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RAIN BRINGS BRIEF RELIEF, BUT DELHI'S WINTER AIR REMAINS DANGEROUSLY POLLUTED



GRAP failed as smog peaks: CAQM flags enforcement collapse of up to 99.6 per cent across Delhi-NCR

AAYUSH GOEL
New Delhi

Emergency pollution-control measures across Delhi-NCR collapsed during peak smog conditions this winter, with enforcement failures running as high as 99.6%, according to a damning performance review by the Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM). The review, which assessed the implementation of the Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP) during Stage-III and Stage-IV, triggered only when air quality deteriorates to 'Severe' and 'Severe+' levels, found that several mandated actions were either poorly implemented or almost entirely ignored, despite constant monitoring by CAQM's control room.

Haryana emerged as the worst-performing NCR state, recording a 100% failure in mandatory inspections of large construction and demolition sites during Stage-IV GRAP, effectively indicating a complete breakdown of enforcement when pollution levels were at their most hazardous. During Stage-III, inspection gaps stood at 99.6% in Haryana, compared to 87% in Delhi,



84% in Rajasthan (NCR) and 96% in Uttar Pradesh (NCR). Construction and demolition dust is among the biggest contributors to particulate pollution in the region. Yet CAQM found that inspections of sites measuring 500 square metres and above remained critically low throughout the emergency periods. Other core GRAP measures also showed significant shortfalls. Mechanical road sweeping, intended to suppress resuspended dust, fell short by nearly 70% in both Delhi and Haryana during Stages III and IV. The deployment of mechanical road sweeping

machines revealed gaps of up to 60% in Delhi and 40% in Haryana, even as pollution alerts prompted school closures and health advisories. The enforcement breakdown extended to grievance redressal. During Stage-IV GRAP, 68% of air pollution-related complaints in Delhi and 71% in Haryana remained unresolved. Uttar Pradesh recorded 81% unresolved complaints, while Rajasthan saw 100% non-resolution, albeit with fewer complaints. CAQM described the pendency as serious and escalated the matter to the Chief Secretaries of the four NCR states.

The Commission noted that these lapses occurred despite daily monitoring and regular communication with implementing agencies, ruling out lack of oversight as a factor. Enforcement gaps across actions ranged from 7% to 99.6%, suggesting that some emergency measures existed largely on paper. At the Centre, Environment Minister Bhupender Yadav has reiterated that GRAP measures are mandatory and binding. In line with this, CAQM has directed the Delhi Pollution Control Committee and state pollution control boards to identify officers responsible for non-compliance and initiate disciplinary proceedings. CAQM warned that recurring failures during 'Severe' and 'Severe+' pollution episodes seriously compromise efforts to curb air pollution in Delhi-NCR and undermine public confidence in the region's pollution-control framework.

BANKING & FINANCE

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INDIA WILL REMAIN FASTEST GROWING MAJOR ECONOMY IN THE WORLD: RBI



Delhi to raise sewage treatment capacity to 1,500 MGD by 2028 to clean Yamuna



OUR CORRESPONDENT
New Delhi

The Delhi government sets a target to increase the capital's sewage treatment capacity to 1,500 million gallons per day (MGD) by 2028 as part of its renewed push to clean the Yamuna river, Chief Minister Rekha Gupta said on Wednesday. Reviewing the Yamuna Action Plan, Gupta said the river was central to Delhi's survival and stressed the need for time-bound execution of sewerage and drainage projects. She announced that a drone-based identification and survey of all small drains connected to the Najafgarh and Shahdara drains would be completed by the end of January, while the Delhi Jal Board (DJB) would complete

surveys of the remaining drains by June 2026. The government has also fixed 2028 as the deadline to connect all 1,799 unauthorised colonies in Delhi to the sewerage network. Highlighting the role of neighbouring states in polluting the river, the chief minister said coordination with Haryana and Uttar Pradesh was critical. "Six drains from Haryana contribute around 33 per cent of the total contaminated water flowing into the Najafgarh drain, while four major drains from Uttar Pradesh account for nearly 40 per cent of the pollution in the Shahdara drain," she said, adding that she would take up the issue with the chief ministers of both states. At present, Delhi has 37 sewage treatment plants (STPs) with a combined treatment capacity

POTPOURRI

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BITTER LESSONS OF EXILE: RELIGION MAY UNITE, BUT HOME LAND SECURES



Projects above Rs 5 crore must be updated on CM-Progress portal within a week: Rekha Gupta



OUR CORRESPONDENT
New Delhi

Chief Minister Rekha Gupta on Thursday directed all Delhi government departments to update details of projects costing more than Rs 5 crore on the 'CM-Progress' portal within one week, underscoring the government's push for tighter monitoring and transparency in governance. The direction was issued during a high-level review meeting with heads of all departments at the Delhi Secretariat, which focused on departmental performance, progress of ongoing projects and planning for the upcoming financial year. Gupta stressed the need for real-time disclosure of development work and instructed departments to regularly upload progress reports on their respective digital platforms. "Every department must continuously update progress reports of development works so that the general public is aware of the actual status of work and transparency in governance is maintained," she said. The chief minister said the Delhi government was moving towards a results-based administrative model, where schemes would be evaluated on visible outcomes rather than remaining confined to paperwork. She added that this approach would allow effective project monitoring, timely reviews and regular oversight at the highest level. Reiterating the government's commitment to accountability, Gupta said all projects must be completed within stipulated timelines and departments would be held responsible for delays. Citizens, she added, should receive regular and accurate information on the status of development works. During the meeting, Gupta also emphasised the need for swift and effective redressal of public grievances and announced that the 'Delhi Mitra' portal would be launched soon. The portal, she said, would function as a dedicated digital platform to streamline and speed up the grievance redressal process. "All technical and administrative work related to the portal will be completed at the earliest," the chief minister said, adding that the platform would act as a direct channel of communication between citizens and the government, making grievance resolution simpler, faster and more reliable.

Rainfall Revives Hopes for Bumper Wheat Crop in Punjab and Haryana

NEERAJ MOHAN
Chandigarh

Wheat farmers in Punjab and Haryana are rejoicing after light to moderate rainfall swept across the region on Friday morning, offering a timely reprieve from a prolonged dry spell and rising temperature that had raised alarms over crop health.

The showers, triggered by a strong Western Disturbance, have cooled temperatures and replenished soil moisture positioning the rabi season for better yields.

The India Meteorological Department (IMD) reported scattered rainfall from January 22-24, with moderate accumulations in key districts. In Haryana, Karnal and Panipat received up to 30 mm, while Kurukshetra and Yamunanagar saw 20 mm. Other areas like Ambala, Yamunanagar, and Panipat experienced thundershowers leading to a dip



in minimum temperatures to 10.5°C in Karnal. Punjab districts such as Patiala and Sangrur anticipated 19-20 mm, with Amritsar recording 2 mm and Patiala 1 mm. The IMD officials predict more rain in the next 24 hours accompanied by gusty winds and isolated hail. The farmers and agriculture experts termed the rainfall as a boon for wheat, currently in its flowering and booting stages. High temperatures exceeding 20°C in recent weeks

had stressed late-sown varieties, but the rain has dropped averages below 15°C, ideal for growth. "The rainfall is very good for wheat as it brings down temperatures and aids grain development," said Karam Chand, Deputy Director of Haryana's Agriculture Department. He added that favorable conditions could persist for two to three weeks, reducing irrigation needs and enhancing photosynthesis. Farmers echo this optimism.

Ajay Kumar from Indri of Karnal stated, "The rainfall will boost growth and yields may exceed to average 20 quintals per acre if weather holds for the next by the next couple of weeks".

In Punjab's Sangrur district, known for top yields farmer Gurnam Singh noted, "We're hopeful for another bumper wheat crop as the weather is in favour," he said.

Agricultural experts emphasize that January rains correlate positively with wheat output, cleansing leaves of dust and supporting root development after dry spells threatening rabi crops like wheat and mustard. The extended winter by 10 to 15 days due to early sowing amplifies benefits.

However, the rain poses risks to vegetables growers and may led a rise in the prices. Excessive moisture could cause waterlogging, fostering diseases in Potatoes, tomatoes, capsicum, peas, and cauliflower.

Silver's Exceptional 200 Pc Rally Boosts near Term Case for Gold: Report



NEW DELHI: Silver's exceptional rally of over 200 per cent in the last 12 months sharply outperforming gold's 80 per cent surge has created a condition in favour of yellow metal in the near term, a new report has said.

The report from Motilal Oswal Financial Services Ltd. (MOFSL) said that the current gold-silver ratio favours the yellow metal after silver's outsized run. The sharp outperformance of silver over has led to a "significant compression in the gold-silver ratio, which has fallen from pandemic highs of 127 to around 50 at the start of 2026," the report mentioned.

This reset suggests that while the long-term outlook for precious metals remains constructive, the near-term risk-reward equation may now be shifting in favour of gold after silver's outsized run.

"While we remain positive on both metals and silver continues to have long-term upside backed by industrial demand and tight physical market conditions, the recent rally has also increased near-term volatility," said Navneet Damani, Head of Research Commodities and Manav Modi, Commodities Analyst, Motilal Oswal Financial Services Ltd.

Damani maintained that in this phase of silver's sharp outperformance, a higher allocation to gold can help manage fluctuations while staying invested in precious metals.

Silver showed more volatility with sharper price swings, while gold continues to offer relatively better stability—making it a preferred near-term hedge in uncertain market conditions, the report said. Silver's sharp surge of over 200 per cent, from Rs 60,000 to Rs 3,20,000, could lead to a phase of consolidation at elevated levels or rebalancing by market participants becomes more likely. The brokerage emphasised that the view is not a negative call on silver, but a risk-managed reallocation strategy after an aggressive up move.

Haryana factionalism key challenge for newly appointed BJP National President Nitin Nabin

AAYUSH GOEL
New Delhi

After taking charge as National President of the BJP, Nitin Nabin faces rampant factionalism in the Haryana BJP as his first big challenge. Not oblivious to the internal wars between MPs and MLAs across the state, Nabin has summoned a meeting of Haryana leadership to tackle the visible indiscipline and spats on public forums. A decision regarding the state President, too, is expected to be taken at this meeting.

With the Rao vs Rao turf war taking over South Haryana, the Goel and Gurjar turf war shadowing party functioning, the BJP state and national leadership is out for damage control. State President Mohanlal Badoli has warned all party leaders to maintain discipline and abstain from making any comments against each other in public.

The immediate trigger for the high command's action was the derailment of an official BJP press conference



on the 'Viksit Bharat-G Ram G' in Gurugram, followed closely by a controversial New Year gathering in Palwal that exposed visible organisational cracks. Senior leaders said the two incidents, coming in quick succession, convinced the leadership that internal rivalries were beginning to overshadow official party programmes.

The meeting, scheduled in New Delhi, will be attended by Haryana Chief Minister Nayab Singh Saini, state BJP president Mohan Lal Badoli, and organisation general secretary Phanindranath Sharma. Party sources said restoring discipline and addressing factional assertions of authority in South Haryana will be the key focus.

Jathedar Akal Takht Raises Questions over Sajjan Kumar's Acquittal, Calls for Fixing Responsibility for 1984 Sikh Massacre

JAGMOHAN SINGH
Amritsar

The Jathedar of Akal Takht Sahib, Giani Kuldip Singh Gargaj, questioned the decision of Delhi's Rouse Avenue Court acquitting Congress leader Sajjan Kumar in a case related to the Janakpuri incident related to the November 1984 Sikh massacre, asking the government and the courts to clarify who was responsible for the massacre of Sikhs in Delhi.

He said that although Sajjan Kumar is still serving sentences in two Sikh massacre cases and will remain in jail, his acquittal in one case raises serious questions about the sincerity and seriousness of the government's investigating agencies and is tantamount to rubbing salt into the wounds of the Sikh community.

In a statement issued here today, Gargaj said that in the Sikh massacre case in which Sajjan Kumar has been acquitted, a 17-year-old minor, Gurcharan Singh, was mur-



dered by being thrown alive into the burning truck of his father, Nath Singh. From the period 1984 to 2008, for 24 years, Gurcharan Singh—himself half-burnt—kept pleading for justice, stating that Sajjan Kumar was leading the mob on that day. However, his claims were ignored by the investigating agencies; his testimony was neither heard nor recorded, and he eventually passed away. He said that although the CBI recorded Gurcharan Singh's statement in 2008, it was not formally registered and made part of the case. He said the

Government should clarify why even when Gurcharan Singh's testimony was recorded and it was not made part of the case against him.

He further stated that the investigation into the Janakpuri case against Sajjan Kumar was being conducted by the Delhi Police, but the police closed the case without recording the statement of Gurcharan Singh, which is unfortunate and raises serious questions about the actions of the government and the police. He said that another witness in the case, Harwinder Singh Kohli, also consistently stated that Sajjan Kumar was leading the mob, but his case too was closed without investigation. Later, in 2015, when a new investigation team was constituted, the statement of Harwinder Singh Kohli was recorded, but by then he too had passed away. He said that the family members of both the main witnesses also identified Sajjan Kumar and recorded testimonies against him, yet despite this he was acquitted,

which is highly unfortunate.

Gargaj questioned the government, stating that according to official figures, 2,733 killings took place in the November 1984 Sikh massacre, whereas in reality the number of killings was far higher. He said that to assuage Sikh sentiments, the government must fix responsibility in every single case of the Sikh massacre in Delhi and other states by identifying who committed these killings and ensure justice. He also said that the government must clarify who should be held accountable for the deliberate, conspiratorial delays in delivering justice. He added that providing justice to Sikhs was the responsibility of governments, but this task was not carried out with seriousness and commitment.

He said that the struggle for justice must continue in the Janakpuri attempt to murder case of Sikh youth Gurcharan Singh and that the court's recent order should be challenged in a higher court.

24TH JAN - NATIONAL GIRL CHILD DAY

National Girl Child Day: When ten daughters are still not enough in Haryana

AAYUSH GOEL
Chandigarh

Antim Panghal, the celebrated wrestler from Hisar, is a two-time U-20 world champion, an Asian Games medalist and an Olympian. But at the recent Paris Olympics, it was not just her sporting achievements that drew attention—it was her name. Antim shares it with a noted kabaddi player from Charkhi Dadari and with hundreds of lesser-known girls across Haryana.

Globally, the name sparks curiosity. Locally, it blends into a long list - Santoshi, Antim, Bhateri, Kaafi, Bharpai, Aachuki, Anchahi, Badho, Baskori, Rambhateri, Bohati, Dhapan, Kasoor, Maafi, Seema, Baskar, Binti. In Haryana, these names often mark girls born after several sisters, children who arrived



amid an unfulfilled longing for a son. A local belief persists that naming a daughter thus will ensure the next child is male.

