

REGION

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DELHI TO LAY 7,000 KM OF NEW WATER PIPELINES IN 2-3 YEARS: MINISTER PARVESH VERMA



NEW DELHI: Hitting out at AAP leaders for targeting a woman serving as the government head, Delhi Chief Minister Rekha Gupta said on Friday that team has achieved much more in its first 11-months than what the AAP government did in 11 years.

Concluding the discussion on Motion of Thanks on Lieutenant Governor's Address in the Delhi Assembly, a combative CM Gupta said, "Some words uttered by me by mistake have been made weapons by AAP leaders to target me."

"My slip-ups were inadvertent, but you are committing blunders intentionally," she said, pointing to disrespectful language used by AAP leaders for Sikh Gurus.

"We will not tolerate disrespect of Sikh Gurus," said CM Gupta, referring to the alleged "objectionable words" used by Leader of Opposition Atishi while referring to Sikh Gurus during a discussion in the House and the corruption perpetrated by the AAP government over 11 years.

Reiterating her resolve to resolutely face the Opposition campaigns to tarnish her image, the Chief Minister said she would continue to serve the people of



Delhi to the best of her capability. "These people don't like to see a female Chief Minister working 24x7. It bothers them; they can't tolerate it. Sometimes they'll say things that hurt her honour. Then they'll make cheap comments. Then they'll level baseless accusations. Then sometimes they'll nitpick words," she said.

"But what you did wasn't a mistake of words. You deliberately lied to the people of Delhi. The journey from the fast to 'Sheeshmahal' didn't happen by mistake... it was intentional. It was calculative politics. It was a conspiracy," she said.

Presenting a report card of her government's performance, she highlighted "clear policy

and clean intent" as the cornerstone of the BJP government's 11 months in office. She said after years of suffering, the national capital is trying to emerge from confrontation and mismanagement through coordination between all its agencies and the Central and Delhi government.

This Vote of Thanks is not a customary exercise but a platform to showcase the roadmap of efforts being made to improve services and deliver welfare schemes, the CM said.

"We are working at a war-footing level to make Delhi's public transport 100 per cent EV. New ISBTs, renovation of old depots, increasing capacity, and setting up EV charging stations—all

“ We are working at a war-footing level to make Delhi's public transport 100 per cent EV. New ISBTs, renovation of old depots, increasing capacity, and setting up EV charging stations—all these efforts are continuously underway.”

these efforts are continuously underway. We will also make travel free for women and ensure a friendly, transparent system through pink cards," she said.

"We are fulfilling every promise made to Delhi. With the thought that no hardworking person or poor person in Delhi should go hungry, we are opening 100 Atal Canteens. 45 have already opened, and 55 more will open soon. This is a new model of service. This is the difference between their 11-year government, and our 11-month government," she added.

BANKING & FINANCE

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RBI SEEKS PUBLIC FEEDBACK ON REVISED BANK DIVIDEND & PROFIT REMITTANCE FRAMEWORK



Delhi Pollution: CAQM Orders Closure of 16 Industrial Units in NCR



NEW DELHI: The Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM) on Friday issued closure directions to 16 industrial units located across the National Capital Region (NCR) after detailed inspections revealed gross and persistent violations, an official said.

Of the 16 industrial units, one is located in Uttar Pradesh (NCR), one in Rajasthan (NCR) and the remaining 14 are in Sonapat district of Haryana, said the official.

The inspections were carried out as part of the Commission's continuous and intensified enforcement drive to curb air pollution and ensure strict

compliance with statutory directions, said a statement issued by an official of the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change.

The inspections revealed a range of serious environmental violations, including establishment and operation without obtaining mandatory Consent to Establish (CTE) and Consent to Operate (CTO) as mandated under extant statutes and non-installation or non-functioning of Air Pollution Control Devices (APCDs), the statement said.

The CAQM teams also detected use of unapproved fuel; operation of units dur-

ing restricted periods under GRAP; non-compliance of diesel generator (DG) sets with prescribed norms and visible smoke and emissions from industrial processes, said the statement.

In several cases, units were found operating in blatant disregard of extant statutes, statutory directions and environmental norms, it said.

The CAQM has taken a serious view of these lapses and directed the immediate closure of the defaulting units until requisite compliance with extant statutes and statutory directions is attained, it said.

The Commission reiterated that non-compliance will not be tolerated and that strict enforcement actions, including closure and other penal actions as per law, shall continue against defaulting industrial units.

All industries operating in the NCR are once again urged to strictly adhere to prescribed environmental norms, ensure proper installation and operation of APCDs and ensure compliance at all times, said the CAQM statement.

POTPOURRI

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AHAN SHETTY THANKS 'BORDER-2' CO-STAR DILJIT DOSANJH FOR ALWAYS BEING 'KIND & SUPPORTIVE'



Friday prayers amid heavy security, locals seek return to normalcy after bulldozer action



OUR CORRESPONDENT New Delhi

Friday prayers were held peacefully in central Delhi's Turkman Gate area amid heavy police deployment, drone surveillance and barricading, even as residents appealed to authorities to ease restrictions and allow businesses to reopen, saying prolonged curbs were hitting livelihoods hard.

Security arrangements were stepped up in view of the weekly Friday prayers following Wednesday's stone-pelting incident during a court-ordered anti-encroachment drive. A large contingent of Delhi Police and paramilitary personnel was deployed near mosques, inside narrow residential lanes and at key intersections, with senior officers overseeing the arrangements on the ground.

Police drones hovered over the locality and CCTV cameras were used to monitor movement, while debris-clearing work continued at the demolition site. Barricades were placed at several points to regulate movement, lending a tense but controlled atmosphere to the neighbourhood.

Residents said people moved cautiously, speaking in hushed tones as security personnel remained stationed inside residential lanes. Despite the heightened presence, locals said there were no restrictions on offering prayers and the situation remained peaceful.

However, many residents chose to pray at mosques closer to their homes instead of larger mosques in the area, citing unease due to the prevailing situation. "We offered prayers at a mosque near our home. There is no restriction as such on going to the Faiz-e-Elahi Masjid, but people are obviously wary because of what happened recently," said Shehnaaz, a 43-year-old handicrafts trader.

He said fear and uncertainty had prompted many to avoid long walks through heavily guarded streets. "People don't want to take unnecessary chances, so they are praying wherever they feel more comfortable," he said, adding that shopkeepers were bearing the brunt of the restrictions. "Our shops have been shut for days and we are suffering losses. Daily-wage earners, small traders and shop owners depend on everyday sales. Some miscreants did something wrong and now the entire area is paying the price for it."

Piyush Goyal Holds Talks in Brussels on Key Issues in India-EU Free Trade Pact



NEW DELHI: Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal held high-level talks with the EU Trade and Economic Security Commissioner, Maros Sefcovic, in Brussels on Friday as part of the efforts to secure a mutually beneficial India-EU Free Trade Agreement (FTA).

"During this dialogue, we deliberated across key areas of the proposed agreement. We reaffirmed our commitment to a rules-based trading framework and a modern economic partnership that safeguards the interests of farmers and MSMEs while integrating Indian industries into global supply chains," Goyal said in a post on X.

India is pushing for zero-duty access for its labour-intensive sectors, such as textiles, leather, apparel, gems and jewellery, and handicrafts.

The Indian minister's visit to Brussels underscores the intensifying diplomatic and technical engagements between India and the EU.

The primary objective of these interactions is to provide strategic guidance to the negotiating teams, resolve pending issues, and expedite the conclusion of a balanced and ambitious agreement.

The Ministerial engagement follows a week of intensive deliberations in Brussels, building upon the groundwork laid during high-level discussions held earlier this week between India's Commerce Secretary Rajesh Agrawal and the Director-General for Trade of the European Commission, Sabine Weyand.

The talks come at a historic juncture for India-EU economic relations. The negotiations were ambitiously re-launched in June 2022 after a hiatus of over nine years, reflecting a renewed mutual commitment to deepen economic integration. Since the resumption, the two sides have held 14 rounds of intense negotiations and several high-level dialogues at the ministerial level, with the latest interaction in December 2025, according to an official statement.

Both India and the EU have expressed strong political resolve to deliver a comprehensive deal.

PM Modi, Other Leaders Express Grief over Himachal Bus Tragedy



NEW DELHI: Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Congress leader Priyanka Gandhi, and others on Friday expressed deep sorrow over the loss of lives in a tragic road accident in Himachal Pradesh's Sirmour district, where a private bus skidded off the road and plunged into a deep gorge in a remote mountainous area.

"The loss of lives due to a bus mishap in Sirmour, Himachal Pradesh, is extremely saddening. Condolences to those who have lost their loved ones. Praying for the speedy recovery of those injured," PM Modi said in a post on X.

He announced an ex gratia of Rs 2 lakh from the PMNRF to the next of kin of each deceased. The injured would be given Rs 50,000 each. Terming the incident extremely heartbreaking, Union Minister J.P. Nadda said he had asked BJP state president Rajeev Bindal and Leader of the Opposition Jairam Thakur to closely monitor the relief and rescue operations.

"Hundreds of BJP workers are engaged at the spot to assist the injured. I express my deepest condolences to the bereaved families and pray to God to give them strength to endure this difficult time," he said in

a post on X.

Congress leader Priyanka Gandhi Vadra also expressed grief over the tragedy. "The news of the deaths of several people due to a passenger bus falling into a gorge in Sirmour, Himachal Pradesh, is extremely heartbreaking. May God grant peace to the departed souls. My deepest condolences to the bereaved families. I pray for the speedy recovery of the injured," she said, appealing to the state government and Congress colleagues to extend all possible assistance to the victims.

At least eight people were killed and several others injured when the bus, carrying over 50 passengers, met with the accident near Haripurdhara on Friday. Officials said the death toll may rise as rescue operations continue.

According to the police, the cause of the accident is yet to be ascertained. The bus was travelling from Shimla to Kupvi via Rajgarh when it reportedly lost control while descending a steep gradient. Most of the injured, many of them local residents, were rushed to the government hospital in Haripurdhara.

India Stands Firm on Atmanirbharta in Fluid Global Landscape: Shaktikanta Das



NEW DELHI: Shaktikanta Das, Principal Secretary-2 to the Prime Minister, said on Friday that India is headed to be the fastest growing economy in the world, despite geopolitical tensions and trade barriers.

Delivering the Inaugural Bibek Debroy Memorial Lecture, Das highlighted that the shifting geopolitical winds and trade policies are reshaping the global economic order. Traditional multilateralism, once a cornerstone of global governance, is increasingly being sidelined by geopolitical rivalries, protectionism and fragmentation. Das pointed out that in this fluid global landscape, India has embraced Atmanirbharta, a vision of self-reliance, as the overarching principle of the country's policies.

Indian diaspora remains powerful bridge between India and the world: PM Modi



NEW DELHI: Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday extended warm greetings to overseas Indians on the occasion of Pravasi Bharatiya Diwas, stating that the Indian diaspora continues to serve as a powerful bridge between India and the rest of the world.

Taking to the social media platform 'X', Prime Minister Modi said, "Warm greetings on Pravasi Bharatiya Diwas. The Indian diaspora remains a powerful bridge between India and the world. They have enriched societies wherever they went and, at the same time, stayed connected to their roots. I often say that our diaspora is our Rashtrodoots, who have popularised the culture of India globally. Our Government has taken numerous steps to bring our diaspora even closer to India." Pravasi Bharatiya Diwas is a significant national event observed every year on January 9 to recognise and honour the contributions of the Indian diaspora to India's development and its global standing. The occasion provides an important platform for engagement with overseas Indians and acknowledges their role in promoting India's progress across various sectors.

January 9 was chosen to commemorate the return of

Trump Signals Control of Venezuelan Oil Reserves, Drawing Global Attention



WASHINGTON: President Donald Trump is framing the US intervention in Venezuela not as a short-term military action but as a long-range economic and geopolitical reset—one that he says reclaims control of oil assets, deters rivals, curbs drug trafficking and sends a signal well beyond Latin America.

In a sit-down interview on Fox News' Hannity, Trump laid out a sweeping rationale for the operation that led to the capture of Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro, repeatedly returning to oil as the central lever of US power. "They took the oil from us years ago," Trump said, referring to the nationalization of American energy assets in Venezuela. "We just took it back."

The president said the United States has already secured large quantities of Venezuelan crude under sanctions enforcement. "We've taken \$4 billion worth of oil in one day," he said, adding that the total would rise over time. Trump said major American companies would now rebuild Venezuela's collapsed energy sector. "The top



14 companies are coming," he said. "They're going to rebuild the whole oil infrastructure."

He argued that restoring production would have global effects. "It means lower oil prices all over the world," he said, a claim that underscores how closely the administration is linking foreign policy to commodity markets.

While the president acknowledged that reviving Venezuela's oil industry would take time—"The oil will take a while," he said—he made clear that US involvement would not be brief. "We're going to be there till we straighten out the country," Trump said. The comments suggest an open-ended US role, with economic oversight preceding political transition. On elections, Trump said conditions are not yet in place. "They wouldn't even know how to have an election right now," he said. "The country's become third world."

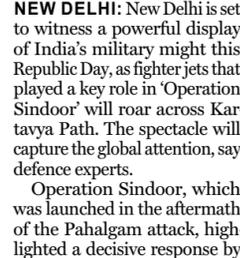
Beyond economics, Trump portrayed the Venezuela action as a demonstration of deterrence. He said the operation sent a

message across the region, particularly to governments in Cuba and Colombia. "They saw what happened," he said. "They're treating us with great respect."

Trump noted that Maduro's removal had prompted other leaders to fall into line, reducing the likelihood of confrontation. The implication was that decisive action in one country reshapes behavior in others.

Framing the operation as a law-enforcement success with immediate security benefits, he accused the former Venezuelan government of exporting crime to the United States. "He emptied his prisons into the United States," Trump said. "He emptied his mental institutions and insane asylums." He claimed a sharp reduction in maritime drug trafficking. "We've knocked out 97 per cent of the drugs coming in by water," he said. "There are very few boats operating right now." While he did not provide independent verification of that figure, he returned to the theme repeatedly, arguing that military force paired with law enforcement had produced tangible results.

Republic Day Parade to Showcase 'Operation Sindoor' Might and Bhairav Battalion



NEW DELHI: New Delhi is set to witness a powerful display of India's military might this Republic Day, as fighter jets that played a key role in 'Operation Sindoor' will roar across Kartavya Path. The spectacle will capture the global attention, say defence experts.

Operation Sindoor, which was launched in the aftermath of the Pahalgam attack, highlighted a decisive response by the Indian armed forces. This military operation by India targeted terrorist hideouts and key locations in Pakistan and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK). When Pakistan tried to carry out retaliatory strikes, India responded with double the force. This showcased the Indian Air Force's operational dominance to the world.

Now, the same fighter jets that struck terror infrastructure will feature prominently in the Republic Day flypast. One of the main highlights will be the special Sindoor Formation which



will symbolise the success and resolve of the operation. Advanced aircraft including Rafale, Sukhoi, Jaguar, and MiG-29 fighter jets—along with more than half a dozen combat aircraft—will fly in formation over Kartavya Path. In addition to this, multiple other formations comprising fighter jets, helicopters, and transport aircraft will also be part of the grand aerial display. Bhairav Battalion to make historic debut— For the first time, the newly raised Bhairav Battalion of the Indian Army will march

down Kartavya Path and salute the Supreme Commander. Following the success of Operation Sindoor, Army Chief General Upendra Dwivedi announced the formation of these new light commando battalions from Kargil. Five Bhairav battalions have already been established, according to officials. The Army plans to raise a total of 25 such battalions within six months, they added. Each battalion consists of around 250 elite soldiers, trained for swift, surprise, and high-impact operations.

Delhi to lay 7,000 km of new water pipelines in 2–3 Years: Minister Parvesh Verma

OUR CORRESPONDENT
New Delhi

The Delhi government plans to lay around 7,000 km of new water pipelines over the next two to three years as part of its push to ensure clean drinking water for every household, Water Minister Parvesh Verma told the Assembly on Friday.

Replying to questions raised by BJP MLA Satish Upadhyay, Verma said the government has initiated works worth Rs 7,212 crore in the last 11 months and launched 94 projects in the water and sewerage sector. He said the city's current water challenges were a legacy issue inherited from the previous AAP government. "The Delhi government is working closely with the Centre to provide drinking water to every household," Verma said, adding that infrastructure expansion was central to meeting this goal.

To augment water availability, the government is in



talks with neighbouring states, including Uttar Pradesh and Haryana. Verma said the proposal involves sourcing raw drinking water from these states in return for supplying them treated water for irrigation. "This arrangement has the potential to add over 100 million gallons per day to Delhi's water supply," he said.

The minister also said work had begun on replacing old, broken and damaged pipelines to curb contamination. He noted that water losses from

the Munak canal, currently estimated at around 40 per cent, would be brought down to 5 per cent within the next two years. "We have initiated a concrete plan for this. Reducing losses will also help us move closer to our promise of 24/7 water supply to every household in Delhi," Verma said.

