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PRADHAN CALLS FOR SHIFT FROM 'MACAULAY MINDSET', ANNOUNCES MASTER'S UPGRADE FOR SRCC GBO



YOGESH KANT
New Delhi

Citing seven lakh Ayushman beneficiaries, 150 kilometres of newly built roads and a target of 4,000 electric buses, Chief Minister Rekha Gupta on Friday outlined the Delhi government's first-year performance, framing it as a shift toward outcome-based governance.

Releasing a detailed report card at the Delhi Secretariat, Gupta said the administration had focused on measurable delivery across welfare, health, infrastructure and environment, guided by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision of a developed India.

Describing the government's working style as "less paperwork, more work", she said poor households and basic services were placed at the centre of planning decisions after the BJP assumed office in the national capital.

Welfare focus

Gupta said implementation of the Ayushman health scheme in Delhi was approved in the first Cabinet meeting, with around seven lakh residents benefiting so far.

To provide affordable meals to low-income groups, 70 Atal Canteens have been made operational, serving nearly 70,000

people daily, she said. The government has allocated Rs 700 crore for the development of jhuggi clusters, with allotment of already-constructed flats initiated for 13,000 economically weaker families in the first phase. Additionally, 500 childcare centres have been opened to support children of labourers.

Health infrastructure push
In the health sector, Gupta said 370 Ayushman Arogya Mandir facilities have been opened within a year, with a target to expand the network to 1,100 centres in 2024.

New blocks in five government hospitals have started functioning, and equipment installation is underway to strengthen diagnostic and

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DIGITAL PAYMENTS SURGE UNDER RUPAY-UPI INCENTIVES: REPORT



been cleared to improve supply, alongside replacement of ageing sewer lines and upgrades to water treatment plants. A water bill relief scheme has benefited 3.52 lakh consumers, she added. The Delhi Drainage Master Plan is being implemented to tackle waterlogging, including construction of 40 foot-over bridges to improve pedestrian safety.

EV push and green measures

Linking transport and pollution control, Gupta said the government plans to add 4,000 electric buses to the city's fleet and set up around 9,000 charging stations. A new EV policy is under preparation. The administration also plans to plant 35 lakh trees this year as part of its environmental strategy.

Anniversary observance

On the government's first anniversary, Gupta visited the Marghat Wale Hanuman Mandir and offered prayers, seeking peace and prosperity for Delhi residents.

She said the mandate given to the BJP would be treated as a responsibility to deliver results and reiterated the long-term goal of achieving "Developed Delhi 2047", adding that performance-based assessment would continue to guide governance decisions.

POTPOURRI

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'MY FAITH IN JUSTICE IS RESTORED': MOTHER REACTS AS SUPREME COURT OVERTURNS ALLAHABAD HIGH COURT ORDER



Delhi HC Orders MCD to Demolish Open Dustbin, Urinal beside Residential Property



NEW DELHI: The Delhi High Court has directed the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) to demolish an open garbage bin and a public urinal constructed adjacent to a residential property in old Delhi, holding that their presence violated the resident's right to live with dignity in a clean and healthy environment under Article 21 of the Constitution.

Disposing of a writ petition filed by an advocate, who appeared in person, a single-judge bench of Justice Amit Bansal observed that the existence of an open dustbin and public urinal next to a residential house constituted a clear nuisance and compelled residents to live in unhygienic conditions.

In its order, the Delhi High Court ordered the civic body to "forthwith demolish the open dustbin and the urinal next to the house of the petitioner" within four weeks.

The petitioner had alleged that the respondents-authorities constructed an unauthorised open garbage bin and urinal along the eastern wall of his property, where around 150 residents from the neighbourhood dump garbage and use the urinal, causing severe inconvenience and unsanitary conditions.

The plea claimed that despite several representations to civic authorities seeking maintenance of sanitary conditions and relocation of the facilities, no effective action had been taken.

In its status report filed before the Delhi High Court, the MCD stated that regular inspection and cleaning of the urinal were being carried out. It also informed that a joint inspection had been conducted pursuant to an earlier order, but the alternative site suggested by the petitioner was found infeasible.

In response, the petitioner contended that the locality is primarily residential and residents are expected to have toilets within their homes, negating the need for a public urinal. He further argued that under the Solid Waste Management Rules, the MCD is required to collect garbage directly from households rather than through open dumping points.

After hearing the parties, Justice Bansal observed: "In my considered view, the presence of an open garbage bin as well as a public urinal is undoubtedly a nuisance to the residents of the area, including the petitioner, outside whose house the same is located."

Infra, Health and EV push anchor Delhi govt's one-year report card



On infrastructure, the chief minister said 150 kilometres of roads have been completed so far, with another 400 kilometres planned before the monsoon. The Nand Nagri flyover has been opened to traffic, while Barapullah Phase-3 is targeted for completion by June. The Mukarba underpass is expected to open by March, and flyover projects are planned at Modi Mill and Savitri Cinema. Gupta said 833 kilometres of new water pipelines have

Delhi launches AI-Enabled CM SHRI School, 7,000 smart classrooms by March



OUR CORRESPONDENT
New Delhi

The Delhi government on Friday inaugurated an artificial intelligence-enabled CM SHRI School in Sarojini Nagar and announced that 7,000 classrooms across the city will be converted into "smart" classrooms by March 31. Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan inaugurated the school and formally launched the CM SHRI scheme in the presence of Delhi Chief Minister Rekha Gupta and Education Minister Ashish Sood.

The scheme was also rolled out in 75 government schools across the national capital. Pradhan congratulated the chief minister and the education minister, saying the government had made significant progress in the education sector within a year of taking office. Chief Minister Gupta said the CM SHRI Schools initiative goes

beyond infrastructure development and reflects a commitment to making Delhi's students globally competitive. "These schools are being developed as Centres of Excellence, integrating modern technology, skill education, career guidance and holistic personality development," she said. Gupta said AI-enabled smart classrooms are being set up with interactive panels, digital learning content and modern teaching tools to enable personalised learning based on each student's abilities. She added that a dedicated digital portal has been developed to help students prepare for competitive examinations, featuring regular online tests and progress tracking mechanisms. Highlighting the focus on skill development, Gupta said multi-sectoral skill labs will introduce students to robotics, artificial intelligence, design and mechatronics at an early stage, helping them

PM Modi to Participate in Groundbreaking Event of HCL-Foxconn Chip Project



NEW DELHI: Prime Minister Narendra Modi is scheduled to participate in the groundbreaking ceremony of the Rs 3,700 crore HCL-Foxconn joint venture project - India Chip Pvt. Ltd. - in the Yamuna Expressway Industrial Development Authority (YEIDA) area near the Noida International Airport in Jewar, Uttar Pradesh on February 21 via video conferencing, according to a PMO statement issued on Friday. The establishment of the semiconductor facility by Taiwanese electronics manufacturing giant Foxconn and India's HCL Group marks a significant milestone in India's journey towards technological self-reliance and reflects the Prime Minister's vision of positioning India as a trusted global destination for high-end electronics and semiconductor manufacturing.

This Outsourced Semiconductor Assembly and Test (OSAT) facility at YEIDA will be set up by India Chip Pvt. Ltd. under the Modified Scheme for Semiconductor Assembly, Testing, Marking and Packaging (ATMP), with a total investment of over Rs 3,700 crore. The project is aligned with the government's efforts to strengthen domestic manufacturing capabilities, reduce import dependence, and build resilient global supply chains. It is expected to play a crucial role in supporting key sectors such as mobile phones, tablets, laptops, automotive, consumer electronics and other devices.

Through this initiative, India's semiconductor ecosystem will receive a major boost, fostering innovation, skill development, and technology transfer. The facility is also expected to create thousands of direct and indirect employment opportunities to engineers, technicians, and professionals, while catalysing growth in ancillary industries, the statement said.

Delhi Police Say Taking Legal Action after Youth Cong Members Breach Security at AI Summit

NEW DELHI: Delhi Police declined to give a clear explanation after members of the Indian Youth Congress staged a protest inside Bharat Mandapam during the India AI Impact Summit on Friday. Youth Congress workers raised slogans against Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Central government over issues including unemployment, inflation and the India-US trade deal.

When asked by IANS how the protesters managed to breach security at the high-profile venue, Additional DCP Anand Mishra did not provide specific details, saying only that Delhi Police were "taking action" in the matter. According to officials, several Youth Congress workers removed their shirts and shouted slogans such as "PM is compromised" inside the venue. Some stood in front of an India AI Summit display board, clicked photographs and attempted to disrupt proceedings before security personnel



intervened. The protesters were swiftly detained and escorted out to prevent disruption of the international event, which was attended by senior government officials, industry leaders and foreign delegates. They were later taken to Tilak Marg Police Station for questioning and further legal action. Police said appropriate action was being initiated against those involved for violating security norms. However, it remained unclear how the protesters

Govt Likely to Discontinue Cash Payments at National Highways from April 1



NEW DELHI: The government on Friday said that the NHAI is contemplating to completely discontinue cash transactions at the National Highway fee plazas across the country from April 1, 2026. The move will develop a fully digital National Highway tolling ecosystem. Post implementation, all toll payments at National Highway fee plazas will be processed exclusively through digital modes using FASTag or Unified Payments Interface (UPI). According to the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways, the proposed measure is aimed at

consolidating the gains achieved in Electronic Toll Collection and strengthening the efficiency and reliability of National Highway fee plaza operations. "The transition will help to enhance 'Ease of Commuting' for National Highway users by improving lane throughput, reducing congestion at fee plazas and bringing greater consistency and transparency in toll transactions," according to the official statement. Over 98 per cent penetration of FASTag has significantly transformed toll collection practices in the country. Moreover, an overwhelming

proportion of toll transactions are processed electronically through RFID-enabled FASTag affixed to vehicles, facilitating seamless and contactless movement across toll plazas. According to the NHAI, UPI payment facilities have been operationalised at the National Highway toll plazas, ensuring availability of instant and accessible digital payment options for National Highway commuters nationwide. Vehicles entering a fee plaza without a valid, functional FASTag are currently charged twice the applicable user fee, if the fee payment is made in cash. Whereas National Highway users who opt to pay via UPI are charged only 1.25 times of the user fee for the applicable vehicle category. "A complete transition to digital only mode of payment will strengthen operational efficiency, improve traffic management, minimise delays and enhance overall National Highway user experience at over 1,150 fee plazas on various National Highways and Expressways in the country," said the government.

events but fail to address ground realities. Farmers will suffer because of the India-US trade deal. We have a right to protest in a democracy. No law was violated," he said. Chib added that the slogans reflected widespread anger among the country's youth over rising prices and joblessness. A visitor at the summit criticised the disruption, saying differing views should be expressed through dialogue rather than by opposing every initiative. "We are working for the country. If you have a different opinion, present it properly," the attendee said. In a statement later, the Youth Congress said the protest aimed to highlight concerns that "corporate interests are being prioritised over national interests", and alleged that the government's foreign policy stance had weakened. They linked the demonstration to economic challenges, claiming growing frustration among young people over unemployment and inflation.