That belief has returned to public focus yet again as two families from Haryana recently welcomed sons after having nine and ten daughters. The births have once more exposed the deep patriarchal roots of the state, casting a shadow over years of government efforts to alter social attitudes.

"Haryana has a long history of patriarchy. It has taken decades just to secure women's right to survival, let alone celebrate their existence," said Sunil Ja-

glan, women's rights activist and founder of the Selfie with Daughter Foundation. "Yes, things have changed and girls are getting more opportunities in many areas. But the belief that a son is essential remains deeply entrenched. Ironically, even social role models like politicians and actors reinforce it. Female foeticide may have reduced, but the idea that 'girls are enough' has still not taken root."

One of the latest cases is from Uchana Kalan village, where homemaker Ritu Devi gave birth to a son after 10 daughters and 23 years of marriage. The birth, following a similar case in Fatehabad two weeks earlier, lays bare Haryana's darkest social reality, women being pushed into repeated pregnancies and daughters born under a cloud of disappointment simply because they are not sons.

Rain brings brief relief, but Delhi's winter air remains dangerously polluted

OUR CORRESPONDENT
New Delhi

A spell of light rain and scattered thunderstorms brought short-lived relief to Delhi and the National Capital Region on Friday, slightly clearing the winter smog that has hung over the city for weeks. The improvement, however, was fleeting, with air quality still hovering at unhealthy levels across most areas.

Rains triggered by an active western disturbance helped bring down pollution levels in the early hours. By mid-morning, Air Quality Index (AQI) readings at stations such as IGI Airport, Pusa Road and Mandir Marg slipped into the "poor" category, while a few locations briefly touched "satisfactory" levels. The city's average AQI around 11 am stood in the high-200s, a visible improvement from the "severe" readings above 400 seen repeatedly over the past week.

But the relief did not extend evenly across the region. Large parts of Delhi and neighbouring



areas continued to record "poor" to "very poor" air quality, while pockets of Gurugram remained in the "severe" zone, with AQI levels crossing 360.

"Rain gives a temporary washout effect, but winter conditions do not allow pollutants to disperse for long," an India Meteorological Department official said. "Once the rain stops and winds slow down, pollution levels tend to rise again."

Experts say Delhi's winter weather works against sustained improvement. Low temperatures, weak winds and poor vertical mixing trap emissions close to

the ground. Vehicular exhaust, construction dust, industrial emissions and biomass burning continue to add to the pollution load, with fine particulate matter posing the biggest health risk.

"Even when AQI drops from 'severe' to 'poor', the air is still harmful, especially for people with breathing or heart-related problems," said a senior pulmonologist at a government hospital in the capital. "PM2.5 levels remain several times above safe limits."

Over the past two weeks, Delhi has seen repeated spells of very poor to severe air quality, often

accompanied by dense smog, reduced visibility and health advisories. Authorities have responded by rolling out and easing measures under the Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP), including curbs on construction activity, industrial operations and older vehicles.

A senior official with the Commission for Air Quality Management said weather-driven improvements should not be misread. "This is not a structural improvement. If pollution levels rise again, stricter GRAP measures will be enforced without delay," the official said.

Health authorities continue to advise residents, particularly children, the elderly and those with respiratory ailments, to limit outdoor exposure. Environmental experts warn that while rain can offer momentary relief, Delhi's winter pollution problem will persist without tighter enforcement of emission norms, better control of dust and construction activity, and coordinated action with neighbouring states that contribute to the capital's seasonal smog.

AAP blamed for waterlogging in Kirari, says Delhi PWD Minister Parvesh Verma

OUR CORRESPONDENT
New Delhi

Delhi Public Works Department (PWD) Minister Parvesh Verma on Thursday blamed the previous Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) government for persistent waterlogging in Kirari constituency, alleging that no effective sewerage or drainage infrastructure was developed in the area during its 11-year rule.

Addressing a press conference, Verma said waterlogging in Kirari has resurfaced as a major issue in recent days, with several videos circulating on social media. "I hope opposition leaders are also watching this press conference. What work was done by the previous government during its 11 years in power?" he said.

The minister displayed media reports from the past decade documenting repeated incidents of sewer and drain water flooding in various colonies of Kirari. He said that when Arvind Kejriwal assumed office as Chief Minister, areas such as Sharma Colony did not experience waterlogging, but by 2022, drain water had started accumulating there.



Verma pointed out that Sharma Colony is a low-lying area and that nearly 10 lakh people reside in Kirari constituency. He said the colony was developed before 2000 and alleged that neither the Congress nor the AAP governments laid sewer lines there. The absence of proper outlets for rainwater and sewage, he said, resulted in water accumulating in low-lying pockets. The minister claimed that the AAP government spent only Rs 43 lakh on sewer-related works in Kirari during its tenure. He said the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) had planned a drainage project worth Rs 100 crore in 2020, and construction on the drain has now begun.

Verma further alleged that the Delhi Jal Board initiated sewer line projects worth Rs 480 crore in 114 unauthorised colonies, including Kirari, without planning proper connectiv-

ity to sewage treatment plants. According to him, the work, scheduled for completion by December 2024, was stalled after contractors stopped work due to non-payment.

"After the BJP government came to power, the work was restarted and will be completed by June 2026," Verma said. He added that three sewage pumping stations are being constructed to carry waste to the Rohini Sewage Treatment Plant.

A new 4.5-kilometre drain worth Rs 220 crore is also being built by the Irrigation and Flood Control department and is expected to be completed within one-and-a-half years. Verma said land filling is underway to raise ground levels in Kirari and sewer lines are being laid above ground level. "Within six months, sewer overflow will not be seen in Kirari," he asserted. Verma said sewer network projects have also been initiated in Deoli, Badarpur, Najafgarh and Tughlakabad, and challenged the AAP to clarify whether any sewer networks, drainage systems or treatment plants were built in these areas during its rule.

SGPC delegation meets Delhi Police Commissioner, demands action against AAP leader Atishi for hurting Sikh sentiments



JAGMOHAN SINGH
Amritsar

An SGPC delegation met the Delhi Police Commissioner and demanded the registration of a case against former Delhi Chief Minister and Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) leader Atishi Marlena for making derogatory remarks about the Sikh Gurus, thereby hurting religious sentiments.

In a statement issued here today, the delegation was led by SGPC Senior Vice President Raghujit Singh Virk, also included Junior Vice President Baldev Singh Kalyan, Executive Member Gurpreet Singh Jhabbar, Haryana Sikh Mission In-charge Sukhwinder Singh, and Delhi Sikh Mission In-charge Manveet Singh.

In the application submitted to the Police Commissioner, the SGPC stated that on January 6, former Delhi Chief Minister Atishi and leader of opposition in Delhi Vidhan Sabha used objectionable words regarding the Sikh Gurus inside the Delhi Vidhan Sabha, deeply hurting Sikh sentiments. The words used by her are also recorded in the official proceedings of the State Assembly. The letter emphasized that the teachings of the Sikh Gurus are a guiding light for all humanity, and that the Sikh community has always upheld the principles of equality, brotherhood, and harmony above caste, creed, race, and discrimination, as taught by the Gurus.

The SGPC further stated that the remarks made by the AAP leader against the Sikh Gurus have severely hurt the religious sentiments of Sikhs living across the world. It alleged that the comments were made deliberately and reflect her mindset towards the Sikh community.

The letter to the Police Commissioner also mentioned that at a time when India and the world are commemorating the 350th martyrdom centenary of Sri Guru Tegh Bahadur Sahib and remembering his supreme sacrifice, it is extremely unfortunate for an elected public representative to use such language against the Sikh Gurus. The delegation demanded that the FIR be registered against AAP leader Atishi Marlena for hurting religious sentiments and that strict action be taken, so that no political leader dares to indulge in acts that injure the religious sentiments of any community in the future.

Supreme Court overturns High Court's CBI probe order in Gurugram Ambience Mall dispute



AAYUSH GOEL
New Delhi

The Supreme Court of India on Tuesday set aside a Punjab and Haryana High Court order that had directed a Central Bureau of Investigation probe into alleged irregularities linked to the Ambience Island project in Gurugram, while also staying a penalty imposed by the National Green Tribunal on the developer.

A bench comprising Justices J.B. Pardiwala and Sandeep Mehta held that the High Court's 2020 direction for a CBI investigation was legally untenable and could not be sustained, effectively halting the criminal probe ordered earlier. At the same time, the apex court made it clear that its ruling was limited only to the CBI probe and would not affect other proceedings arising out of the same matter that are still pending before the High Court. Those cases, the bench said, would continue independently in accordance with law.

The dispute relates to a nearly 19-acre land parcel in Nathupur village along the Delhi-Jaipur highway, which was originally licensed in the early 1990s for a group housing project. Over the years, part of the land was de-licensed and used for commercial development, including the construction of Ambience Mall and other commercial structures. This change in land use triggered objections from residents and homebuyers, who alleged that land earmarked for residential purposes and open spaces was diverted in violation of planning norms. These grievances culminated in a public interest litigation filed in 2015, following which the Punjab and Haryana High Court, in its 2020 judgment, had quashed several approvals granted to the project and ordered a CBI probe, observing that the record indicated possible collusion between the developer and government officials. The High Court had also directed the state authorities to take corrective action.

Rao vs Rao: BJP press briefing on 'Viksit Bharat-G Ram G' derails into bitter power struggle in South Haryana

AAYUSH GOEL
Gurugram

What was meant to be a routine BJP press conference on the Viksit Bharat-G Ram G in Gurugram on Sunday quickly spiralled into a political slugfest, laying bare deep and simmering factional faultlines within the party in South Haryana. The focus shifted sharply from policy to personality as the long-running rivalry between two of the region's most influential leaders, Rao Narbir Singh and Rao Inderjit Singh, erupted into the open yet again.

The official briefing, organised

14% of Tier-1 borrowers take loans for medical bills; Delhi among worst hit

YOGESH KANT
New Delhi

Personal loans are fast becoming a default financial tool for households in Delhi and the National Capital Region, driven by rising medical expenses, costly social obligations and easy access to unsecured credit, a new nationwide consumer study has found.

The study, conducted by Paisabazaar across 23 cities of India including Delhi NCR, shows that borrowers in Tier 1 cities such as Delhi are significantly more likely to take personal loans for healthcare expenses and large celebrations compared to smaller towns, signalling growing financial pressure even among urban middle-income families.

According to the findings, 14% of personal loan borrowers in Tier 1 cities cited medical treatment as the primary reason for borrowing, the highest among all city categories. Nationally, the figure stands at 11%.

Healthcare costs hit urban households hardest



The data highlights healthcare as one of the biggest stress points for Delhi households. Despite better access to hospitals and insurance coverage compared to smaller towns, rising treatment costs and insufficient insurance limits are pushing families towards unsecured loans.

Medical inflation in India currently ranges between 12% and 15% annually, and nearly 40% of healthcare spending still comes directly from patients' pockets. In a city like Delhi, where private healthcare dominates and costs are significantly higher, this gap is increasingly being bridged

through personal loans. The study notes that even insured households are forced to borrow when hospital bills exceed coverage limits, turning medical emergencies into long-term financial liabilities.

Sharing a similar experience, a 36-year-old borrower from Ludhiana said sudden hospitalisation can leave families with few immediate options. "My father was suddenly admitted to the hospital, and the responsibility of arranging funds fell on me during a very difficult time for our family. A personal loan helped me manage the medical expenses on time and focus on

his recovery," he said.

Weddings and social pressure drive borrowing. Alongside healthcare, social spending has emerged as a major trigger for borrowing in Delhi. About 14% of Tier 1 borrowers said they took personal loans to fund weddings or large family celebrations, compared to 10% in Tier 2 cities and 7% in Tier 3 towns.

The findings reflect the growing cost of weddings in urban India, where venue charges, catering, jewellery and social expectations have escalated sharply. Easy access to credit has normalised borrowing for celebrations that were earlier financed through savings or family support.

Essentials still account for bulk of borrowing. Despite the rise in lifestyle-led borrowing, necessity remains the dominant driver. Nearly half of all borrowers nationally, including in Delhi, reported taking personal loans to cover essential expenses such as household costs, education, emergency vehicle repairs and home maintenance.

Morning blaze on KMP Expressway leaves 2 dead, traffic choked for 3 hours



AAYUSH GOEL
Gurugram

A routine Sunday morning on the Kundli-Manesar-Palwal Expressway turned into chaos after a chain collision involving five vehicles sparked a massive fire, killing two people and choking traffic for nearly three hours in Haryana's Nuh.

The accident occurred around early morning hours between villages Sabaras and Gudhi in the Mohammedpur Ahir police station limits of Tauru subdivision when a vehicle suddenly applied brakes, triggering a pile-up of vehicles moving at high speed. With little reaction time, multiple vehicles rammed into each other in quick succession.

A stone-laden dumper and a container were caught in the middle of the crash and immediately burst into flames after impact. The fire spread rapidly, turning both heavy vehicles into blazing wrecks within minutes. The driver and helper trapped inside were burnt alive before rescue teams could reach them. Their identities are yet to be established as the bodies were completely charred.

The fire and mangled vehicles brought traffic on the busy expressway to a complete halt. Hundreds of vehicles were stranded on both sides, with commuters stuck for hours as thick smoke engulfed the stretch.

Delhi to cap ration cards district-wise, launch verification drive under new food security rules



OUR CORRESPONDENT
New Delhi

The Delhi government is set to introduce district-wise caps on ration cards based on population as part of a broader reform of the public distribution system, senior officials said on Thursday.

The proposal is part of the Delhi Food Security Rules, 2025, approved at a high-level meeting chaired by Chief Minister Rekha Gupta. Under the new framework, each district will be allotted a fixed quota of ration cards, calculated using exist-

ing census data. Officials said the move is aimed at improving targeting and preventing overcrowding of beneficiaries in certain areas.

At present, ration in the national capital is distributed through e-Pos devices with Aadhaar-based biometric authentication.

The government will also carry out a fresh verification of ration card holders to identify and remove ineligible beneficiaries. According to official records, authorities have already detected 23,394 duplicate ben-

eficiaries and flagged around 95,682 "silent beneficiaries" who have remained enrolled for years without availing any ration.

A key change under the proposed rules is the introduction of a mandatory family income certificate to determine eligibility. The Chief Minister has announced that the annual household income limit for ration cards will be raised from Rs 1 lakh to Rs 1.2 lakh.

The policy also proposes a three-tier grievance redressal mechanism at the circle, district and state levels to address complaints related to ration distribution and eligibility.