He added that the government was also working to revive a water-sharing project with Himachal Pradesh as part of efforts to strengthen the capital's long-term water security.

'Breach of Privilege': Delhi Speaker on Punjab Police FIR against Kapil Mishra

NEW DELHI: Delhi Speaker Vijender Gupta said on Friday that the Assembly has formally taken cognisance of Punjab Police registering an FIR against Minister Kapil Mishra on the basis of an unauthorised video clip of House proceedings.

The issue of the video clip, purportedly linked to the alleged "disrespect of Sikh Gurus" by AAP leader Atishi, was raised by Laxmi Nagar MLA Abhay Verma of the BJP.

The FIR registered by Jalandhar Police is based on the video clip — related to the Atishi episode in Delhi Assembly — downloaded by Punjab Police from Mishra's X handle and put to forensic test, before declaring it "tampered" and filing a case against Mishra.

Speaker Gupta stated that the matter raised by Verma pertains to breach of privilege of this House.

"The FIR that has been registered is based on a video



which is the recording of the proceedings within the House and is the property of the Assembly. Taking such action on this video and registering an FIR against a Minister is a serious issue. In this context, a clear case of breach of privilege is made out against the Police Commissioner of Jalandhar," said the Speaker.

Recordings made inside the House belong exclusively to the House and to no one else, he said.

the matter was referred to the Forensic Science Laboratory for their satisfaction, said the Speaker.

Since the recording belongs to the House, calling it "tampered" is against the dignity of the House and anyone found involved in this conspiracy will face strict action by the House, said the Speaker, adding, "The House is formally taking cognisance of the entire matter."

Mishra accused AAP National Convenor Arvind Kejriwal of misusing Punjab Police to file a fake FIR against him to scare and silence him.

In a message on X, Mishra wrote, "Mr Kejriwal, your FIR and the fear of the police cannot scare us. There is a video in the records of the Delhi Assembly and the whole world has heard the video... since that day Atishi has not had the courage to come to the Assembly even though the Speaker of the Assembly called her several times."

Delhi aims to emerge as India's startup hub, focus on Youth Entrepreneurship: Ashish Sood



OUR CORRESPONDENT
New Delhi

The Delhi government is working towards positioning the national capital as India's leading startup hub, with a sharp focus on youth-led entrepreneurship and innovation, Education Minister Ashish Sood said on Thursday.

Speaking ahead of the Delhi Startup Yuva Festival, set to be launched on Friday at Netaji Subhash University of Technology (NSUT) in Dwarka, Sood said the government, through the Directorate of Training and Technical Education (DTTE), is strengthening the campus-to-market ecosystem by encouraging students to see entrepreneurship as a viable and mainstream career option.

According to the minister, more than 75,000 students and young innovators are currently engaged in DTTE-supported entrepreneurship and innovation programmes, with participation growing by 25–30 per cent every year. Over 470 startups are being incubated across government-supported institutions in sectors including technology, healthcare, sustainability, education, manufacturing and creative industries.

Sood said DTTE-backed startups generate an average of four to five direct jobs in their first year, making a significant contribution to employment generation.

National shooting coach booked under POCSO, suspended after minor trainee alleges sexual assault



AAYUSH GOEL
Gurugram

Police in Faridabad have registered a case under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act against Ankush Bhardwaj, a national-level shooting coach after a 17-year-old female shooter accused him of sexually assaulting her. Sports authorities have suspended the coach with immediate effect pending the outcome of the investigation.

According to police, the alleged incident occurred on December 16 at a hotel in Faridabad, a day after a shooting competition held at the Dr Karni Singh Shooting Range in Delhi. The minor, who trains under the accused coach, told investigators that he contacted her after the event and asked her to meet him, claiming he wanted to discuss her performance. Police said the girl met the coach in the hotel lobby, from where he allegedly persuaded her to accompany him to his room. Once inside, the coach allegedly made inappropriate advances and sexually assaulted her. The minor stated that she resisted and managed to leave the room. She further alleged that the coach later warned her against disclosing the incident, threatening to ruin her shooting career if she spoke out.

The victim returned home and continued distressed for several days. She later confided in her mother, following which the family decided to approach the police. An FIR was registered on January 6 based on the complaint, and statements of the victim and her family members were recorded. Police officials said they have initiated a detailed investigation, including verification of hotel records and other evidence. They added that further legal action will be taken as the probe progresses. Meanwhile, the National Rifle Association of India confirmed that it has placed the coach under suspension following the complaint. The body said it has a zero-tolerance policy towards sexual misconduct and will cooperate fully with law-enforcement agencies.

NCRTC invites bids for commercial development at Ghaziabad Namu Bharat Station



OUR CORRESPONDENT
New Delhi

The National Capital Region Transport Corporation (NCRTC) has invited bids for commercial development of property development (PD) areas at the Ghaziabad Namu Bharat Station on the Delhi-Ghaziabad-Meerut corridor, as part of efforts to enhance passenger amenities and boost non-fare revenue.

According to an official statement, the initiative aims to transform station premises into integrated, commuter-friendly spaces offering facilities such as rooftop restaurants, food outlets, cafes and other commercial establishments. Applications have been invited through an e-tendering process to license the PD area at the station for commercial use. Around 18,578 square metres of space will be offered on a licence basis against a fixed rent for a period of 25 years. The move is expected to allow commuters and nearby residents access to shopping, dining and other modern amenities within a single, well-connected location inside the station complex. As per the tender details, commercial spaces will be available across multiple levels, including the ground floor, upper and lower PD levels, and Core-A floors. This includes about 4,229 square metres on the ground floor, 11,914 square metres on upper levels 1 and 2, and 2,435 square metres across Core-A floors comprising the upper PD level, lower PD level and concourse terrace. NCRTC said the initiative is aimed at promoting commercial activity within station areas while strengthening non-fare revenue streams. Interested bidders can submit applications until February 4, 2026, with detailed information on scope, eligibility criteria and timelines available on the NCRTC website. The corporation said the spaces can be utilised for shops, kiosks and service establishments catering to commuters and local residents. Proposed facilities include rooftop and fine-dining restaurants, cafes, food outlets, hotels, showrooms, banquet halls, pharmacies, medical and wellness centres, and outlets showcasing regional products. By encouraging participation from local vendors, retailers and service providers, NCRTC aims to develop station precincts into vibrant and people-friendly commercial hubs. The project is also expected to generate employment opportunities and enhance passenger convenience by integrating dining, shopping, healthcare and hospitality services within the station complex. Ghaziabad Namu Bharat Station is seen as having strong commercial potential due to its location in a densely populated urban area and its proximity to the city's main bus terminal, which ensures high daily footfall.

Sudden Rain Spell Freezes Delhi, Air Quality Remains 'Very Poor'

NEW DELHI: Residents of Delhi and the National Capital Region (NCR) were caught off guard early Friday morning as an unexpected spell of rain swept across the region, deepening the ongoing cold wave. Despite the showers, air pollution levels continued to remain dangerously high, with the Air Quality Index (AQI) recorded in the 'very poor' category.

Dark clouds enveloped the capital in the early hours before rainfall began around 6 a.m. in several parts of Delhi. The rain was moderate to heavy initially and later turned light. Cold northwesterly winds accompanied the showers, further intensifying the chill. Gurugram also experienced rainfall, even though no specific precipitation warning had been issued for the city.

According to the India Meteorological Department (IMD), Delhi's minimum temperature on Friday is expected to remain around 5 degrees Celsius, while the maximum temperature may hover between 16 and 17 de-



grees Celsius. On Thursday, the Safdarjung weather station recorded a minimum temperature of 5.8 degrees Celsius, nearly one degree below the seasonal average, making it the coldest day of the winter so far. Lodhi Road registered a similar low of 6.1 degrees Celsius.

Although rainfall is generally expected to improve air quality, pollution levels showed little improvement. As per official data, the AQI stood at approximately 321 at 8 a.m., firmly within the 'very poor' range. Several monitoring stations across the capital continued to report alarming

readings. Data from the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) revealed that Anand Vihar recorded an AQI of 385, while Bawana stood at 276. Chandni Chowk reported an AQI of 335, Dwarka 346, and ITO registered 307. Jahangirpuri recorded 340, Mundka 326, Wazirpur 336, and Vivek Vihar showed particularly severe conditions at 368. IGI Airport, comparatively better, recorded an AQI of 252.

Neighbouring cities in the NCR also continued to struggle with poor air quality. Ghaziabad recorded an AQI of 286, while Noida's air quality deteriorat-

ed further to 370. Gurugram reported AQI levels ranging between 238 and 385 at different locations. On Thursday, Palam emerged as the coldest station in the capital, recording a minimum temperature of 4.8 degrees Celsius. Ridge and Ayanagar both recorded lows of 5.8 degrees Celsius. The persistent cold was felt throughout the day, as maximum temperatures remained below normal across all weather stations.

Meanwhile, the IMD has warned of heavy rain in parts of southern India, while severe cold and dense fog conditions are expected to prevail across northern and central regions.

The IMD has indicated that there is unlikely to be any major change in minimum temperatures over the next three to four days. Light to moderate fog is expected to persist during mornings, while partly cloudy conditions may develop at some places between January 10 and 12. Maximum temperatures are also expected to stay below normal.

Delhi Police Nab One More in Turkman Gate Stone Pelting Case, Total Arrests 12



NEW DELHI: Delhi Police on Friday arrested one more accused in connection with the violence that erupted during the municipal corporation's demolition drive near the Faiz-e-Ilahi Mosque in the Turkman Gate area of the national capital.

With this latest arrest, the total number of people apprehended in the case has risen to 12.

According to Delhi Police, the accused has been identified as Mohammad Imran, also known as Raju, aged 36.

Earlier on Thursday, Delhi Police had stated that around 30 individuals involved in the violence had been identified. The identification was carried out using CCTV footage from the area, body-worn camera recordings of police personnel, and multiple videos that went viral on social media platforms.

Earlier, the police officials said that a summons will soon be issued to Samajwadi Party (SP) MP Mohibbullah Nadvi, asking him to join the investigation. According to police, the MP was allegedly present at the site shortly before the violence broke out. Senior police officials had reportedly requested him to stay away from the immediate vicinity

of the demolition site, but he continued to remain in the area prior to the incident.

Meanwhile, Delhi Police have intensified their search for YouTuber Salman in connection with the case and are preparing to issue a notice to him. According to police sources, Salman allegedly attempted to disturb public order by using social media platforms. He is accused of calling upon residents to gather at the site during the demolition drive.

The investigation has further revealed that some influential individuals in the locality allegedly used WhatsApp groups to incite residents to assemble at the spot. Police said their intent was to create unrest and obstruct the work of the civic authorities and law enforcement agencies during the demolition operation.

A copy of the FIR, accessed by IANS, outlines the sequence of events leading to the violence. It states that the unrest began at around 12.40 a.m., when police personnel started demolishing the encroached government land ahead of the demolition. As barricading was underway, a group of around 30 to 35 people gathered at the spot, raised provocative slogans, and attempted to

prevent police from setting up blockades.

The FIR further mentions that the situation escalated when the crowd began pelting stones at police personnel, even as officers tried to explain that the demolition drive was limited to illegal constructions and the removal of encroachments on government land. Police also assured the crowd that there would be no harm to the adjoining mosque during the operation.

On Thursday, BJP's National Spokesperson Pradeep Bhandari criticised the Congress and SP, alleging that both parties are echoing Pakistan's stance on the recent court-ordered demolition of illegal encroachments near the Syed Faiz Elahi Mosque in Delhi.

He shared a video of Tahir Andrabi, ambassador and spokesperson of the foreign affairs of Pakistan, expressing the country's views on encroachments near the structure in Delhi.

In a strongly worded statement shared on social media, Bhandari claimed that the opposition parties are once again aligning themselves with Pakistan's narrative, prioritising vote bank politics over respect for India's judicial process and rule of law.

The controversy stems from the Delhi High Court's directive to remove illegal structures around the mosque, a move that has sparked political debate and protests in certain quarters.

While the BJP has defended the demolition as a lawful action mandated by the judiciary, Congress and SP leaders have criticised the decision, citing concerns over community sentiments.

Delhi High Court upholds acquittal in molestation case



NEW DELHI: The Delhi High Court dismissed an appeal filed by the city police against the acquittal of a man accused of molestation, ruling that the prosecution failed to prove the case beyond reasonable doubt and that the trial court's assessment of evidence contained no infirmity. A single-judge Bench of Justice Neena Bansal Krishna upheld the 2016 sessions court judgment acquitting the accused of charges under Sections 354 and 509 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) in an FIR registered at the Defence Colony police station. In its decision, the Delhi High Court observed that the trial court had correctly appreciated the material contradictions and inconsistencies in the prosecutrix's testimony, along with the unexplained delay in registering the FIR. "The learned trial court rightly noted the contradictions and the improvements in the statement of the complainant... and rightly acquitted the respondent," Justice Krishna observed while dismissing the prosecution's appeal under Section 378 CrPc. According to the case records, the complainant, who was working as an ayah in a school in Defence Colony through a placement agency, had alleged that on December 3, 2011, the accused misbehaved with her on the school premises, touched her inappropriately and attempted to rape her. An FIR, however, came to be registered only on January 2, 2012. The Delhi High Court noted that while the complainant had alleged an attempt to rape in her initial complaint, her testimony before the trial court did not support such an allegation.

'BJP doesn't want to discuss pollution', AAP demands 'accountability' from Delhi govt



NEW DELHI: The AAP on Tuesday staged a protest outside the Delhi Assembly over the worsening pollution in the national capital, demanding accountability from the BJP-led government.

Holding banners and shouting "Pradushan par jawab do (Answer on pollution)" slogans, the AAP MLAs, led by Leader of Opposition (LoP) Atishi, demanded answers from the ruling party.

Speaking to IANS, Gopal Rai, the AAP MLA and former Delhi Environment Minister, said, "This time, people in Delhi have had to suffer severely due to pollution. It is the responsibility of the Legislative Assembly to discuss this issue. The government must answer why it failed and why it did not fulfil its responsibilities."

He further claimed that the government is "running away" from discussion.

"Yesterday, when the MLAs demanded answers, they were suspended; this shows that the government does not want to discuss it. However, we will continue to raise the pollution issue till the government is willing to discuss it," Rai said.

India's First Hydrogen Train Set to Run Between Jind and Sonipat in Haryana

NEERAJ MOHAN
Chandigarh

Haryana's Jind is all set to witness the launch of India's first hydrogen-powered train under the Northern Railway's ambitious project, which will operate between Jind and Sonipat, in its final stages of preparation.

A stable and uninterrupted 11 kV power supply has been ensured for the hydrogen plant established in Jind, which will provide fuel for the train during its final commissioning and regular operations.

According to the Haryana Chief Secretary Anurag Rastogi a meeting to this regard took place with officials from Dakshin Haryana Bijli Vitran Nigam (DHBVN) to review the project. The meeting covered detailed discussions on the plant's current power supply status, backup arrangements, and future requirements.

The Chief Secretary directed that regular reviews of the power supply system be conducted



to prevent any obstacles to this ambitious project. He emphasized strengthening alternative arrangements and rapid response mechanisms.

The meeting was informed that India's largest hydrogen plant with a storage capacity of 3,000 kilograms has been established in Jind for this hydrogen train project and is now in its final commissioning phase. Since the plant will operate on a 24x7 basis, uninterrupted and quality power supply is essential.

DHBVN officials assured the Chief Secretary that stable power supply is being provided to the plant, with additional monitoring and rapid maintenance arrangements in place as needed. The Northern Railway also expressed satisfaction with the quality of power supply being provided to the plant.

Harassment of Women Dog Feeders to be Dealt Under Criminal Law: SC

NEW DELHI: The Supreme Court, continuing its hearing in the suo motu case on stray dog management in public spaces, on Friday made it clear that allegations of harassment, assault, or use of derogatory language against women feeding dogs constitute criminal offences, and such issues must be addressed under the penal law and not before the apex court in individual cases.

A bench of Justices Vikram Nath, Sandeep Mehta and N.V. Anjaria was hearing submissions from animal rights activists, NGOs and victims' groups in the matter.

During the hearing, senior advocate Mahalakshmi Pavani, appearing for an animal rights activist, alleged that women dog feeders across the country were facing harassment, assaults, and public humiliation by so-called "anti-feeder vigilantes", and that in several cases, the police had failed to register FIRs despite



complaints. The senior counsel cited instances where women were allegedly beaten, molested and defamed, including claims that in some housing societies in Haryana, bouncers had been hired to target dog feeders.

Pavani argued that the authorities' inaction amounted to passive endorsement of such acts.

Responding to the submissions, the Justice Vikram Nath-led Bench advised the aggrieved



individuals to approach the local police, magistrates or jurisdictional High Courts. However, it clarified that the Supreme Court could not sit in judgment over individual criminal complaints.

"If someone is harassing women, it is a crime under the Penal Code. Get FIRs registered. There are procedures available," the apex court observed, adding that the issue raised was essentially one of law and order.

