given that Bumrah's availability crucial not only for MI but also for India's upcoming tour of England.

### The Dhoni question

As the IPL returns, so does the never-ending speculation: Is this Mahendra Singh Dhoni's last season?

The 43-year-old, who retired from international cricket in 2020, remains an enigma, gracing the field only during the IPL.

While he may not be the consistent match-winner of old, his presence alone bolsters Chennai Super Kings.

His sharp cricketing brain, field placements, and ability to finish games with quick cameos make him an invaluable asset.

Exactly 30 years his junior is Vaibhav Suryavanshi, a prodigious batting talent acquired by Rajasthan Royals but it remains to be seen how many games he manages to get.

### Ro-Ko in T20 again

Both Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma retired from T20Is after India's triumphant World Cup campaign last year, making IPL 2025 their first major outing in the short-format post-retirement.

Kohli, the highest run-getter in IPL 2024 with 741 runs, remains the linchpin for RCB, while Rohit, after a lean patch, will look to rediscover his magic for Mumbai Indians.

## Novak Djokovic wanted players to add names to antitrust lawsuit

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Miami Gardens (US)

Novak Djokovic doesn't want the antitrust lawsuit filed by the players' association he co-founded to create a rift in tennis, but he also said that the athletes' share of revenues and their influence both need to increase.

The 24-time Grand Slam champion, speaking at a pre-tournament news conference at the Miami Open on Thursday, explained that he was not listed among the plaintiffs on the case filed Tuesday in federal court in New York — along with actions in Brussels and London — "because I want other players to step up."

The suit by the Professional Tennis Players' Association (PTPA) against the women's and men's tours, the International Tennis Federation and the sport's integrity agency said the organizations hold "complete control over the players' pay and working conditions," calling them a "cartel." "I've never been a fan and supporter of division in our sport, but I've always fought for better representation and influence of and positioning of the players globally in our sport, which I think is still not where I think it should be," Djokovic said, "and where most of the players think it should be, not just in terms of prize money, but in terms of many other points that have been also stated in that document."

The PTPA said it had spoken with more than 250 players — women and men — and gotten backing for the class-action suit. Players whose names are attached to the US lawsuit include 2022 Wimbledon runner-up Nick Kyrgios, Sorana Cirstea, Varvara Gracheva, Reilly Opelka, Tenny Sandgren and Nicole Melichar-Martinez.

But four-time major champion Carlos Alcaraz said Wednesday at the Miami Open that he wasn't a fan — in part because he wasn't aware he'd be quoted in the filing, hadn't been told it was happening and didn't agree with everything stated by the attorneys.

Djokovic echoed that last sentiment. "I really hope that all the governing bodies, including PTPA, will come together and solve these issues," he said.

"This is a classic lawsuit, so lawyers to lawyers, type of situation. So to be quite frank with you, there are things that I agree with in the lawsuit, and then there are also things that I don't agree with. And I found that maybe some wording was quite strong in there, but I guess the legal team knows what they are doing and what kind of terminology they're supposed to use in order to get the right effect.

## Parry, Hillier to participate in Hero Indian Open

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Gurugram

England's John Parry and New Zealand's Daniel Hillier, both in outstanding form, have confirmed their participation in the 2025 Hero Indian Open, scheduled to be held at the DLF Golf and Country Club here from March 27 to 30.

The tournament, sanctioned by the DP World Tour and the Indian Golf Union, will feature 138 players from nearly 30 countries competing for a prize purse of \$2.25 Million.

Both Parry and Hillier are currently in Top-5 of the Race to Dubai rankings on the DP World Tour.

Parry, ranked third in the Race to Dubai, is no stranger to success in India, having won the Delhi Challenge on the Hotelplanner Tour last year. He followed up this victory with two more wins on the Hotelplanner Tour and secured his first DPWT win in 14 years at the AFRAsia Bank Mauritius Open.

Parry has continued his strong form in 2025, finishing T-8 at the Australian PGA, T-2 at the Alfred Dunhill Championship in South Africa, and clinched a win at Mauritius, followed by a runner-up finish in Kenya.

Hillier, 25, is also in impressive form, having finished runner-up at the 2025 Hero Dubai Desert Classic. He has posted consistent Top-20 finishes across Australia, South

Africa, Bahrain, and Qatar and is currently ranked fifth in the Race to Dubai standings.