In addition, district-level committees will be constituted to identify and prioritise the "poorest of the poor." Headed by the District Magistrate or Additional District Magistrate, the committees will include MLAs, Sub-Divisional Magistrates and the Assistant Commissioner, and will maintain a 20 per cent waiting list for eligible applicants.



by the Bharatiya Janata Party, was intended to outline the Centre's vision for rural development under the VB G Ram G framework. Instead, it became a platform of accusations when Rao Narbir Singh, a senior Haryana cabinet minister, launched a sharp personal attack on Union minister and Gurugram MP Rao Inderjit

Singh, reviving old political grievances in full public view.

Taking aim at Inderjit Singh's political narrative, Narbir Singh dismissed references to the 2009 Assembly elections and asserted that his own political rise began by defeating Inderjit Singh. He went further, claiming he had defeated him in 1987 from the Jatwana

Assembly constituency, widely considered Inderjit Singh's stronghold. In a remark that instantly grabbed attention, Narbir Singh quipped that "with advancing age, Rao Inderjit remembers my defeat but has forgotten his own."

The remarks electrified the atmosphere, turning a policy-focused interaction in Gurugram into a full-blown "Rao vs Rao" showdown. Senior BJP leaders privately concede that the rivalry has been brewing for years, but today's episode marked one of the rare occasions when it spilled over so openly during an official party event.

Delhi Metro Services to Start Early at 3.00 am on Republic Day



NEW DELHI: As the nation prepares to celebrate the Republic Day, the Delhi Metro will commence its services at 3.00 a.m. on all lines on January 26 (Monday). This special arrangement has been made to facilitate the smooth movement of people to Kartavya Path and enable them to witness the Republic Day celebrations.

According to the Principal Executive Director (Corporate Communications) of the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC), trains will operate at intervals of 15 minutes on all lines from 3.00 a.m. to 6.00 a.m. to ensure convenient and hassle-free travel for commuters. After 6.00 a.m., the Metro services will follow the regular timetable for the rest of the day.

Passengers have been advised to plan their journeys and make use of the early morning Metro services to avoid last-minute inconvenience, especially those heading towards Kartavya Path to attend the national celebrations. In addition, parking facilities at Metro stations across the entire network will remain fully operational on Republic Day, providing added convenience to commuters and visitors attending the celebrations in the

national capital. Republic Day commemorates the day when the Constitution of India came into effect on January 26, 1950, marking India's transition from a British dominion to a sovereign democratic republic. The first Republic Day was celebrated in 1950, and the count has continued annually since then.

This year, India will celebrate its 77th Republic Day, observed as a national holiday across the country, with flag-hoisting ceremonies, cultural programmes, and patriotic events organised in government offices, schools, and local communities nationwide.

The Kartavya Path in New Delhi will host the customary grand military and cultural parade to commemorate the occasion. The parade will feature marching contingents from the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Central Armed Police Forces, along with vibrant tableaux presented by various states, Union Territories, and Central ministries. A first-of-its-kind 'battle array' formation will also be showcased, depicting military units moving in an operational sequence rather than as a static display. New units, including the Bhairav Light Commando Battalion, will be part of this year's line-up.

Congress alleges manipulation of electoral rolls in Rajasthan



KAVITA SHARMA
New Delhi

The Congress party has alleged that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government in Rajasthan was conspiring to manipulate the electoral rolls by trying to remove voters who support the Congress, and that the secret operations were directed by Union Home Minister Amit Shah and BJP national general secretary (organisation) BL Santosh.

Addressing media persons Rajasthan Pradesh Congress president Govind Singh Dotasra and Leader of Opposition in Rajasthan Tika Ram Juley alleged that the process of deleting voters' names suddenly gained momentum following the visit of BJP general secre-

tary (organisation) B L Santosh and later Union Home Minister Amit Shah.

Dotasra said that while earlier everything seemed to be going normally, Santosh visited the state on January 3 and held meetings with party leaders, after which a fraudulent exercise of removing and adding names from electoral rolls started.

The Rajasthan Congress president alleged that the Congress was already suspecting that the BJP and the Election Commission would collude to extend the SIR timeline to facilitate the removal of names of people aligned with the Congress ideology from the voter list. And that is exactly what happened, he pointed out. He alleged that the process of

deleting voters' name from the electoral roll was carried out secretly and at an accelerated pace between January 3 and January 13, coinciding with Amit Shah's visit to the state.

Giving details of how the electoral rolls were manipulated, he revealed that thousands of fake computerised forms were printed for every Assembly segment and handed over to ministers, BJP MLAs and those who contested elections unsuccessfully.

He alleged that the Assembly segments won by the Congress were primarily targeted for this operation, which he described as "vote chori". He said that while according to the rules, after the publication of the draft electoral roll, a Booth Level Agent can submit a maximum of ten forms per day, BJP MLAs and ministers submitted thousands of forms to the SDMs with forged signatures of the BLAs.

He added that several BJP BLAs have publicly stated before the media that they had not submitted any such forms and that their signatures were forged. He disclosed that the SDM in his own constituency refused to accept the forms bearing forged signatures.

Prime Minister Modi to Hand Over 61,000 Govt Job Letters to Youth

NEW DELHI: Prime Minister Narendra Modi will distribute more than 61,000 appointment letters to the newly appointed youth in various government departments and organisations at the 18th Rozgar Mela on Saturday, according to a statement issued by his office on Friday.

The Prime Minister will address, via video conferencing, the 18th Rozgar Mela, to be held at 45 locations across the country. The newly recruited candidates, selected from all parts of India, will be joining various Central ministries and departments, including the Ministry of Home Affairs, Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, Department of Financial Services, Department of Higher Education, among others, the statement said.

In line with the Prime Minister's commitment to accord the



highest priority to employment generation, Rozgar Mela is a key initiative aimed at translating this vision into action. Since its inception, more than 11 lakh recruitment letters have been issued through Rozgar Melas organised across the country.

Prior to this, the 17th Rozgar Mela was held at 40 locations across the country, in which more than 51,000 appoint-

ment letters were distributed to the newly selected youth from across the country for jobs with the Central government in October 2025.

The appointments in the round were made in the Department of Posts, Ministry of Railways, Ministry of Home Affairs, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Department of Higher Education, and Department of Financial Services.

Besides, appointments in Central Public Sector Enterprises (CPSEs) were also offered during the round. These included the Power Grid Corporation of India Ltd (PGCIL), the Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Ltd (HPCL), the Coal India Ltd (CIL), the Gas Authority of India Ltd (GAIL), and the Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC).

Rahul Gandhi Holds Closed-Door Pathshala in Kurukshetra

First Visit Since Poll Debate Focuses on Grassroots Rebuilding, Unity Displayed

NEERAJ MOHAN Chandigarh

In his first visit to Haryana following the Congress party's disappointing performance in the last year's assembly elections, Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha and Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Wednesday addressed a key organisational training camp in Haryana's Kurukshetra urging district-level leaders to unite and strengthen the party from the booth level upward.

Rahul Gandhi arrived at Ambala Air Force Station and later reached the Punjabi Dharam-



shala Kurukshetra venue of the ongoing 10-day 'Sangathan Srijan' (Organisation Creation) training camp for district presidents of Haryana and Uttarakhand (running from January 13 to 22).

The camp, attended by nearly

60 district presidents, has been a focal point for rebuilding the party's grassroots structure. In a deliberate move to foster direct interaction and focused training, senior leaders were barred from entering the main sessions. Meet-

Union Minister Jitendra Singh pushes steel slag roads for hilly terrains

A ready-to-use pothole repair mix, named 'ECOFIX' capable of turning Steel slag into durable, instant repair option

KAVITA SHARMA

Union Minister of State (Independent Charge) for Science and Technology, Dr. Jitendra Singh recommended the use of steel slag-based technology for sustainable road construction, particularly in difficult and hilly terrains, noting that its adoption in the Himalayan States and UTs remains limited and needs to be accelerated



through targeted outreach and training.

Addressing an event marking the signing of an agreement between the Technology Development Board (TDB) and

Visakhapatnam-based Industry partner 'Ramuka Global Eco Work Private Limited' for commercial production of ECOFIX, a ready-to-use pothole repair mix, the Minister said workshops were

Army vehicle accident in J&K's Doda leaves 10 soldiers dead, 11 injured

AAYUSH GOEL New Delhi

Ten Indian Army personnel lost their lives and 11 others sustained injuries after a military vehicle skidded off a mountainous road and plunged into a deep gorge in Doda district on Thursday.

The accident occurred at Khanni Top along the Bhaderwah-Chamba interstate road, when the bullet-proof vehicle, carrying 17 soldiers, was travelling towards a high-altitude location. Officials said the driver lost control of the vehicle, causing it to fall nearly 200 feet into a gorge.

A joint rescue operation by the Army and local police was launched immediately after the incident. Four soldiers were found dead at the spot, while six others later succumbed to their injuries, taking the death toll to ten.



Of the injured personnel, 10 soldiers were airlifted to the Udhampur command hospital for specialised medical care, while one injured soldier is under observation at the Bhaderwah sub-district hospital, officials said.

Confirming the casualties, Bhaderwah Additional Deputy Commissioner Sumit Kumar Bhutyal said the Army had lost 10 personnel in the accident, with 11 others injured.

The office of the Lieutenant Governor of Jammu and Kashmir expressed deep sor-

row over the loss of lives, paying tribute to the soldiers for their service and sacrifice. The statement added that the nation stands in solidarity with the bereaved families and that senior officials have been

directed to ensure the best possible treatment for the injured.

Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Omar Abdullah also expressed grief over the tragedy, offering condolences to the families of the deceased soldiers and wishing a speedy recovery to those injured. He praised the swift rescue and evacuation efforts carried out after the accident.

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh paid tributes to the fallen soldiers and said the injured personnel were receiving medical treatment.

Bail should not be Linked to Monetary Deposits/Undertakings: SC



NEW DELHI: In a significant ruling on bail jurisprudence, the Supreme Court has observed that courts should not insist on upfront monetary deposits or undertakings as a precondition for the grant or reconsideration of bail, as such a practice has the potential to derail the criminal justice system and be misused to coerce settlements.

A bench of Justices Manoj Misra and Manmohan made the observations while hearing a special leave petition (SLP) challenging a Delhi High Court order that declined to extend the interim bail of an accused in a case involving the alleged diversion of government subsidy funds. Relying on its recent ruling in Gajanan Dattatray Gore vs. State of Maharashtra, the apex court reiterated that courts must not link bail relief to financial conditions. "The decision in Gajanan Dattatray Gore deprecates the practice of the courts in insisting on upfront deposits, or undertaking for such deposits, or compliance(s) of certain obligations, from bail/stay applicants for consideration of their prayer on merits," the Justice Misra-led Bench said.

Such a practice "encourages implication with an oblique purpose and has the potential to derail the criminal justice delivery system by making it a tool in the hands of unscrupulous complainant(s) to extort a settlement and force the other side to give up its right of defence", it added. The SLP arose from a July 21, 2025, order of the Delhi High Court, which refused to extend the accused's interim bail in connection with an FIR registered by the Economic Offences Wing after his failure to comply with an undertaking to deposit the remaining allegedly diverted amount. In its order, the Supreme Court observed that instead of repeatedly extending interim bail while insisting on further deposits, the appropriate course was to decide the regular bail application on its own merits. "If a person is unable to comply with the undertaking, that is not a ground to defer consideration of bail prayer on merits," the bench observed.

Rahul calls for unity to force Modi to restore MGNREGA

KAVITA SHARMA New Delhi

Leading from the front for the restoration of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), the Congress today resolved to fight to the finish until the scheme is restored in its original form, in letter and spirit.

The party held a national convention of the MGNREGA workers at Jawahar Bhawan, which was organised by the 'Rachnatmak Congress' headed by Sandeep Dikshit. Around 300-400 MGNREGA workers and activists from 20-25 states took part in the convention.

Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge and the Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi assured the MGNREGA workers that the party will fight for their rights and ensure that the rights-based scheme is restored in letter and spirit. Speaking on the occasion, Kharge said the fight to get MGNREGA restored is a long-drawn one. He said the rights-based law will not be restored through dharnas and demonstrations alone, but will need a consistent and long-term struggle.

He said the Modi government has not just dismantled a scheme that helped the poor and the Dalits, but has carried



out a conspiracy that attacks the very concept of 'gram swaraj'. The Congress president said the BJP was the first party to have scrapped a scheme like MGNREGA, which was named after the Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi. Leader of the Opposition in Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi said that the scrapping of MGNREGA amounted to an attack on the Constitution of the country, the same way the Modi government had attacked it by bringing in three black farm laws, demonetisation and the flawed implementation of the GST. He noted that the core idea of MGNREGA was to give rights to the poor. He said its aim and purpose was to give work to anyone in need, with respect and dignity. Gandhi said that with MGNREGA, the third tier of the government, that is the Panchayati Raj, was strengthened and empowered, as the panchayats would decide the nature of work to be done under MGNREGA.

Electricity (Amendment) Bill, 2025: Reforming the ELECTRICITY SECTOR—But for Whom?



JAG MOHAN THAKREN

To go ahead for reforming the Electricity Sector, the central government, in a press release through PIB on November 22, 2025, claims that the Electricity (Amendment) Bill, 2025, is a major step toward transforming India's power system to meet the needs of a rapidly growing economy. It aims to create a future-ready electricity sector that delivers reliable, affordable, and high-quality power to every consumer: farmers and households, to shops and industries. The Bill moves away from the old monopoly supply model and encourages a performance-driven approach, where both public and private utilities compete fairly to improve consumer service. It promotes better use of the existing electricity network with transparency and accountability so that citizens get more value for every rupee spent.

The government stresses on its Key Takeaways: The Bill aims at making the Indian industry and logistics more competitive by rationalising electricity cost and reducing hidden cross-subsidy, promotes cost-reflective tariffs to ensure financial viability of the sector, while fully protecting subsidised tariffs for farmers and low-income households. Strengthens regulatory accountability to prevent financial distress in the sector and create a stable, investment-friendly environment.

It enables shared network use to avoid wasteful duplication, lower system costs, and support rapid expansion of distribution infrastructure and focuses on improving supply quality and reliability, and ensuring better coordination between the Centre and States in policy implementation.

The Government claims that the Electricity (Amendment) Bill, 2025, is a major step toward transforming India's power system to meet the needs of a rapidly growing economy. It aims to create a future-ready electricity sector that delivers reliable, affordable, and high-quality power to every consumer: farmers and households, to shops and industries. The Bill moves away from the old monopoly supply model and encourages a performance-driven approach, where both public and private utilities compete fairly to improve consumer service. It promotes better use of the existing electricity network with transparency and accountability so that citizens get more value for every rupee spent.