On allegations regarding de-

rogatory and abusive remarks made against women dog feeders on social media and elsewhere, the bench observed that such statements do not fall under the protection of free speech if they infringe upon a woman's dignity, reiterating that legal remedies are available under existing laws.

The Supreme Court clarified that the scope of the proceedings was confined to stray dog management and public safety, and would not extend to unrelated issues such as dog breeding or the import of foreign breeds.

Further, the top court also declined a request to view videos allegedly depicting cruelty to dogs, observing that the internet was full of videos showing both animal abuse and dog attacks on children and elderly persons. It said that the hearing should not be converted into a contest of such footage. The hearing in the matter will continue on January 13

HM Amit Shah launches NSG's platform for analysing bomb explosions, sharing data



NEW DELHI: Reiterating Prime Minister Narendra Modi-led government's tough stand against terror, Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Friday launched a digital platform for accurate analysis of bomb explosion-related incidents and shared details of work being done to set up a new NSG regional hub in Ayodhya, in addition to six other centres.

Describing the new National IED Data Management System (NIDMS) of the National Security Guard (NSG) as the next-generation

security shield against terrorism, HM Shah said the digital platform will prove extremely important in investigating terrorist activities, understanding trends in explosions, and formulating effective strategies against them.

"The NIDMS will become a robust platform for accurately analysing the patterns of bomb explosions that have occurred in the country so far, the modus operandi, and the explosives used," said the Home Minister after inaugurating the platform through video conferencing.

He said NIDMS will serve as a single-click access window for data scattered across different case files for investigating agencies and anti-terror organisations.

With the help of AI, NIDMS will connect with other data sources to create a strong security grid in the country, he said.

Home Minister Shah said that through 'One Nation, One Data Repository', the data scattered across different departments will now become available to every police unit as a national asset.

NIDMS will prove extremely important in investigating terrorist activities, understanding trends in explosions, and formulating effective strategies against them, he said.

Home Minister Shah said that NSG is a strong pillar of our country's internal security. Due to the valour, unique skills and unwavering dedication of NSG personnel, our citizens can sleep peacefully.

ECI holds CEOs' conference ahead of IICDEM 2026



NEW DELHI: The Election Commission of India (ECI) on Thursday held a conference of Chief Electoral Officers (CEOs) as part of preparations for the India International Conference on Democracy and Election Management (IICDEM)-2026.

The three-day global conference is scheduled to be held from January 21 to 23 at Bharat Mandapam here.

At Thursday's meet at the India International Institute of Democracy and Election Management (IIIDEM), Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar, along with Election Commissioners Dr Sukhbir Singh Sandhu and Dr Vivek Joshi, briefed the CEOs on the framework, objectives and operational nuances of IICDEM 2026, outlining their specific roles and responsibilities in the lead-up to the event.

Following the inaugural address, the CEOs deliberated on 36 thematic groups, each to be led by a designated CEO during the conference. These themes span all critical aspects of election management and are aimed at creating a comprehensive body of knowledge by drawing upon the diverse experiences of Election Management Bodies (EMBs) from across the globe.

IICDEM 2026 is set to be the largest international conference of its kind hosted by India in the domain of democracy and election management. The event will see participation from nearly 100 international delegates representing EMBs worldwide, in addition to representatives from international organisations, foreign missions in India, and leading academic and professional experts in electoral processes.

The conference will feature a range of general and plenary sessions, including the Inaugural Session, EMB Leaders' Plenary, EMB Working Group Meetings, and the launch of ECINET. It will also host multiple thematic sessions focusing on global electoral challenges, international electoral standards, and innovations and best practices in election management.

Criticism based on facts helps our democracy, motivated fatalism doesn't: Hardeep Puri



NEW DELHI: Union Minister Hardeep Singh Puri said on Thursday that India's democracy benefits by criticism, but not by motivated fatalism by some "experts", who seem more guided by their politics rather than academic rigour.

"As we step into 2026, public debate in India should begin with a little New Year discipline, not by packaging insinuations, assumptions and shoot and scoot assertions as economic analysis," the minister observed in a post on X. He further stated that in recent years, a genre of commentary has emerged that reduces the work of reform to caricature, treats every imperfect transition as proof of permanent failure. "The refrain is familiar and sweeping: India's data sets are unreliable, economic growth is not benefitting the poor, there is crony capitalism, India cannot manufacture at scale etc. etc," the minister remarked.

Congress divided over ED raids on I-PAC

KOLKATA: The Indian National Congress (INC) leaders seem to be divided over their reactions to the Enforcement Directorate (ED)'s simultaneous raid and search operations at the office of the India Political Action Committee (I-PAC) and at the residence of I-PAC co-founder Pratik Jain at Loudon Street in Kolkata.

The differences of opinion in the matter are especially evident in the divergent reactions to the matter by a national-level leader of the state and a state-level leader in West Bengal. Senior Congress leader and senior Supreme Court advocate, Abhishek Manu Singhvi, issued a statement lambasting the ED for its raids on the I-PAC office and the



residence of its co-founder. "ED now raids political consultants because it has failed to raid facts, truth or credibility. The I-PAC raid in Kolkata is yet another chapter in the BJP's playbook of coercion. When democracy is inconvenient, agencies are weaponised," Singhvi said in his statement. Incidentally, Singhvi had

represented the Mamata government in several high-profile cases both at the Supreme Court and the Calcutta High Court. However, a completely divergent view was expressed by the former state Congress president in West Bengal and the former five-time Congress Lok Sabha member, Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury, who

questioned Mamata Banerjee's anxiety regarding the ED's actions against I-PAC.

"Why is the Chief Minister having headaches about I-PAC? Surely there is a mystery behind it," Chowdhury said in his reaction about the ED's actions and the counter-reactions by the Chief Minister on the matter. Incidentally, the Leader of the Opposition in the West Bengal Assembly, Suvendu Adhikari, also raised the same question on Thursday, after the Chief Minister stormed into the residence of Jain and the I-PAC office, accompanied by senior administrative and police officers, while the ED raids were going on. She reportedly left the place with some files and electronic documents.

Cong Law, RTI, Human Rights department being activated at district level



KAVITA SHARMA
New Delhi

The AICC Law, Human Rights and RTI Department will be expanding at all the district levels across the country. There will be a team of at least five prominent lawyers in each administrative district of the country to coordinate the activities and litigate on behalf of the party.

Disclosing this, Chairman of the AICC Law, Human Rights and RTI Department Dr Abhishek Manu Singhvi said that under the party's expansion programme spearheaded by the senior leadership including Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge and the Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha, Rahul Gandhi, the department will also be setting up units at the district level. "They will be our eyes and ears on the ground," he said about the lawyers to be appointed at the district level. Today's meeting was attended,

among others, by senior party leader Salman Khurshid and eleven state chairpersons who participated physically and virtually. The department will also set up a 'Rapid Response Force' in each state with at least five prominent lawyers who will take up the legal matters in the court for the party in their respective states. Dr Singhvi said that the meeting also decided to compile a comprehensive computerised directory of the members of the department from across the country in state-wise alphabetical order. He disclosed that in order to involve and engage those who are not with the Congress party and are in the age group of 21 and 28 years, the department will launch an internship programme under which one or two such interns will be attached with each of the 127 MPs in the beginning. Later the internship programme will be extended at the MLA level also.

'Save MGNREGA' is Congress's shield for corruption, says Shivraj Chouhan

AAYUSH GOEL
Gurugram

Escalating the political confrontation over rural employment reforms, Union Agriculture, Farmers' Welfare and Rural Development Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan on Saturday accused the Congress of launching a "Save Corruption Movement" in the garb of a "Save MGNREGA" campaign, asserting that the Opposition's real discomfort stems from the shutdown of long-entrenched



corruption channels. Addressing a press conference in the national capital, Chouhan said Congress's agitation was not driven by concern for workers but by the loss of control over a system riddled

with leakages, fake beneficiaries and contractor dominance. "Congress's pain is simple — corruption opportunities have ended," he said. Launching a direct political attack, the minister said Congress "has a problem with villages, with work, and with Ram," calling it the ideological core of the party's resistance to decentralised, transparent development. He also questioned the conduct of Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi, asking why he was absent during the Lok Sabha debate on the issue. "Where

was Rahul Gandhi when facts were being placed before Parliament? Congress must answer," Chouhan said, alleging the party chose disruption over dialogue because it lacked the courage to hear the truth. Chouhan claimed that the earlier rural employment framework had degenerated into a hub of systemic fraud. Contractors carried out works in the name of labourers, machines replaced human labour, and wages were siphoned off using fake muster rolls, he alleged.

Women Health: Will Punjab Be a Path Setter?



JAG MOHAN THAKEN

Hindustan Times on its web portal reported an incident, on Oct 15, 2025, which makes everyone shudder and reflects how humanity has dipped into a deep well of poisonous inhuman water.

"A 27-year-old woman was allegedly forced to give birth on the roadside in Palwal (Haryana) on Sunday afternoon after the doctors at the local government hospital refused to attend to her without a fresh ultrasound report, her family and police said on Tuesday, adding that the baby was declared dead soon after.

Hospital staff allegedly told the woman's family that she could not be admitted for delivery until they produced a new ultrasonography report, despite the family showing one that was a week old. With no ambulance available, the woman's husband placed her on a motorcycle and drove to a private diagnostic centre nearby, according to the family's complaint filed with the police. Ultimately the baby had to breathe his last."

Another example of shameful behaviour of Haryana government hospital staff

NDTV.com in its updated news on Jan 10, 2024, reports, "A woman gave birth to a baby on a vegetable cart on the premises of the government-run district hospital in Haryana's Ambala yesterday after the doctors allegedly refused

to pay attention to her husband's repeated requests for help. The baby was born out of doors on one of this winter's coldest evenings. The man — a resident of Dappar, a city in Punjab's Mohali district— had been running from pillar to post after managing to bring his pregnant wife to the hospital. But no one was ready even to bring a stretcher for her, he said."

Such examples are not limited to the boundaries of any state

Rajasthan NDTV, on Jul 02, 2025, posted on its web portal, "Pregnant woman gave birth to a child on the road in Karauli (Rajasthan): A shameful incident involving the health department has come to light in Karauli. A woman gave birth to a child on the road outside the district's Community Health Center (CHC). The CHC was locked due to the absence of doctors and medical staff. The pregnant woman's family members made her sit on the road. Later in the afternoon, the woman, writhing in pain, gave birth."

However, on January 5, 2026, Haryana Health Minister Arti Singh Rao has directed officials to ensure that special emphasis is laid on strengthening the state's healthcare infrastructure in the upcoming general budget. She said that, based on GIS mapping, it must be ensured that no region of the state remains deprived of health institutions and that all citizens receive equitable and quality healthcare services.

The Minister reiterated that the Haryana Government is

fully committed to the health of the common people and that every possible step will be taken to provide accessible, affordable, and quality healthcare services across the state.

Now the question arises, despite a developed state and having a double engine government of the same party for the last 11 years, both in state and centre, and as being claimed the Haryana Government is fully committed, then why it has not succeeded yet in providing an accessible, affordable, and quality healthcare services across the state? Aren't the incidents of Oct 15, 2025 and Jan 10, 2024 a stigma on the face of the BJP-led state government, if true to the extent as reported?

Amid such disturbing news, Punjab has claimed to have developed an Oasis in the Women Health Sector. Let us see what they claim?

Punjab Health and Family Welfare Minister Dr. Balbir Singh, on January 4, 2026, claimed that in a major stride toward safeguarding the health of future generations, the Punjab Government has successfully decentralized maternal healthcare, with Aam Aadmi Clinics (AACs) emerging as the new lifeline for expectant mothers. Within just four months of launching a specialized, protocol-driven pregnancy care model, the state has recorded a massive surge in service utilization, with nearly 20,000 pregnant women visiting these clinics every month.

Sharing the success of the initiative, the Minister Dr.



Balbir Singh revealed that the program has already provided free ultrasound services to over 10,000 women through a unique referral system. By empanelling nearly 500 private diagnostic centres, the government has ensured that women can access scans—which usually cost between Rs 800 and Rs 2,000—entirely free of charge. This intervention alone has saved Punjab's families an estimated Rs 1 crore in out-of-pocket expenses in a short span of 120 days.

Official data shows that less than 70 percent of pregnant women in Punjab had received their first ante-natal check-up and fewer than 60 percent had completed the recommended four check-ups, while the state's maternal mortality ratio stood at 90 per one lakh live births, higher than the national average. These figures underlined the urgent need for a comprehensive, accessible pregnancy care model across the state.

The Minister stated that Punjab witnesses nearly 4.3 lakh pregnancies every year, making early detection, regular

monitoring, and timely referral critical for safeguarding the health of mothers and infants. Over the last three years, the Mann government has established 881 Aam Aadmi Clinics, which have emerged as the backbone of Punjab's primary healthcare system, recording over 4.6 crore OPD visits and treating nearly 70,000 patients daily. Leveraging this infrastructure, the government launched an expanded, protocol-driven pregnancy care model through AACs around four months ago.

Under this reform, all essential ante-natal check-ups are now available at Aam Aadmi Clinics themselves. These include routine and critical tests such as HIV and syphilis screening, complete blood tests, sugar, thyroid, hepatitis, fatal heart rate, cholesterol and haemoglobin assessments. Where ultrasounds are required, AAC doctors issue referral slips enabling pregnant women to access free ultrasound services.

Importantly, around 5,000 women are being identified monthly as high-risk pregnan-

cies, allowing for continuous tracking, focused support, and timely referral to higher medical facilities for specialist care.

The Minister revealed that the reform has also significantly improved the patient experience. Women can now complete most pregnancy-related tests close to their homes, avoid long travel and queues at major hospitals, receive consultations within minutes, and access ultrasound services without any financial burden. From the first ante-natal visit to postnatal follow-up, the initiative strengthens the entire pregnancy care pathway by integrating technology, standardised clinical protocols, referral systems and community-level support.

On this momentous achievement, Health Minister Dr Balbir Singh said the initiative reflects the Punjab government's commitment to maternal and child health. "Under the visionary leadership of Chief Minister Bhagwant Singh Mann, Punjab is building a healthcare system that ensures every mother receives quality care close to home. With 4.3 lakh pregnancies annually, the expansion of pregnancy care services at Aam Aadmi Clinics is a transformative step and sets a new benchmark for primary healthcare in India," he said.

The government maintains that the initiative is one of Punjab's most significant investments in maternal and child health in recent years, aimed at ensuring that no woman is left behind due to geography, income constraints or lack of awareness, while steadily im-

proving health outcomes for mothers and newborns across the state.

The Health Minister said that under the Diagnostic Initiative, X-ray and ultrasound facilities are being provided at all secondary healthcare facilities or empanelled diagnostic centres at nominal government fixed rates. To bridge the human resource gap, he said that 3,620 health professionals have been recruited over the last three years, including specialists, medical officers, nurses, and frontline workers. Special initiatives such as re-employment of specialists up to 65 years and hiring on empanelment basis are further boosting specialist availability, he added.

While highlighting the government's commitment towards women-centric welfare policies, the Minister for Social Security, Women and Child Development, Punjab, Dr. Baljit Kaur, stated on December 29, 2025 that the state Government continues to take people-centric initiatives to ensure the welfare of women and strengthen maternal and child health security. In this direction, the Punjab Government has disbursed financial assistance worth Rs 26.06 crore to pregnant women and lactating mothers during the current financial year.

Dr. Baljit Kaur emphasized that the scheme is not limited to financial assistance alone, but is a significant step towards strengthening maternal health, nutrition, and newborn care. She reiterated that the Punjab Government is committed to ensuring that no mother is deprived of essential healthcare

services due to financial constraints, and that every child receives a safe and healthy start to life.

Providing further details, Dr. Baljit Kaur said that under the scheme, financial assistance of Rs 5,000 is provided on the birth of the first child, which is released in two instalments—Rs 3,000 as the first instalment and Rs 2,000 as the second instalment.

She added that on the birth of the second child, if the child is a girl, financial assistance of Rs 6,000 is provided in a single instalment. The Minister emphasized that the entire amount is transferred directly into the beneficiaries' bank accounts through Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) to ensure transparency and timely support.

The Cabinet Minister informed that so far, 69,110 pregnant and lactating women have benefited from the scheme during the current financial year. She further stated that the Punjab Government has set a target to cover 1.14 lakh beneficiary women during the financial year 2025-26 under this scheme.

Reaffirming the government's resolve, she said that the Punjab Government remains fully committed to the welfare of women and children, and ensuring that the benefits of government schemes reach every eligible beneficiary remains the top priority.