India's AI Opportunity Is Amazing: Sam Altman

NEW DELHI: OpenAI CEO Sam Altman on Thursday said India is witnessing extraordinary growth in Artificial Intelligence adoption, describing the country as one of the company's fastest-growing markets globally. Speaking to media on

the sideline of 'India AI Impact Summit 2026' in the national capital, Altman said India's AI opportunity is amazing. It's great to be here. "This is one of our fastest growing markets in the world. Maybe it's the fastest at this point. It's certainly the fastest for Codex," Altman told reporters. Altman highlighted that India is now home to over 100 million weekly users of ChatGPT, ranging from students and teachers to developers and entrepreneurs. "There's more than 100 million people. They use ChatGPT every week," he mentioned. He noted that the scale and speed of adoption in the country underline its growing importance in the global AI ecosystem.

India's Forex Surges by \$8.663 Bn to Reach All-Time High of \$725.727 Bn

MUMBAI: India's foreign exchange reserves increased by \$8.663 billion to an all-time high of \$725.727 billion in the week ended February 13, according to data released by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on Friday. Foreign exchange reserves had declined by \$6.711 billion in the previous week due to a fall in gold prices. According to RBI data, the value of gold reserves, a key component of foreign exchange reserves, increased by \$4.990 billion to \$128.466 billion in the week ended February 13.

Foreign Currency Assets (FCA), the largest component of foreign exchange reserves, increased by \$3.550 billion to \$573.603 billion. FCA includes the dollar, along with several other major global currencies such as the yen, euro, and pound, whose value is expressed in dollars. According to the RBI, the value of SDRs increased by \$103 million to \$18.924 billion in the week ended February 13. Meanwhile, India's reserve position with the RBI increased by \$19 million to \$4.734 billion. Foreign exchange reserves



are crucial for a country and provide a clear indication of its economic health. Furthermore, they play a significant role in maintaining a stable currency exchange rate. For example, if the rupee is under significant pressure against the dollar and its value declines, the central bank can use its foreign exchange reserves to prevent the rupee from falling against the dollar and maintain a stable exchange rate. Increasing foreign exchange reserves also indicates a significant inflow of dollars into the country, strengthening the country's economy. Furthermore, this increase also makes it easier for the country to trade abroad. Notable, the country remains the world's largest recipient of remittances, with inflows reaching \$135.4 billion in FY25, supporting stability in the external account, according to the Economic Survey 2025-26.

India Witnessing Religious and Cultural Renaissance under PM Modi: Pralhad Joshi

RAICHUR: Union Minister for Food and Civil Supplies Pralhad Joshi said on Friday that under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India is witnessing a major transformation and experiencing a religious and cultural renaissance.

He was speaking at the inauguration and Brahmakalashotsava ceremony of the newly constructed Sri Veeranamma Devi Temple at Gejjalagatta in Lingsugur taluk of Raichur district. He said India is a nation rooted in a rich cultural heritage and is a confluence of many unique traditions. He pointed out that the concepts of knowledge, science, religion, and customs are deeply embedded in the country, adding that as a result, the world today acknowledges and praises India's greatness. "You may worship any deity you choose. But life must be led



with justice, morality, peace, and righteousness - that is what our Sanatana Dharma teaches," he said, adding that beyond rituals and modes of worship, there exists a greater principle called "Human Dharma." He said that historically, there was no concept of untouchability in society, but it crept in over time, adding that there is no question of accepting untouchability. He urged religious leaders and pontiffs to work towards eradicating untouchability and uniting society and the nation. "Under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, re-

ligious, cultural, and spiritual rejuvenation activities are being carried out across the country," he said, adding that efforts are being made to instil cultural and spiritual values among children. The Union Minister said the Central government has launched a spiritual tourism initiative called the "Ramayana Circuit" to introduce people to prominent religious sites and to the legacy of Lord Rama. Under this initiative, visitors are taken to 15 important religious and spiritual destinations associated with Lord Rama. Railway travel has been arranged for spiritual tours to key locations such as Ayodhya, Hampi, Chitrakoot, Nashik, and Nagpur, he said. Quoting a verse, the Minister said, "Life becomes like stagnant water when Veeranamma Devi is forgotten; it flows like a river and roars like the ocean when remembered."

Pradhan Calls for Shift from 'Macaulay Mindset', Announces Master's Upgrade for SRCC GBO

OUR CORRESPONDENT
New Delhi

Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan on Friday called on higher education institutions to "exit the Macaulay doctrine" and align themselves with the vision of Viksit Bharat, as he announced that Shri Ram College of Commerce's Post Graduate Diploma in Global Business Operations (PGDGB) will be converted into a full-fledged Master's degree programme.

Pradhan made the announcement while inaugurating Yugantar '26, the annual management conclave of SRCC's PGDGB programme, themed "AI for Sustainability & Startup Innovation," at the Shrihar Shriram Auditorium in the national capital.

The event was attended by Vice-Chancellor of University of Delhi Prof. Yogesh Singh, SRCC Principal Prof. Simrit Kaur, faculty members, industry leaders, alumni and students. Dr. Misha Govil, GBO Coordinator; Dr. Sapna Bansal, Convener of Yugantar 2026; and Dr. Sunita Sharma, Co-Convener, were also present.

"Structural reset" under NEP In his keynote address, Pradhan described the National Education Policy (NEP) as a structural reset of India's academic framework.



"We have to get out of the Macaulay doctrine that enslaved India academically. The National Education Policy, envisioned by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, will ensure that Bharat becomes a Vishwa Guru. Institutions like SRCC must lead this transformation," he said. He stressed the need for technological sovereignty and institutional reform, saying the nature of global competition has fundamentally changed in the age of advanced technologies.

"We know change is needed, but we must not be afraid to accept it. India must move toward sovereign AI ecosystems, strengthen institutions like IIT Madras and IIT Bombay, and build indigenous capabilities so that Bharat becomes a leader in Artificial Intelligence," Pradhan said. He urged universities to embed research, patent development, startup incubation and AI-led innovation into

their academic structures. PGDGB to become Master's programme Announcing a key academic reform, the minister said SRCC's two-year PGDGB diploma programme would be upgraded into a full-fledged Master's degree.

The move is expected to enhance the programme's academic recognition, bring it in line with NEP reforms and improve its global academic equivalence, while integrating stronger research and innovation components.

Focus on innovation and industry linkage Vice-Chancellor Yogesh Singh said universities must ensure that research outcomes translate into commercially viable products.

"Only three words can safeguard the future of young minds — innovation, creativity and originality. Universities must go beyond publications; we must develop patents, prototypes and commercially

sustainable products," he said, calling for stronger university-industry collaboration.

SRCC Principal Simrit Kaur underlined the need for ethical and inclusive adoption of artificial intelligence. "Artificial Intelligence has the capacity to shift both demand and supply curves, improving productivity and efficiency. But without the intelligence of humans, there is no optimal solution. AI must be coordinated with humanity and adopted responsibly," she said.

Kaur added that institutions must ensure AI-led growth remains inclusive, accountable and sustainable. Panels, startup expo mark first day Day 1 of Yugantar '26 featured corporate panel discussions on AI-enabled sustainability, founder sessions on startup scaling, and case simulations across finance, marketing, analytics, human resources and international business.

Pradhan also visited the Viksit Bharat Startup Expo 2026, where student-led ventures showcased innovation prototypes. With the announcement of the Master's degree upgrade and a renewed emphasis on NEP-driven reforms and sovereign AI capabilities, the conclave positioned SRCC within the broader roadmap toward Viksit Bharat 2047.

Delhi govt tells HC private schools cannot collect fees without approval under new law

OUR CORRESPONDENT
New Delhi



The Delhi government informed the Delhi High Court that private schools cannot collect fees for the new academic session from April 1 unless the amount is determined and approved under the newly enacted Delhi School Education (Transparency in Fixation and Regulation of Fees) Act.

Opposing petitions filed by school associations seeking a stay on the government's directive to constitute School-Level Fee Regulation Committees (SLFRCs), Additional Solicitor General S V Raju argued that halting the process would have "disastrous" consequences and that forming the panels would not cause any prejudice to schools at this stage.

A bench comprising Chief Justice D K Upadhyaya and Justice Tejas Karia was hearing pleas challenging the February 1 notification mandating the

constitution of SLFRCs within 10 days. Appearing for the Delhi government, Raju submitted that schools are prohibited under the Act from charging anything beyond the approved fee. "Schools cannot collect from April 1 because the Act prohibits it. From April 1, 2026, if they want to collect unregulated fees, they cannot do it," he told the court. He added that the Act permits schools to submit fee proposals before the start of the academic year and that the formation of committees would not prejudice them.

Defending the February 1 Removal of Difficulties Order, Raju said the government initiated the fee-determination process earlier than the prescribed timeline to ensure that fees are fixed before the commencement of the new academic session in compliance with the law. He described the order as being in the interest of schools, students and parents. The court posted the matter

for further hearing on February 24 and extended till then the February 10 deadline set by the government for schools to constitute the SLFRCs. The bench also asked senior counsel representing the Action Committee Unaided Recognised Private Schools to clarify why the associations were unwilling to set up the committees. Senior advocate Akhil Sibal, appearing for the petitioners, argued that the February 1 notification is legally untenable as it alters the timeline prescribed under the Act. He contended that the fee-fixation process is required to begin in July of the preceding academic year and accused the government of rushing the implementation. Sibal further submitted that the law requires unanimous decisions within the SLFRCs, making it practically impossible to conclude the process in time for the upcoming academic session. He also argued that the power to fix fees had effectively been vested in another authority. The court indicated that it would consider passing an order on the request to stay the notification on the next date of hearing. In its affidavit, the Directorate of Education stated that preventing implementation of the Act from April 1 would defeat its objective of curbing profiteering and ensuring regulated fees from the start of the academic year 2026-27.

Delhi CM orders Rs 800 crore makeover for 241 roads to end potholes, dust



NEW DELHI: Delhi Chief Minister Rekha Gupta announced on Tuesday that more than 241 major roads spanning 400 km will be redeveloped under a 'wall-to-wall carpeting' model to eliminate potholes and dust, for Rs 802.18 crore.

The Chief Minister said that with strong support from the Central government, the project aims to make Delhi's roads pothole-free, even, and long-lasting.

She described the 'wall-to-wall carpeting' model as a significant step towards making the capital safer, more organised and future-ready.

The total length of roads to be upgraded is nearly 400 kilometres across 45 Assembly constituencies, said a statement.

Out of the total project cost, Rs 643.36 crore will be funded by the Central Road Infrastructure Fund (CRIF) of the Central government, while Rs 158.82 crore will be contributed by the Delhi government.

The Chief Minister noted that often only the central portion of roads, or isolated potholes, are repaired, resulting in deterioration within a short period.

She said under the new system, entire stretches will be uniformly strengthened from edge to edge, enhancing durability and lifespan.

She also informed that last year, approximately 150 kilometres of roads were constructed in Delhi using the same technology.

A fully levelled and sealed surface across the complete width will also lead to a marked reduction in dust and air pollution, she said.

Damaged roads generate loose soil and fine particles that become airborne due to vehicular movement, contributing significantly to pollution. The new approach will help reduce particulate matter (PM) levels and improve cleanliness and air quality in surrounding areas, said the statement.

The project is targeted for completion by the end of the year. Work will be undertaken in phases to minimise traffic disruption and public inconvenience. The Public Works Department (PWD) of the Delhi government will execute the project across approximately 45 Assembly constituencies, it said.