Importantly, the reforms fully protect subsidised tariffs for farmers and low-income households. By providing a platform for the Centre and States to work together, it gives a big role to the states in shaping policies. More than just an update, this Bill is a blueprint for a modern, efficient, and resilient power sector. It aligns with India's developmental aspirations, from farmers to industries. The bill supports the country's vision of Viksit Bharat 2047,

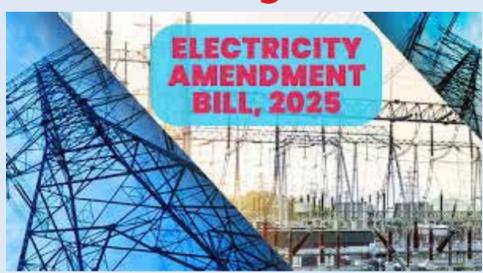
supporting India's long-term economic growth.

The press release mentions this bill a step to 'Correcting the Current: The Push Behind the Amendment,' and reveals that the Electricity (Amendment) Bill, 2025, was brought forward to resolve deep-rooted inefficiencies, ease financial strain on the power sector, promote competition, and optimise network cost across India's power distribution sector to overcome the persistent financial losses in distribution companies (discoms) due to poor billing efficiency, high aggregate technical and commercial (AT&C) losses.

Lack of competition in electricity supply, with consumers tied to a single discom, limiting service quality and innovation. Cross-subsidisation distortions, where industrial users pay inflated tariffs to subsidise other categories, making Indian manufacturing less competitive.

The Electricity (Amendment) Bill, 2025, aims to transform the existing market structure by rationalising cross-subsidy, promoting cost-reflective tariffs, and enabling direct procurement of power by industrial users. It seeks to dismantle longstanding barriers to India's manufacturing competitiveness, making industrial power more affordable, reliable, and responsive to market demands, and at the same time protecting the subsidised tariff for farmers and other eligible consumers.

The Bill empowers State Electricity Regulatory Com-



mine cost-reflective wheeling charges to ensure adequate network development by all the distribution licensees in accordance with the framework established by the SERCs. These regulated charges will be uniformly applicable to all users of the distribution network, whether public or private. This mechanism ensures that utilities have sufficient financial resources for staff salaries, routine maintenance, and future network development.

The central government terms this bill as 'The ISTS Model: Efficient, Fair, Reliable' and states that India already operates a successful Inter-State Transmission System (ISTS) built on shared infrastructure. Both public and private Transmission Service Providers (TSPs), including PowerGrid (a CPSU), compete to develop ISTS assets under the oversight of the Central Electricity Regulatory Commission (CERC). Monthly payments made by users are fairly redistributed among the TSPs. This model has helped reduce costs and construction time for ISTS projects while

maintaining high reliability. The government claims it a pace to 'Powering Reform: Core Pillars of the Bill', and asserts that the Electricity (Amendment) Bill, 2025, sets the stage for a more efficient, environmentally and financially sustainable, transparent, and consumer-focused power sector. It blends structural reforms with regulatory clarity to modernise electricity distribution across India. By aligning policy with evolving needs, the Bill aims to deliver quality service, financial discipline, and sustainable growth.

The Bill promotes fair competition between government and private distribution companies in electricity supply, overseen by State Electricity Regulatory Commissions (SERCs). This approach is expected to enhance service quality, boost operational efficiency, and offer electricity supply to the industrial sector at a reasonable cost. By shifting from a monopoly-based supply to performance-driven delivery, it fosters a more accountable and consumer-oriented power sector, while protecting the interests of the farmers and

other consumers.

What Structural Reforms the Bill will come up with? The government pleads that it will facilitate regulated competition in electricity distribution, allowing multiple licensees to operate in the same area using shared and optimized infrastructure. It mandates Universal Service Obligation (USO) for all licensees, ensuring non-discriminatory access and supply to all consumers, while enabling SERCs to make Distribution licensees free from USO, in consultation with State Governments, for large consumers eligible for Open Access (more than 1 MW).

The Bill will be a step ahead towards 'Tariff and Cross-Subsidy Rationalisation', the government observes. It will promote cost-reflective tariffs while protecting subsidised consumers (e.g., farmers, poor households) through transparent budgeted subsidies under Section 65 and seek elimination of cross-subsidy for the Manufacturing Industry, Railways, and Metro railways within five years. It will bring reforms in—Infrastructure and Network Efficiency, Governance and Regulatory Strengthening, Sustainability and Market Development, and Legal and Operational Clarity.

Why Power Engineers are against this Bill? But on the other hand, Power Engineers are protesting against the Bill. Why they are terming National Electricity Policy is Anti-Consumer, Anti-Farmer and Anti-Employee? Why they claim that this amounts

to privatisation of profits and socialisation of losses? The All India Power Engineers Federation (AIPEF) has strongly opposed this policy and pleads through a press release dated 22 January, 2026, that the policy allows private companies to use power distribution networks built with public funds by State DISCOMs, while the responsibility of maintenance, losses and system stability remains with public utilities. This amounts to privatisation of profits and socialisation of losses. Exempting private companies from Universal Supply Obligation will enable them to supply power only in profitable urban and industrial areas, abandoning rural, agricultural and poor consumers which by default will become responsibility of Govt Discoms.

The Power Engineers Federation (AIPEF) states that the National Electricity Policy 2026, issued by the Central Government on 20 January, promotes rapid privatisation of the power sector and is against the interests of consumers, farmers and power sector employees. Shailendra Dubey Chairman of AIPEF has urged that ongoing Chintan Shivir of Power Ministers should also discuss the damage to be caused by Farmers, poor consumers & employees due to Privatization, EA Bill and NEP.

The AIPEF claims that sharp increase in electricity tariffs, Weakening of subsidised power supply to farmers, Higher cost of irrigation and adverse impact on agriculture Increased burden on poor and middle-class consumers

due to expensive and unreliable power. It will also have an adverse impact on Power Employees and their Job security will be threatened. Due to this there will be rise in contractualization and retrenchment, dilution of service conditions, ignoring experienced engineers and employees and will weaken the power system.

Showing its concern AIPEF demands that the Government of India should immediately withdraw the National Electricity Policy 2026, Retain electricity as a public service, not a profit-driven commodity and frame any policy only after meaningful consultation with States, consumers, farmers and employees. The Power Engineers Federation warned that if the policy is imposed, power engineers and employees across the country will be compelled to launch a nationwide agitation.

Why do the farmers' unions term this Bill as a threat to farmers and vulnerable consumers? All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) states that free/subsidised power for farmers, Dalits, Tribals, aquaculture and more will become uncertain. This Bill is structurally next to push corporate profits over farmers' interests. Therefore, the Farmers unions are demanding its withdrawal, and are planning to protest across the country to force the GOI to repeal this draconian Bill.

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

Inflation data gets overdue reality check

The retail inflation figure for December 2025 marks the end of a chapter. It is the final data point from the Consumer Price Index (CPI) series based on 2012 weights, ahead of a long-awaited shift to a new base. That makes it significant in itself. But the number also highlights the growing inadequacy of an index that no longer reflects how Indians spend or feel about prices. Inflation stood at 1.33 per cent in December—a three-month high, yet still the third-lowest reading in the current CPI series. Between April and December 2025, inflation averaged just 1.7 per cent, compared with 4.9 per cent in the same period last year. On paper, the economy appears to enjoy extraordinary price stability. On the ground, however, this is not how households experience inflation. Consumption data points to a different reality. The government's advance GDP estimates project slower private consumption growth this year. If inflation had truly eased, spending should have picked up. Instead, the Reserve Bank's own survey shows households perceive inflation at 6.6 per cent and expect it to rise—suggesting not just a disconnect, but a credibility gap. Some distortion is inevitable: a single index cannot fully capture the diversity of incomes, regions, or consumption patterns. But the 2012-based CPI magnifies the problem. Its weights are outdated, ignoring the rise in services, shifts in subsidies, and evolving household priorities. That is why the revised CPI, due from February 12, matters. Based on the 2023–24 Household Consumption Expenditure Survey, it should align official data more closely with lived experience. It will not resolve all perception gaps, but it is a necessary step towards restoring trust in inflation statistics. For economic policy to be credible, its measurements must first be grounded in present-day realities.

LETTERBOX

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SYED AKBARUDDIN EXPLORES WHY 2026 DEMANDS DELIVERY, RESTRAINT AND COALITION-BUILDING

India's strategic balancing act



better use of New Development Bank guarantees and practical toolkits that turn communiqués into action. External risks also matter. Washington's tariff threats against countries seen as aligning with BRICS raise the cost of careless signalling. India gains little by letting the group drift into anti-West rhetoric or a de-dollarisation crusade, which would undercut its effort to attract western capital and technology. India's task is to hold the balance. Reform is not the same as rejection.

burdens for firms.

The European window is open because the EU wants to reduce exposure to China and hedge against U.S. unpredictability by deepening partnerships with India. Delhi needs to move quickly. Windows close.

The next is BRICS and the Quad

Europe is the technocratic test of India's white space diplomacy. BRICS is the political one. BRICS in 2026 is not what it was. Expansion has widened its reach but blurred its focus because members do not want the same things at the same speed. That raises the key question: what is BRICS actually for, and can India help define it?

The demands BRICS represents are real. Many members want a stronger voice for the Global South, fairer representation and credible alternatives in development finance. Yet, the group's direction is contested. As chair and host in 2026, India can steer BRICS toward delivery through

is the Quad. If India hosts a Quad leaders' summit, it could be hosting U.S. President Donald Trump. That would add political weight and raise the stakes for delivery.

The Quad's agenda on maritime domain awareness and resilient ports matters to Indian Ocean littoral states that want capacity without being drawn into great power rivalries. India can make the Quad useful by turning capabilities into services that others can access.

India's Operation Sagar Bandhu following Cyclone Ditwah in Sri Lanka showed the value of having assets that can be retasked quickly without diplomatic drama. Success, however, will depend on Washington managing trade differences with partners without disrupting broader cooperation.

All this underlines a hard truth about large forums. The United Nations remains essential for legitimacy and norm-setting, but it is a weak instrument for delivery when major powers are at odds. Outcomes are

shifting to coalitions that can move even when the centre cannot.

The G-20 shows the same strain. In theory, it is the premier table for economic coordination. In practice, it is increasingly exposed to domestic politics and agenda fights. The U.S. boycott of the Johannesburg G-20 summit in 2025 and the push to narrow the agenda under the U.S. presidency in 2026 could sideline Global South priorities and make the forum feel less inclusive.

Amid global volatility, India's momentum in 2026 will come from turning white spaces into working arrangements. Europe is about standards, BRICS is about functionality, and the Quad is about public goods.

The message for India

The AI Impact Summit in Delhi (February 2026) is India's chance to get governments, companies and researchers together to bridge differences where interests overlap. As Washington experiments with new forums, including Mr. Trump's proposed 'Board of Peace' that is focused on peace building, Delhi will need to choose carefully. An invitation for India to join Pax Silica, a U.S.-led capability club for Artificial Intelligence and semiconductor supply chains, is reportedly in the works and shows how fast these new tables are multiplying.

In a divided world, it is rarely the biggest table that shapes the future. It is the smaller tables where things actually get done. In 2026, India's advantage will lie in making the tables that it chooses work.

Syed Akbaruddin is a former Indian Permanent Representative to the United Nations and, currently, Dean, Kautilya School of Public Policy, Hyderabad. Views are personal.



JYOTI VIJ EXPLAINS WHY POLICY CLARITY, FISCAL PRUDENCE AND SECTOR FOCUS ARE ESSENTIAL

A reform-driven budget to power India's growth



India faced global headwinds in 2025 but belied fears that America's 50% tariffs would hurt its economy. The resilience of the Indian economy had a lot to do with the government's reformist measures. As Prime Minister Narendra Modi said recently, "2025 will be remembered as a year when India treated reforms as a continuous national mission." Budget 2026-27 can give a fillip to the mission.

India needs to strengthen the domestic levers of growth. This can be done by prioritising growth-enhancing productive capital expenditure and social sector spending, while maintaining the current fiscal consolidation glide path and keeping debt risks contained.

First, the government should continue the focus on defence, with higher expenditure on the capex. The share of capital outlay in defence should be enhanced to 30% from the budgetary estimate for 2025-26 of 26.4%. The budgetary allocation for the Defence Research and Development Organisation should also be increased by at least Rs 10,000 crore. Defence industrial corridors in Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu have made strides in promoting defence indigenisation and raising defence production. The government should consider establishing an eastern India defence industrial corridor.

Second, private enterprises have played a key role in augmenting defence exports in recent times, contributing nearly 65% of total defence exports in 2024-25. There can be a further boost by setting up a defence export promotion council for enhanced coordination with armed services, their foreign directorates, defence public sector undertakings, private manufacturers, the Ministry of External Affairs, Indian embassies, the Ministry of Defence, and communicate with foreign governments and buyers. This will also help achieve the target

of defence exports set at Rs 50,000 crore by 2028-29.

Third, a transition toward clean energy, advanced manufacturing, electric mobility, semiconductors and strategic technologies is driving a demand for critical minerals. The National Critical Mineral Mission (NCMM), approved in early 2025 provides a strong strategic foundation to secure these materials. This can be supplemented by a dedicated critical minerals tailings recovery programme under the NCMM, with the purpose of treating tailings recovery. The government should also consider offering dedicated financing for this.

Fourth, exports need a significant policy thrust in the current global environment. The present budgetary allocation for the Remission of Duties and Taxes on Exported Products Scheme, at around Rs 18,233 crore needs to be raised significantly to make the exports more competitive.

Fifth, India has emerged as the world's leading hub for Global Capability Centres, but its transfer pricing (TP) framework has yet to evolve. The government may consider issuing clear guidance on acceptable TP models for different categories.

Sixth, to accelerate drone adoption, global

competitiveness, and exports, the government should consider catalysing scale through targeted financial support, including enhancing the production linked incentive outlay from Rs 120 crore to Rs 1,000 crore and setting up a Rs 1,000 crore drone research and development fund.

Finance credit and tax disputes

Seventh, deepening the corporate bond markets is critical for diversification of finance credit beyond the banking system. The government could consider lowering the qualifying borrowing threshold and include listed and unlisted corporates to widen the issuer base and stimulate bond supply, encourage large corporations to diversify borrowings through market issuances, increase investment caps for insurance companies beyond the current 25% limit and revise the 'Approved Investment' threshold from AA to AA-, enabling prudent allocation into high-quality but lower-rated issuers. It could also permit provident funds to invest in non-convertible debentures issued by infrastructure investment trusts and real estate investment trusts, enabling long-term capital to support infrastructure aggregation vehicles.