Jag Mohan Thaken is a Senior Journalist, Columnist & Political Analyst, views are personal



When capital push meets revenue drag

The Goods and Services Tax (GST) collection of Rs 1.74 lakh crore in December 2025 highlights an uncomfortable reality: the Union government's fiscal space is narrowing. A modest rise over November's Rs 1.7 lakh crore was expected. December's figures reflect economic activity from November, only the second month since the GST rate cuts took effect. Hopes that lower indirect taxes would swiftly boost consumption — and in turn, revenue — now look misplaced. In practice, households react cautiously to tax relief. Additional disposable income is more often saved or used to repay debt before fuelling spending. The pattern was clear after the income-tax overhaul in Budget 2025, which effectively exempted incomes up to Rs 12 lakh. While both the GST cuts and income-tax relief were sound in principle — and politically attractive — they have, in the short term, strained rather than stimulated public finances. The numbers bear this out. By end-November, total tax revenue was Rs 13.9 lakh crore, down 3.4 per cent year-on-year. At the same time, capital expenditure rose to Rs 6.58 lakh crore during April–November, a sharp 28 per cent increase. Revenue expenditure growth, in contrast, was muted at 2.1 per cent. But the room to cut further is limited: salaries, pensions and interest payments offer little flexibility. New revenue measures — including higher GST and excise duties on tobacco and fresh cesses on pan masala — will take effect only from February, with most gains felt in the next fiscal year. Meanwhile, persistently low wholesale inflation, averaging -0.08 per cent, is dragging down nominal GDP, which mechanically worsens deficit and debt ratios. The government has shown discipline in recent years. But it now faces a hard choice: scale back growth-oriented capital spending or risk overshooting fiscal targets. Neither option is painless — and time is running short.

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CHANDRAJIT BANERJEE EXPLORES HOW INDIA SECURES DEEPER TRUST THROUGH BALANCED TRADE AGREEMENTS

India comes of age as a trade ally



Agriculture, often a sensitive area in trade negotiations, has been handled with balance. The FTA envisages value chain development through knowledge transfers and agri-technology collaboration on apples, kiwifruit, and honey. The livelihood of farmers, however, will not stand compromised since no duty concessions have been made in dairy, sugar, spices and edible oils.

Challenges in optimal utilisation

ability in several advanced economies posing headwinds for skilled mobility, they offer alternatives and stability for India's youth and knowledge workers.

New Zealand has agreed to eliminate duties on 100% of its tariff lines, giving duty-free access to all Indian exports, while India has offered market access on 70% of its tariff lines. Benefits could accrue to India in labour-intensive sectors: textiles, apparel, leather, engineering goods, pharmaceuticals and farm products. Also, duty-free intermediate inputs such as wooden logs, coking coal, metal waste and scrap would lower manufacturing costs for final products, especially in steel, engineering goods and construction.

Inclusion of an annex on health and traditional medicine services creates new opportunities for India's pharmaceutical and health-care sectors, giving them an edge over competitors such as China and the European Union. It would also reinforce India's growing role as a global health partner.

Overall bilateral trade, which was approximately \$2.4 billion in 2024–25, is projected to double by 2030, post implementation of the FTA. However, it must be heeded that the success of any FTA lies in how it is utilised. In the past, India has exhibited a low utilisation rate of only about 25%, as in contrast with developed economies touching 70%–80%. FTAs often remain underused due to awareness gaps, compliance challenges, and non-tariff barriers (NTBs). However, the India-New Zealand FTA has provisions to address technical barriers to trade through enhanced regulatory cooperation, streamlined customs procedures and transparency.

Once implemented, the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) recommends optimally leveraging the trade pact, with business associations, large enterprises and policymakers sharing responsibility to build awareness and developing capabilities to translate the negotiated benefits into effective market access. They should also look beyond tariffs

and expand services trade, deepen skills and education linkages, and leverage mobility and diaspora networks.

A strong foundation exists

The FTA can build on the strong foundations of a growing middle class, a skilled workforce, and a reform-driven, innovation-based Indian economy. It carries elements of global integrated production and service export growth (India already ranks among the top five globally), both of which can propel Indian firms up global value chains and towards the \$7 trillion economy goal by 2030. Notably, with the India-New Zealand FTA deal, India has now concluded economic partnership agreements with all Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) members, except China.

Notwithstanding the modest quantum of bilateral trade, the significance of the India-New Zealand FTA lies not just in trade data. Rather, it marks a coming of age in the way India is viewed on the world stage. The kind of access in terms of labour mobility and services that New Zealand is willing to extend to India, reflects growing strategic trust from developed economies in bilateral economic engagements. This is a particularly welcome development amid India's trade talks with other partners, including the European Union, lending credence to India as a country with a stable trade policy, and capable of establishing norms of effective cooperation through balanced, high-quality agreements that protect domestic interests while promoting openness and growth.

Chandrajit Banerjee is Director General, Confederation of Indian Industry (CII). Views are personal.



SHUBHAM KUMAR DELVES INTO WHY FAIRER MODELS MUST VALUE EVERY LIFE EQUALLY

Beyond wages: Toward just compensation



Every year, on New Year's Eve, a revelry results in a number of road accidents across India. Some of these result in fatalities. John Donne wrote, "Each man's death diminishes me, for I am involved in mankind." His words remind us that every death carries a weight greater than its statistics. Yet, when a family loses someone in a road accident, the language of justice turns into the language of arithmetic. The Motor Accident Claims Tribunal multiplies income by an age-based factor, adds modest sums for love, care, and funeral expenses, and announces the result as 'just compensation'.

What begins as a legal exercise often ends as a moral puzzle. A doctor and a homemaker may lose their lives in the same accident, yet the law values their absence differently. The doctor's family receives several lakhs of rupees more than the vendor's, and the homemaker's loss is often measured in token figures. The problem lies not in the intent of the law but in its method. A welfare statute that was meant to bring relief has quietly absorbed the habits of the marketplace, where worth is measured by earning, not by being.

The arithmetic of loss

Section 168 of the Motor Vehicles Act, 1988, empowers tribunals to award compensation that "appears to be just." To bring consistency, the Supreme Court in *Sarla Verma v. DTC* and later in *National Insurance Co. v. Pranay Sethi* introduced the multiplier method. The formula multiplies a victim's annual income by an age-based factor and adds fixed sums under standard categories such as loss of consortium, loss of estate, and funeral costs. The goal was fairness through uniformity.

In practice, uniformity has produced hierarchy. When a victim has no formal income, tribunals assign a "notional income," often a

symbolic amount detached from real contribution. Children, homemakers, and informal workers are thus treated as marginal lives in the eyes of arithmetic. The Supreme Court, in *Kirti v. Oriental Insurance*, recognised unpaid domestic work as genuine labour and sought to correct the imbalance, but the structure remains tethered to income. In a system that counts only what can be measured, those who build, teach, care, and nurture are often valued least.

Article 14 of the Constitution promises equality before the law, yet a system that compensates the salaried more generously than the self-employed or the unwaged risks violating that promise. Equality cannot depend on economic visibility. Article 21, which protects the right to life with dignity, faces a similar tension. Dignity is intrinsic, not conditional. When compensation fluctuates with income, dignity becomes a privilege rather than a principle. The mason who built the city and the child who never drew a salary deserve recognition beyond their wage potential.

The contrast with other modes of transport

is revealing. Under the Railways Act, 1989, the death of any passenger attracts a fixed sum of Rs 8 lakh. Under the Carriage by Air Act, 1972, airlines pay a uniform amount for every deceased passenger. On the road, however, the law insists on knowing one's income before assigning value to one's life.

Even the notion of unlimited liability offers little comfort. Section 147 of the Motor Vehicles Act requires insurers to cover "the amount of liability incurred" for death or bodily injury. There is no statutory ceiling. In theory, the liability is unlimited. In reality, it remains bounded by income. The absence of a cap matters little when the base figure is drawn from an unequal scale.

The difficulty is not only procedural but philosophical. The American philosopher, Lon Fuller, described the inner morality of law as its duty to be coherent and fair. A formula that equates life with livelihood cannot satisfy either. The American legal philosopher and jurist, Ronald Dworkin, envisioned law as integrity, a system that treats every person with equal concern and respect. When tribunals

attach greater value to some lives over others, they move from integrity to inequity. For the American philosopher, Martha Nussbaum, dignity lies in capability — the real freedom to live, love, and flourish. Income may enlarge these freedoms, but it cannot define them. The law, by tying worth to wages, narrows the meaning of both justice and life.

Towards a fairer formula

A fairer design must begin with a universal baseline. Every life should attract a fixed "dignity floor," an amount payable in every case of fatality or grievous injury, irrespective of income. Beyond that, income-linked additions can address actual financial loss, preserving fairness without eroding equality. The law should also carve out a separate category of "dignity damages" to recognise grief, companionship, and emotional harm. These amounts must evolve with inflation and social conditions. Equally important is the need for process reform. The Delhi High Court's Motor Accident Claims Annuity Deposit model, which integrates police, hospitals, and banks, shows that technology can deliver compensation swiftly and transparently.

Defenders of the current model often argue that compensation must restore dependents to their previous standard of living and that income is a neutral measure of loss. This reasoning fits private contracts better than public welfare. The goal of social law is not to mirror the market but to correct its distortions. A universal floor can guarantee recognition for all, while proportional increments can accommodate differences. In this balance between equality and equity lies the true meaning of 'just compensation.'

Shubham Kumar, academic, lawyer and public policy consultant. Views are personal.



BOOKS: REVIEW

Book highlights Rajnarayan's courage to stand alone

On the 39th death anniversary of socialist leader Rajnarayan, reading *Rajnarayan: Ek Naam Nahi Itihaas Hai!* is not just an intellectual exercise — it is a moral reckoning. Edited by my friend from Lucknow, the noted socialist Shahnawaz Ahmad Qadri, this 512-page volume compelled me to confront long-held misconceptions. This review is thus part critique, part confession.

For much of my life, Rajnarayan was portrayed — through early conversations in the Rashtra Seva Dal and even in Maharashtra's socialist circles — as a political eccentric, almost a caricature. This book systematically dismantles that image, revealing instead a principled, courageous, and consequential figure in post-Independence Indian politics.

Qadri's volume succeeds by documenting Rajnarayan not

as a theoretician, but as a doer. After Dr Ram Manohar Lohia, he emerges here as the most authentic embodiment of Lohia's triad: "jail, vote, and spade." Born into the royal family of Kashi in 1917, Rajnarayan renounced privilege in favour of public service. The contrast is striking — a man of feudal lineage who lived like a fakir, refusing wealth, power, and dynastic politics.

The personal is political in Rajnarayan's life. Despite having four sons and a daughter, none entered politics. They worked in ordinary jobs — as farmers, civil servants, and bankers — living by the values their father espoused. This rejection of dynastic entitlement reinforces the book's central claim: that Rajnarayan's private life mirrored his public ideals.

The political journey begins early. At thirteen, he entered public life as a student leader at Banaras University. Arrested

in 1939 for opposing the British war effort, he would go on to spend more time in prison after Independence than before. For him, jail was not a badge of honour but a cost of conviction.

Among the book's most compelling sections is the account of his post-Independence reforms. True to Lohia's belief that "the tiller should own the land," Rajnarayan handed over his ancestral land to tenant farmers. Few leaders — socialist or otherwise — have lived their ideology with such consequence.

Equally powerful is the retelling of the 1956 Kashi Vishwanath temple-entry movement. Despite police repression and injury, Rajnarayan persisted until the "Entry Prohibited for Dalits" sign was removed. These chapters portray a man who took on caste discrimination not with gestures, but with sacrifice.

His campaign to remove colonial-era statues — most famous-



Rajnarayan: Ek Naam Nahi Itihaas Hai! By Shahnawaz Ahmad Qadri Self-published; 530 pages; Rs 600

ly Queen Victoria's in Beniya Bagh — further underscored his view that political freedom was incomplete without mental decolonisation. Each such act, the book shows, often came at the cost of another arrest.

The heart of the book lies in the Indira Gandhi years. His 1971 decision to challenge her in Rae Bareilly, when no one else dared, seemed quixotic. Yet the Allahabad High Court's 1975 verdict against her proved his faith in constitutional methods. That transformation — from ridicule to vindication — is one of the most dramatic arcs in Indian politics.

Later chapters are no less instructive. As Health Minister, Rajnarayan gave formal recognition to homeopathy, Ayurveda,

and other traditional systems. As someone who once campaigned for this very recognition as a homeopathy student, I found this especially meaningful.

Perhaps the book's most difficult but vital contribution is its honest treatment of Rajnarayan's break with the Janata Party over the RSS issue. His resignation from the cabinet rather than compromise on secular values is a sobering contrast to today's politics.

Qadri deserves credit for the book's depth. It blends memoirs, ideological writings, interviews, and over 140 pages of parliamentary documentation covering 31 national issues. It is both archive and argument.

Rajnarayan: Ek Naam Nahi Itihaas Hai! is not hagiography. It is a necessary corrective. On this anniversary, it reminds us that Rajnarayan was not an outlier — but a benchmark. And by that measure, today's politics stands exposed.

This review is adapted from a Facebook post by Dr Suresh Khairnar, former president of the Rashtra Seva Dal.



NSE, IGX Collaborate to Launch Indian Natural Gas Futures Contract

MUMBAI: The National Stock Exchange of India Ltd (NSE) is in ongoing discussions with the Indian Gas Exchange (IGX) to launch an Indian Natural Gas Futures contract, a move aimed at strengthening the country's natural gas market ecosystem, according to an official statement on Friday.

The proposed futures product aims to offer market participants a transparent, efficient risk management tool aligned with India's evolving natural gas pricing framework, the exchange said.

NSE said the collaboration would combine its deep derivatives market expertise with IGX's leadership in spot natural gas trading, price discovery and physical market development. "The introduction of Indian Natural Gas Futures is expected to benefit gas producers, city gas distribution companies, power generators, fertiliser manufacturers, industrial consumers, traders and financial participants, by enabling effective hedging against price volatility and improving long-term planning," the statement said.



NSE Chief Business Development Officer Sriram Krishnan said the partnership "marks a significant step in NSE's efforts to deepen India's commodity derivatives markets," adding that natural gas is emerging as a critical transition fuel for India's energy mix. Krishnan said that a domestic futures contract would "enhance price transparency, improve risk management capabilities, and support the development of a credible gas price benchmark aligned with

Indian market fundamentals." "By leveraging NSE's market infrastructure and IGX's physical market expertise, we aim to create a futures product that is relevant, liquid and trusted by the entire gas value chain," he further said. The proposed collaboration is aligned with India's broader objective of increasing the share of natural gas in the energy basket and promoting market-based pricing mechanisms.

Following regulatory approvals, NSE and IGX will announce

“By leveraging NSE's market infrastructure and IGX's physical market expertise, we aim to create a futures product that is relevant, liquid and trusted by the entire gas value chain”

details and timelines on contract design and work closely with stakeholders to ensure a smooth launch of the proposed derivatives contract. The government has taken various measures to enhance the availability of natural gas for power generation, which include expansion of the National Gas Grid to connect domestic gas sources as well as Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) terminals to power plants.

India's Data Centre Capacity More Than Doubled In 2025



NEW DELHI: India's data centre capacity additions more than doubled in 2025, reaching 387 MW IT — from 191 MW IT added in 2024 — thus marking a robust year-on-year growth of 103 per cent, a report showed on Thursday.

On the demand side, data centre absorption rose to 427 MW IT in 2025 from 407 MW IT in the previous year, registering a 5 per cent annual increase. Mumbai and Chennai led absorption, together accounting for 70 per cent of the total at 427 MW IT, driven by hyperscalers amid rising cloud adoption, AI workloads, 5G rollout, and IoT demand, according to Savills India's new report. The market is projected to triple to over 4 GW IT

by 2030, growing at a CAGR of 23 per cent. "MW IT capacity" refers to the electrical power (Megawatts) a data centre facility can provide for its IT equipment. Capacity additions surged 103 per cent year-on-year to 387 MW IT from 191 MW IT in 2024, pushing operational stock to 1,520 MW IT — a 34 per cent increase — led by Mumbai (34 per cent supply share), Delhi-NCR (20 per cent), and Chennai (19 per cent).

Hyperscale data centres dominate growth fuelled by global hyperscalers, domestic cloud players, and institutional investors, while enterprise colocation sustains demand alongside edge data centres in Tier 2 and 3 cities, said the report.

Emerging markets like Visakhapatnam, Kolkata (48 per cent CAGR projected), and Hyderabad (44 per cent CAGR)

gain momentum from policy support, cost advantages, undersea cables, and low-latency needs for 5G/IoT.

"With data centre absorption estimated at 430 MW in 2025, driven by both enterprise and hyperscale demand, India's digital infrastructure growth is gaining strong momentum. Rising cloud adoption by enterprises is accelerating demand from global hyperscalers and domestic cloud players, while emerging locations such as Visakhapatnam, backed by policy support and cost advantages are strengthening India's attractiveness as a data centre destination," said Srihari Srinivasan, Director and Lead Data Centre Services, Savills India.

Beyond major metros, the rollout of 5G and the growing use of mobile streaming and digital services are driving hyperscale demand across Tier 2 cities to meet local data and latency requirements. These developments reinforce India's position as a fast-emerging global hub for scalable and long-term data centre investments, Srinivasan added.

SEBI extends timeline for extra incentives to mutual fund distributors till March 1



NEW DELHI: Markets regulator Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) on Wednesday extended the timeline for implementing an additional incentive structure for mutual fund distributors aimed at bringing in new investors from smaller cities and more women investors into the mutual fund ecosystem.