Among other top players in the Race to Dubai standings, three winners from the ongoing season will also be competing. They are Johannes Vermeer (No. 8), winner of the Nedbank Golf Challenge; Callum Hill (No. 11), winner of the Joburg Open; and Ryggs Johnston (No. 14), winner of the ISPS Handa Australian Open. Additionally, Jayden Schaper, ranked 15th, will also take part.

The tournament is part of the Asian Swing, which began in Singapore and will conclude with two events in China. The winner of the 'Asian Swing' will earn an exemption into the next Rolex event, the Genesis Scottish Open, co-sanctioned with the PGA Tour.

Another major incentive for all DPWT players is the opportunity to earn points towards the Race to Dubai. At the end of the season, the Top-10 players who are not already exempt from the PGA Tour will earn dual PGA Tour membership for the following year.

As many as 16 winners from both the current and previous DP World Tour seasons are set to compete. This includes 12 champions from the 2024 season and four winners from the 2025 schedule, all of whom will be serious contenders to lift the trophy on March 30.

## AIU bans two more Indian athletes

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ New Delhi

Indian long distance runners Pradhan Kirulkar and Vivek More have been banned for three and five years respectively by the Athletics Integrity Unit (AIU) after they tested positive for prohibited substances.

Both athletes' positive results were from in-competition tests conducted during the Pune Half Marathon on December 15, 2024, adding to a recent surge in doping cases involving Indian athletes.

On Tuesday, Archana Jadhav also tested positive for a banned substance from a urine sample collected during the same event. She has been banned for four years.

Kirulkar's urine sample collected during Pune Half Marathon in December last year, which he had won with a time of 1:04:22, was found to

contain Meldonium when tested at the National Dope Testing Laboratory in New Delhi.

His ban period was to be four years but it was reduced by one year following his early admission of the doping offence and acceptance of sanction.

His ban period has already started from February 19 and his results from December 15, 2024 — the date of sample collection — onwards will be disqualified.

Earlier, New Caledonia's 36-year-old striker Georges Gope-Fenepej scored twice in his team's win over Tahiti. The 14-year international veteran collected the rebound from captain Cesar Zeoula's saved shot in the 50th minute and deli-

## Pakistan beat New Zealand by 9 wickets in third T20

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Auckland

Hasan Nawaz made an unbeaten 105 from 45 balls as Pakistan beat New Zealand by nine wickets in the third Twenty20 international on Friday to keep alive the five-match series. Pakistan won the toss and was able to bowl first, reversing the trend of the first two matches which New Zealand won by nine and five wickets. Nawaz was supported in his first century by captain Salman Ali Agha, who made 51 from 31 balls in an unbroken partnership of 133 for the second wicket. Pakistan finished at 207-1, running down the home team's total of 204 with four full overs to spare to inflict New Zealand's heaviest T20 loss in terms of wickets.

"I failed in the first two games and I thank the team for backing me," he said through an interpreter. "When I went out to bat I wanted to score my first international run. After I scored the first run the pressure was released and I wanted to win the game." Mark Chapman made 94 from 44 balls before New Zealand was bowled out with one ball remaining in their 20 overs. Chapman hit 11 fours and four sixes but lacked support. Captain Michael Bracewell's 31 was the next-best effort by the Kiwis, who lost wickets regularly. Tim Seifert made 19, including 16 runs from the second over.



## Sankar stuns world no 2 Antonsen in Swiss Open

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Basel

India's Sankar Muthusamy Subramanian caused a major upset by knocking out world no 2 Anders Antonsen of Denmark in a thrilling three-game contest to reach the men's singles quarterfinals of the Swiss Open Super 300 badminton tournament here.

The 21-year-old from Tamil Nadu, a silver medallist at the 2022 World Junior Championships and currently ranked 64th in the world, put up an impressive display of defense to defeat the three-time World Championships medallist 18-21 21-12 21-5 in a 66-minute contest.

This win marks one of the biggest victories of Subramanian's career, which will boost his confidence as he continues his transition into the senior ranks.

Next, the Indian will face world no 31 Christo Popov of France, a 2019 World Junior Championships silver medallist. Popov had a strong 2024 campaign, claiming titles at the German and Hylo Opens. He was the runner-up at this year's German Open.