Eighth, measures to address disputes pen-

alty need to be prioritised. The first appellate level in direct tax disputes, the office of the Commissioner of Income Tax (Appeals) or CIT(A), is facing severe pendency. There is a need to prioritise high-pitched assessments, cases with complete submissions, cases covered by jurisdictional High Court or Supreme Court rulings, appeals older than five years, and matters that are chronologically the oldest. The need is a dual-track disposal system: a fast-track for simple or low-value matters and a detailed track for complex or high-value matters. Also, around 40% vacancies at the CIT(A) level need to be filled.

Ninth, newly incorporated companies (even for new companies formed by established Authorised Economic Operator or AEO-accredited groups) are ineligible for certification by the AEO. Removing this restriction for AEO-accredited groups will help enhance trade efficiency and facilitate greater trade.

Tenth, the reforms related to customs tariffs introduced in the last Budget must continue. Further reduction in the customs tariffs slabs can help streamline the duty structure, address the issue of inverted duties and benefit trade. Import duties should be calibrated across the value chain to support domestic manufacturing competitiveness and address the inverted duties.

Budget 2026-27 must focus on sustaining India's growth momentum by deepening competitiveness across sectors and strengthening the domestic engines of expansion. By combining fiscal prudence with unlocking growth potential across industries, ensuring policy certainty and addressing structural bottlenecks, the Budget can crowd in private investment and enhance India's global competitiveness.

Jyoti Vij is Director General, Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry (FICCI). Views are personal.

BOOKS: REVIEW

New book offers tender portraits of parting, rooted in memory and place

Ravi Shankar Etteth's *The Little Book of Goodbyes* is a poignant and evocative collection of short stories that weaves memory, love, and loss into a tapestry of deeply human reflection. Published in late 2025 by Westland, the book invites readers to linger on the moments that define a life—those fleeting intersections of people, places, and the inexorable passage of time.

At just 154 pages, *The Little Book of Goodbyes* may appear modest in form, but its slowness belies the emotional and narrative depth of its contents. Etteth—an experienced writer, editor, graphic designer, and political cartoonist with decades in India's media landscape—turns his keen observational skills inward, drawing from personal memories to craft stories that feel at once intimate and universal.

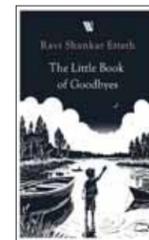
The unifying thread across the collection is farewell—goodbyes rendered both literal and metaphorical. Etteth's narrative spans geography and generations, moving from the quiet lanes of a Malabar town to the expansive skylines of Delhi, and to foreign cities like Dresden and New York. Through this journey, he introduces a vivid cast of characters: an authoritative grandfather who once led a battalion, a loyal batman with unexpected layers, a schoolmaster with improbable tales, and many others whose lives, however briefly, intersect with the narrator's in ways that illuminate both humour and heartbreak.

The book opens on a deeply personal note, setting the tone with reflections on grief. Etteth writes of losing his mother after a prolonged illness and of missing his father's funeral during the pandemic—a layered sense

of loss delivered without melodrama. The writing is marked by quiet acceptance, the kind that comes from having lived through sorrow and carried on. As Etteth notes, grief cannot be "processed"—only lived. That honesty becomes the emotional anchor of the book.

Throughout, Etteth's prose is lyrical without becoming ornate, often pairing the mundane with the metaphorical. His scenes are rich with sensory detail—paddy fields aglow in the evening light, skies ablaze with molten colour, old houses heavy with memory and rumor. Simple gestures and quiet conversations take on deeper meanings. A recurring theme is the way people and places imprint themselves on us, lingering in memory long after they are gone.

Some stories carry the weight of myth, blending local lore and touches of the supernatural—a haunted house, a shape-shifter—



The Little Book of Goodbyes
By Ravi Shankar Etteth
Westland;
154 pages;
Rs299.

but never veering into fantasy for its own sake. These elements stay grounded in lived experience, offering textured glimpses into the subcontinent's layered social fabric. In some stories, the transgression of caste boundaries becomes a marker of legacy or tragedy, reinforcing how history and folklore often blur.

Etteth's humour, when it appears, is understated and wry. It does not aim for easy laughs, but rather highlights life's absurdities and contradictions. While a few tales carry moments of levity, the prevailing mood is one of quiet, reflective nostalgia—of remembering those who shaped us, of how we say goodbye, and how identity is sculpted by memory.

A striking feature of the book is its illustrations, created using AI. These images serve as subtle companions to the text—suggestive rather than explanatory, visual echoes of the stories themselves. The cover, in particular, captures this tone: a woman in the passenger seat of a car, gazing into the distance, contemplative and ambiguous. Like the stories within, it poses more questions than it answers.

The Little Book of Goodbyes does not offer closure or neat conclusions. Instead, it invites readers to sit with ambiguity—to reflect on the inevitability of partings and the beauty of connection. In an age that often prioritises speed, novelty, and resolution, Etteth's work offers something quieter and more enduring: a space to remember, to feel, and to grieve.

For readers who appreciate stories that linger beyond the final page, this book is a quiet triumph. Etteth has created not just a collection of farewells, but a meditation on the textures of memory, the echo of ordinary lives, and the grace of moving forward without forgetting.

India Will Remain Fastest Growing Major Economy in the World: RBI

NEW DELHI: Amid global uncertainties, the current state of the economy provides ground for optimism going forward and the GDP growth estimates for 2025-26 indicate that India will remain the fastest growing major economy in the world, according to the Reserve Bank of India (RBI).

India has made significant efforts to diversify and strengthen its exports, aiming to mitigate external sector risks. "The country is currently engaged in trade negotiations with 14 countries or groups, representing nearly 50 nations, including the European Union, Gulf Cooperation Council countries, and the United States," said the Central Bank in its monthly Bulletin.

The first advance estimates of real GDP growth for 2025-26 reflected the resilience of the Indian economy, driven by domestic factors amid a challenging external environment.



High-frequency indicators for December suggest continued buoyancy in growth impulses with demand conditions remaining upbeat.

"Headline CPI inflation edged up in December but remained below the lower tolerance level. The flow of financial resources to the commercial sector has increased over the past year, with both

non-bank and bank sources contributing to the credit pick-up," said the RBI report. The month of December saw India concluding trade negotiations with New Zealand and Oman. The year 2025 also witnessed major economic reforms, including the rationalisation of tax structures, implementation of labour codes for labour market reforms, and financial sec-

tor deregulation, all of which are expected to strengthen the growth prospects.

The Reserve Bank's 'Report on Trend and Progress of Banking in India 2024-25' underscored the resilience of the banking system, supported by strong capital buffers, improved asset quality, and robust profitability. Macro stress test results from the latest 'Financial Stability Report' released in December 2025, affirmed the resilience of banks and non-banking financial companies to withstand losses under adverse scenarios and maintain capital buffers well above the regulatory minimum.

"Going forward, the policy focus on striking a balance between innovation and stability, consumer protection, and a prudent approach to regulation and supervision should help improve productivity and support long-term economic growth," said the RBI.

RBI Likely to Hold Policy Rates in Feb Review amid Inflation Pickup

NEW DELHI: The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) is expected to keep its key policy rates unchanged at the upcoming monetary policy review scheduled for February 4-6, 2026, rating agency Crisil said citing a gradual rise in inflation and a need for caution.

The Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) of the RBI had reduced the repo rate by 25 basis points to 5.25 per cent in its December meeting, while retaining a neutral policy stance, signalling a data-dependent approach going forward.

Inflation Uptick Limits Room for Rate Cuts- "We expect the RBI to stay put on policy rates given the creep up in inflation," Crisil said in its report. India's retail inflation rose from 0.71 per cent in November to 1.33 per cent in December, marking a moderate increase, though it remains below the RBI's comfort band of 2-4 per cent, reported ANI. In December, RBI Govern-



nor Sanjay Malhotra described the current macroeconomic conditions as a 'rare Goldilocks period', characterised by strong growth and unusually low inflation.

Growth Outlook to Moderate Next Fiscal- Supported by robust growth in the July-September quarter, the RBI had raised its GDP growth projection for the current financial year to 7.3 per cent. However, Crisil expects growth to slow in the next fiscal year. "Challenging global trade

environment, moderating domestic fiscal support and waning support from statistical factors, namely a low base and this fiscal's low deflator, are expected to drag growth next fiscal. However, nominal growth is expected to be higher due to rising inflation," Crisil said.

India's GDP growth is projected to moderate to 6.7 per cent in 2026-27, compared with an estimated 7.4 per cent in the current fiscal year.

The National Statistics Office's first advance estimates pegged real GDP growth at 7.4 per cent for 2025-26, up from 6.5 per cent in the previous year. Inflation Seen Rising but Within Target- On inflation, Crisil expects retail inflation to rise to around 5.0 per cent in 2026-27 from an estimated 2.5 per cent in the current fiscal year. The agency said the unusually low food inflation this year is likely to create a statistical lift next year.

India's Gross Tax Revenue to Improve 9.6 Pct, Capex to Grow 10 Pct



NEW DELHI: India's gross tax revenue is projected to improve in FY27, rising by 9.6 per cent, marginally lower than projected nominal GDP growth of 10.1 per cent, a report said on Friday.

The report from CareEdge Ratings said that direct tax collections are expected to see some improvement in FY27, aided by recovery in income and corporate tax collections. The government's capex is projected to grow 10 per cent to Rs 12.3 trillion in FY27, while the fiscal deficit is expected to be budgeted at 4.2-4.3 per cent in FY27.

"We expect gross borrowing to be in the range of Rs 16-17 trillion in FY27; Net borrowing likely at Rs 11.5-12 trillion," the report said.

Though GST rate rationalisation is expected to weigh on collections, GST revenues are likely to show signs of improvement.

Nontax collections have been healthy this fiscal year aided by a higher Reserve Bank of India dividend, with nontax revenues up 20.9 per cent during the first eight months of FY26.

The RBI dividend transfer is likely to remain high at Rs 2-Rs 2.5 trillion in FY27 compared to Rs 2.7 trillion in FY26 and nondebt capital receipts may fall short by Rs 0.2 trillion in FY26, the firm forecasted.

The ratings agency noted that excise duty on tobacco products, effective February 1, 2026, is expected to support union excise duty growth in FY27.

"With higher-than-expected dividend transfer by RBI, we expect the non-tax revenues to overshoot the budgeted amount of Rs 5.8 trillion, by Rs 0.3 trillion in FY26," the report said.

India Becomes 'Strongest Growing' Insurance Market with Annual Premium Growth at 6.9 Pct

NEW DELHI: The mid term annual premium growth in India is expected to touch 6.9 per cent between 2026 and 2030, making it the strongest growing major insurance market, a report said on Monday.

The report from reinsurance company Swiss Re said the Indian insurance sector is entering a new era of robust mid-term growth, driven by strong macroeconomic fundamentals and rising consumer demand. The reinsurer forecasted life insurance to grow about 6.8 per cent annually, health insurance 7.2 per cent and motor insurance 7.5 per cent over 2026-2030, the report said. Further, India's insurance market is expected to benefit from forward-looking regulatory reform, digital innovation and a disciplined but attractive product mix for consumers.

"India is a true bright spot for



insurance growth in the mid term as opportunities emerge, especially in health and motor insurance," said Amitabha Ray, Swiss Re Market Head for India.

Insurance growth will act as a significant financial shock absorber for millions of Indian families and businesses as they face increased risk from natural catastrophes, increasing health-care costs and the financial pressure of an ageing population, Ray added. The Indian insurance sector's strong rebound follows a slower 3.1 per cent growth in 2025 as the market adjusted to new regulations, the report said.

Budget 2026: Experts urge public spending boost, GST relief on lifesaving equipment, vaccines

NEW DELHI: Ahead of the Union Budget 2026-27, industry experts on Thursday urged the government to boost the health spending, and grant GST exemption on lifesaving equipment and vaccines, especially for thalassemia and cancer patients.

The Union Budget will be presented by the Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on February 1 at 11 am.

Citing the rising burden of noncommunicable diseases and cancers in the country, the expert urged the government to invest more deeply in public health infrastructure, prevention, and technology-enabled care.

Currently, they stated that the public health expenditure continues to remain well below the National Health Policy target of 2.5 per cent of GDP, and lags benchmarks seen in comparable developing economies.

Jyotsna Govil, chairperson of the Indian Cancer Society, Delhi Branch, told IANS that preventable and treatable cancers continue to claim lives due to late detection and unequal access.

"India must raise public health spending to 2.5-5 per cent of GDP and invest in population-based screening, universal HPV vaccination, district-level cancer centres, affordable access to new therapies, and expanded Ayushman Bharat coverage," Govil said.

"GST exemptions on lifesaving equipment, consumables and vaccines, responsible regulation of FDI, and sustained investment in awareness and prevention are essential to reduce suffering, control costs, and build a cancer-resilient India," the expert added.

Deepak Chopra, from the Thalassemia Patients Advocacy



Group (TPAG), urged the Centre to make lifelong care affordable for thalassemia patients by reducing duties and promoting related generic medicines production in India.

"At present, customs duty is charged at 32 per cent and GST at 12 per cent on infusion pumps. Chelation medicines have GST of 5 per cent, and essential medical equipment such as bedside filters

are also taxed at 5 per cent GST," Chopra told IANS.

"Since these medicines and equipment are life-saving and indispensable for thalassemia patients, we strongly request that customs duty and GST on these items be completely removed to reduce the financial burden on patients and their families," he added.

Tax-funded universal health

care with a basic health package for all citizens can significantly improve the health sector in the country, Dr Vinay Aggarwal, former National President, Indian Medical Association, told IANS.

"Increase public health allocation to 2.5-5 per cent of GDP, strengthening government hospitals and human resources. Reform PMJAY to include outpatient care, realistic package rates, DBT, copayments, and timely reimbursements, support small and medium hospitals through infrastructure financing, subsidies, and credit guarantees. Provide GST exemption on lifesaving equipment, consumables, and all vaccines," Aggarwal said.

He also stressed the need to regulate FDI in healthcare, ensure data protection, promote innovation, and establish a National Healthcare Fund.

Banking Sector's Expectations from Union Budget



SATISH SINGH
The banking sector, like many other industries, is anticipating specific measures in the upcoming budget to strengthen its stability and efficiency. A critical and long-standing demand among bank employees is the implementation of a 5-day workweek. Currently, there are no significant barriers to adopting this shift, especially since prominent institutions—including the Reserve Bank of India, Life Insurance Corporation of India, various insurance providers, stock exchanges, and foreign banks—have already made this transition. As a result, bank employees are hopeful that this long-sought change will be highlighted in the 2026 budget discussions.