The new incentive framework, which was earlier scheduled to come into effect from February 1, 2026, will now be implemented from March 1, 2026.

SEBI said the decision was taken after receiving feedback from the mutual fund industry, which flagged operational challenges in setting up the required systems and processes for smooth implementation.

"Based on the feedback received from the industry, citing operational difficulties in putting place the requisite systems and processes for smooth implementation of the additional incentive structure, it has been decided to extend the implementation timeline," the market regulator said.

"Accordingly, the provisions of the aforesaid circular shall now come into effect from March 01, 2026," it added.

The incentive structure is designed to encourage distributors to onboard new individual investors from B-30 cities, which refer to locations beyond the top 30 cities, as well as new women investors from any part of the country.

The move is part of SEBI's broader effort to deepen mutual fund penetration and improve financial inclusion.

Under the revised framework, asset management companies will pay distributors an additional commission equal to 1 per cent of the first lump-sum investment or the first-year SIP amount, subject to a maximum of Rs 2,000.

This incentive will be paid only if the investor remains invested for at least one year.

SEBI clarified that the additional commission will be paid from the 2 basis points already earmarked by AMCs for investor education and will be over and above the existing trail commissions.

However, the regulator has made it clear that dual incentives will not be allowed for the same woman investor from B-30 cities.

SEBI Revamps Stockbroker Rules after 30 Years, Aims to Ease Compliance and Boost Business



NEW DELHI: Market regulator SEBI has overhauled its stockbroker regulations for the first time in more than three decades, replacing the 1992 rules with the new Sebi (Stock Brokers) Regulations, 2026.

The move is aimed at simplifying compliance, improving clarity, and making it easier for brokers to do business.

Under the new framework, stockbrokers will now be allowed to carry out activities that fall under other financial regulators, as long as they follow the rules prescribed by those authorities.

The market regulator said such activities will be governed by the concerned financial sector regulator, not by Sebi.

The regulator has also rewritten the rules in simpler language, removed outdated provisions, and introduced clearer definitions.

The regulations are now organised into eleven chapters that cover all major aspects of stockbroking, making them easier to read and understand.

Adani Ports Berths India's 1st-Ever Fully Laden Very Large Crude Carrier at Mundra Port

AHMEDABAD: In a defining moment for India's maritime and energy infrastructure, Adani Ports and Special Economic Zone Ltd (APSEZ) on Thursday announced the berthing of India's first-ever fully laden Very Large Crude Carrier (VLCC) at its Mundra Port.

With the docking of Mt New Renown, which has a total cargo capacity of 3.3 lakh m³ (meter cube), Mundra became the first port in India to handle Fully Laden VLCC at Berth, the Adani Group company said in a statement. The handling of Mt New Renown was executed under challenging conditions with strong currents, winds and sea states, showcasing expertise, coordination and operational excellence of the APSEZ marine



team and port management. Mundra's VLCC jetty is seamlessly connected via a 489 km crude oil pipeline to the HPCL Rajasthan Refinery at Barmer — one of India's most strategic refining assets. This direct connectivity significantly enhances

India's energy security; efficiency of large-scale crude imports; supply chain resilience; and regional economic growth across Gujarat and Rajasthan.

The port facility allows berthing of a fully laden VLCC at maximum displacement,

represents a transformational shift in India's crude oil logistics, enabling safer, faster and more cost-efficient crude handling through direct jetty operations.

Direct jetty berthing of fully laden VLCCs is available at only a limited number of ports across the world due to extreme draft, displacement and infrastructure requirements of these vessels.

With this achievement, Mundra Port is now among select global crude handling hubs, strengthening India's position in the global maritime and energy map. Mundra's advanced vessel-handling capability eliminates dependency on offshore Single Point Moorings (SPMs) or lighter operations that were traditionally used for such large vessels, said the company.

ONGC May Get Unpaid Dividend of \$500 Million from Its Venezuelan Oil Project

NEW DELHI: ONGC may receive nearly \$500 million in unpaid dividends from its Venezuelan oil project as the evolving US-Venezuela situation has revived expectations of long-pending payouts from the South American nation, global brokerage firm Jefferies has said.

Market experts are anticipating that a potential US takeover of Venezuela's oil industry could eventually lead to the lifting of sanctions on Venezuelan crude exports.

Although US President Donald Trump has said that sanctions remain in place for now, any future relaxation could bring more oil supply into the global market, putting pressure on crude prices.

ONGC could benefit if the situation improves, as the company is due to receive around \$500 million in unpaid dividends from the San Cristobal project for the period up to 2014.

However, production at the field halted after 2014, resulting in no dividend accruals in the subsequent years.

ONGC has exposure to Venezuela's oil sector through its overseas arm, ONGC Videsh Limited (OVL).

The company holds a 40 per cent participating interest in the San Cristobal Project in Venezuela.

In addition, OVL, along with Indian Oil Corporation and Oil



India, owns an 11 per cent stake in the Carabobo-1 oil field.

Brokerage firm Jefferies cautioned that while there may be short-term positives, a medium-term risk for ONGC lies in a potential revival of Venezuelan oil output.

Higher production from the country could add to global supply and weigh on crude oil prices, impacting upstream oil companies.

Meanwhile, commodity experts believe the US-Venezuela conflict has added a geopolitical risk premium to oil prices, even though the immediate impact on global supply remains limited.

According to Aamir Makda, Commodity and Currency Analyst at Choice Broking, Venezuela currently produces between 800,000 and 1.1 million barrels of oil per day, accounting for around one per cent of global supply.

"While the immediate effect on global oil supply is limited, the change in control over Venezuela's vast oil reserves poses critical implications for heavy crude pricing and long-term supply forecasts," he noted.

Bharat Coking Coal Limited has Rs 1,071.11 cr IPO

DOMINICK RODRIGUES
Mumbai

Bharat Coking Coal Limited is coming out with an IPO priced at Rs 21 to Rs 23 per share — aggregating to Rs 1,071.11 crores — that will open on January 9, 2026 and close on January 13, 2026.

The IPO's total issue size is 465,700,000 equity shares. IDBI Capital Markets & securities Limited and ICICI Se-



curities Limited are the book running lead manager, and KFin Technologies Limited is the registrar to the offer. The Company is looking at raising its production with focus for 300 million tons steel output

by 2030. The officials said here recently that the IPO's proceeds will go towards introducing new technology for deeper mining and also setting up newer mines in the country.

BCCL is the largest coking coal producer in India with 58.50% of domestic coking coal production in FY2025 and estimated reserve of approximately 7,910 million tons, as of April 1, 2024. BCCL — a wholly-owned subsidiary of Coal India Limited

and conferred with Mini Ratna status in 2014 — produces various grades of coking coal, non-coking coal and washed coals for steel and power industries. The company recorded its highest raw coal offtake of 39.27 million tons in FY2024. It operates a network of 34 operational mines, and its Revenue from Operations was Rs 5,659.02 crores during six months ended September 30, 2025, and its Net Profit was Rs 123.88 crore.

From Silos to Solutions: Lessons from a Pharma Alliance



DR. ANIL KUMAR ANGRISH
Co-opetition as the concept and term was introduced by Adam M. Brandenburger and Barry J. Nalebuff in their book titled, 'Co-opetition: A Revolutionary Mindset That Combines Competition and Cooperation' that was published in 1996. This work has guided many organizations to strategically combine 'cooperation' and 'competition'. While describing the 'The Rules of Co-opetition', authors described that the fierce 'competition' between Cold War rivals (the United States and the erstwhile USSR) was preceded by proposal of 'cooperation' for a joint mission to the moon that could not materialize. Joint mission to moon was proposed by John F. Kennedy, the U.S. President to Nikita Khrushchev, the leader of the Soviet Union in 1961. The US and the Soviet Union pioneered joint mission — the Apollo-Soyuz Test Project (1975) which became a precedent for cooperation. Rivals coming together and cooperating for mutual benefit is now well-known. Knowledge-sharing is helpful for collaborating entities. In ancient texts of India, knowl-

edge-sharing has always been appreciated. A Sanskrit verse is apt in this background which reads — 'Vidya vibhajanam vardhate', that means 'knowledge increases through sharing.' This verse directly states that 'sharing knowledge amplifies it.' Hence, sharing knowledge is considered a virtuous act which leads to greater wisdom and good.

Multiple industry associations exist which cover diverse sectors and work for their members, e.g., PHD Chamber of Commerce and Industry (PHDCCI), Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry (FICCI), Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India (ASSOCHAM), etc. There are multiple sector-specific industry associations too, e.g., Indian Pharmaceutical Alliance (IPA), Organisation of Pharmaceutical Producers of India (OPPI), Indian Drug Manufacturers Association (IDMA), Association of Biotechnology-Led Enterprises (ABLE), Bulk Drug Manufacturers' Association (India) (BDMAI) to name a few. These forums equip members through knowledge sharing through various mechanisms such as workshop, seminars, etc. Associations or groupings

Table 1: Three Levels of Co-opetition among LAZORR Members (2011)

Level	Members	Meetings
Tier I	Six CEOs	Once in 3 Months
Tier II	Area Heads ('Captains')	Monthly or Bi-monthly
Tier III	Field Officers of Companies	-

have their own mandate, e.g., the Indian Drugs Manufacturers' Association (IDMA) represents the pharmaceutical industry on prominent issues such as regulatory affairs, pricing, and other policy matters, besides playing the role in keeping business leaders, media, and the public informed about the industry. Similarly, Indian Pharmaceutical Alliance (IPA) represents 23 national-level pharmaceutical companies which account for over 85.0 per cent of the private sector investment in Pharma R&D, contribute over 80.0 per cent of pharma exports, besides serving approximately two-third of the domestic market. One missing link is the sharing of their best practices amongst members so that each member can learn from other and imbibite those practices to improve own working.

All industry associations can take cues from a unique initiative that was taken by Satish Khanna, former Group President (APIs) of Lupin. In July 2010, Satish Khanna wrote to Heads of six pharmaceutical

companies regarding the need for a common platform with underlying motto to enhance learning and sharing experience. One nationalistic objective was achieved as leading pharmaceutical companies from India came together to cooperate and learn from each other.

Initially, five pharmaceutical companies which came together included Lupin, Aurobindo Pharma, Zydus Cadila (now, Zydus Lifesciences), Orchid Chemicals and Pharmaceuticals (now, Orchid Pharma Limited), and Ranbaxy Laboratories (now, part of Sun Pharma). Hence, the alliance got the acronym — LAZORR as each letter represented the name of the member company. Entry of Dr. Reddy's Laboratories (DRL) in the alliance got delayed due to some organizational restructuring issues. DRL became part of the initiative in July 2011, and acronym of the alliance was changed to LAZORR.

To give shape to the Initiative, Satish Khanna convinced heads of five pharma companies to give 20 senior professionals of diverse background (representatives from R&D, Marketing,



Plant Heads, Head Office) from each company. The first discussion that took place in Mumbai had Heads (CEOs/Owners) of leading Indian pharma companies. Second meeting took place in Baroda with 100 professionals from five companies where Khanna dealt with doubts and questions that professionals had. Professionals had doubts and questions about 'what to share and what not to share' among 'competitors' as pharmaceutical business involves confidentiality, and business secrets.

One can imagine the difficulty in responding to the 'questions posed by those who were meeting Khanna for the first time', who were not re-

porting to him', and 'majority of attendees from those companies where Khanna had not served'. Finally, Khanna could convince all those who had to actually play active role in the Dream Team of one Company — LAZORR. Expectations from the team involved commitment to live up to the dream. Khanna told the group of professionals not to share two things — R&D of new molecules, and anything about which they feel that there is possibility of misuse.

Liberal sharing of best practices by constituents of LAZORR, these companies could bring down their operating costs, and improve their

efficiency. LAZORR constituents started collaborating on areas such as procurement, formulations, material handling, solvents, energy, safety and water. Different platforms such as 'Water Platform', 'Procurement Platform', 'Energy Platform', etc. were formed and each platform was headed by the representative from the company which had strength in that area. The Group also contemplated the use of 'knowledge bridging' through learning from other sectors such as chemicals, automobile, etc. to improve efficiency. Gains accrued to group members in terms of reduction in power bill, reduction in water usage, and in many other areas of cooperation.

In a recent podcast (2025, July 2), Satish Khanna shared that under this initiative, representatives of alliance pharma companies learnt from their counterparts from other pharma companies besides learning from their intra-company members too. Further, the Owners and the CEOs reviewed the performance of the Initiative in a timely manner by putting in place the proper Management Information System (MIS), through presentations, and Reviews.

The framework of LAZORR has immense potential for rep-

lication in other industries. Industry associations are in a position to implement this framework by identifying the common ground for cooperation. One such example is of AYUSH and Herbal products. India's exports of AYUSH and Herbal products in 2024-25 stood at \$688.89 million. In contrast to this, pharmaceutical exports from India stood at \$30.49 billion in the FY25. AYUSH and Herbal industry can learn a lot from pharmaceutical industry in areas such as rigorous scientific validation through R&D and Clinical Trials, stringent quality control, standardization, documentation to name a few.

While writing this column, I wish to acknowledge my recent interaction with Mr. Satish Khanna who shared details on the initiative, along with links to his podcasts, and wish to thank Dr. Deepak Chhabra for connecting with Satish Khanna, who happens to be alumnus of my alma mater — Panjab University, Chandigarh.

Dr. Anil Kumar Angrish — Associate Professor (Finance and Accounting), Department of Pharmaceutical Management, NIPER S.A.S. Nagar (Mohali), **DISCLAIMER:** Views are personal and do not represent the views of the Institute.

RBI Seeks Public Feedback on Revised Bank Dividend & Profit Remittance Framework

NEW DELHI: The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has invited comments on the draft 'Prudential Norms on Dividend and Remittance of Profit' Directions, 2026, which propose a revised framework for the declaration of dividends and remittance of profits by banks in India. The draft has been released for public consultation until February 5, 2026, with feedback to be submitted via the 'Connect2Regulate' section on the RBI website.

Background and Objective: The draft Directions follow a review of the existing prudential norms governing dividend declaration and profit remittance by foreign banks operating in branch mode in India.

An earlier draft was issued for comments on January 2, 2024, and stakeholder feedback has been incorporated into the current draft. The revisions propose a new methodology for calculating the maximum eligible dividend payout.

Coverage Across Bank Categories: The draft Directions apply across multiple banking categories, encompassing commercial banks, small finance banks, payment banks, regional rural banks, and local area banks.



Key Provisions: Under the draft Directions for commercial banks, a bank will be permitted to declare dividends or remit profits only if it satisfies certain prudential conditions.

These include maintaining compliance with regulatory capital requirements at the end of the previous financial year and ensuring that capital remains above the prescribed level throughout the year of the proposed dividend payout.

Additionally, banks incorporated in India must report a positive adjusted Profit After Tax (PAT) for the relevant period, while foreign banks operating through branches must have a positive PAT for the period for which profits are to be remitted. Similar prudential conditions are being proposed for Small Finance Banks, Payment Banks, Regional Rural Banks, and Local Area Banks, requiring compliance with regulatory capital norms both before and after dividend distribution, ensuring a positive adjusted profit after tax for the relevant financial year, and confirming that no existing restrictions on dividend declaration have been imposed by the RBI or any other authority.

Data in the Advance Estimates: The growth is aided by a strong rebound in manufacturing sector which is seen accelerating to 7 percent from 4.5 percent last year, despite disruptions caused by 50 percent US tariffs on Indian goods.

Data released on Wednesday by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) showed that while real GDP growth is projected to rise from 6.5 percent in 2024-25, nominal GDP growth, which does not adjust for inflation, is set to fall to a five-year low of 8 percent.

In rupee terms, nominal GDP for 2025-26 is estimated at Rs 357 lakh crore. At an exchange rate of Rs 89.89 per US dollar, this translates to a GDP size of nearly USD 4 trillion.

Under the current series, GDP growth was recorded at 7.6 percent in 2022-23, 9.2 percent in 2023-24 and 6.5 percent in 2024-25. The

India's Real GDP Growth Likely to Accelerate to 7.4 per cent in FY26: Advance Estimates



NEW DELHI: India's real GDP growth is expected to rise sharply to 7.4 percent in the current fiscal 2025-26, according to the government's first advance estimate.

Upcoming Data Releases and Revisions: On February 27, the MoSPI will release GDP data for the October-December 2025 quarter under the new series, along with the second advance estimate for 2025-26 and revised GDP numbers for the previous three years.

Overall, gross value added (GVA) growth is seen rising to 7.3 percent from 6.4 percent in the previous fiscal, supported largely by manufacturing and services.

final GDP growth figure for 2025-26 will be available only in February 2028.

Sectoral Performance: Manufacturing Up, Agriculture Slows: On the sectoral front, manufacturing growth is projected to rebound strongly in the current fiscal, reflecting improved industrial activity despite global trade headwinds.

Agricultural growth is expected to moderate to 3.1 percent, down from 4.6 percent in 2024-25, indicating a cooling in farm output. The construction sector is forecast to expand by 7 percent, slower than the 9.4 percent growth recorded last year but still pointing to sustained infrastructure and real estate activity.