The roads identified for upgradation include August Kranti Marg in Malviya Nagar, Outer Ring Road, Rao Tula Ram Marg, Kapashera-Bijwasan Road, Najafgarh-Jharoda Road, Captain Gaur Marg in Kalkaji, Lala Lajpat Rai Marg in Greater Kailash, Dr K.N. Katju Marg in Rohini, Shammath Marg in Chandni Chowk, D.B. Gupta Road in Karol Bagh, ESI Hospital Road in Shahdara, Tanga Stand Road in Seemapuri, Preet Vihar Road, Patparganj Road, Khichripur Road, Khudiram Bose Road, Khajuri Flyover, Gokalpuri Flyover, Zero Pusta Road, Seelampur Road and Loni Road, among others.

JIH President Calls for Deeper Piety and Steadfastness in Ramadan 2026 Message



FW DESK
New Delhi

The President of Jamaat-e-Islami Hind (JIH), Syed Sadatullah Husaini has called upon Muslims to treat Ramadan 2026 as a serious project of inner reform and principled living, stressing that fasting is meant to cultivate piety, patience, and moral strength at a time when faith and values face constant pressure.

In a statement to the media, the JIH President said, "Piety is a state of the heart, a deep consciousness of Allah's presence and His oversight, which creates hesitation toward sin and a natural attraction toward virtue." He explained that fasting trains believers to live with this awareness beyond rituals and outward discipline. Highlighting the spiritual dimension of fasting, he said that through fasting a person becomes acquainted with spiritual pleasures as opposed to physical ones, and that hunger and restraint reveal that bodily comfort does not define a meaningful life. Repentance and seeking forgiveness, he added, cleanse the soul and restore clarity of purpose.

Syed Sadatullah Husaini described Ramadan as the 'Month of Patience' and said, "Patience is the name for remaining as firm as a mountain on one's principles against all external forces and internal promptings." He noted that fasting teaches restraint amid hunger, thirst, workload, and distraction, ensuring that actions flow from principle rather than impulse. By altering sleep, food habits, and daily routines for the sake of Allah, believers develop willpower and the strength to make difficult choices and remain steadfast under pressure.

The President of Jamaat-e-Islami Hind averred that faith and morals are facing continuous challenges through social media and the spread of immodesty, and that values and principles are under tremendous pressure in the digital age. He urged Muslims to move beyond symbolic observance and allow Ramadan to become a turning point that produces lasting personal and collective reform rooted in piety and steadfastness.

BJP govt failed to deliver on key promises in 1st year: Sisodia

OUR CORRESPONDENT
New Delhi

Senior Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) leader and former deputy chief minister Manish Sisodia on Friday alleged that the BJP government in Delhi has failed to fulfil several key promises in its first year in office, claiming that various sections of the population are facing hardship.

There was no immediate response from the Delhi government or the BJP. Addressing a press conference to mark the government's first anniversary, Sisodia said that while sweeping changes cannot be expected within a year, the administration had not taken meaningful steps to honour major pre-poll assurances. "We are not saying everything should have changed within one year. But in this one year, several promises made to the people of Delhi have remained unfulfilled," he said.

Women's financial assistance Sisodia pointed to the BJP's pre-election promise of providing monthly financial assistance to women. He said Prime Min-



ister Narendra Modi had guaranteed that Rs 2,500 per month would be credited to women's bank accounts starting March 8, 2025. "One year has passed but not a single step has been taken to fulfil this guarantee," he alleged.

Pollution concerns On air quality, Sisodia claimed that Delhi witnessed some of its worst Air Quality Index (AQI) levels during the past year. He further alleged that when public anger over pollution intensified, there were attempts to manipulate AQI data by shutting down monitoring centres, relocating them to greener areas, or placing water sprinklers near the stations.

Referring to government schools, Sisodia alleged that several flagship initiatives introduced during the previous AAP government have been discontinued. He claimed that Schools of Specialised Excellence were shut down and programmes such as the Happiness Curriculum, Entrepreneurship Curriculum and IIT-NEET coaching support have been stopped.

He also alleged that budget allocations for education had been reduced, affecting infrastructure development and innovation in schools.

Employment and workers On employment, Sisodia claimed that more than 1,000 contractual and temporary

workers had lost their jobs over the past year. He also alleged that promises to regularise bus marshals within 60 days were not fulfilled and that many marshals were instead dismissed.

Healthcare and civic issues In the health sector, Sisodia alleged that free medicines and diagnostic tests in government hospitals have been discontinued. He further claimed that the construction of new hospitals initiated under the previous government has been halted.

Highlighting civic concerns, he referred to garbage accumulation, overflowing sewers, contaminated water supply and pothole-ridden roads across the city.

Sisodia also alleged that ration cards of around eight lakh beneficiaries had been cancelled and that pensions for widows and elderly citizens were either discontinued or delayed.

"In summary, this year has been marked by unfulfilled promises, rising unemployment and strained public services. Slogans and name changes cannot substitute for concrete results," he said.

Haryana export sees a strong presence in global market in Automobiles, Textile and Basmati sectors

SATISH HANDA
New Delhi

According to NITI Aayog's 2023-24 report, Haryana, ranking among the top exporting states, has established a strong presence in the global market, especially has established a strong presence in the global market in Automobiles, Textile and Basmati sectors. According to the report, Haryana has also moved to become a strong industrial and export hub having presence in other sectors such as Agriculture, Footwear, Pharmaceutical, Gems and jewelry sectors. In the NITI Aayog report, Haryana has firmly established itself among the country's leading exporting states having exports growth in 2023-24 with rupees 1.48 Lakh Crore Global Trade, the state is not only ahead in traditional agricultural products but is also rapidly progressing in automobile parts, handloom products and emerging industrial sectors witnessing 8.5% growth in the July-September quarter last year amid global uncertainties.

A US-Europe trade deal is likely to benefit the rice industry. With reduced tariffs, the certification process will be simplified, strengthening the ecosystem. The past scenario reveals, The Haryana state's total exports in the financial year 2023-24 were approximately rupees 1.48 lakh crore. The state's overall score was 55.01, placing Haryana among the top states in the rankings. The United States is Haryana's largest market, accounting

BJP govt in Haryana has completely failed to control crime, says Hooda



SATISH HANDA
Rohtak

Addressing media persons at his Rohtak residence former Haryana Chief Minister and Leader of the Opposition Bhupendra Singh Hooda said that according to central government data, Haryana is one of the most unsafe states nationally. Industrialists are forced to flee. New investment is not coming in. The situation is such that only those who are safe in the state are safe. He said that extortion is being openly demanded from businessmen, doctors, and former MLAs. Gangsters are sitting outside and committing crime after crime, but the government is unable to do anything. He said that a young man was murdered in public near the IG's office in Rohtak a day ago.

"Around 60 gangs are active in the state. Ransom is being demanded in the name of Bishnoi, sometimes Bhau and even those gangsters sitting abroad," Hoodasw said that Congress will protest inside the Assembly and, if necessary, on the streets. Hooda said that the situation was similar before 2005, and gangsters were eliminated during Congress rule and after 2015, gangsters became active again. Hooda said out of fear businessmen, doctors, and others are forced to pay extortion money.

Delhi Assembly Speaker Issues Attendance Advisory to House Panel Members, Officials



NEW DELHI: Issuing an advisory for regular attendance, Delhi Assembly Speaker Vijender Gupta said on Sunday that House Committees are the working pillars of legislative oversight and their effectiveness depends upon the seriousness, regular participation, and collective wisdom of members.

He issued advisory to members serving on various House Committees of the Eighth Legislative Assembly, urging them to ensure regular attendance and active participation in Committee meetings. "The advisory emphasises that Committees play a crucial role in examining matters relating to governance, administrative functioning, and public accountability," a statement said. Meaningful engagement within Committees, the Speaker noted, strengthens institutional functioning and ensures that recommendations are comprehensive and well considered. The communication further highlights that Committee proceedings often require the presence of senior officers from concerned departments for presentations and for furnishing relevant factual inputs on matters under examination.

Three senior ministers from Faridabad recently met the party's national president Nitin Navin in Delhi, sparking fresh discussion about internal tensions in the BJP's state unit. The ministers — Vipul Goyal, Rajesh Nagar, and Gaurav Gautam — described the meeting as a courtesy call. However, political observers believe the visit carried a deeper message. All three leaders are considered to be part of a camp that has differences with Union Minister Krishan Pal Gurjar, who holds strong influence in Faridabad. The region has witnessed internal rivalry within

BJP Politics Heats Up in Haryana: Faridabad Leaders Knock on Delhi's Door



Three Haryana Ministers Meet BJP President Amid Power Struggle in Faridabad

FW BUREAU
Chandigarh

The BJP for quite some time, and this joint meeting in Delhi suggests that the matter has now reached the party's central leadership. By meeting the national president together, the ministers appear to be showing unity and strength. The move is being seen as an attempt to establish a direct connection with the central leadership, possibly sidelining state-level leadership in the process. Sources indicate that the leaders discussed upcoming party organizational appoint-

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BJP Politics Heats Up in Haryana: Faridabad Leaders Knock on Delhi's Door

Three Haryana Ministers Meet BJP President Amid Power Struggle in Faridabad

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UN Secretary General Guterres Calls on President Murmu

NEW DELHI: United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres on Friday called on President Droupadi Murmu at Rashtrapati Bhavan on the sidelines of the AI Impact Summit in New Delhi.

According to the President's Secretariat, the UN Secretary General appreciated India's leadership role in convening the successful AI Impact Summit, and its longstanding collaboration with the United Nations in various fields.

President Murmu welcomed the initiative of Secretary General Guterres to create a global scientific panel on AI to serve all of humanity.

"The President noted that at a time of global uncertainties, multilateralism is facing major challenges, including a widening trust deficit. She added that the existing outdated framework of the UN Security Council must be reformed to reflect contemporary geopolitical realities, and the Global South must have a greater say in decision-making. She emphasized that urgent reform



of the UN Security Council is the key to maintaining the relevance and effectiveness of the UN," read a statement issued by the President's Secretariat.

"The President noted that while the 'UN-80' initiative offers a good platform for reforms, it is important that developmental priorities of the Global South are protected in any restructuring exercise. The President extended her good wishes for the rest of Mr Guterres' tenure as UN Secretary General, and reiterated India's full support towards multilateralism," it added.

Earlier in the day, Guterres

met Prime Minister Narendra Modi during which both leaders talked about making Artificial Intelligence (AI) all inclusive and how the UN can play a constructive role in this regard.

"Reiterated India's support towards any effort aimed at harnessing AI for a better planet. We also exchanged perspectives on UN reforms, especially giving greater voice to the Global South," PM Modi posted on X after the meeting.

In his address at the landmark event, Guterres on Friday cited AI fragmentation risks, calling for global interoper-

ability standards for better outcomes at the 'India AI Impact Summit 2026'.

"Technological rivalry is growing. Without a common baseline, fragmentation wins, with different regions and different countries operating under incompatible policies and technical standards," he warned.

Addressing the Summit, he said that when we agree on how to test systems and measure risk, we create interoperability.

"So a startup in New Delhi can scale globally with confidence because the benchmarks are shared and safety can travel with technology," he noted.

Guterres also called for science-led AI guardrails to protect people and accelerate innovation.

"Once we understand what AI systems can do and what they cannot, we can move from rough measures to smarter, risk-based guardrails. Guardrails that protect people, uphold human rights, and preserve human agency," he told the gathering.