In today's evolving financial landscape, the reliance on digital platforms for banking transactions has surged, allowing customers to perform numerous banking activities from the convenience of their mobile devices. Tasks such as opening or closing accounts, transferring funds, and depositing or withdrawing cash can now be accomplished without stepping foot in a bank branch, showcasing a significant transformation in banking practices.

However, recent government tax policies have posed challenges for bank employees, as allowances and other benefits they previously received are now taxed as income. This new tax has strained bank staff's financial well-being and had a detrimental effect on their morale. Addressing this issue by announcing a 5-day workweek alongside making allowances tax-exempt would not only provide immediate relief but also elevate the spirits of bank employees, ultimately enhancing overall performance within the bank-

ing sector.

One pressing issue banks face is the lack of affordable capital. In light of this, the government must consider implementing budgetary measures to expand banks' deposit bases significantly. While there is a burgeoning demand for loans, the anticipated growth in deposits has not materialised, leading the Reserve Bank of India to implement measures such as reducing the repo rate and injecting liquidity into the banking system via open market operations (OMO).

For a sustainable resolution to the deposit shortage crisis, traditional investors must reinvest in the banking system. To encourage this, the government should introduce special tax incentives for bank deposits and consider abolishing existing taxes on them. Currently, taxes are levied on various savings products, including savings accounts, recurring deposits, and fixed deposits, which negatively impacts deposit growth. Additionally, it is vital to enact sensible tax provisions for mutual funds, pensions, insurance, and other financial products, ensuring that the banking sector and related institutions can access stable, low-cost capital. With a robust deposit base, banks would be better equipped to serve the heightened demand for loans, thereby driving economic growth and activity.

Furthermore, to combat fraud and ensure rightful ownership of funds, there is a pressing need to refine and clarify regulations surrounding inactive and dormant accounts. Data from June 2025 revealed that over Rs 67,000 crore was sitting idle in these accounts across Indian banks, with no claimants to recover the funds. Strategic budgetary provisions could facilitate the utilisation of these funds for lending, thereby benefiting the banking sector.

Moreover, the half-yearly



Financial Stability Report released by the Reserve Bank of India on December 31, 2025, indicated encouraging trends, with the gross non-performing asset (GNPA) ratio of banks dropping to 2.1% by September 2025 and projected to decrease further to 1.9% by March 2027. While current NPA levels are manageable, further improvements could be achieved by introducing robust measures such as credit guarantee schemes and risk-sharing mechanisms. By strengthening the banking framework, there is a significant opportunity to ensure ongoing economic stability and growth.

Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) are a vital engine of the economy, and the banking sector plays an indispensable role in bolstering this crucial segment. To further empower MSMEs, the government should allocate dedicated budgetary provisions to enhance their growth and sustainability. Presently, the country boasts over 65 million MSME units that collectively employ around 280 million individuals. This dynamic sector significantly contributes approximately 30% of the nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and accounts for roughly 45.73% of total exports, underscoring its importance in the economic landscape.

The current landscape shows that the MSME sec-

tor has experienced a boost due to heightened consumer demand during the festive season, improved cash flow dynamics, and the beneficial reforms to the Goods and Services Tax (GST) slabs introduced in September. To further catalyse the growth of this sector, the government should prioritise simplifying access to various government schemes and streamlining GST and other tax regulations in the upcoming budget. This strategic approach could substantially accelerate MSMEs' growth trajectory.

Moreover, attracting both foreign and domestic private capital investment through comprehensive tax reforms is essential to rejuvenate the MSME sector. To enhance the efficiency of the loan approval process, leveraging advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence and blockchain can significantly speed up transactions and to improve security. It is equally vital to devise and implement policies that encourage investments in green projects and crucial infrastructure, supported by concrete budgetary measures that facilitate these initiatives.

In conclusion, the forthcoming Union Budget, scheduled for presentation on February 1, 2026, holds the potential to substantially fortify the banking sector by introducing provisions focused on digital innovation, fostering financial inclusion, enhancing MSME lending, and improving the governance of public sector banks through the adoption of technologies such as artificial intelligence and blockchain. Additionally, implementing a five-day workweek in the banking sector, along with tax exemptions on allowances and other financial benefits for bank employees, would significantly enhance banks' performance and profitability, contributing to a more resilient economic framework.

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

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India's AI Adoption to generate \$1.7 Trillion in Economic Value by 2035: Report

NEW DELHI: As India's semiconductor industry scales up, its adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) is projected to generate \$1.7 trillion in economic value by 2035 and reshape industries across the economy, a new report has said.

A KPMG report, launched at the World Economic Forum 2026 in Davos, said that India's responsible AI scaling gained support from robust data governance frameworks, sectoral adoption in healthcare, agriculture, education, and defence, and the creation of the IndiaAI Safety Institute. "India's emergence as a pivotal force in global trade, technology, and sustainability is underpinned by bold investments in semiconductor manufacturing and rapid adoption of artificial intelligence (AI)," the report said.

The business advisory firm highlighted India's achievement



in the sector, such as approval of six semiconductor fabrication plants with an outlay of \$1.3 billion and allocation of \$2.2 billion for deeptech research and development. Government-supported flagship initiatives such as the India Semiconductor Mission and Semicon India are accelerating chipmaking infrastructure, testing and advanced packaging, the report said.

The report highlighted over 38,000 GPUs deployed under the IndiaAI Mission, over 6 million people employed in the technology and AI ecosystem and that 89 per cent of new startups in 2024 leveraged AI,

the report said.

"India's transformation is remarkable. What we're seeing is more than economic growth, it's about building trust and shaping the future of global collaboration. From advanced manufacturing and digital infrastructure to clean energy and AI, India is building an ecosystem that drives resilience and innovation at scale," said Bill Thomas, Global Chairman and CEO, KPMG International. "The country's ability to turn ambition into action is what stands out, delivering real progress that opens new opportunities for businesses worldwide," Thomas added. India's leadership in digital infrastructure, sustainability, and advanced technologies like semiconductors and AI sets new benchmarks, according to Yezdi Nagporewalla, Chief Executive Officer, KPMG in India.

Equity Infusion of Rs.5000 cr in SIDBI by Govt of India

TANVIR KAUR
New Delhi

On January 22, the Union Cabinet chaired by the Prime Minister, Narendra Modi has accorded approval for an equity infusion of Rs 5,000 crore in three tranches (` 3,000 crore in FY2026, ` 1,000 crore each in FY27 and FY28), aimed at significantly enhancing the flow of affordable and timely credit to India's vast Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME) sector.

In the recent years, SIDBI has expanded its operations rapidly and its balance sheet as on September 30, 2025 crossed ` 5.8 lakh crore. SIDBI has opened 65 branches in the last two FYs and its present branch network is 161 branches covering 195 identified major MSME clusters by MoMSME, GoI. The equity infusion is expected to significantly scale up SIDBI's ability to serve MSMEs across the country by further reaching out to all ma-



Manoj Mittal, CMD, SIDBI

stated that "I would like to sincerely thank the Government of India for reposing its trust in SIDBI. I am confident that SIDBI shall play a significant role in empowering the MSME sector - as truly identified as a growth engine of the nation to achieve the goals under Viksit Bharat, 2047". The Bank would also enhance formalization process of Informal Micro Enterprises (IMEs) and support ecosystem development through energy efficient and cluster interventions in the form of financing as well as outreach programs with industry associations.

INTERNATIONAL

WEF 2026: India Emerges as Major AI Force Backed by Reforms, Digital Infra, says IMF

NEW DELHI: India is emerging as one of the world's major forces in artificial intelligence (AI), supported by strong reforms, digital public infrastructure, and a skilled technology workforce, said Kristalina Georgieva, Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund, at the World Economic Forum in Davos.

The IMF MD pointed to India's rapidly built digital public infrastructure and deep pool of IT-skilled labour as major strengths, NDTV Profit reported. Georgieva said the IMF holds India in high regard for the pace and quality of its recent economic reforms. When asked about comments by Union Electronics and Information Technology minister Ashwini Vaishnaw,



Georgieva said that the Fund believes India's prospects in AI are "remarkable". Vaishnaw had recently pushed back strongly against remarks by Georgieva that India is in a "second grouping" of AI powers. Vaishnaw cited a Stanford assessment that showed India

ranked third globally on AI preparedness. Georgieva noted that the IMF's assessment showed AI could boost global growth by up to 0.8 percentage points and that dynamic economies like India stand to gain even more. "India is a very dynamic

economy already, and with AI, it would be even more so," Georgieva said, praising India's approach to staying competitive while charting its own path on AI development.

She confirmed her travel plans to India next month for the AI summit, saying she was "very, very excited" about the visit and described India as "a bright spot on a somewhat cloudy global economic horizon".

She cautioned that globally, expectations from AI are very high, which could cause downturns if they fail to materialise. Georgieva said that in such an environment, countries must focus on strong economic fundamentals, adding that India's policy focus in this regard is admirable.

At Davos, Trump Delivers A Blunt Message — Hits Europe Over NATO, Ukraine Costs



DAVOS/WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump on Wednesday slammed America's traditional allies, European leaders, and NATO member countries, for what he described as relying disproportionately on US military power and financial support while failing to adequately defend their own security interests, even as Washington bears the brunt of the Ukraine war.

"The United States is treated very unfairly by NATO," Trump told a gathering of European and global leaders at the World Economic Forum (WEF) meeting in Switzerland's Davos, arguing that America has long paid far more than its allies for Europe's defence. "We give so much and we get so little in return," he said.

Trump said NATO would not exist in its current form without his leadership. "You wouldn't have NATO if I didn't get involved," he said, claiming he forced alliance members to dramatically increase defence spending after years of non-compliance.

FDI flows to India surged by 73 pc in 2025: UNCTAD

UNITED NATIONS: Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in India surged by 73 per cent last year, bringing in \$47 billion, according to UNCTAD.

The increase was "mainly due to large investments in services — including finance, IT (information technology), and R&D (Research and Development) — as well as manufacturing, supported by policies aimed at integrating India into global supply chains", the UN trade agency said in a report released on Tuesday. India's FDI growth rate was among the highest. Investments in data centres in India totalled \$7 billion during the first three quarters of last year, according to the latest issue of the Global Investment Trends Monitor. That put India in seventh place among the countries receiving investments for data centres



during that period.

However, in the fourth quarter, FDI in the sector jumped significantly, making the sector ever more dynamic. Google announced in October that it was investing \$15 billion in an AI hub in Andhra Pradesh. In December, Microsoft announced \$17.5 billion investments in AI and cloud infrastructure, and data centres.

And also in December, Amazon said it would invest \$35 billion in AI and other sectors. These investments are likely to spread over a few years.

Globally, the report said FDI increased last year by 14 per cent to \$1.6 trillion. "Industry trends in 2025 show that data centres now shape the FDI landscape; they accounted for one-fifth of global greenfield project values," the report said. With demand driven by AI infrastructure and proprietary digital networks, announced investments in the area exceeded \$270 billion, according to the report.

Semiconductors was another area showing high growth, with the value of newly announced projects increasing by 35 per cent, it said.

In areas that were exposed to tariff risks, project numbers fell sharply by 25 per cent, according to UNCTAD.

Textiles, electronics, and machinery were among the sectors hardest hit, the report said.

US President Trump Says Putin, Zelensky Want Deal, Cites Complex War



WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump said the main obstacle to a Ukraine-Russia agreement remains the same factors that have stalled talks for months, describing the conflict as complex and insisting it was not his war.

"Look, this is a war. This isn't my war," Trump said when asked about the hold-up in reaching a deal. "This is a war that should have never happened, but it's complex, because you have beats and bounds, you have streets, you have rivers, you have everything," he told reporters abroad Air Force One on his way back from Davos to Washington.

Trump said disputes over territory and boundaries have prolonged the fighting. "Where does it end? So it's a little bit complicated," he said, adding that similar issues had arisen in other conflicts he claimed to have resolved quickly. "I got them done fast in days, and this one is just going on."

The president said both Russian President Vladimir Putin and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy now appear open to an agreement, though he stopped short of predicting a breakthrough. "I'm not making any predictions.

There are no changes," Trump said. "I think that President Putin would like to make a deal. I think that President Zelenskyy would like to make a deal."

Trump said Zelenskyy traveled to meet him and conveyed his desire to reach an agreement. "He said he'd like to make a deal," Trump said. "Because people know the parameters. It's not like, you know, we're discussing things that have been discussed for six or seven months."

He said conditions inside Ukraine were severe, particularly during winter. "It's really tough for the people of Ukraine," Trump said, describing areas where people live without heat in extreme cold. "That's no way to live."

On Greenland, Trump said the administration was working toward a framework arrangement and suggested clarity would emerge soon. "We'll have something in two weeks," he said, adding there was "a good spirit to get something done." He emphasised the need for freedom of action and pointed to US military strength. "We have a great military. I built a great military," he said, citing weapons capabilities and the pace of defense production.

Trump also spoke at length

about Venezuela, praising what he described as strong leadership and outlining oil flows to the United States. "Over 50 million barrels of oil is already moved or moving into the United States, and much more to come," he said. Trump said the arrangement would benefit both countries. "Our country will become richer, and that means our taxes are going to be going down and they will do better than they've ever done."

Asked about JPMorgan Chase chief Jamie Dimon, Trump said he had not spoken with him since a lawsuit and accused the bank of cutting off services. "He debanked me," Trump said. "You shouldn't be debanked." He said commentators believed he had a strong legal case.

On Iran, Trump said the US had deployed significant military assets while expressing a preference to avoid conflict. "We have a big flotilla going in that direction," he said. Trump claimed he intervened to stop mass executions. "I stopped 837 hangings on Thursday," he said, adding that the action was canceled after his warning.

Trump said talks with Iran had occurred previously and referenced past US strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities. "That was a total Obliteration," he said.

The president also addressed his potential role beyond his current term, saying he could remain involved in peace efforts. "I have the right to be if I want," he said, referring to the Board of Peace. He said it could work with the United Nations, which he said had "great potential."

Why Azerbaijan Has Become the New Launchpad for Khalistan's Anti-India Narrative



NEW DELHI: The Khalistan movement has been able to survive, thanks to the lenient policies in the United Kingdom and Canada. Successive governments have been soft on these criminals, as a result of which they made these nations bases to launch attacks on India.