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Proposal to Raise EPF Wage Ceiling Back on Table, May be Increased to Rs 25,000-30,000



NEW DELHI: A bid to raise the monthly wage ceiling for mandatory coverage under the Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) is under consideration. This could significantly expand India's social security net, according to a report by The Times of India. The wage ceiling, currently set at Rs 15,000 per month, may be increased to Rs 25,000-30,000, the report said. The ceiling determines the salary level up to which employees in EPFO-covered establishments are required to make mandatory provident fund contributions.

Earlier Resistance from Employers: The government had earlier considered raising the wage threshold to Rs 25,000 but dropped the proposal amid employer opposition over higher compliance costs, with some seeking lower contribution rates. In contrast, trade unions have pushed for a higher cut-off of Rs 30,000, arguing the current limit is outdated.

Outdated Ceiling Leaves Many Workers Excluded: The EPF wage ceiling was last revised in September 2014, when it was raised from Rs 6,500 to Rs 15,000. Since then, wages, particularly in urban areas, have increased sharply. Minimum monthly wages in several states, even for unskilled workers, now exceed the existing ceiling. As a result, a large number of low-income and minimum-wage earners remain outside the ambit of mandatory EPF coverage, limiting their access to formal retirement savings and pension benefits.

Supreme Court Directs Review: The Supreme Court earlier this week directed the labour ministry to review the EPF wage ceiling within a four-month timeframe. The court's direction is expected to accelerate deliberations on revising the threshold. According to the report, raising the ceiling could help substantially widen the EPFO subscriber base and bring more workers, particularly from the unorganised and semi-formal sectors, under the retirement fund body's coverage.

CCPA 'Proposes' February 1 date for Union Budget 2026

NEW DELHI: The Cabinet Committee on Parliamentary Affairs (CCPA) on Wednesday proposed presenting the Union Budget for 2026-27 on February 1, even though the date falls on a Sunday. If approved, this would mark a rare instance in recent years of the Budget being tabled on a weekend, as the government sticks to its February 1 timeline to ensure timely implementation of budget proposals from the start of the financial year, as per media reports.

The Budget Session will begin on January 28 with the President's address to a joint sitting of both Houses of Parliament. The Economic Survey, which reviews the state of the economy, will be tabled in Parliament on January 29, according to reports.

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman will be presenting her ninth consecutive Union Budget, making it the 88th Budget since India's Independence. Since 2017, the Union Budget has been presented at 11 am on February 1 after the government advanced the date from the earlier tradition of February 28.

Finance Ministry Launches 3-Year PPP Pipeline with 852 Projects Valued Over Rs 17 Lakh Cr

NEW DELHI: The Department of Economic Affairs (DEA), Ministry of Finance, has unveiled a comprehensive three-year Public-Private Partnership (PPP) project pipeline, in line with announcements made in the Union Budget 2025-26, aimed at accelerating structured infrastructure development across India.

The pipeline consolidates 852 projects across various Central Infrastructure Ministries and States/Union Territories, with an estimated total cost exceeding Rs 17 lakh crore. According to the Finance Ministry, this initiative is intended to provide early visibility of upcoming PPP projects, enabling investors, developers, and stakeholders to plan and invest more strategically.

Central Ministries Leading



the Pipeline: Data from the PPP India portal indicates that the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways leads the central pipeline with 108 projects valued at Rs 8,76,889.12 crore. Other significant contributions come from the Ministry of Power with 46 projects totaling Rs

3,40,230.7 crore, the Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways with 22 projects worth Rs 37,644.58 crore, the Ministry of Railways with 13 projects valued at Rs 30,903.65 crore, and the Department of Water Resources, River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation with 29 projects

totaling Rs 12,253.8 crore.

These projects cover key infrastructure sectors including transport, energy, ports, and water resources, reflecting the government's focus on leveraging private participation to accelerate national development.

State-Level Participation: At the state and union territory level, Andhra Pradesh leads with 270 projects valued at Rs 1,15,578.81 crore, followed by Tamil Nadu with 70 projects worth Rs 87,639.65 crore, Madhya Pradesh with 21 projects totaling Rs 65,496.5 crore, Uttar Pradesh with 89 projects valued at Rs 11,518.55 crore, Jammu & Kashmir with 57 projects worth Rs 21,374.31 crore, and Rajasthan with 12 projects amounting to Rs 22,741.04 crore.

Centre Launches Rs 7,295 Crore Export Finance Support Schemes for MSMEs

NEW DELHI: The government launched export finance support schemes worth Rs 7,295 crore to improve access to trade credit for micro, small and medium exporters over the next six years (FY26-31), officials said. The measures are part of the Export Promotion Mission approved by the Union Cabinet in November 2025.



Interest Subvention to Lower Cost of Export Credit: A key component is the 'Interest Subvention for Pre- and Post-shipment Rupee Export Credit'

scheme with an outlay of about Rs 5,181 crore over six years. The scheme will help MSME exporters access rupee-denominated working-capital finance at competitive rates, below market interest costs, reported BS.

An initial provision will also clear about Rs 830 crore of arrears. A base interest subvention of 2.75 percent has been provided, with additional incentives for exports to under-represented or emerging markets, subject to operational readiness. The annual benefit is capped at Rs 50 lakh per firm, and the scheme will cover roughly 75 percent of tariff lines. Guidelines will be issued by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) and the Directorate General of Foreign Trade (DGFT).

provided, with additional incentives for exports to under-represented or emerging markets, subject to operational readiness. The annual benefit is capped at Rs 50 lakh per firm, and the scheme will cover roughly 75 percent of tariff lines. Guidelines will be issued by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) and the Directorate General of Foreign Trade (DGFT).

Levels of NPA in the banking sector are expected to decline further

SATISH SINGH

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) published its half yearly Financial Stability Report on December 31, 2025, highlighting a notable improvement in the banking sector's asset quality. The report disclosed that the gross non-performing asset (GNPA) ratio of banks had dropped to an encouraging 2.1% as of September 2025. If the positive trends continue in the coming months, the RBI projects that the GNPA for a cohort of 46 banks could decline further to an impressive 1.9% by March 2027. Even in the event of unfavourable economic conditions, the report expects the GNPA ratio to remain within 3.2% to 4.2%, indicating a resilient banking sector.

In the previous Financial Stability Report, the RBI revealed that public sector banks had experienced some of the highest GNPA levels recorded, peaking at 14.58% in March 2018. This figure had significantly improved, decreasing to 3.12% by September 2024.

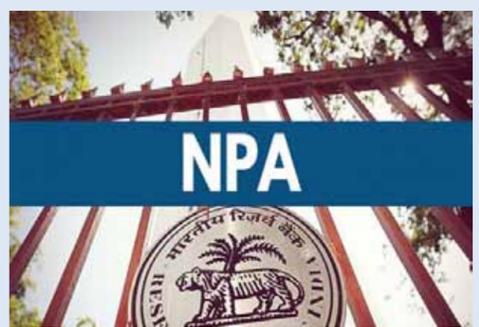
The report attributes the enhancement in asset quality to several key factors: a consistent improvement in the portfolio quality of large borrowers, a more expedited recovery process for stressed loans, the strategic write-off of non-performing asset (NPA) accounts, and sustained demand for credit. Furthermore, the returns on assets (ROA) and return on equity (ROE) of banks have surged in recent years, reaching their highest

levels in a decade, thereby facilitating the downward trend in the GNPA ratio.

The most recent stability report also highlights a favourable increase in the capital-to-risk-weighted assets ratio (CRAR) for banks. As of September 2025, the CRAR was recorded at 16% for public-sector banks and 18.1% for private-sector banks. This represents a significant rise from the 11.45% recorded in March 2015, reaching 15.43% by September 2024. These ratios suggest that banks are well-positioned to manage risks effectively; a higher percentage indicates sufficient capital reserves to absorb potential shocks.

The report anticipates a slight decrease in the total Capital Adequacy Ratio (CAR) for 46 major Scheduled Commercial Banks (SCBs)—projected to dip from 17.1% in September 2025 to 16.8% by March 2027. Given that this adjustment is expected to be marginal, there is no cause for alarm, as the Indian economy is forecasted to remain robust in the coming years. Additionally, the report reveals a reduced reliance of Scheduled Commercial Banks on large borrowers, a positive trend in risk management. While large borrowers still account for approximately 44% of total loans, their share of bad loans has declined to 33.8%.

Currently, the 12 public sector banks collectively command around 60% of the banking sector's total business. In the first half of the fiscal year 2025-26, they reported profits of Rs 93,675 crore, reflecting a 10% increase from Rs 85,520 crore in the same



period the previous year. If historical trends continue, this profit is likely to surpass Rs 2 lakh crore by the close of FY 2026. In the last financial year, public sector banks achieved a remarkable profit of Rs 1.78 lakh crore, while in FY 2023-24, they reported their highest-ever aggregate net profit of Rs 1.41 lakh crore. This trajectory indicates a promising outlook for the sector's profitability and stability going forward.

In line with established international banking norms, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) initiated the Asset Quality Review (AQR) in 2015 to transparently classify stressed loans as NPAs. This regulatory measure resulted in a marked increase in NPAs by the end of 2018, leading to a temporary contraction in banks' lending capabilities and subsequently curtailing economic growth. However, through a series of prudent and strategic policies implemented by both the government and the central bank, banks effectively navigated these challenges, reducing NPA levels and enhancing profitability in the following years.

In a significant step towards

strengthening of these essential small businesses.

To further bolster the economic empowerment of the rural sector and support farmers, banks are diligently working to enhance the agricultural landscape. As of September 2024, the total number of Kisan Credit Card (KCC) accounts stood at 7.71 crore, with a cumulative outstanding amount of Rs 9.88 lakh crore disbursed to support agricultural activities. The gross advances of Scheduled Commercial Banks have grown markedly, increasing from Rs 8.5 lakh crore during FY 2004-2014 to Rs 61 lakh crore, and further surging to a staggering Rs 175 lakh crore by March 2024. This remarkable growth reflects the banks' sustained commitment to expanding their operations and strengthening the nation's economic landscape.

In summary, the decisive actions undertaken by the government, financial institutions, and the Reserve Bank of India since 2015 have collectively contributed to the recovery and resolution of NPAs, the recapitalisation of public sector banks, and the effective addressing of various challenges encountered by the banking sector. As a result, the banking industry has experienced rapid growth in business and profitability, alongside a continuous decline in NPA levels, ultimately leading to a stronger banking sector and a more resilient Indian economy.

Satish Singh is a Senior Columnist based in Mumbai, and the opinions expressed in the article are personal.

Commodities Outperform Key Asset Classes in India, Precious Metals Lead

NEW DELHI: Commodities emerged as the best-performing asset class in India in 2025, outperforming equities, bonds and most traditional assets, a report showed on Friday.

The report by Motilal Oswal Financial Services Ltd underscores that precious metals — particularly silver and gold — were the primary drivers of performance, supported by policy uncertainty, currency volatility, strong institutional participation, and persistent supply constraints.

Domestic silver prices surged by over 170 per cent, while domestic gold prices rose by more than 76 per cent, outperforming benchmarks such as the Nifty and the S&P 500. Rising gold-to-equity ratios through the year reflected sustained investor preference for precious metals even during risk-on phases.

Within precious metals, silver emerged as the standout performer. The gold-silver ratio declined sharply from around 110 to near 65, signalling faster price discovery and a decisive shift in leadership toward silver, said the report. This rally was underpinned by structural supply tightness, with global silver demand exceeding supply for the fifth consecutive year, alongside the second-highest industrial demand on record, driven by solar photovoltaics, electrification, electric vehicles, grid infrastructure, and emerging technology applications.

Manav Modi, Analyst-Commodities, Motilal Oswal Financial Services Ltd, said that the performance of precious metals in 2025 reflects a clear shift in investor behaviour.



"Gold has evolved beyond a cyclical hedge into a strategic reserve asset, supported by sustained central-bank buying, currency volatility, and persistent macro uncertainty," he mentioned.

Gold continued to strengthen its position as a strategic portfolio hedge in 2025. Central banks purchased more than 1,000 tonnes of gold annually, reinforcing long-term price support and accelerating the shift toward de-dollarisation. Renewed ETF inflows in the second half of the year, combined with a weaker dollar index and rupee depreciation, further amplified domestic gold returns, said the report.

As per latest AMFI data, gold exchange-traded funds (ETFs) witnessed significant net inflows in December 2025, with the category recording Rs 11,646 crore, the highest monthly inflow on record. The report further stated that that financial participation played a critical role in reinforcing commodity price trends during 2025. Domestic gold and silver ETF

assets under management increased by more than 150 per cent, while global ETF flows turned decisively positive in the latter half of the year. Currency movements added further support, with a weaker dollar index and a depreciating rupee enhancing domestic commodity returns, it added. Base metals delivered selective gains in 2025. Copper outperformed on the back of supply constraints, electrification trends, and investor interest, while aluminium posted steady gains supported by consumption from automotive, construction, and electrical sectors. Zinc remained relatively range-bound amid surplus conditions, despite periods of tight inventories. Looking ahead, the report highlights that 2026 is likely to be a year of transition rather than disruption, building on the structural themes that enabled commodities to outperform in 2025. Gold and silver are expected to retain their strategic relevance in early 2026, supported by continued central-bank and investor demand, limited mine supply growth, and relatively inelastic scrap flows.

INTERNATIONAL

Rights Body Flags Rising Violence against Minorities in Bangladesh

DHAKA: The Human Rights Congress for Bangladesh Minorities (HRCBM) highlighted escalating attacks on minorities across the country, documenting over a hundred deaths within a seven-month period.

The rights body alleged that violence reflects a nationwide pattern of targeting minorities rather than isolated incidents.

Between June 6, 2025 – January 5, 2026, 116 minority deaths were documented across all 8 divisions and 45 districts of Bangladesh, spanning lynching, murder, and suspicious deaths. This is not isolated violence. It is a nationwide pattern of targeted atrocities," HRCBM posted on X. Earlier on Tuesday, the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council, a human rights organisation against religious discrimination, expressed grave concern over the escalating attacks on minority communities across Bangladesh. The human rights body stated



that communal violence has been increasing at an alarming rate as the February national election in Bangladesh approaches.

Highlighting the growing atrocities against minorities in Bangladesh last year, the council in a statement said, "In the month of December alone, at least 51 incidents of violence occurred. These include 10 mur-

ders, 10 incidents of theft and robbery, 23 cases of occupation, looting and arson involving homes, business establishments, temples and land, 4 cases of detention and torture on false allegations of religious blasphemy and being agents of the RAW, 1 attempted rape, and 3 incidents of physical assault."

The Council revealed that the trend of violence, especially

against Hindu minorities, has continued into the first week of January.

"On 2 January, paddy crops on 96 decimals of land belonging to Satyanarjan Das were set on fire in Ramgati, Lakshmipur. On 3 January, businessman Khokon Chandra Das was brutally murdered in Shariatpur after being hacked and set on fire. Early the same morning, a robbery was carried out at the house of Milon Das in Ward No. 4 of Amuchia Union under Boalkhali Upazila of Chattogram, where all family members were taken hostage," the rights body detailed.

"On 4 January, a gold trader named Shubho Poddar was tied up, and approximately 30 bhoris (around 350 grams) of gold ornaments were looted from his shop. On the same day, a 40-year-old Hindu widowed woman was raped in Kaliganj, Jhenaidah; she was tied to a tree, her head was shaved, and she was subjected to severe torture," it added.

Japanese Defence Minister to Visit US Next Week, Attend Honolulu Defense Forum in Hawaii



eth on Thursday, Japan's Kyodo News reported.

Koizumi said, "With Secretary Hegseth, I plan to have a frank discussion about the security environment

TOKYO: Japanese Defence Minister Shinjiro Koizumi announced on Friday that he will travel to the United States next week for a week-long visit to bolster the bilateral alliance in the face of an increasingly severe security environment in the Asia-Pacific region.

While addressing a press conference, Koizumi stated he will deliver remarks at the Honolulu Defence Forum in Hawaii on Monday before visiting Los Angeles the next day and then Washington, where he is scheduled to hold talks with his US counterpart Pete Heg-

as well as specific efforts to strengthen the alliance's deterrence and response capabilities further." He will return to Japan on January 18.

Koizumi and Hegseth will hold talks for the fourth time since the former assumed office in October last year. The two leaders spoke over phone in December last year after Chinese military aircraft locked radar on Japanese Self-Defence Forces fighter jets over international waters off Japan's southernmost prefecture of Okinawa. Shinjiro Koizumi is set to meet the commander of the US

Indo-Pacific Command, Admiral Samuel Paparo, in Honolulu. Koizumi also plans to travel to Los Angeles, where he will visit a drone-related company and attend a reception commemorating the 15th anniversary of Operation Tomodachi, the rescue and relief efforts jointly conducted by the US military and Japan's Self-Defence Forces following the earthquake and tsunami in 2011.

When asked whether he would respond if Hegseth urged him to express support for the recent US actions in Venezuela, Koizumi responded, "It's difficult to answer before the meeting."