India-US Trade Deal: Rahul Gandhi, Kharge to Lead Farmers' Protest in Bhopal on Feb 24



BHOPAL: Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge and Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi will visit Bhopal on February 24 to lead a major protest against the interim India-US trade framework, which the party alleges severely harms Indian farmers by opening doors to cheaper US imports.

Madhya Pradesh Congress President Jitu Patwari announced the visit, stating: "On February 24, 2026, in Bhopal, Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge ji and Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi will raise

their voice for the rights and privileges of farmers against the injustice being done to them in the India-US trade deal."

Speaking to the media, Patwari accused the government of yielding under US pressure, claiming the deal has already depressed prices for key crops like soybean, cotton, and maize.

He described it as a "compromise deal" imposed "with a sword on their neck," adding that Madhya Pradesh's soybean, maize, and cotton farmers — along with families across the state — are directly affected.

The February 24 event, he said, reflects the party's commitment to fighting for farmers nationwide. The protest will take the form of a Kisan Sammelan (farmers' convention) in Bhopal, launching a targeted campaign in vulnerable states: Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir, and Bihar. These regions grow crops like cotton, soybean, maize, fruits, nuts, apples, almonds, and walnuts, which face risks from reduced tariffs and potential influx of US products such as soybean oil, dried distillers' grains (DDGS), red sorghum, and others. Senior Congress leader Jairam Ramesh emphasised the deal's adverse effects on cotton, soybean, and maize farmers, labelling it a "total surrender" to US corporate interests without proper safeguards or farmer consultation. The backlash follows the framework announced earlier this month, sparking nationwide farmer protests, strikes, and symbolic burnings of deal copies.

PM Modi to Lay Foundation Stone of Assam's First Expressway



GUWAHATI: Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Friday said that Prime Minister Narendra Modi will visit the Barak Valley on March 14 and make several major announcements aimed at boosting connectivity and infrastructure in the region.

Addressing a gathering while attending the Vibrant Village Programme at Natanpur in Assam's Cachar district, Sarma said the Prime Minister will lay the foundation stone for Assam's first express highway connecting Guwahati with Panchgram.

The project will be constructed at an estimated cost of Rs 22,000 crore.

The Chief Minister said that once completed, the express highway will reduce the travel time between Guwahati and the Barak Valley to around four and a half hours, significantly improving road connectivity and economic integration between the two regions.

Sarma further stated that the people of Barak Valley have received the express highway without having to raise any demand, describing it as a reflection of the Centre's commitment to Assam's development.

He also announced that the long-pending East-West Corridor project is expected to be completed within the next month.

The Chief Minister also said that his government has freed more than 1.5 lakh bighas of land from encroachers and asserted that the BJP has set a target of clearing five lakh bighas of land from illegal encroachment in the next term.

"Our government has freed more than 1.5 lakh bighas of land from encroachers. In the next term, we have taken a resolve to free five lakh bighas of land from encroachers," Sarma said, outlining the BJP-led government's commitment to protecting Assam's land and identity.

The Chief Minister said that illegal encroachment had posed a serious threat to Assam's demographic balance and economic security for decades, but the present government had taken firm and decisive steps to address the issue.

He added that eviction drives were carried out strictly in accordance with the law and to restore land to rightful owners and public use.

8,000 mule accounts frozen in J&K as agencies flag digital hawala threat



FW DESK

Central security agencies, working with the Jammu and Kashmir Police, have frozen more than 8,000 suspected "mule accounts" in the Union Territory over the past three years, amid concerns that proceeds of cyber fraud could be diverted towards separatist and anti-national activities.

Officials said the accounts were part of an expanding financial network used by global cybercrime syndicates to receive, layer and launder stolen funds. The action follows sustained efforts to curb terror financing channels in Jammu and Kashmir after earlier crackdowns by agencies including the National Investigation Agency.

Security agencies believe that after conventional funding routes were disrupted in previous years, anti-national elements may have shifted to a digital model resembling "digital hawala", where commissions earned through mule accounts are siphoned off to support unlawful activities while maintaining operational distance from the primary fraud.

Investigators describe mule accounts as a critical link in the cybercrime chain. These accounts are used to temporarily park funds obtained through online scams before the money is routed through multiple layers and converted into cryptocurrency, making it harder to trace.

A mule account holder typically does not interact with victims or run phishing operations. Instead, such individuals provide access to bank accounts that fraud operators use to receive and move illicit funds. In many cases, one fraud operator is given access to 10 to 30 accounts at a time.

Authorities said the accounts often belong to individuals lured by promises of easy commissions. Some are persuaded to hand over net banking credentials under the pretext that their accounts will be used briefly for transactions. In other instances, shell or fictitious firms are used to open accounts that can handle transactions of up to Rs 40 lakh in a day without immediately attracting scrutiny.

Funds are rapidly transferred across multiple accounts and broken into smaller transactions to evade detection before being moved into private cryptocurrency wallets. Central agencies have flagged the alleged involvement of handlers based in countries such as China, Malaysia, Myanmar and Cambodia, who are suspected of directing the creation of private crypto wallets using virtual private networks to bypass location tracking and Know Your Customer norms.

India Attended Board of Peace Meeting as an Observer: MEA

NEW DELHI: The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) on Friday stated that India attended the Board of Peace's first meeting in Washington on Thursday as an observer country and continues to back all efforts underway to find peace in Gaza as part of the UN Security Council (UNSC) resolution.

"We did attend the Board of Peace meeting in Washington DC as an observer. We have also welcomed the Gaza Peace Plan initiative of President Trump, as well as all such efforts underway as part of Resolution 2803 of the UNSC," Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal stated at the weekly media briefing in New Delhi. Representatives from over 40 countries, including



several Heads of State attended the inaugural meet. India was represented at the meeting by Namgya Khampa, Charge d'Affaires at the Indian Embassy in Washington DC.

The MEA spokesperson also clarified India's stance on signing a joint statement that had expressed concerns over Israel's "unilateral" measures in the

occupied West Bank.

"You may be aware that this was not a negotiated document as is usually the case in the UN. Our position on this issue was most recently expressed in the India-Arab League Ministerial Joint statement," said Jaiswal.

He was referring to the 'Delhi Declaration of the Second India-Arab Foreign Ministers'

Meeting' issued on January 31 following the second India Arab Foreign Ministers' Meeting. The meeting saw the participation of Foreign Ministers of Arab States and the Secretary-General of the League of Arab States and was preceded by the meeting of India Arab Senior Officials on January 30. On the issue of Palestine, the Declaration stated: "Both sides reaffirmed their commitment to achieving a just, comprehensive, and lasting peace in the Middle East, according to international law, relevant UN resolutions and the Arab Peace Initiative. They called for a sovereign, independent and viable State of Palestine based on 1967 borders, living side by side in peace with Israel. Both parties supported the practice of inalienable rights of the Palestinian people."

India AI Summit 'Moment of Pride' for Global South, Says PM Modi

NEW DELHI: Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday said it was a moment of pride for the Global South that the AI Impact Summit is being hosted in India, while underlining the urgent need for the responsible and ethical use of artificial intelligence in a rapidly evolving technological era.

Addressing the India AI Impact Summit 2026, the Prime Minister welcomed global leaders and dignitaries, describing the gathering as unprecedented in scale and significance.

"I welcome you all to the biggest and most historic AI Summit



in the world. India, where this summit is going, is a country that represents 1/6th of the world; it is a youth nation, a centre of the world's largest tech pool and tech ecosystem. India makes new technology as well as adopts it," he said.

"It is a matter of pride for the Global South that the AI summit

is being organised in India," he added. During his address, an AI-enabled sign language interpretation was displayed in the backdrop, underscoring the practical applications of the technology being discussed at the summit.

Reflecting on the transformative potential of artificial intelligence, the Prime Minister said technological revolutions often begin in ways that are difficult to fully comprehend at the outset. "When signals were first transmitted wirelessly, no one imagined that the world would one day be connected in real time. Artificial Intelligence

is one such transformation of human history. What we are seeing and predicting today is just the beginning of its impact. AI is making the machines intelligent, but above all, it's multiplying human capability," he said.

He observed that the pace of technological change has accelerated dramatically in recent years.

Earlier, it would take decades to witness the full impact of a new technology, he noted, but today "the journey from machine learning to learning machine is also faster, deeper and wider."

PM Modi Discusses Minority Welfare with Indian Grand Mufti



NEW DELHI: Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday held a wide-ranging discussion on social and minority welfare matters with Indian Grand Mufti Kanthapuram A.P. Aboobacker Musliyar, an official said.

PM Modi expressed his appreciation for the educational and social welfare initiatives being carried out in India under the Grand Mufti's leadership. He noted that the Grand Mufti's social and cultural engagements at the global level enhance India's reputation and are commendable. Their meeting in New Delhi covered a wide range of issues, including social, humanitarian, educational, and developmental concerns, minority welfare matters, and important international developments, the statement said.

The Grand Mufti drew the attention of PM Modi to the concerns raised by people from different sections of society who approached him during his recent Kerala tour, held under the theme "With Humanity". The

Grand Mufti said he had taken note of the concerns raised by people from different sections of society during his public interactions. He also handed over his special message for the holy month of Ramadan. The discussion touched upon the need for inclusive development that embraces all communities, the importance of giving due attention not only to economic growth but also to happiness indices and human development, and the fair distribution of resources based on population proportion and regional balance.

Concerns related to Waqf matters and SIR were raised, along with the protection of historic mosques and Islamic heritage monuments, the statement said. The reinstatement of minority educational welfare schemes, including the Maulana Azad National Fellowship, and the development of the Aligarh University Malappuram Centre were also discussed, the statement said.

Farmers interest, Energy security sacrificed in US trade deal: Congress

KAVITA SHARMA
New Delhi

The India-US trade agreement compromises farmers' livelihoods, India's energy security, digital sovereignty and economic self-reliance, Congress General Secretary Randeep Singh Surjewala said today. He also asserted that "national interest cannot be mortgaged" under the guise of a trade pact.

The Congress General Secretary and MP Randeep Singh Surjewala also termed the Indo-US Trade Deal a "one-sided and unequal agreement" that undermines India's sovereignty and domestic economic priorities.

Surjewala said trade agreements must be based on parity and mutual public interest, and cannot become instruments that compromise sovereignty or the livelihoods of millions. He said that 1.44 billion Indians would not accept any arrangement that weakens the country's self-reliance.

Maintaining that farmers' interests have been compromised, the senior Congress leader said that under the February 6, 2026 framework agreement, India has agreed to open its agricultural markets to duty-free imports of US food and farm products.

He said the proposed im-

port of products such as Dried Distillers' Grain (DDG) or processed maize, sorghum, soybean oil and cotton would adversely impact domestic producers.

India, he noted, produces approximately 43 million metric tonnes of maize annually, compared to the United States' 425 million metric tonnes. Stating that the US needs a big market like India to sell such a huge quantity of maize, he asked how Indian farmers would compete if duty-free imports are allowed.

Similarly, he cited India's annual sorghum output of 5.2 million metric tonnes against 8.7 million metric tonnes in the US, and soybean production of 15.3 million tonnes against 120 million tonnes in the US, warning that tariff-free imports could depress domestic prices and adversely affect farmers.

On cotton, Surjewala referred to a recent US-Bangladesh trade arrangement and statements by Union Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal, saying that India may allow duty-free US cotton imports to secure benefits on export of textiles, which he said would hurt cotton-growing states such as Maharashtra, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Haryana, Punjab, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Telangana.