After setting up bases in multiple countries, the Khalistan movement now appears to be flourishing in Azerbaijan. A conference was held last week in Baku, the capital city, aimed at amplifying the need for a separate Sikh nation, Khalistan, to be carved out of India.

On the face of it, the event looked like it was trying to raise concerns about the treatment of Sikhs and other minorities in the country. This has been a false narrative against India that has been spread by many to defame the nation and the Modi government.

The event was titled 'Racism and Violence Against Sikhs and Other National Minorities in India.' Officials say there are plenty of red flags here. First of all, it was organised by the Azerbaijani government-linked Baku Initiative Group. This highlights the government's role in hosting such an event.

The Khalistan angle became amply clear when the audience and organisers stood up and observed a minute's silence for slain Khalistan terrorist, Hardeep Singh Nijjar. The event focused heavily on videos appearing to show atrocities against India.

Officials say that this is a narrative that these Khalistani elements have been drumming up without any evidence. Even those in Punjab do not complain about discrimination by the state, but these ISI-backed elements want to portray a false picture.

Another official said that after the US, the UK, Canada, and Australia, the Khalistanis are trying to set up a base in Milan. The Khalistan elements had already called for a referendum and this is a clear signal that they are looking to spread to more countries.

US Senator Daines presses India on Montana pulse crops

WASHINGTON: US Senator Steve Daines travelled to India this month to push for better market access for Montana's pulse crops and to underscore the strategic partnership between Washington and New Delhi, his office said.

Daines, a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, was in India from January 17 to 19. He met senior government officials, members of parliament, and business leaders in New Delhi. The meetings included

talks with External Affairs Minister Subrahmanya Jaishankar and Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal, according to the statement.

"I came to India to reaffirm our two countries' shared values and strategic partnership and to advocate on behalf of Montana's pulse crop farmers," Daines said. "I appreciated Minister Goyal for listening to our farmers' concerns and will continue to work with President Trump to press this important priority."



The visit focused on trade, defense cooperation, and supply chain security. Daines discussed growing US-India defense ties and the role of the partnership in maintaining a stable and open Indo-Pacific region, according

to a media release.

According to his office, trade was a central issue in the talks. Daines urged Indian officials to support favorable treatment for US pulse crops in any future trade agreement between

the two countries. Montana is the top producer of pulse crops in the United States. India is the world's largest consumer of crops, including lentils, peas, and chickpeas. Daines also pushed for faster progress in ongoing trade talks between Washington and New Delhi. The statement said he sought movement toward a fair and reciprocal bilateral trade deal.

The senator said he was advancing the interests of both the Trump administration and

the people of Montana during the visit. In an accompanying statement, US Ambassador to India Sergio Gor said the trip highlighted the importance of regular high-level engagement with India. "As we work to take the partnership between our two nations to the next level in cooperation, I will ensure that senior government officials will regularly travel to India," Gor said. He added that Daines' meetings were instrumental in advancing the bilateral relationship.

THE SECRET COMMUNICATION

Bush-Putin Dialogues' Relevance in Geopolitics

THE RECENT RELEASES OF THE TRANSCRIPTS FROM AMERICAN ARCHIVES COULD BE A DELIGHTFUL STUDY FOR ANY SCHOLAR ENGAGED IN INTERPRETING THE CONTEMPORARY PLAY OF FORCES WHICH APPEARS TO BE HERALDING THE END OF THE AMERICAN STATUS AS THE ONLY SUPERPOWER ON THE EARTH.

GOPAL MISRA

The recent documents from the secret archives of George Washington University offer a rare insight into the understandings among the big players in geo-politics, especially during the post Cold War period. They need to be understood or interpreted in the context of the growing despair among Americans in 2026.

The US President Donald Trump, who was illegally recently talking about the nuclear US efforts for reinvigorating American economy, has to understand that the kidnapping of the Venezuela president, Nicholas Maduro, has failed to trigger the collapse of the regime, he may have to abandon the Greenland occupation and the Tehran Mulla regime has survived with the strategic support of Russia and China.

In recent weeks, a number of the US citizens of Indian origin were in New Delhi, perhaps to avoid bitter cold in the US, were seen blaming President Donald Trump for the ongoing fox-pause of the US policies; but it appeared that most of the American intelligentsia miss the fact that the American decline had actually begun during the nineties when the American capital and technology was being harnessed for the profit of the US-owned multinational corporations. These companies decided to use the cheap Chinese work-

force for producing goods for international markets. It is interesting to note that why the Americans were not concerned even during the Bush Administration, when the

"China Shock" had already adversely affected the job market in the US manufacturing sector, particularly between 2000 and 2007, with estimates of 2.5 million to 5.7 million jobs lost. It appears that Trump is only using the tariff for the reopening of domestic industrial manufacturing. In New Delhi, a number of economists confided to the Financial World that the problem with Trump is that he is trying to reinstate manufacturing in the US within a few months, a task which takes up years for any country.

The transcripts made available between the exchanges between the then US President George W. Bush and the Russian leader Vladimir Putin not only offer a delightful interesting background, but also give us an insight into the international power play, mostly missed by the media during the period. The texts have been released by the National Security Archive of George Washington University. The revealed texts are the verbatim transcripts of the two world leaders between 2001 and 2008. The foreign affairs experts in New Delhi are in agreement that the studies of the texts could have been more interesting, if the private talks among the leaders of the US, Russia and China during the decade 2015-2025 were



shared with the people.

In spite of some initial reluctance, the texts between Bush and Putin have been released following the judicial intervention. They reveal how the arch enemies of the Cold War era had become close allies, when they realized that the sudden eruption of the Islamists' violence in the early years of the 21st century has triggered off the memory of the mediaeval wars between the cross and the crescent. For them, the struggle between Christians and Muslims appeared being reenacted in the modern world.

Interestingly, Bush and Putin exchanged their common concern towards the menace of the aggressive Islamists, but they didn't care to discuss the Chinese initiative in curbing the Islamists in China.

Fear of China

In international communications, it is important to publish what transpired between two leaders, but it is

when he exclaimed "You're the type of guy I like to have in the foxhole with me."

The National Security Archive's director of Russia programs Dr. Svetlana Savranskaya provided the George W. Bush Library in November 2023 with a detailed Freedom of Information Act request for every conversation between Putin and Bush in the early 2000s, based on her research both on calendars and briefing books at the Bush Library in Dallas, and even more so, on the Kremlin website that frequently summarized each meeting and conversation.

The revelation was delayed, but in June 2024, the George W. Bush Library informed the Archive "our best estimate at this time is that the declassification review for the request under the Freedom of Information Act may be completed in approximately 12 years."

With pro bono (a legal text for the common good) representation from the law firm of Goodwin Procter, the Archive filed suit before a federal court in November 2024 to contest the estimated 12-year backlog of Freedom of Information requests for presidential records held by the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). As a result of the lawsuit, NARA processed the documents in 2025, informed both the former president and the current president in case they objected, and on December 22, informed the archive of the release.

These documents also indicate that the alliance between Bush and Putin were heralding an era of understanding between the two world leaders. If Putin's worry was regarding the growing influence of the Islamists in Chechnya, Bush was equally concerned by the growing menace of Al-Qaeda.

The New Found Love

During one of his communications, Bush was noticed,

previously unavailable evidence on the close partnership between Putin and Bush after the 9/11 attacks, including extraordinary commentary by Bush on U.S. intentions in Afghanistan, year by year assessments of the U.S. debacle in Iraq, and much jocular interaction between the two presidents.

Fear of China

The US and Russia had realised the growing challenges from China. Their concern regarding the rise of China, though during this period there was a noticeable decline of warmth in their conversations. The transcripts indicate that in later years, their conversation became more difficult, especially around the Russian critique of American arguments for missile defense, and Putin's growing distrust of American intentions in Russia's "near abroad," the areas of the former Soviet Union where Putin keeps asserting his superior knowledge of the realities on the ground, and his own national interests.

However, the two powers were worried about the nuclear ambitions of Iran and Pakistan having nuclear weapons.

Further, the transcripts provide high-level candid discussions of Iran's nuclear ambitions, the realities of the North Korean ambitions and the rising power of China (Bush: "China is the biggest long term problem for both of us." Putin: "More for you."

Bush: "They're not on our border..."). It has been noticed that by the end of Bush's tenure in office, Putin had aired his severe criticisms of the US policies in the region.

Common Concern

Further, the transcripts have revealed that Pakistan's nuclear proliferation was a significant concern for both the US and Russia, with leaders expressing apprehensions about its stability over two decades ago. Putin had raised concerns over Pakistan's nuclear proliferation during his talks with his talks with Bush.

During the first Putin-Bush meeting in Slovenia on June 16, 2001, Putin, according to the documents, voiced his worries and unease over the control of Islamabad's atomic assets. According to a transcript, during a discussion on non-proliferation and Iran, Bush said, "We (the US) have a complex history with Iran" and Putin assured him that he would restrict missile technology to Iran.

Concern for Ukraine

The declassified transcripts between Putin and Bush between 2001 and 2008 have also shed light on the Russian leader's stance on Ukraine over the years. The texts also reveal the anguish of Putin regarding the collapse of the USSR. In some conversations, Putin expressed bitterness over the collapse of the USSR, partially contradicting his publicly pro-

Western stance in the early 2000s, and his position on Ukraine's NATO bid in 2008.

The Russian perception regarding the American agenda appears to be revealed in the texts. It is being asked what really happened and why the Russian goodwill changed in this period.

There is a general impression across the continents that Russians gave up thousands of square kilometers of territory, voluntarily.

They had seldom heard of any Ukrainian crisis and in spite of the Russian controls, Moscow had given away thousands of square kilometres of its territory to countries like Ukraine and Kazakhstan. The Russians also withdrew from the picturesque region of the Caucasus. It is too hard to imagine, but was done by the party bosses," Putin stated.

The Soviet republics broke away from the USSR due to a mix of political, economic, and social factors, including the fallout from the Afghanistan invasion and political reforms prompted by rising dissent and economic stagnation in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

It is to be observed whether Trump would reinvent the triangular relationship among three world powers, the US, China and Russia.

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

Smartphones are Fueling Youth Mental Health Crisis: US Lawmakers

WASHINGTON: Widespread smartphone and social media use among children is driving a sharp rise in depression, anxiety and suicide, top American lawmakers and experts have said calling it a public health crisis that demands urgent government action.

Parents are increasingly alarmed by the amount of time children spend on screens and the nature of the content they consume, said Senator Ted Cruz, during a Senate Commerce Committee hearing titled "Plugged Out: Examining the Impact of Technology on America's Youth."

Cruz said children aged 8 to 12 now spend an average of 5.5 hours a day on screens, while teenagers spend more than 8.5 hours a day. "More than half of a teenager's waking hours are spent staring at a screen," he said, calling the trend deeply troubling for parents and educators. Psychologist Jean Twenge told lawmakers that the youth mental health crisis accelerated sharply after 2012, when smartphones became widespread and social media use shifted from optional to nearly mandatory for adolescents.

"Clinical-level depression doubled among adolescents and young adults between 2011 and 2019," Twenge said. She added that emergency room visits for self-harm doubled among girls aged 15 to 19 and quadrupled among girls aged



10 to 14 over the same period, while suicide rates in those age groups also doubled.

Twenge said the timing of the mental health decline did not align with economic factors but closely tracked the rise of smartphones and social media. "This was the first time the majority of Americans owned smartphones," she said, describing it as a pivotal moment for adolescent behavior.

Noting that social media platforms are deliberately designed to capture attention, using algorithms that keep young users scrolling, Ranking Member Maria Cantwell cited research showing that teenagers spend more than an hour a day on smartphones during school hours alone, often on

platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and YouTube.

Cantwell said studies have linked heavy social media use to higher rates of anxiety, depression and isolation among youth. She also cited findings showing that roughly 40 percent of teens exhibit concerning patterns of media addiction, which she said doubles the risk of suicidal behavior.

Pediatrician Jenny Radesky said many digital products used by children were never designed with youth development in mind. "Most digital products used by youth were designed by adults for adults and retrofitted for children after harms were recognized," she said.

Radesky warned that engagement-driven designs often

conflict with basic needs such as sleep, homework and family interaction. She said frequent notifications, algorithmic feeds and compulsive design features make it difficult for children to disengage, contributing to stress and emotional dysregulation.

Several senators expressed concern that schools are compounding the problem by issuing internet-connected devices to students with limited safeguards. Cruz said many parents find it harder to manage screen time when children are required to use laptops or tablets for schoolwork.

"There are not many parents who think it has become easier to help their kids when schools send them home with a tablet," he said, adding that technology in classrooms should be evaluated for whether it improves learning or causes harm.

Experts also warned that sleep deprivation and reduced face-to-face interaction are worsening the crisis. Twenge said teens now spend significantly less time with friends in person and are sleeping less than previous generations, both factors strongly linked to poor mental health outcomes.

Lawmakers from both parties said the problem is likely to intensify as artificial intelligence becomes more embedded in platforms used by children, increasing exposure to addictive and emotionally manipulative content.

Talking Points

Narvijay Yadav



People born in the 1960s form a unique bridge generation. They lived in the slowest era and adapted to the fastest. Their stories, wisdom, and lived transitions deserve to be recorded and remembered.

People born in the early 1960s carry a rare depth. They stand between two eras. They witnessed the slowest rhythm of life and now observe the fastest phase in human history. This shift is not a concept for them. It is a lived memory. They have watched the world move from an analog flow to a digital pulse. This makes them a true bridge generation. A generation that understands both patience and speed.

Their childhood belonged to a quieter world. Walking long distances was common and respectful. Bullock carts carried families across villages. Bicycles covered miles. A train journey felt like a celebration. Letters took days and weeks to reach. News travelled gently. Life had pauses, and that pace carried a certain beauty. Everything felt grounded. Everything felt real.

Their professional lives also began in this unhurried era. Work was done on paper. Editing meant working by hand. Typewriters demanded accuracy, with every mistake requiring a white fluid to correct. Then computers arrived. They learned them. They adapted. Later came the internet, smart-

phones, and now AI. In one lifetime, they have ridden every technological wave without losing their balance. Fortunately, I belong to this rare tribe, and I'm proud of it.

Snail Mail to AI

This is why people from the 1960s hold a special value in society. They have seen headlines and now hold smartphones that run the world. They listened to vinyl records and now stream endless music. They lived in a time of limited information and now navigate an ocean of content. They worked without digital tools and now use AI to enhance their productivity. Such a long-time arc cannot be repeated. No future generation will ever witness that kind of slow beginning followed by such rapid acceleration.