He stressed that it is important for the international community to make diplomatic efforts to restore democracy and stabilise the situation in Venezuela.

Last week, the US carried out a military attack on Venezuela to capture President Nicolas Maduro and his wife, subsequently taking them to New York to face charges for alleged crimes.

President Donald Trump says Cuba faces collapse after Venezuela crackdown



WASHINGTON: President Donald Trump said Cuba is facing a severe economic crisis after US action in Venezuela cut off oil and financial support that Havana relied on for years, warning that the island has few options left. "Cuba totally relies on Venezuela for money and for oil," Trump said in a sit-down interview on Fox News' Hannity. "That doesn't work anymore." He said Venezuela and Cuba had long operated under an arrangement in which Havana provided security support in exchange for oil and cash. "That was always the deal," Trump said. "Cuba gives protection to Venezuela, and Venezuela gives Cuba money through oil." Trump said that the relationship has now ended following the US operation in Venezuela. "I don't know what Cuba is going to do," he said. "I think Cuba is going to fail." Trump said Cuban forces that had been operating in Venezuela were defeated during recent events. "They got wiped out," he said. "I don't even want to say how many." He said Cuba has no clear alternative source of support. "I don't think there are any alternatives to Cuba," Trump said. At the same time, Trump said he wants to help the Cuban people, particularly Cuban Americans living in the United States. "We have some of the best people in the country, Cuban," Trump said. "I want to help those people." Trump recalled how many Cubans fled the island in past decades. "They left on rafts," he said. "They left on broken boats, shark-infested waters." "Many, many of them didn't make it," Trump added. He said Cuban Americans were badly treated under past leaders. "They got treated so badly by Castro," Trump said. Trump did not outline a specific US policy toward Havana but said the United States wants to see positive change. "We want to do something to help Cuba," he said. "We'll see what happens."

India's Economic Interests in Venezuela Minimal, Not Dependent for Oil: Industry Watchers

NEW DELHI: As several countries across the globe criticised the US military attack on Venezuela on Saturday, industry watchers said that India's economic interests in the South American country are minimal and it is not dependent on Venezuela for oil. The bilateral trade between the nations was \$1.175 billion in 2023-24, according to information available on the website of the Embassy of India in Caracas. The main items of India's exports to Venezuela are mineral fuels and oils and products of their distillation; bituminous substances, pharmaceutical products, cotton, nuclear reactors, boilers, machinery and mechanical appliances, electrical machinery and equipment; sound recorders and reproducers, television image and sound recorders and reproducers, articles of apparel and clothing accessories and miscellaneous chemical products.

German Chancellor Merz to Visit India Next Week, Hold Talks with PM Modi

NEW DELHI: German Chancellor Friedrich Merz will be on two day official visit to India, beginning January 12 at the invitation of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Merz is scheduled to hold talks with PM Modi in Ahmedabad, and both leaders will participate in the International Kite Festival at the Sabarmati Riverfront. This will be followed by bilateral engagements at Mahatma Mandir in Gandhinagar, according to the statement released by the Prime Minister's Office. This will be Chancellor Merz's first official visit to India. In a statement, the Prime Minister's Office stated, "The two leaders will review the progress made in the India-Germany Strategic Partnership, which has recently completed 25 years. Their discussion will also focus on further intensifying cooperation in trade and investment, technology, education, skill and mobility, while



also advancing collaboration in important domains of defence and security, science, innovation and research, green and sustainable development, and people-to-people ties."

The two leaders will also exchange views on issues of regional and global importance, as well as engage with business and industry leaders of India and Germany.

Ahead of Chancellor Merz's visit, German Ambassador to

India, Philipp Ackermann, met Defence Secretary Rajesh Kumar Singh on Thursday, discussing bilateral security and defence issues, including priority areas for co-development and co-production of defence equipment.

"German Ambassador Dr Philipp Ackermann called on Defence Secretary Shri Rajesh Kumar Singh today. The Ambassador conveyed new year greetings to the Defence Secretary on behalf of the German side. They also discussed a range of bilateral security and defence issues, including priority areas for co-development and co-production of defence equipment," Directorate of Public Relations, Ministry of Defence, posted on X.

In November last year, PM Modi met German Chancellor Merz on the sidelines of the G20 Summit in South Africa. PM Modi described the relationship between India and Germany as strong and

expanding across key sectors, including trade, technology and innovation.

The Prime Minister had shared details of the interaction in a brief post on X, in which he underlined the growing strategic and economic engagement between the two countries.

"It was wonderful to meet German Chancellor, Mr Friedrich Merz. India's ties with Germany are robust, especially in areas such as trade, technology, innovation and more," PM Modi had written on X.

PM Modi and Friedrich Merz had also met on the sidelines of the G7 Summit in Kananaskis, Canada, in June last year. This was the first meeting between the two leaders since Chancellor Merz assumed office in May 2025.

Germany is one of India's largest trading partners in the European Union and a leading source of investment, engineering expertise and advanced technology.

India Concerned Over Developments in Venezuela, Urges Dialogue: EAM

LUXEMBOURG: External Affairs Minister (EAM) S. Jaishankar has said that India is concerned over the recent developments in Venezuela following the US "capture" of President Nicolas Maduro.

Maduro remains in a New York jail following his capture by US forces.

The EAM urged all parties involved to prioritise the safety and well-being of the Venezuelan people amid the ongoing crisis.

"We are concerned at the developments, but we would really urge all the parties involved to now sit down and sort of come to a position which is in the interest of the well-being and the safety of the people of Venezuela," EAM Jaishankar said at an event in Luxembourg.

He underlined that India's primary concern is ensuring that the Venezuelan people emerge well from the crisis, noting the long history of good bilateral



relations. "At the end of the day, that is our concern, that we would want Venezuela, the country with whom over many, many years we've had very good relations, and people to come out well from whatever is the direction of events," he added.

The crisis in Venezuela escalated after a controversial US military operation on January 3 that resulted in the capture of President Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores, by US special forces in Caracas and their transfer to the United States to face criminal charges.

US Wins a Battle, Faces Anger and Edge in Geopolitics

GOPAL MISRA

Apart from the reports of growing resistance in the Americas against the American intervention in their respective domestic politics, there are few takers of the US President Donald Trump's new assertive "avatar" in the contemporary uncertain geopolitics. Few believe it will enhance the prestige and bargaining power of Trump or his country.

There are reports of anti-US rallies in Colombia and Cuba and the possibility of anti-American sentiments engulfing most of the western hemisphere.

According to Colombia's leftwing president, Gustavo Petro, these rallies were taking place after the indication of Trump that he favoured the idea of military action in Colombia in near future. Petro had further revealed his apprehension regarding his fear of American invasion recently before thousands of his supporters at a rally in Bolivar plaza in Colombia's capital, Bogotá.

The scholars of international affairs across the continents are in unison that apart from the growing alienation of the common people in the region after the military intervention in Venezuela, it unfortunately, may also validate the ongoing Russian aggression in Ukraine. In other words, it concedes the concept of the "jungle raj" that any stronger military power can attack any sovereign country with impunity; thus making the UN irrelevant. Further, it may also provoke China to be more assertive in global politics, especially in Asia. China may invade Taiwan to annex it anytime, if it is assured of American involvement in other regions.

India also has nearly 3000 kilometres of border with Tibet under the Chinese occupation. China has been claiming the Indian state, Arunachal, as South Tibet and is keen to annex it.

In other words, there is a worldwide consensus that the gunboat American diplomacy does not create the same fear or awe it used to cause about a quarter century ago. Earlier, Washington used to assert its predominant role in the western hemisphere without any substantial resistance. The Cuban crisis in the sixties, perhaps, was a watershed when the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics or the USSR was prevented from setting up missiles loaded with the nuclear warheads in Cuba.

The world sighed with relief, when the USA -USSR standoff ended. The then US President, John F. Kennedy, and the general secretary of the USSR, Nikita Khrushchev decided to engage themselves seriously for peace. Later, the US and USSR decided to have a hotline for maintaining peace initiatives to avoid any nuclear catastrophe.

During the nineties, the USSR was fragmented into 19 sovereign countries, including the successor states such as the Russian Federation and Ukraine. In the global theatre, however, following the collapse of the USSR, the US emerged as the only Super Power on the earth. Later, China was also included in this network, having a hotline with Washington and Moscow.

In recent years, China, with its unprecedented economic power accompanied by a formidable defence system, is seen as being more assertive in world politics. In the US, many consider China as a rival to the US as a super power.

Imitating the US



Beijing's growing ambition for a super power status is being noticed worldwide. China might not have fully imitated America's gunboat strategy, but it is being noticed that it has adopted a wolfish aggressive approach in diplomacy, especially while dealing with India.

It is not being ruled out that Washington might have confided in Beijing and also perhaps, Moscow before kidnapping the president of Venezuela.

It is believed also cannot be ruled out that before the well planned kidnapping of the Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro and his wife Cilia by the American Delta force, Beijing and Moscow were kept in the loop. However, it has become difficult for the West to justify the Operation Kidnapping of a sitting president before any international forum. It is also being recalled that the doctrine, US President James Monroe had announced during his seventh annual State of the Union Address to the Congress in 1823 was only against the European powers colonizing the Americas. It was not for justifying any interference of Washington in the internal affairs of any country.

The New York Drama
The abducted Venezuelan

president was brought in handcuffs and was

accompanied by his wife Cilia Flores like criminals before a federal court at Lower Manhattan, while the UN Security Council, just about a few kilometres to the north from the court, was busy in a face-saving exercise for President Donald Trump. Indeed, like a traditional ritual, a dozen countries condemned the US "crime of aggression", but no substantial proposal for correcting this international crime. The UN secretary general Antonio Guterres, however, suggested the operation constituted a breach of international law.

The representatives of two countries, Russia and China, present in the UN Security Council appeared to be really amused by the kidnapping of the president of a sovereign country and his trial in a New York court. For them, this American action not only justifies their aggressions against respective neighbours, it also finally allows them to be more and more aggressive in their respective areas.

With this action, Trump has justified the Russian aggression in Ukraine as well as any bid of the Dragon to annex Taiwan.

History Repeats
History offers a warning that in May 2003, the then

US President George W. Bush was getting photographed beneath a "Mission Accomplished" banner and declared victory in Iraq. What followed was not stabilization, but fragmentation—an insurgency, a legitimacy crisis, and years of costly entanglement. Venezuela now sits at a similar inflection point. Removing Maduro could open the door to a durable transition. It could just as easily draw the United States into a dangerous quagmire or a similar dangerous engagement, it had feared in Vietnam and Afghanistan.

There are reports that Washington is keen to install Venezuelan opposition leader Maria Corina Machado, who recently won the Nobel Peace Prize. However, she has suggested the name of Edmundo González, to be recognized as the rightful leader of the nation. He was widely seen as the legitimate winner of the 2024 presidential election in the country.

Machado rose to global prominence last year with her win of the prestigious Nobel Peace Prize.

Religious Rivalries
The West has always been defining or interpreting the political differences by introducing religious or cut differences among the rivals. In this ongoing political crisis in Venezuela, Trump knowingly or otherwise identified with the white evangelical Christians. During his rallies Trump takes on the symbols, rhetoric and agenda of Christian nationalism. A vocal segment of his Christian supporters in the US, particularly white evangelicals and Christian nationalists, view Trump as "anointed by God" or divinely ordained to lead America back to its supposed "Judeo-Christian roots".

On the other hand, Maduro adheres to a left-wing socialist and anti-imperialist political ideology known as "Chavismo," which combines elements of Bolivarianism and 21st-century socialism. He, however, finds himself closer with the Chinese for his socialist views as well as the role of Roman catholic order in rejuvenation of modern China. Maduro has not overtly emphasized a strong personal religious identity, but he has been associated with a rewritten, pro-Chávez version of "The Lord's Prayer" that was recited at party meetings. He has also made statements with religious overtones in a political context, such as declaring that "Jesus Christ was a young Palestinian unjustly crucified by the Spanish Empire".

It, perhaps, has prompted the Vatican to formally reject the "Doctrine of Discovery" in March 2023, repudiating the 15th-century papal bulls that justified colonial land seizure and Indigenous subjugation, stating these decrees didn't reflect Catholic faith, were manipulated by colonial powers, and failed to recognize Indigenous rights, acknowledging the immense harm caused by these concepts and assimilation policies.

It is also true that the father of modern China, Sun Yat-sen was baptized as a Christian by an American Congregationalist missionary in Hong Kong in 1884. He had adopted the Christian name "Rixin" (meaning "new day"), and thus had laid a strong ties between Beijing and the countries adhering to the faith.

Gopal Misra has been associated with national and international media. His books on journalism and geo-politics have been well-appreciated. Views are personal.

Trump Says US Oversight of Venezuela Could Last Years

WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump has said Washington expects to oversee Venezuela and extract oil from the country's vast reserves for years, signalling a prolonged American role with no clear end date following the arrest of Venezuelan leader Nicolas Maduro.

In a wide-ranging interview with The New York Times, Trump said "only time will tell" how long Washington will maintain direct oversight of Venezuela, but indicated it would be "much longer" than months. "We will rebuild it in a very profitable way," Trump said, adding, "We're going to be using oil, and we're going to be taking oil."

Trump said the United States plans to control the sale of Venezuelan oil indefinitely, an approach he described as necessary to stabilise the country and lower global energy prices. "We're getting oil prices down, and we're going to be giving money to Venezuela, which they desperately



need," he said. The comments came hours after administration officials told Congress that the US would effectively assume control of selling Venezuelan oil as part of a three-phase plan outlined by Secretary of State Marco Rubio. Republicans have largely backed the approach, while Democrats have warned it risks turning into a long-term intervention without clear legal authority.

Trump declined to say when elections would be held in Venezuela and avoided questions about why Washington recognised Maduro's Vice President, Delcy Rodriguez, as the country's interim leader instead of backing opposition figures.

Bangladesh : BNP's Tarique Rahman to Become Party's Next Chairman

DHAKA: The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) announced that its acting chairman, Tarique Rahman, would take over as the party's chairman within the next few days, local media reported.

BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir made the announcement while addressing journalists during a programme at Sylhet district on Sunday evening.

Fakhrul stated that the post of BNP chairperson has remained vacant following the death of party chairperson and former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia on December 30, 2025, adding that her son Tarique would assume the role.

He added that the BNP would relaunch its election campaign from Sylhet, continuing the party's long-standing tradition



of campaigning in the region. "Although the media has expressed concerns over the polls, the BNP does not share those fears. The party has consistently demanded an election," Bangladesh's leading newspaper, the Daily Star, quoted the BNP leader as saying.

Slamming the Muhammad Yunus-led interim government, Fakhrul further said, "Since the interim government took office, a culture of mob violence has taken root over the past year, eroding democracy."

Shafali Lone Indian Among Nominees for Women's Player of The Month for December



DUBAI: Star batters Laura Wolvaardt and Shafali Verma, along with South Africa's influential all-rounder Sune Luus, have been shortlisted for the ICC Women's Player of the Month award for December 2025 following outstanding performances in the last month of the year. Fresh off a commanding campaign in the ICC Women's Cricket World Cup 2025, Wolvaardt continued to showcase her brilliance, rounding off a remarkable year by registering three centuries across formats. Leading South Africa against Ireland, the Proteas captain was in sensational form as her side completed clean sweeps in both the ODI (3-0) and T20I (2-0) series. Wolvaardt was at her destructive best in the opening T20I, blasting an unbeaten 115 at a staggering strike rate of 205.35, an innings studded with 15 boundaries and four sixes. Her dominance carried into the ODI series, where she opened the batting and played a key role throughout. After a steady 31 in

T20I, where she forged a record-breaking partnership with Smriti Mandhana, India's highest for any wicket in women's T20Is, and struck a rapid 79 off 46 balls as India posted their highest-ever T20I total of 221. Verma finished the series with 241 runs from five matches at a phenomenal strike rate of 181.20 and an average of 80.33, earning the Player of the Series award for her match-winning contributions. South African all-rounder Sune Luus also enjoyed a stand-out month, delivering crucial performances with both bat and ball as South Africa completed comprehensive whitewashes over Ireland in both formats. Luus produced a brilliant all-round display in the first T20I, scoring 81 while opening the batting and then claiming four wickets. She followed it up with a vital 37 in the second match as South Africa posted a commanding total of 201. Her influence grew further in the ODI series, where she top-scored with an unbeaten 66 in the opening match and also picked up a wicket. In the second ODI, Luus registered her second ODI century, striking 114 off 113 balls and adding another wicket to her tally. Across the two ODIs, Luus amassed 205 runs at an impressive average of 102.50 and a strike rate of 98.55, while also taking four wickets at an economy rate of 4.97. In the T20Is, she contributed 118 runs at a strike rate of 157.33 and claimed four wickets at an economy of 6.42, underlining her value as a dominant all-rounder throughout December.