He remarked that Bangladesh, which currently buys 50% of its cotton requirement from India, may now stop those imports and source cotton from the US. Calling it a double whammy for Indian cotton farmers, he said the Modi government has already started importing American cotton. In 2024-25, India imported cotton worth Rs 3,428 crore from the US, causing domestic cotton prices to crash Rs 1,000 per quintal below the MSP. He also asked what would happen to India's textile mills and garment manufacturers in such a scenario.

Surjewala also warned that the trade deal could severely impact India's fruit and nut growers if duty-free imports from the US are permitted,

saying producers of apple, pear, orange, banana, strawberry and guava, as well as almond, walnut, pistachio and peanut farmers, would face price pressure and loss of market share. He said lakhs of growers in states such as Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Jammu and Kashmir and the Northeastern region, along with farmers in Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Kerala, Telangana, Odisha and Andhra Pradesh, could be adversely affected if American produce floods the domestic market.

He also raised concerns about the possibility of genetically modified (GM) agricultural imports, expressing apprehension that the import of processed maize, jowar, soy-

bean and other products from the US would harm India's biodiversity and seed purity. He questioned whether the Modi government has quietly allowed GM crop imports through the back door.

Surjewala said that the clause on removing 'non-tariff barriers' in the trade deal implies removal of subsidies for Indian farmers. He said that while the US provides substantial annual farm subsidies, Indian farmers receive limited direct support, and any further reduction in protective measures would be detrimental.

Referring to energy security concerns, the Congress MP said that the trade understanding includes commitments affecting India's crude oil imports.

Pointing to statements made by US officials following the agreement, which said that India has committed to restricting crude oil purchases from Russia, Surjewala also referred to earlier American curbs on Iranian oil imports.

India is the world's third-largest crude oil importer and has sourced a significant portion of its oil from Russia in recent years, he said, adding that shifting to US supplies without price assurances could adversely impact energy costs.

Food security cannot come at farmers' cost

India's pulses policy sits at the uneasy intersection of food security, farmer welfare and trade diplomacy. For years, the government has managed a structural shortfall in pulses through a blend of imports, price stabilisation and limited procurement at the minimum support price (MSP). Of these, imports are the most politically sensitive. A single decision in New Delhi can cool retail prices when supplies tighten. But it can also depress farm-gate prices and leave growers exposed. That is why reports that a trade deal with the United States might oblige India to buy American pulses struck a raw nerve. Since the farm law protests of 2020-21, any hint that farmers' interests are being traded away is combustible. Pulses are not a marginal crop. Output has hovered around 2.5 crore tonnes against demand of about three crore tonnes, with imports bridging the gap. They provide roughly a quarter of non-cereal protein intake and sustain five crore farmers and their families. Yet pulse growers lack the assurance rice and wheat farmers enjoy. Procurement under the Price Support Scheme has ranged between 2.9% and 12.4% of production in recent years. In many States, procurement centres are sparse, forcing farmers to sell below MSP to private traders. Rain-fed cultivation, low yields and weak market support discourage investment. The result is a vicious cycle of low productivity and continued import dependence. The government's new self-sufficiency Mission, with an outlay of Rs 11,440 crore and ambitious production targets by 2030-31, seeks to break that cycle. But farmers remain wary. Opening the market further to American pulses would undercut prices and contradict the Mission's stated aims. If India is serious about pulse self-reliance, it must look beyond trade optics. Strengthening procurement, guaranteeing MSP in practice, investing in rain-fed productivity and rewarding pulse cultivation are essential. Without such structural reform, India will remain dependent on imports — and every trade negotiation will carry political risk at home.

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R. MUKUNDAN ON HOW REFORMS FORMALISE WORKERS, REDISTRIBUTE INCOME, MODERNISE LABOUR GOVERNANCE

Rethinking India's labour codes



The macroeconomic impact **Outdated laws**

The implementation of India's labour codes marks a decisive shift towards greater financial inclusion of the workforce by embedding social security, income protection, and long-term financial safeguards into the employment relationship. By consolidating multiple fragmented labour laws, the codes aim not only to modernise labour governance but also to ensure that the gains of economic growth are shared more equitably with workers.

The reform of a definition

One of the most significant financial inclusion outcomes is the reform of the 'wage' definition. Establishments which used to pay lower wages (basic pay, dearness allowance and retaining allowance) of just 30%-35% of the total remuneration to reduce social security contributions, will now be required to ensure that wages constitute at least 50% of the remuneration. This will increase social security contribution and benefits, which will lead to higher provident fund (PF) accumulation, pension, and gratuity, thus enhancing long-term social security.

Moreover, fixed-term employees are now entitled to gratuity after completing one year of service. This change recognises the realities of modern labour markets and ensures gratuity payments for fixed-term employment.

For decades, workers engaged on fixed-term contracts contributed productively to enterprises but exited employment without any terminal financial benefit. By extending gratuity coverage, the labour codes convert short-term employment into a mechanism for asset creation and income security. PF,

pension and gratuity thus function not merely as a retirement benefit, but as a tool for financial inclusion, enabling workers to build savings, manage life-cycle risks and reduce vulnerability during job transitions.

This change has naturally increased the financial liability of large corporations, including well-known companies such as TCS, Infosys, HCLTech, and L&T, where workforce size and reliance on fixed-term employment are significantly high.

Reports suggesting that companies have been "hit by crores" due to gratuity provisions must be viewed in proper perspective. The financial outgo arising from the new labour codes translates directly into enhanced income security for workers, strengthening their financial capacity and purchasing power. This, in turn, has positive multiplier effects on the economy through increased consumption, savings and social security coverage. The increased social security benefits also signify a more equitable redistribution of value towards labour rather than any erosion of employer interests. This also underscores the success of the labour codes in advancing fairness, dignity, and long-term stability in employment relations.

Financial inclusion under the labour codes extends well beyond social security benefits for organised sector workers. The expansion of social security coverage to gig, platform and unorganised workers is a landmark reform. For the first time, these workers have been formally recognised within India's labour law framework, enabling access to insurance, PF mechanisms, and welfare schemes. Portability of benefits across States and employment is particularly

significant for migrant and informal workers, who have historically remained excluded from stable financial systems. The Code on Wages further strengthens income security by introducing a universal wage definition, ensuring statutory minimum wages across sectors, limiting arbitrary deductions, and mandating timely payment.

Collectively, these measures stabilise incomes and enhance workers' ability to participate meaningfully in the formal economy.

The redistribution of income towards workers has important macroeconomic implications. Enhanced income security increases workers' purchasing power, leading to higher consumption, improved savings behaviour and greater engagement with formal financial institutions. Unlike shareholder income, which may be invested in financial markets or external assets, worker income largely circulates within the domestic economy, generating demand-led growth. From this perspective, the labour codes function as instruments of inclusive growth. By strengthening the financial base of the workforce, they reduce vulnerability to economic shocks and contribute to social stability.

Despite these advances, sections of trade unions continue to oppose the labour codes, often portraying them as anti-worker reforms. While apprehensions about proper implementation and enforcement are legitimate, blanket opposition overlooks the tangible gains embedded in the legislation. In several instances, strike calls appear to be driven by sheer opposition to reforms than by the substantive provisions of the codes themselves. This risks diluting public understanding of reforms that are, in many respects, pro-worker and welfare oriented. It is also important to acknowledge that labour law reform in a country as large and diverse as India cannot be static. The earlier labour laws had become fragmented, outdated and ill-suited to a rapidly changing labour market. Consolidation into four labour codes simplifies compliance, improves transparency and creates a more predictable regulatory environment which benefits workers and employers.

India's labour codes should be understood not merely as regulatory restructuring but as a structural intervention aimed at greater financial inclusion. By extending gratuity, expanding social security coverage and closing long-standing legal exclusions, the codes facilitate a gradual but meaningful redistribution of economic value from capital to labour. This shift strengthens income security, enhances financial dignity, and aligns economic growth with social justice. The true success of the labour codes will lie not in resistance or rhetoric, but in ensuring their effective implementation so that every worker becomes an active participant in India's growth story.

R. Mukundan is President Designate, the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), and the Managing Director and CEO of Tata Chemicals Limited. Views are personal.



ARUN TEJA EXPLAINS HOW DIVERGING AGENDAS REQUIRE SHARED GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORKS

Governing AI in a fragmented Asia-Pacific



Artificial intelligence (AI) holds extraordinary promise for addressing globally persistent challenges such as improving public health outcomes, expanding access to education, and boosting productivity while respecting human rights. However, across South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the wider Asia-Pacific, AI-driven transformation is unfolding unevenly. Decisions about safety, bias, accountability, and social impact are often made far from the communities most affected by them. With these contrasting developments, it is clear that the gains of AI will only be realised if AI systems are trusted by users, developers, regulators, and society at large.

Without trusted AI ecosystems, even the most advanced AI systems risk rejection by societies, resistance from governments, and misuse by certain entities. Enabling trust is a challenge since AI ecosystems are transnational, in terms of global data flows, global interdependence on the hardware, dispersed infrastructure supply chains, skewed supply of global talent, and the absence of common cybersecurity practices securing AI systems. For many developing countries, particularly in South and Southeast Asia, this means becoming consumers of AI systems over which they exercise little influence.

Differing agendas

Recognising this, countries have come up with national AI policies attempting to create a conducive ecosystem for responsible AI development. However, their agendas differ, owing to their technological capabilities and resources. South Korea wants to retain its memory chip dominance within the AI supply chain. Singapore, as stated in its policy, aims

to become the "pace-setter" for AI governance. China aims to lead the global AI governance efforts by respecting the sovereign control of the state within the borders. India looks to upskill its IT workforce and take advantage of its expanding digital market, while Nepal aims to establish itself as the provider of energy-efficient compute infrastructure.

Amidst these differing objectives, the AI policy and governance frameworks of Asian economies emphasise one common principle: building trust among stakeholders. For example, India announced its AI Governance Guidelines last November, anchoring trust as the foundation of AI development and adoption. South Korea's AI Basic Act, which came into force on January 22, 2026, aims to establish a foundation for trustworthiness. The UN Secretary-General's AI Advisory Body has called for shared understanding, common ground, and common benefits in AI governance.

To meet that objective, a common framework is required that measures and strengthens trust in AI ecosystems across Asia. Such a framework should reflect regional realities while remaining interoperable with global

norms, encompassing cybersecurity practices, bias and risk mitigation, institutional accountability, and policy preparedness.

A trusted AI ecosystem in Asia rests on the interaction of several foundational layers. At its core are trusted datasets — a real-time, high-quality, and representative data infrastructure that reflects Asia's linguistic, cultural, and social diversity — increasingly anchored in Digital Public Infrastructure. This must be complemented by resilient AI infrastructure, including reliable access to compute, energy, and cloud resources that can withstand geopolitical and supply-side disruptions without undermining broader socioeconomic activity. Equally critical are AI skills and public awareness, encompassing both advanced technical talent pipelines and widespread societal literacy that enables responsible adoption and productivity gains.