This generation also carries an extraordinary adaptability. They survived political shifts, cultural changes, economic transitions, and social transformations. They rebuilt lives more than once. They adjusted quietly and steadily. They did not learn this adaptability at a workshop. It is a life-earned skill, shaped by decades of constant change.

The Last Bridge Generation



Along with adaptability comes clarity. When people experience long phases of life, they naturally understand the difference between noise and value. They learn where to invest their energy and what to ignore. This clarity becomes their strength. It makes them natural mentors. It allows them to guide younger minds with wisdom that comes from seeing life from both sides.

A Bridge to Remember

Many individuals from this generation have also lived through difficult times. Illnesses, uncertainties, and the COVID years tested families across the country. Those who survived found a renewed purpose. Many embraced healthier lifestyles, quiet mornings, and simple practices that restore peace, clarity, and inner balance. For this generation, documentation has become im-

portant. They have crossed the longest bridges of change. They have seen worlds that no longer exist. Today's children in cities and villages grow up with screens, conveniences, and technology, unaware of how life once unfolded. If the bridge generation does not record its experiences, a valuable part of human history will disappear.

This is why their stories matter. Their memories hold lessons for the future. Their experiences explain how societies evolve. Their journeys reveal how resilience grows. They are a living archive of change. People born in the 1960s are precious. They are living libraries. They are bridges. And their stories must live on.

The author is a senior journalist and columnist. Views are personal.

ICC Rejects BCB's Request, Keeps Bangladesh's T20 World Cup Fixtures In India

NEW DELHI: The International Cricket Council (ICC) on Wednesday confirmed that Bangladesh's matches in the upcoming 2026 Men's T20 World Cup will be played in India, as per the original schedule. The decision comes after an ICC Board meeting, featuring all members, which took place via video conferencing, after the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) requested that its fixtures be shifted to Sri Lanka, due to the BCCI instructing Kolkata Knight Riders (KKR) to remove Mustafizur from its IPL 2026 squad amidst deteriorating relations between both countries. The ICC said its decision was based on security assessments, including independent reviews, which found no threat to Bangladesh players, officials, media, or fans at any of the tournament venues in India.

Bitter Lessons of Exile: Religion May Unite, But Home Land Secures

DR. MAULANA MAQSOOD UL HASAN QASMI

In an era of escalating global migration crises, the plight of Muslim refugees in Muslim-majority nations serves as a stark reminder of the limits of religious solidarity. From the overcrowded camps in Bangladesh to the mass expulsions in Iran and Pakistan, recent events underscore a profound truth: shared faith alone may not shield one from hardship. Drawing from Islamic teachings, particularly the Quran's designation of Mecca as the "Mother of all Villages" (Umm al-Qura), these developments offer a touching lesson for Indians—urging a deeper appreciation for one's homeland as a source of security, identity, and divine blessing.

Consider the Rohingya crisis in Bangladesh. Approximately 120,000 Rohingya Muslims, fleeing persecution

in Myanmar, have sought refuge in Cox's Bazar, one of the world's largest refugee settlements. Yet, this influx has bred growing resentment among local Bangladeshis, who grapple with strained resources, environmental degradation, and economic pressures. Despite the shared Islamic faith between the Rohingya and their hosts, tensions have escalated, manifesting in protests and calls for repatriation. This scenario highlights how national interests often supersede religious bonds, leaving vulnerable communities in limbo. The situation echoes across borders. In 2025, Iran deported approximately 1.5-1.8 million Afghans, as detailed in the UNHCR annual report. Many of these deportees were undocumented migrants who had lived in Iran for years, contributing to its economy amid shared cultural and religious ties. Similarly, under Pakistan's Illegal Foreigners



Repatriation Plan (IFRP), initiated in September 2023, around 1 million Afghans were deported by the end of 2025. These Afghans, predominantly Muslims escaping instability in their homeland, found little solace in the Islamic Republics that hosted them. Official narratives framed these actions as necessary for security and economic stability, but they reveal a broader pattern: when push comes to

shove, nationality and borders trump religious fraternity. These happenings outline a sobering reality—that "your religion will not work for you" in isolation. In times of crisis, it is the strength of one's connection to their homeland that provides true refuge. This is where Islamic perspectives offer profound guidance. The Holy Quran refers to Mecca as Umm al-Qura, or the "Mother of all Villages," in verses such

as Surah Al-An'am (6:92) and Surah Ash-Shura (42:7). This title signifies Mecca not merely as a geographical center but as the foundational source of spiritual guidance and community for all humanity. It also elevates the concept of a "motherland" to a divine status, symbolizing nurturing, protection, and unity. Just as Mecca is the heart from which Islam's message radiates, one's own country—be it India for its citizens—serves as a maternal embrace, fostering growth and security. For Indians, this Quranic wisdom carries a timely lesson. India, with its rich tapestry of cultures and faiths, has long been a beacon of pluralism. Yet, in an increasingly polarized world, the deportations of Rohingya and Afghans by fellow Muslim nations remind us not to take our motherland for granted. Loving one's homeland, as implied in the reverence for Umm al-Qura, means priori-

tizing national unity over divisive ideologies. It encourages Indians—Muslims, Hindus, and others alike—to invest in building a resilient society where compassion transcends borders, but loyalty to the nation remains paramount. By cherishing India as our collective "mother," we can avoid the mistakes of depending only on help or support from outside groups that may fail or let us down.

In conclusion, the crises in Bangladesh, Iran, and Pakistan are not just humanitarian tragedies; they are calls to introspection. As the Quran teaches through the sanctity of the motherland, true strength lies in rooting oneself deeply in one's soil. For us Indians, embracing this love for our homeland ensures that, come what may, we stand united and secure.

Author is prominent Islamic scholar, he has PhD. On Palestinian Issue, View are Personal

Oral health neglect can lead to long-term health risks, say Prof. Mahesh Verma



YOGESH KANT
New Delhi

Neglecting oral health can set off a chain of health problems ranging from poor nutrition to lifestyle diseases, Prof. Mahesh Verma, Vice Chancellor of Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University, said on Thursday, urging people to view dental care as a health necessity rather than an optional expense.

Speaking on the occasion of World Prosthodontist Day, Prof. Verma said oral health continues to remain neglected largely because dental problems are not perceived as life-threatening. However, he cautioned that health is not limited to survival alone but is closely linked to quality of life, in which oral health plays a crucial role.

"In today's era of medical specialisation, people are increasingly conscious about fitness and general health, but oral and dental care is still pushed to the sidelines," he said. "True wellness is incomplete if oral health is compromised. A person may be physically fit, but unhealthy teeth affect overall well-being."

Highlighting a common misconception, Prof. Verma said the loss of even a single tooth can disturb the balance of the entire oral system. Explaining that the mouth functions as a coordinated unit of upper and lower jaws, he noted that missing teeth often lead people to chew predominantly on one side, gradually affecting jaw function and chewing efficiency.

He said compromised chewing directly affects nutrition. "Many patients say they avoid foods like carrots or radish because they cannot chew properly. This shifts their diet towards soft, processed foods that are low in fibre and essential nutrients," he said. Over time, such dietary changes can contribute to digestive issues, rising cholesterol levels, general weakness and lifestyle diseases such as diabetes.

Beyond nutritional concerns, Prof. Verma pointed out that tooth loss also affects facial structure, speech and self-confidence, significantly reducing a person's quality of life. "Oral health has a visible and psychological dimension that is often ignored until damage becomes severe," he said.

Yogi Adityanath Emphasizes Self-Sustaining Gaushalas Shares Views in Recent Meeting

DR RB CHAUDHARY

In a significant step toward sustainable agriculture and animal welfare, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath convened a pivotal meeting on January 15, 2026, in Gorakhpur, demonstrating his keen interest in fortifying gaushalas through the innovative utilization of cow dung and urine. This encounter underscored the state's commitment to transforming these shelters into self-sustaining entities, leveraging natural byproducts for revenue generation while promoting eco-friendly farming practices. The discussion, involving prominent experts, highlighted the Uttar Pradesh Cow Shelter Self-Reliance Campaign, with a focus on bio-fertilizer production from cow urine to foster environmental conservation, economic viability in agriculture, and the yield of healthier, more flavorful produce.

The meeting featured Dr. R.B. Chaudhary, Editor-in-Chief of the Chennai-based animal welfare science journal Pashu Mitra and former Scientist/Assistant Secretary/Chief Editor of the Animal Welfare Board of India, alongside Dr. Amarnath Jaiswal, representative of the Government of India's Animal Welfare Division and Scientific and Technical News Editor of Pashu Mitra. The experts presented a comprehensive report on the ongoing

campaign, emphasizing how stray cattle in gaushalas could be better maintained by scientifically processing cow dung and urine into value-added products. Chief Minister Adityanath, recognizing the initiative's profound implications, inquired directly from the team: "What do you need from us?" This query reflected his proactive stance in supporting such endeavors, which he described as essential for societal welfare and cattle protection. He urged the continuation of the campaign with unwavering dedication and encouraged cattle rearers to adopt government schemes earnestly.

A key highlight was the impending inauguration of Uttar Pradesh's first liquid bio-fertilizer plant in Pilibhit district, constructed at a cost of approximately Rs 20 lakh. This facility, utilizing cow dung and urine, is projected to generate at least Rs 1 lakh in monthly revenue for the associated gaushala. The plant stems from insights gained during a symposium in Prayagraj, attended by 17 renowned scientists and experts nationwide. Copies of a special issue detailing the symposium's conclusions were presented to the Chief Minister, who expressed enthusiasm and committed to reviewing them. This development aligns with broader state efforts to integrate traditional resources into modern economic models, positioning gaushalas as hubs for innovation rather than mere shelters.



Chief Minister Adityanath's enthusiasm for strengthening gaushalas is rooted in a vision of holistic development. Under his leadership, Uttar Pradesh has prioritized cow conservation, viewing gaushalas as integral to rural economies. By harnessing cow dung and urine—abundant byproducts—the state aims to reduce dependency on chemical inputs, mitigate environmental degradation, and enhance agricultural productivity. Cow dung, rich in organic matter, serves as a base for compost and biogas, while cow urine emerges as a primary focus for producing bio-liquid fertilizers. These fertilizers, often formulated as "Jeevamrit" (a mixture of cow urine, dung, jaggery, and soil), enrich soil fertility naturally, promoting microbial activity and nutrient absorption without the harmful residues associated with synthetic alternatives.

The emphasis on cow urine-based bio-fertilizers addresses

critical challenges in modern farming. Chemically intensive agriculture has led to soil depletion, water contamination, and health concerns from pesticide residues. In contrast, cow urine, containing urea, potassium, and growth-promoting compounds, acts as a natural biostimulant. Studies indicate it improves crop yields by 20-30% while reducing input costs by up to 50%, making farming economically viable for smallholders. This approach not only saves nature by minimizing chemical runoff but also yields healthier, tastier products free from toxins. For instance, vegetables grown with these fertilizers exhibit enhanced nutritional profiles and superior flavor, appealing to health-conscious consumers and commanding premium prices in organic markets.

The status of production and marketing of cow dung and urine-based products in Uttar Pradesh reveals a robust, expanding ecosystem. As of

2026, the state has established Panchgavya units—encompassing medicines, paints, and organic fertilizers—in all 75 districts, under the "One District, One Innovation" model. These units process over 54 lakh kg of cow dung daily, converting it into biogas, compost, and bio-fertilizers. Production has scaled significantly since 2022, with the government allocating Rs 2,500 crore in 2025-26 for natural farming expansion across 23,500 hectares in seven districts. Gaushalas now produce formulations like Jeevamrit and Ghanjivamrit, with annual outputs supporting organic cultivation on vast farmlands.

Marketing efforts have been equally strategic. The NITI Aayog recommends capital assistance, brand development, and online portals for gaushala registration to facilitate sales. Products are marketed through cooperatives like IFFCO and UPL, with humic acid from cow dung fetching Rs 80 per bottle and generating revenues like Rs 10.7 lakh in pilot periods. In Pilibhit, the bio-fertilizer plant exemplifies this, aiming for Rs 1 lakh monthly income by supplying to local farmers and exporters. Overall, the cow dung economy contributes to sustainable development, with global markets for derived products exceeding USD 10 billion, where India positions itself as a low-cost producer leveraging its 3 million tonnes of daily biomass.

A noteworthy advancement is the integration of advanced

biorefinery technologies, as pioneered by Dr. Satya Prakash Verma, CEO and Founder of Nanoverse Biomaterials Private Limited. His research on "Integrated Sequential Commercial Production of Nanocellulose, Lignin, Humic Acid, Fulvic Acid, and Carbon Nanoparticles from Cow Dung" transforms ruminant biowaste into high-value nanomaterials. Cow dung, comprising 35-40% cellulose, 10-15% lignin, and humic precursors, is processed in a zero-waste biorefinery model, yielding products for industries like packaging, pharmaceuticals, and energy storage. Since 2021, Nanoverse has become the world's pioneer in this domain and the second-largest nanocellulose producer.

To formalize collaboration, an Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed involving Nanoverse Biomaterials, non-governmental organizations, gaushalas, and the Pilibhit district administration. Monitored by the Uttar Pradesh Gau Seva Aayog, the MoU outlines key provisions: (1) Establishment of decentralized production units in gaushalas for bio-fertilizers and nanomaterials; (2) Technology transfer from Nanoverse for processing cow dung and urine into commercial-grade products; (3) Training programs for shelter staff and farmers on sustainable practices; (4) Marketing support through state channels to ensure revenue streams, targeting 25-60%

gross margins; (5) Alignment with Sustainable Development Goals, including zero-carbon targets by 2050; and (6) Pilot implementation in Pilibhit, expandable statewide. This agreement ensures gaushalas generate income while advancing green chemistry and circular bioeconomy principles.

The economic ramifications are profound. Products like nanocellulose (USD 1.8 billion market, 20-25% CAGR) find applications in biocomposites and 3D printing, while humic acid (USD 0.9 billion, 12-14% CAGR) boosts organic farming. In Uttar Pradesh, this translates to rural employment, reduced plastic pollution, and energy self-reliance under models like "Har Gaon Urja Kendra."

In conclusion, Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath's engagement with experts exemplifies a forward-thinking strategy to empower gaushalas. By prioritizing cow urine-based bio-fertilizers and integrating biorefinery innovations via the MoU with Dr. Verma, Uttar Pradesh is poised to lead in sustainable agriculture. This not only generates revenue—potentially billions through multi-product chains—but also safeguards the environment, economizes farming, and delivers nutritious produce, embodying a harmonious blend of tradition and science.

Dr. RB Chaudhary is Author/Columnist, Former Assistant Secretary and Editor of the Animal Welfare Board of India, Government of India.