Kriti Sanon gets emotional, says 'am gonna cry' as sister Nupur gets engaged



MUMBAI: Bollywood beauty Kriti Sanon is unable to control her emotions as her younger sister Nupur Sanon got engaged to her long-time beau Stebin Ben. The 'Tere Ishk Mein' actress shared a picture from Nupur and Stebin's dreamy proposal on the Stories section of her Instagram handle and wrote, "Ahh, am gonna cry so much!! (sic)". On Saturday, Nupur took to her Instagram handle and posted a couple of sneak peeks from her lakeside proposal, along with the caption, "In a world full of maybes, I found the easiest YES I've ever had to say", followed by red heart and evil eye emojis. The first pic in the post showed Stebin down on one knee, lovingly holding Nupur's hands. People holding the placards saying, "Will You Marry Me?" were also visible in the background. The newly-engaged couple was also seen sharing the precious moment with their parents through a video call. Looking mesmerizing in a floral dress, Nupur was seen flaunting her massive engagement ring. In one of the pictures from the post, a female figure was seen hugging the happy couple. Although her face is not visible, it is most likely Kriti showing her excitement for Nupur and Stebin's new journey. Reports were doing the rounds for some time that Nupur and Stebin will be tying the knot in Udaipur soon. Stebin keeps joining Nupur's family at numerous events. Recently, Stebin celebrated Christmas with Nupur, Kriti, and their parents. Taking to her Insta, the 'Mimi' actress uploaded some insights into her Christmas celebration. The snaps had Kriti posing with her parents, sister Nupur, and Stebin. "Late Christmas Post.. was busy celebrating," the caption on the post read. Nupur and Stebin, who are reported to be in a relationship since 2023 have now finally decided to take the plunge.

Ahan Shetty Thanks 'Border-2' Co-Star Diljit Dosanjh for always being 'Kind & Supportive'

MUMBAI: Actor Ahan Shetty, who will be working with actor and singer Diljit Dosanjh for the first time in the forthcoming war drama "Border-2", thanked him for lending his support during this journey. Ahan took to his Insta Stories and shared a video of Diljit lovingly feeding cake to him with a massive smile on his face. Showering love on the 'Jatt & Juliet' actor on his birthday, Ahan penned on social media, "Happy birthday @diljitosanjh sir. Thank you for always being so kind and supportive throughout this journey. Lots of love sir," followed by a red heart emoji.



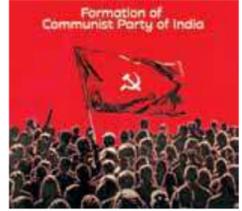
Ahan's father, and actor Suniel Shetty, who had been a part of the original drama, "Border", also thanked Diljit for always standing by his son. Wishing him all the best for his journey ahead, Suniel Shetty added, "Happy Birthday @

diljitosanjh! May your music keep soaring across skies, touching hearts wherever you go. And Thank you for always standing by Ahan with so much warmth...tussi sach-much dil jeet lete ho paaji! "Keep flying, keep shining, keep inspiring," he concluded. Made under the direction of Anurag Singh, "Border 2" enjoys an ensemble cast comprising Sunny Deol, Varun Dhawan, Diljit Dosanjh, Ahan Shetty, Mona Singh, Medha Rana, Sonam Bajwa, and Anya Singh, along with others. Presented by Gulshan Kumar & T-Series, along with J.P. Dutta's J.P. Films, and backed

by Bhushan Kumar, Krishan Kumar, J.P. Dutta, and Nidhi Dutta, "Border 2" will reach the cinema halls on January 23. In another update, Diljit also surprised his admirers on his birthday by announcing a global collaboration with Colombian superstar J. Balvin for the upcoming song "Senorita". Diljit took to the IG and posted a glimpse of the music video of the "Senorita" track, along with the caption, "Birth Day Surprise with The Pride of Colombia Big Brother @jbalvin X 2026 @rajanrjodofficial @mixsingh @sharicsequeira Hello Balvinistas."

Left Looks to Cultural Roots to Regain Lost Political Clout

PROF. PRADEEP MATHUR
The decline and marginalisation of once-powerful Left forces from India's political landscape is as intriguing as it is troubling for a democratic polity. Over the past few decades, several explanations have been offered to account for this erosion, yet no single, convincing answer has emerged. This persistent weakening appears particularly paradoxical because the objective social conditions—rising inequality, joblessness, agrarian distress, and concentration of wealth—should, in theory, provide fertile ground for socialist and secular politics. The surprising victory of young Zohran Mamdani as mayor of the powerful New York City has once again triggered debate among liberal intellectuals and Left thinkers. It has prompted renewed reflection on why socialist forces have lost relevance despite the deepening crises of capitalism and democracy, both globally and in India. One obvious factor behind the marginalisation of India's Communist parties has been their earlier ideological posture, which often appeared out of sync with popular sentiment. For the average Indian, the overt allegiance to distant ideological centres in the former Soviet Union or China was difficult to comprehend. Political opponents exploited this disconnect, portraying the Left as detached from national realities. The idea of an international struggle against monopoly capitalism failed to resonate with large sections of society, who were more immediately rooted in their own cultural and historical contexts. Over time, this fed the perception that Communist parties were indifferent, if not hostile,



to India's ancient and diverse cultural traditions—something most Indians take pride in. There is now a growing realisation within the Left that culture cannot be treated as peripheral. In a country like India, culture is not merely an aesthetic domain; it is central to identity, community, and political mobilisation. It can serve as a powerful instrument of resistance, especially at a time when democratic values are under sustained assault. This new thinking found expression in Kerala late last month when Chief Minister Comrade Pinarayi Vijayan inaugurated a first-of-its-kind, three-day Cultural Congress. In his candid inaugural address, Vijayan acknowledged that a Cultural Congress was a new initiative for the Communist movement. While science congresses, history congresses, and similar forums were familiar terrain, a nationwide gathering devoted exclusively to culture marked a significant departure. Yet, he argued, prevailing conditions in India made such an initiative not only relevant but urgent. Vijayan warned that communal forces are actively seeking to tear apart the secular cultural fabric that has historically ensured peaceful coexistence among people of diverse beliefs and ways of life. What is at stake, he said, is the very inclusiveness of India's

social existence. This poses a grave danger to national unity. Against this backdrop, the Cultural Congress acquires heightened significance. He expressed satisfaction that the organisers recognised this historic necessity and, with the Kerala government's support, convened a large gathering under the joint aegis of multiple cultural institutions and academics. The chief minister hoped the congress would send a clear message across the country—that the people of India will resist every attempt to divide the nation along communal lines. Holding the event in Kerala was itself symbolic, given the state's long secular tradition and sustained struggles against communalism. Vijayan situated the present moment as a decisive one in India's history. Forces that reject the core values of the Constitution, he argued, are steadily gaining strength. The centenary of the RSS in 2025 has been used not for introspection but to aggressively advance a divisive political project aimed at reshaping India into a narrow, exclusionary nation. Such a project, he warned, threatens the foundations of secularism, democracy, federalism, and social justice. This assault, he stressed, is neither abstract nor hidden. Laws like the Citizenship Amendment Act seek to redefine citizenship on religious lines. Proposals such as "One Nation, One Election" aim to weaken federalism and centralise power. Large-scale and arbitrary revisions of electoral rolls threaten the voting rights of millions. Institutions meant to safeguard knowledge, culture, and history are being reshaped to fit a particular ideological agenda. When the state itself becomes an instrument to erode pluralism

and suppress dissent, resistance becomes not just a choice but a duty. At such a juncture, culture assumes a central political role. History shows that authoritarian and fascist forces strike first at culture. Mussolini banned folk knowledge; Hitler feared art, burning books and destroying works that challenged narrow worldviews. Writers, artists, historians, and rational thinkers are targeted precisely because culture nurtures critical thinking, collective memory, and moral courage. India has witnessed this fear translate into violence. Rationalists and intellectuals like Narendra Dabholkar, Govind Pansare, M.M. Kalburgi, and Gauri Lankesh were murdered for questioning superstition, caste hierarchies, and communal politics. Others, such as writer Perumal Murugan, were hounded into silence through threats and intimidation. Activists like Stan Swamy were denied dignity even in their final days, illustrating how state machinery and fabricated cases are used to crush dissent. These are not isolated incidents but warnings of an atmosphere where independent thought itself is criminalised. Simultaneously, there is a systematic saffronisation of history and knowledge. Renowned secular historians are being sidelined, academic institutions restructured, and advisory bodies dismantled to install ideologically aligned individuals. Research is pressured to abandon evidence-based inquiry in favour of simplistic communal narratives. This is an attempt not merely to control the past but to shape the consciousness of future generations. Against this grim backdrop, Vijayan invoked Kerala's own history as a counter-example.

Talking Points Narvijay Yadav

Unchecked development across hills and fragile landscapes is weakening India's ecological balance. From Aravalli to the Himalayas, the need now is mindful growth that allows the land to recover and endure.

India's hills and fragile ecosystems are under visible strain, and the signals are becoming impossible to dismiss. Landslides, flash floods, soil erosion, water scarcity, and rising heat are no longer occasional disruptions. They are appearing with increasing regularity across different regions. What connects these events is not climate alone, but the way development is being pursued. Across the country, hills are being treated as available land rather than living systems. Mining, road expansion, construction, and real estate projects are often cleared in fragments, each assessed on its own merit. The cumulative ecological impact rarely receives the same attention. Over time, this approach weakens natural structures that once absorbed stress quietly. The pattern is evident in the Aravalli range, where mining and construction have affected groundwater recharge and drainage. In the Western Ghats, slope cutting and deforestation have increased landslide vulnerability. In the Himalayan belt, aggressive infrastructure projects are destabilising already fragile terrain. Even parts of the Deccan plateau are showing

signs of erosion and water stress. These are not isolated developments; they point to a systemic issue. **Keep the Balance** Hills perform multiple functions at once. They regulate local climate, hold soil together, recharge aquifers, and support biodiversity. When one of these functions weakens, the others follow. Development planning, however, often isolates impact. Roads are assessed for traffic benefits. Mining leases for economic return. Construction projects for compliance. The ecological chain connecting these activities is rarely evaluated in full. Once hills are cut or mined beyond a threshold, recovery becomes difficult. Rainwater runs off instead of soaking into the ground. Rivers carry excess silt. Downstream cities face flooding. Rural areas lose water security. What begins as a local intervention gradually affects regions far beyond the project site. Nature responds to pressure, not paperwork. **Ecological Intelligence** India does not need to choose between growth and conservation. It needs to integrate the two. Environmental clearances must evolve beyond procedural approval. Long-

When the Earth Pushes Back



term land stability, water behaviour, and ecological recovery must become central to decision-making. This requires listening to geologists, ecologists, hydrologists, and local communities together, not selectively. Project design also matters. Slopes can be stabilised instead of cut sharply. Infrastructure can follow natural contours. Mining sites can be scientifically restored. Native vegetation can be protected and replanted alongside construction. Monitoring must continue after approvals, not end with them. Many of these practices are already known. What is missing is consistent enforcement and accountability. Development becomes costly when ecological limits are ignored. Flood repairs, landslide damage, water shortages, and health impacts eventually burden the same economy that development is meant to strengthen. **Recognize the Limits** India's relationship with its land is at a turning point. The choice lies between continued extraction and long-term

stewardship. Stewardship does not mean slowing progress unnecessarily. It means recognizing limits and planning within them. It means treating hills as assets that need care, not obstacles to be removed. Public concern around ecosystem damage is rising across regions. People are connecting environmental degradation with everyday disruptions, climate stress, and declining quality of life. This awareness aligns closely with the thinking behind the BlissEarth Mission, which emphasizes mindful living and responsibility toward the planet. Technology can support this shift through satellite monitoring and transparent data. But tools alone cannot replace intent. The Earth has a natural capacity to heal when given space and time. Forests regenerate. Water tables recover. Soil regains strength. Healing, however, requires restraint. Strong systems are built by working with the land, not by pushing it beyond its limits. Bliss On. *The author is a senior journalist and columnist, views are personal.*

Sarfraz Khan Slams Fastest List a Half-Century by An Indian



JAIPUR: India batter Sarfraz Khan created history on Thursday with a breathtaking innings, smashing the fastest fifty by an Indian in List A cricket during Mumbai's Vijay Hazare Trophy clash against Punjab at the Jaipuria Vidyalaya Ground. Playing for Mumbai, Sarfraz reached his half-century in just 15 balls, surpassing the previous record held by Ajith Sheth, who had achieved the feat in 16 deliveries against Chhattisgarh while representing Baroda. Sarfraz came to the crease at a crucial moment after Mumbai lost the wicket of his brother Musheer Khan in the ninth over. The 28-year-old wasted no time in imposing himself, hammering Punjab bowler Abhishek Sharma for 30 runs in his first over at the crease. He continued his onslaught in the following over, smashing Harpreet Brar for 19 runs off five balls. Sarfraz brought up his landmark half-century in just 15 deliveries, shattering the five-year-old record. Sarfraz, Mumbai's top scorer, was eventually dismissed in the 15th over after a stunning knock of 62 off 20 balls, which included seven fours and five sixes. Apart from Sarfraz, Mumbai captain Shreyas Iyer also played a valuable innings, scoring 45 off 34 balls that featured four fours and two sixes.

A BREAKTHROUGH YEAR FOR PROOST

Proost Beer Achieves 115 Crore Revenue in FY25 & Turns EBITDA-Breakeven

FW DESK New Delhi
Grano69 Beverages, the company behind the rapidly growing beer brand Proost, has announced a major milestone for FY25 crossing 115 crores in revenue and achieving EBITDA breakeven. This marks an exceptional 174% growth over last year's revenue of 42 crore and a sharp rise in volumes from ~2.5 Lakhs cases in FY24 to ~8 lakhs cases in FY25.



Proost's growth has been rooted in a simple yet powerful operating philosophy ensuring the beer is Available, Visible, Cold, and driving Velocity (AVCV) at every point of sale. Building strong distribution width over the last several years laid the foundation for consistent demand and retailer trust. Improved on-ground execution, disciplined financial management, lean organizational structure, and efficient procurement helped drive healthier margins. A key contributor to this year's performance has been Proost

Strong Beer, the company's hero product. The brand expanded its footprint to six states – Delhi, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Kerala, Karnataka and Jharkhand while strategically deepening market share in its core regions. The company also maintained a focused product portfolio and is set to introduce new products shortly to further strengthen its lineup. Reflecting on this milestone,

Tarun Bhargava, CEO and Co-Founder of Proost Beer, said, "Growing from around 42 crores in FY24 to 115 crores in FY25 and turning EBITDA-Breakeven is a validating moment for the team. It proves that a beer brand in India can be built sustainably, with discipline and capital efficiency, without burning irrational amounts of cash. For us, this milestone represents years of learning, pivots, setbacks, and belief. And honestly, it still feels like day one." Bhargava added that three decisions were instrumental in reaching breakeven; doubling down on Proost Strong as the hero product, staying primarily focused on the off-trade channel where margins are structurally stronger, and running a lean organization with marketing spends under 2% of revenue. He also highlighted how simplifying SKUs, negotiating better input costs, and improving sales productivity helped strengthen contribution margins and operational efficiency.

Dell Technologies takes enterprise innovation on the road with 'Tech on Wheels'

ARUN KUMAR RAO Bengaluru



Dell Technologies on Wednesday unveiled Tech ON Wheels, a mobile experience centre aimed at taking enterprise innovation directly to customers across India. The initiative underscores Dell's commitment to making cutting-edge technology accessible by meeting businesses where they operate—across IT parks, business districts and manufacturing hubs. Over the next six months, from January to June 2026, Tech ON Wheels will traverse 20 cities and over 80 locations nationwide. Beginning its journey in southern India, the mobile showcase will move west and north before culminating in eastern India. Key stops include major business and technology hubs such as Bengaluru, Mumbai, Pune, Delhi-NCR, Hyderabad, Chennai, Ahmedabad and Kolkata, among others. The initiative was formally inaugurated by Manish Gupta, President and Managing Director, Dell Technologies India, at the company's office in Embassy Golf Links Business Park, Bengaluru. Following the ribbon-cutting ceremony and a

guided walkthrough on January 8, the mobile experience centre set off on its first destination in Bengaluru, marking the start of its nationwide journey. "At Dell Technologies, we believe innovation should meet you where you are," said Manish Gupta. "With Tech ON Wheels, we are going on the road to connect directly with businesses of all sizes across India. By taking our latest solutions to their doorstep, we are not just showcasing products—we are helping organisations discover technologies tailored to their unique needs, enabling them to solve real-world challenges and accelerate their digital transformation journeys." Tech ON Wheels brings Dell's

comprehensive solutions portfolio—ranging from laptops and desktops to servers, monitors and peripherals—directly to customers, offering a hands-on, immersive experience. The platform is designed for consumers, business leaders and IT decision-makers from large enterprises as well as small and medium businesses, allowing them to explore solutions that enhance productivity, collaboration and operational efficiency. The mobile experience features a Smart Desk Zone highlighting modern workspace solutions, including Dell Precision Mobile Workstations, Dell Pro Tower Essential desktops, the latest professional monitors, docks and wireless audio accessories.