Trust is further shaped by a country's leverage on the global AI value chain, particularly its access to semiconductors, critical minerals, and manufacturing capabilities that determine the stability and predictability of AI development. Proportionate AI governance is essential to balance innovation

with accountability — tackling risks such as misinformation, deepfakes, and liability — without disrupting data flows, hindering AI development, or deterring investment. Such governance institutions must operate within global frameworks, such as UNESCO's Recommendation on the Ethics of AI, and consider ISO 42001/42005 standards for AI management. Finally, cybersecurity underpins the entire ecosystem, safeguarding AI systems against both AI-enabled threats and attacks. Together, these layers provide a foundation for measuring trust in AI ecosystems and for guiding policy choices

India's opportunity

As AI adoption accelerates across Asia, the region faces a choice. One pathway is to accept the fragmented governance that reinforces existing asymmetries. Another is to establish a shared framework that ensures technological progress and translates into inclusive human development. When the AI value chain is global and interdependent, India is particularly well positioned to lead this with its approach to AI governance. Characteristics such as techno-legal solutions that simplify compliance help establish governance mechanisms, balancing AI innovation with safeguards for individuals and society. India's AI Impact Summit offers an opportunity to advance the establishment of a shared framework that measures trust of AI ecosystems in Asia. It aims not to minimise AI's risks, but to build the trusted ecosystems necessary to realise its promise.

Arun Teja works with JSW Science and Technology Fellows, Asia Society Policy Institute, New Delhi. Views are personal.

BOOKS: REVIEW

When enterprise must negotiate geography, politics and perception

In *Made in Nepal*, Binod Chaudhary does something relatively rare in South Asian business writing: he treats geography not as a sentimental backdrop but as a structural constraint. Framed as a collection of "lessons in business building", the book's deeper value lies in documenting what it takes to scale an enterprise when the home market is small, infrastructure uneven, and global credibility must be earned repeatedly rather than assumed.

Chaudhary, chairman of CG Corp Global and Nepal's most internationally recognised business figure, builds his narrative around an ambitious premise: that world-scale companies can emerge from places the global economy often overlooks. Nepal, in his account, is not merely a point of origin but a continuing challenge—one that shapes access to capital, negotiation leverage, political exposure and brand perception.

The book moves between family history, early experiments in trade and manufacturing, and the gradual

expansion of CG Corp across sectors such as hospitality, finance and infrastructure. Unlike many billionaire memoirs that rely on the confidence of hindsight, *Made in Nepal* is most persuasive when it lingers on uncertainty. Chaudhary emphasises how decisions were made amid limited data, volatile regulation and frequent political change—conditions familiar to entrepreneurs across emerging markets.

Diversification emerges as a recurring theme. It is not presented as a neat strategic framework but as a series of calculated responses to risk. In smaller economies, concentration risk is magnified: a single policy shift, currency fluctuation or political disruption can destabilise even a well-managed firm. Diversification, therefore, becomes less an engine of expansion than a mechanism of survival.

One of the book's strengths is its direct engagement with politics. Rather than treating political relationships as an awkward aside, Chaudhary situates them squarely within the operating

environment. Regulatory navigation, state capacity and policy uncertainty are treated as managerial realities rather than moral abstractions. For readers accustomed to Western business literature—where markets are presumed neutral and institutions stable—this candour is instructive. In many developing economies, business strategy and statecraft are intertwined.

The book is particularly compelling in its discussion of what might be called the "small-country penalty". Chaudhary recounts negotiating abroad while confronting credibility gaps: explaining where Nepal is, correcting assumptions and establishing seriousness in rooms where scale itself confers legitimacy. The argument is not that such disadvantages disappear, but that they can be mitigated through consistency, long-term presence and adherence to professional standards that transcend origin.

Yet the book's lessons-driven structure occasionally constrains its narrative depth. The effort to distil each phase into a takeaway can flatten



Made in Nepal: Building Big from a Small Market
By Binod Chaudhary
Business; 268 pages; Rs699

episodes that might have benefited from greater dramatic tension. Readers seeking psychological introspection—the emotional cost of expansion, the strain of public scrutiny, or prolonged moral ambiguity—may find the tone more executive than reflective. Chaudhary writes as a builder explaining a system rather than as a memoirist excavating inner conflict.

There is also an undercurrent of optimism that sits uneasily with the realities of survivorship bias. While failures and missteps are acknowledged, the arc is inevitably shaped by success. Younger founders, particularly those operating in even more fragile ecosystems, may find the guidance useful but would do well to read it alongside accounts of ventures that faltered.

These reservations, however, do not diminish the book's central con-

tribution. *Made in Nepal* functions as a regional counterpart to Silicon Valley's mythology of disruption. It argues—quietly but persuasively—that institution-building matters more than speed, that patience can be strategic, and that legitimacy is earned through consistency rather than spectacle.

For policymakers, the book offers indirect insights into what entrepreneurs require from the state: predictability, basic infrastructure and continuity rather than constant reinvention. For business leaders, it underscores the importance of governance and succession planning as enterprises outgrow founder-centric control. And for readers across South Asia, it provides a rare articulation of ambition that does not disown local context.

Ultimately, *Made in Nepal* is not a literary memoir, nor does it attempt to be one. It is a pragmatic account of building within constraints—geographic, political and perceptual. Its central claim is quietly radical: global businesses need not originate in global centres, but they must meet global standards. In grounding that argument in lived experience rather than abstraction, Chaudhary offers a perspective that is both regionally rooted and internationally relevant.

'Outstanding' Summit Showcases India's AI Vision to the World: Tata Sons Chairman

NEW DELHI: The 'outstanding' India AI Impact Summit 2026 has showcased the energy, the broader AI vision and what India can do to take this vision forward, according to Tata Sons Chairman, N. Chandrasekaran.

Chandrasekaran told to media on the sidelines of the 'AI Impact Summit 2026' here that the event provided a platform to showcase all of the country's AI-related plans. The summit earlier saw OpenAI joining Tata Group to develop local, AI-ready data centre capacity designed for data residency, security, and long-term domestic capability.

"I think it's an outstanding summit where we are able to show all of our initiatives, the plans, vision coming together of all the important leaders globally and all the political leaders, and



most importantly, the energy, the AI vision and what India can do," Chandrasekaran said.

OpenAI will become the first customer of Tata Consultancy Services' HyperVault data centre business, beginning with 100 megawatts of capacity and with

ment workloads.

"This strategic collaboration between OpenAI and Tata Group marks a major milestone in India's vision to become a global leader in AI. We are pleased to partner with OpenAI to create state-of-the-art AI infrastructure in India," said Chandrasekaran.

This is a unique opportunity for OpenAI and TCS to transform industries and together, "we will skill India's youth and empower them to succeed in the AI era," he mentioned.

Tata Group plans to deploy ChatGPT Enterprise across its employees over the next several years, starting with hundreds of thousands of TCS employees, making it one of the largest enterprise AI deployments in the world.

Struck By Pace of Change in India, Must Approach AI Boldly: Sundar Pichai

NEW DELHI: Alphabet and Google CEO Sundar Pichai said on Thursday that he is struck by the pace of change in India, and we must approach AI boldly as it can improve billions of lives.

Speaking at the 'India AI Impact Summit 2026' here, Pichai said the company is also building a vast network of subsea fibre optic cables, including four new systems between the US and India, as part of the India-America Connect initiative.

"In India, we are helping farmers protect their livelihoods. The Indian government sent AI-powered forecasts to millions of farmers, alerting them about bad weather last year," he told the gathering. "We won't realise AI's full benefits unless we work together," Pichai added. He further



stated that we are on the cusp of hyper-progress and must approach AI boldly, as it can improve the lives of billions.

"For 50 years, predicting protein structures was a grand challenge and a blind spot that stalled drug discovery. Today, over three million researchers in 190 countries are using it to develop malaria vaccines," he informed. Google is establishing a full-stack AI hub in India as part of its \$15 billion infrastructure investment.

According to Pichai, Google is infusing artificial intelligence (AI) at all levels in India to

improve healthcare, support startups, agriculture and more.

"The country must ensure strong investments go into AI research and into spreading the use of AI across all sectors," he mentioned. The 'India AI Impact Summit 2026' is underway at Bharat Mandapam in New Delhi, running from February 16 to 20. The summit has brought together policymakers, industry leaders, academicians, innovators and civil society representatives from across the world. It aims to provide a global platform for discussions on strengthening cooperation in artificial intelligence. More than 110 countries and 30 international organisations are participating in the summit. Around 20 Heads of State or Government and nearly 45 ministers are attending the event.

Vijay Mallya tells Bombay HC he cannot say when he will return to India



MUMBAI: UK-based businessman Vijay Mallya on Wednesday informed the Bombay High Court that he is not in a position to specify when he would return to India. He cited restrictions imposed by courts in England that he said prevented him from leaving the country.

The matter was heard by a Bench comprising Chief Justice Shree Chandrashekar and Justice Gautam Ankhad, in connection with two petitions filed by Mallya. One petition challenges his designation as a "Fugitive Economic Offender" under the Fugitive Economic Offenders Act (FEOA), while the other contests a court order formally declaring him a fugitive.

Senior advocate Amit Desai, appearing for Mallya, referred to Supreme Court judgments where writ petitions were heard even in the absence of petitioners. He submitted that extradition proceedings against Mallya are ongoing in the UK and that his client is aware of them but is unable to leave English jurisdiction due to binding court orders.

The Chief Justice, however, questioned Mallya's intent to appear before the court, observing that he appeared to be relying on UK court orders without clarifying whether those orders had been challenged. The Bench indicated that such reliance could not be treated as a blanket justification. The court directed Solicitor General Tushar Mehta to file a response to Mallya's affidavit. It also asked Desai to submit a detailed affidavit placing on record all statements made during the hearing so that the Union of India could respond accordingly.

Granting three weeks' time for further proceedings, the Bench noted that the petitions have been pending since 2019 and remarked that no sincere efforts appeared to have been made for their early disposal. The matter is now scheduled for a hearing on March 11. According to the Finance Ministry, Mallya — former promoter of Kingfisher Airlines — is among 15 individuals declared Fugitive Economic Offenders as of October 31, 2025, allegedly causing losses of thousands of crores of rupees to Indian banks.

AI Emerging as Strategic Growth Engine for India's MSMEs: CII



NEW DELHI: Artificial Intelligence (AI) is rapidly transforming India's micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs), moving beyond large corporations and tech startups to become a critical enabler of productivity, innovation and global competitiveness, according to an article released by the Confederation of Indian Industries (CII).

As the backbone of India's economy, MSMEs are increasingly leveraging AI to streamline operations, automate repetitive tasks, enhance customer engagement and make data-driven decisions. Industry observers note that AI adoption is no longer an optional upgrade but a strategic necessity for small businesses aiming to scale and compete globally.

AI tools are helping MSMEs improve efficiency, reduce operational costs and unlock new revenue streams. From predictive analytics in manufacturing to AI-powered customer insights in retail and services, the technology is enabling faster and smarter decision-making.

BEL and SASMOS Ink Strategic MoU to Accelerate Defence Indigenisation

ARUN KUMAR RAO
Bengaluru

In a significant boost to India's defence indigenisation drive, Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL) and SASMOS HET Technologies Ltd have signed a strategic Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to collaborate on advanced defence technologies.

The MoU was formally exchanged on February 16, 2026, by Mr Manoj Jain, CMD, BEL, and Mr HG Chandrashekar, Chairman & Managing Director, SASMOS, in the esteemed presence of Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and Shri Sanjeev Kumar, IAS, Secretary (Defence Production).