Subramanian is the sole Indian singles player remaining in the tournament, while the women's doubles pair of Treasa Jolly and Gayatri Gopichand also advanced to the quarterfinals. The world no. 9 pair defeated Germany's Amelie Lehmann and Selin Hubsch 21-12 21-8 on Thursday.

Among other Indians, Isharani Baruah put up a valiant fight but lost 19-21 21-18 18-21 to China's Han Qian Xi in 63 minutes.

Anupama Upadhyaya was ousted by

Indonesia's world no. 11 Putri Kusuma Wardani as she lost 17-21 19-21 in another women's singles match.

The mixed doubles pair of Sathish Karunakaran and Aadya Variyath had a tough outing, going down 14-21 16-21 to Liu Kuang Heng and Jheng Yu Chieh.

### Subramanian vs Antonsen

Subramanian was more precise, while Antonsen struggled with his control at St Jakobshalle, often sending his shots wide and long.

In the opening game, the two engaged in a tough battle, with leads changing frequently. Antonsen managed just a one-point lead at the break. The left-handed Subramanian made it 16-14 but couldn't sustain the pressure as the Dane took the first game.

However, the momentum shifted completely in the second game, with Subramanian giving no chance to his illustrious opponent.

After Antonsen sent another shot wide and kicked his racket in frustration, Subramanian moved from 8-4 to 11-6. He then surged to 18-9 as Antonsen continued his errors.

Subramanian soon sealed the game, taking it 21-12, with Antonsen sending another shot long.

The third game started with the score tied at 3-3 before Antonsen completely lost control, committing a series of unforced errors as the Indian raced to an 11-3 lead at the break.

The Dane continued to send his net shots, cross-court shots, and tosses out, and Subramanian emerged victorious without much ado.

# New Zealand, New Caledonia to meet in Oceania qualifying final

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Wellington

Nottingham Forest striker Chris Wood scored a hat trick of headed goals as New Zealand beat Fiji 7-0 on Friday to join New Caledonia in the Oceania qualifying final for the 2026 World Cup.

New Caledonia earlier beat Tahiti 3-0 in the first semifinal in FIFA's smallest confederation.

Wood received a yellow card when he climbed into the grand-



stand to finish the game among the crowd, surrounded by fans and signing autographs for eager children.

Singh and Payne also scored in the first half along with an own goal by Fiji. Payne's goal was his first for New Zealand

since 2013. Kosta Barbarouses scored the final goal in the 73rd minute while Ben Waine missed an 87th-minute penalty.

"It's all about team," Wood said. "We had a pretty dominant first half and we wanted to keep it going into the second half. I think the team did really well in that sense."

Earlier, New Caledonia's 36-year-old striker Georges Gope-Fenepej scored twice in his team's win over Tahiti. The 14-year international veteran collected the rebound from captain Cesar Zeoula's saved shot in the 50th minute and deli-

cately chipped the ball into the Tahiti goal from close range. In the 75th minute, he launched a spectacular left-foot shot from 30 meters, catching the goalkeeper off his line. Substitute Lues Waya added to the scoring in stoppage time.

"We're all obviously football fans so to see someone like Georges play and the display he put on today is absolutely magnificent and wonderful," New Caledonia coach Johann Sidaner said.

The loser of the Oceania final will still have a chance to qualify through an intercontinental playoff.

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"e" Procurement Notice  
 Bid Identification No. SE R&B Divn. No.1 Bam. 59 /2024-25 Lr. No. 5702 dtd. 20.3.2025

Name of work	: Building works.
No. of works	: 01 (One) No
Estimated Cost	: Approximately Rs. 39.51 lakh
Period of completion	: Two Calendar months.
Date and time of Availability of bid document in the portal.	: From 10.00 hours of 28.03.2025 to 16.00 hours of 07.04.2025
Last date / time for receipt of bids in the portal	: Upto 16.00 hours of 07.04.2025.
Name & address of the Officer Inviting Bid	: Superintending Engineer, Ganjam (R&B) Division No.1, Berhampur.

Further details can be seen from the e-Procurement portal  
<https://tenders.odisha.gov.in>

OIPR-34109/11/0023/2425

Superintending Engineer  
 Ganjam (R&B) Division No.1  
 Berhampur