Strengthening India's Defence Ecosystem



Aligned with the Government of India's Atmanirbhar Bharat mission, the partnership focuses on co-development and co-indigenisation of critical defence technologies. Key areas of collaboration include:

- Fibre Optics & Photonics
- Tank Electronics
- Naval Systems

• Airborne Platforms
By combining BEL's deep expertise in defence electronics with SASMOS's advanced capabilities in fibre optics and photonics interconnect solutions, the two companies aim to deliver next-generation indigenous systems for the Indian Armed Forces while enhancing

export potential.

Leadership Speaks

Mr Manoj Jain, CMD, BEL, described the MoU as a milestone in reinforcing India's defence manufacturing ecosystem. He emphasised that the collaboration would enable the development of cutting-edge, homegrown solutions tailored for both national security and global markets.

Mr HG Chandrashekar, CMD, SASMOS, highlighted that the partnership reflects a shared commitment to innovation, technological excellence, and self-reliance. He noted that the collaboration will accelerate advanced R&D efforts and contribute meaningfully to the national vision of Viksit Bharat 2047.

BEL & Safran Forge Strategic Partnership to Produce HAMMER in India

ARUN KUMAR RAO
Bengaluru

In a major boost to India's defence manufacturing ambitions, Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL) and Safran Electronics & Defense (SED), France, have signed a landmark Joint Venture Agreement (JVA) to manufacture the Highly Agile Modular Munition Extended Range (HAMMER) smart precision-guided air-to-ground weapon in India.



The agreements were formalised in Bengaluru during the 6th India-France Annual Defence Dialogue. The Joint Venture Agreement and a comprehensive Master Production Agreement (MPA) were signed by Mr. Manoj Jain, CMD,

BEL, and Mr. Alexander Ziegler, Executive Vice President & Defence Director, Safran Electronics & Defense. The signing took place in the presence of Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and French Minister of the Armed Forces and Veterans Affairs Catherine Vautrin, reflecting the growing strategic depth between India and France.

The newly formed Joint Venture Company (JVC), with equal shareholding between BEL and SED, will focus on the manufacturing, supply, and maintenance

of HAMMER weapons for the operational requirements of the Indian Air Force and Indian Navy.

This partnership is a strong reinforcement of India's Atmanirbhar Bharat vision, aimed at reducing dependency on defence imports while strengthening domestic capabilities. By bringing production of a world-class precision-guided munition system to Indian soil, the collaboration marks a decisive shift from buyer to manufacturer in the global defence ecosystem.

AYUSH Industry in India: Gaining Momentum



DR. ANIL KUMAR ANGRISH
AYUSH as an acronym stands for

Ayurveda, Yoga & Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha, Sowa Rigpa, and Homoeopathy. Homoeopathy with origin in Germany and Unani in Greece are not indigenous but these two have been officially recognized and integrated into the Indian Healthcare System. Other systems of AYUSH are in existence in India from many centuries, e.g., Ayurveda has the documented history of its practice for more than 5,000 years. The Ministry of Ayush has mandate to develop Ayush systems. As per the first all-India survey on 'Ayush' that was conducted by the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) from July 2022 to June 2023, Ayurveda is the most commonly used system across both rural and urban areas for treatment.

Even with these credentials, and significant domestic presence of these systems, export of Ayush & Herbs from India is a small proportion of total exports of pharma products. In FY25, export of Ayush & Herbs formed just 2.26% of total pharma exports from India. Indigenous systems must take a cue from Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). The global market for TCM herbs was itself valued at over \$12.7 Bn in 2023. Tu Youyou became the first mainland Chinese scientist to get a Nobel Prize in a scientific category, i.e., Nobel

Product Category	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25	% Share in FY25
Drug Formulations & Biologicals	18,446.58	20,536.56	22,928.83	75.26%
Bulk Drugs & Drug Intermediates	4,680.3	4,755.25	4,869.98	15.98%
Vaccines	1,017.52	1,187.99	1,222.40	4.01%
Surgicals	620.05	720.64	756.76	2.48%
Ayush & Herbs	628.54	649.20	688.89	2.26%
Total Exports	25,392.99	27,849.65	30,466.85	100.00%

Source: Compiled from Pharmexcil, Annual Report 2024-25.

Prize in Physiology or Medicine 2015, for the discovery of "artemisinin" through reviewing ancient medical texts to understand traditional Chinese ways of fighting malaria. She kept the title of her lecture as "Discovery of Artemisinin: A Gift from Traditional Chinese Medicine to the World" while accepting Nobel Prize.

In recent years, many notable initiatives have been undertaken to strengthen AYUSH Industry in India. Traditional Indian systems of healthcare got desired attention with the formation of the Ministry of Ayush, a full-fledged Ministry under the Government of India in 2014. Earlier, it operated as the Department of Indian Systems of Medicine and Homoeopathy (ISM&H) since 1995 which was renamed as the Department of Ayurveda, Yoga & Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha, and Homoeopathy (AYUSH). With the export of Ayush products to more than 150 countries, and acknowledgement of Ayurveda as a System of Traditional Medicine in more than 30 countries, Ayush system has gained widespread acceptability and credibility across the globe.

AYUSH industry is yet to attain the stature that it deserves at international level. Establishment of Ayush Export Promotion Council (Ayushexcil) on January 4, 2022 and launch by the Prime Minister in April 2022 addressed key issues facing the export of Ayush products.

Indian Pharmaceutical Industry is the world's 3rd largest by volume of production and 11th largest in value terms. But Ayush & Herbs Industry stands nowhere in volume or value terms. In recent years, the industry is gaining momentum. Percentage growth in export of Ayush & Herbs in FY25 as compared to FY24 stood at 6.11 per cent. Import of Ayush & Herbs products stood at US \$150.32 Mn, and import of Ayush & Herbs grew by 31.95 per cent in FY25 as compared to FY24. As per the data submitted in Rajya Sabha in response to a starred question on "Global market share of Ayurvedic medicines," India's exports of Ayush and Herbal products in rupee terms stood at Rs 3,997.10 Crore in 2020-21 which touched Rs 5,831.40

Year	Amount in US \$ Million		
	Export of Ayush & Herbs	Import of Ayush & Herbs	Trade Balance
2022-23	628.54	120.65	507.89
2023-24	649.20	113.92	535.28
2024-25	688.89	150.32	538.57

Source: Compiled from Pharmexcil Annual Report 2024-25.

Country	Percentage share of Ayush & Herbal Exports
The USA	27.4
Germany	10.3
Italy	6.0
The UAE	4.8
France	3.4

Source: Compiled from the response to Starred Q. No. 241 in the Rajya Sabha answered on 12/08/2025

Year	Ayush Manufacturing Units
2018	8,954
2019	8,407
2020	8,104
2021	8,648
2022	8,705

Source: Compiled from the response to Starred Q. No. 812 in the Rajya Sabha (July 30, 2024)

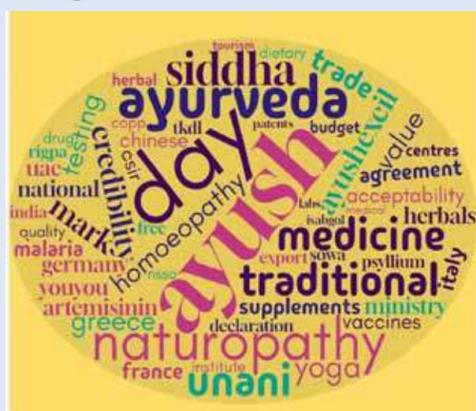
Crone in 2024-25, thereby registering a Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of 9.9 per cent during this period.

Country and region-specific issues need to be addressed by exporters of Ayush products, e.g., in the USA and European Union, Ayush pharmaceuticals are marketed and distributed as herbal dietary supplements but health claims are not permitted for labelling of dietary supplements. Single herb botanical substances are included in the Over-the-Counter (OTC) drug review, e.g., Psyllium. In October 2025, Psyllium husk (Isabgol) industry that had

Rs 3,500 Crore export, was in news as their Goods and Services Tax (GST) issues were not resolved. At that time, it was pointed out that the US absorbs 70.0 per cent of India's Psyllium exports.

Other notable initiatives from Ayushexcil along with the Ministry of Ayush and the Ministry of Commerce and Industry include launch of the 'AYUSH Quality Mark' programme launched by the PM during the 2nd WHO Summit on Traditional Medicine in December 2025.

India and European Union Trade Agreement that has



been concluded recently is positive for Indian Traditional Medicine services, and AYUSH practitioners. The FTA has also recognized the importance of digital libraries, especially the Traditional Knowledge Digital Library (TKDL) project of the CSIR to protect Indian traditional medicinal knowledge and misappropriation at International Patent Offices.

AYUSH has been given formal recognition in bilateral trade agreements, e.g., the India-Oman Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) and the India-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement (FTA). These bilateral agreements include the provision for dedicated annexes on health-related services and traditional medicine.

Union Budget of 2026-27 has increased the budgetary allocation for the Ministry of AYUSH from Rs 3,992.90 Crore in FY26 (BE) to Rs 4,408.93

Crore in FY27 (BE). Proposals regarding setting up of three (03) new All India Institutes of Ayurveda, upgradation of AYUSH pharmacies and Drug Testing Labs for higher standards of certification ecosystem, and make available more skilled personnel, are also beneficial for AYUSH sector. The proposal to upgrade the WHO Global Traditional Medicine Centre in Jamnagar will strengthen evidence-based research, training, and awareness for traditional medicine. AYUSH industry is likely to benefit from the proposal regarding 'Hubs for Medical Value Tourism' due to the reason that Integrated Healthcare Complexes are expected to combine medical, educational and research facilities along with AYUSH Centres.

In this background, Ayush Industry players need to follow footsteps of their pharma counterparts as India has 2nd

highest number of U.S. FDA approved plants outside the US.

India has close to 9,000 Ayush manufacturing units but till December 2024, a total of 44 Ayurvedic Drug Manufacturing units, have been granted WHO-GMP (Certificate of Pharmaceutical Product or CoPP) by the Drugs Controller General (India) as per Annual Report 2024-25 of Ministry of Ayush.

To conclude, it can be said that AYUSH Industry players must gear up for taking advantage in the present scenario. Developments are positive for Ayush Industry such as increased budget allocation to the Ministry of Ayush from Rs 1,939.76 Crore in 2019-20 to Rs 4,408.93 Crore for FY27, ayurveda getting global recognition in FTAs, increased awareness due to celebration of Ayurveda Day annually since October 28, 2016, celebration of International Yoga Day since celebration of the first International Day on June 21, 2015 following a 2014 UN declaration, observing 18th November as Naturopathy Day every year since 2018, observing February 11 as Unani Day since February 11, 2017, observing January 4 as National Siddha Day since January 4, 2018, among others.

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DISCLAIMER: Views are personal and do not represent the views of the Institute.

Digital Payments Surge under RuPay-UPI Incentives: Report

NEW DELHI: The Department of Financial Services (DFS) has released a report titled 'Socio-Economic Impact Analysis of the Incentive Scheme for Promotion of RuPay Debit Card and Low-Value BHIM-UPI (Person-to-Merchant) Transactions' during a Chintan Shivir held on 13-14 February 2026.

The study, conducted by an independent research agency in consultation with the National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI), evaluated the effectiveness of the government's incentive framework in expanding digital payments, strengthening infrastructure and promoting financial inclusion.

The report indicates a significant shift towards digital transactions. Among surveyed users, Unified Payments Interface (UPI) accounted for 57 per cent of transactions, surpassing cash at 38 per cent. About 65 per cent of users reported making multiple digital payments daily.

Adoption was highest in the 18-25 age group at 66 per cent. Nearly 90 per cent of users said



their confidence in digital payments increased after using UPI and RuPay cards.

Cashback incentives were cited as a key motivator by 52 per cent of respondents, while 74 per cent identified transaction speed as the primary advantage.

Launched in FY 2021-22 and continued until FY 2024-25, the scheme provided budgetary support to acquiring banks and ecosystem participants to ensure digital payments remained affordable and sustainable.

The evaluation was based on a primary survey of 10,378 respondents across 15 States. Parti-

cipants included users, merchants and service providers from urban and semi-urban areas across five geographical zones.

Merchant adoption reached 94 per cent among small businesses, with 72 per cent expressing satisfaction and 57 per cent reporting increased sales after adopting digital payment systems. The study notes that incentives helped reduce cost barriers, accelerate onboarding and build trust across regions and income groups.

During the scheme period, digital transactions increased nearly elevenfold, with UPI ac-

counting for around 80 per cent of total digital transactions. UPI QR deployment expanded from 9.3 crore to nearly 65.8 crore.

The number of third-party app providers grew from 16 to 38, while banks on the UPI platform increased from 216 in March 2021 to 661 by March 2025.

The report also observed a decline in lower-denomination currency usage and ATM withdrawals, indicating greater reliance on small-ticket digital payments.

Future Recommendations—Beyond transaction growth, the study highlights improvements in formalisation, transparency, business efficiency and fintech innovation.

It recommends targeted measures to strengthen RuPay debit card usage in rural and semi-urban areas, promote low-value solutions such as UPI Lite, and continue investments in connectivity, digital literacy and fraud risk mitigation to sustain momentum in India's digital payments ecosystem.

RBI Proposes Simpler Forex Rules for Authorised Dealers, Seeks Feedback



NEW DELHI: The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on Tuesday released draft Directions on 'Foreign Exchange Dealings of Authorised Persons', proposing wider operational flexibility for authorised dealers and easing certain reporting requirements.

The central bank has invited comments from market participants and stakeholders on the draft framework by March 10, 2026. According to the RBI, the regulatory framework governing facilities for Authorised Persons and inter-bank foreign exchange transactions has been reviewed and refined.

The proposed changes seek to provide greater flexibility to authorised dealers in handling

foreign exchange products and undertaking transactions related to hedging exposures, balance sheet management, market-making, and proprietary positions. Authorised dealers may undertake permitted foreign exchange transactions with other authorised dealers for these purposes. The draft also allows borrowing and lending in foreign currency.

The RBI has proposed permitting authorised dealers to enter into non-deliverable derivative contracts (NDDCs) involving the rupee with other authorised dealers. Under the draft norms, authorised dealers may undertake foreign exchange derivative contracts

and foreign currency interest rate derivative contracts on electronic trading platforms (ETPs) authorised by the RBI.

Transactions on overseas ETPs would also be allowed, subject to conditions. The ETP operator must be incorporated or established in a country that is a member of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), among other safeguards.

The draft permits designated banks under the Gold Monetisation Scheme, 2015, as well as banks allowed to enter forward gold contracts with domestic constituents, to hedge gold price risk using exchange-traded and over-the-counter products in overseas markets. However, while using option-based products, banks must ensure there is no net receipt of premium, either direct or implied. The RBI said it has updated the format for reporting net open position limits as part of its effort to simplify compliance. The draft follows the announcement made in the central bank's Statement on Developmental and Regulatory Policies dated February 6, 2026.

RBI Proposes Mandatory Reporting of Offshore Rupee OTC Derivatives



NEW DELHI: The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has released draft directions requiring banks to report offshore over-the-counter (OTC) foreign exchange derivative transactions involving the rupee undertaken by their related parties. Stakeholders and market participants have been asked to submit feedback on the draft by March 9, 2026. The move is aimed at improving transparency in derivative markets, particularly where offshore rupee contracts currently remain outside the reporting framework. At present, market-makers report OTC foreign exchange, interest rate and credit derivative transactions to the trade repository of the Clearing Corporation of India Limited (CCIL). However, the RBI noted that several offshore rupee derivative deals are not captured, limiting transparency and affecting price discovery. The proposed framework seeks to address this gap and support better pricing decisions for market participants. Under the draft directions, Authorised Dealer Category-I (AD Cat-I) banks will be required to report all OTC foreign exchange derivative contracts involving the Indian Rupee undertaken globally by their related parties to CCIL's trade repository. The term 'related party' will follow definitions under Ind AS 24 or IAS 24, excluding associates. Banks must report key transaction details such as notional value, counterparty name, maturity date and currency specifications. Transactions executed on anonymous trading platforms and cleared through a central counterparty may report the central counterparty as the counterparty. Reporting must be completed preferably on the trade date and no later than two working days thereafter. Certain exemptions have been provided. Banks are not required to report back-to-back transactions or trades between related parties and other AD Cat-I banks in India. They may also exclude contracts with a notional value of up to USD 1 million or its equivalent.

RBI Governor Holds Stakeholder Talks with MSME Industry Bodies

MUMBAI: Reserve Bank of India Governor Sanjay Malhotra on Monday held discussions in Mumbai with representatives of select micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) and industry bodies as part of the central bank's continuing stakeholder outreach efforts.

In his address, the Governor emphasised the critical role of the MSME sector in India's economy, noting its significant contribution to GDP, exports and job creation. He stated that expanding timely and adequate access to formal credit for MSMEs continues to be a key priority for the central bank. Malhotra detailed the policy and regulatory initiatives introduced by the Government of India and the RBI to strengthen the sector.

RBI Raises ECB Limit to USD 1 Bn under Amended Framework

NEW DELHI: The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has issued the Foreign Exchange Management (Borrowing and Lending) (First Amendment) Regulations, 2026, bringing significant changes to the External Commercial Borrowing (ECB) framework.

The revised rules, finalised after stakeholder consultations on draft norms released in October 2025, aim to simplify and rationalise overseas fundraising.

Under the new framework, eligible entities can raise ECBs up to USD 1 billion or 300 per cent of their net worth, whichever is higher, compared with the earlier annual cap of USD 750 million. The RBI has expanded the pool of eligible borrowers and recognised lenders, permitting any entity incorporated under a Central or State Act to access ECBs, including those under restructuring or facing investigation, subject to disclosure requirements. Recognised lenders now



include persons resident outside India, overseas branches of RBI-regulated entities and financial institutions in International Financial Services Centres.

Borrowers must maintain a minimum average maturity period of three years. Manufacturing sector entities may raise ECBs with a maturity between one and three years, provided the outstanding amount does not exceed USD 150 million.

The cost of borrowing will be market-determined. For fixed-rate loans, the floating

rate plus swap spread must remain within the prescribed ceiling.

The regulations retain restrictions on certain end-uses. Borrowed funds cannot be used for chit funds, Nidhi companies, real estate business and construction of farmhouses, trading in transferable development rights, investment in securities for non-strategic purposes, or repayment of domestic loans classified as non-performing assets. Limited agricultural activities such as horticulture under controlled

conditions and select plantations remain permitted. ECB proceeds can be parked temporarily in deposits or debt instruments with a maturity of up to one year pending utilisation.

Borrowers must obtain a Loan Registration Number before drawdown and comply with revised reporting norms through designated Authorised Dealer Category-I banks.

The amended rules also streamline reporting requirements and clarify procedures for refinancing, conversion into non-debt instruments, and security creation.

The regulations have been issued under the powers conferred by the Foreign Exchange Management Act, 1999, and will take effect from the date of publication in the Official Gazette.

Proposed changes in KCC rules aim to boost farmers' financial stability



SATISH SINGH
The Kisan Credit Card (KCC) scheme, initiated in 1998 based on the recommendations of the RV Gupta Committee, was designed to enhance farmers' access to credit for essential agricultural expenditures. These expenditures include vital inputs such as seeds, fertilisers, pesticides, and other necessary farming resources. In 2004, the program underwent a significant expansion, broadening its scope to encompass a wider array of agricultural activities. The notable 2019 amendment further enhanced the scheme by expanding its coverage to include not only traditional crop cultivation but also lucrative sectors such as dairy farming, animal husbandry, and fisheries. This modification aimed to boost farmers' potential for generating non-crop income, providing them with more diverse earning opportunities.

Further enhancements in 2020 focused on providing farmers with increased financial support and benefits. Under the KCC scheme, loans can be utilised for a variety of purposes, including crop loans, working capital for ongoing agricultural operations, livestock purchases, and the procurement of pesticides. To ease the financial burden on farmers, the Government of India offers a 2% interest subsidy and a 3% incentive for prompt repayment. As a result, farmers can secure loans at a remarkably low annual interest rate of just 4%. Additionally, the scheme includes personal ac-

cident insurance coverage for beneficiaries, ensuring a safety net for farmers.

Recent proposals are set to revolutionise the KCC by extending the loan repayment period from the current 12 months to a more manageable six years, depending on crop harvest and marketing timelines. This extension aims to alleviate pressure on farmers, allowing them to rely on the same KCC card for longer without having to apply for new cards or visit banks repeatedly. Moreover, the loan limits will be adjusted based on the specific crop cycle, ensuring that farmers receive appropriate financial assistance promptly.

As part of the proposed modernisation of the KCC, loans will also be available to adopt innovative agricultural technologies. This includes investments in efficient irrigation systems such as drip irrigation and sprinklers, small-scale farming machinery, digital tools for better farm management, soil-testing kits, and practices focused on organic farming. The Reserve Bank of India has issued updated guidelines to enhance the KCC scheme's flexibility, comprehensiveness, and overall utility, making it more farmer-friendly. To further improve the scheme, public feedback is welcome until March 6th, allowing stakeholders, especially farmers and rural communities, to voice their opinions online or through the Reserve Bank's official platform.

The new regulations will apply to various financial institutions, encompassing commercial banks, small finance banks, regional rural banks, and rural cooperative banks. Crops will be



systematically categorised by growth duration—12 months for short-term crops and 18 months for long-term crops. This classification will promote consistency in both loan approval processes and repayment timelines across all banking participants. Previously, discrepancies existed as some banks adopted varying crop-season timings and shorter loan terms. Additionally, technology-related expenditures will now qualify for loan eligibility, which was previously excluded.

These significant changes are designed to relieve the long-term debt burdens faced by farmers, enabling them to navigate cash shortages more effectively by wisely utilising their credit facilities. The growing adoption of technology is expected to create new income streams, thereby increasing profitability. Loans will be available for a wide range of activities—from agricultural production and grain marketing to irrigation, labour, harvesting, storage solutions, equipment procurement, and even household necessities.

The approved KCC limit will be supplemented by an additional 20% loan ceiling, allow-

ing farmers to procure critical non-agricultural items seamlessly. This strategy will significantly reduce their dependence on informal moneylenders, ensuring timely access to loans tailored to specific crop cycles, along with a wealth of other benefits.

The Kisan Credit Card (KCC) initiative plays a crucial role in integrating small and marginal farmers into India's formal banking system, significantly improving their financial stability and growth. By the projected December 2024 deadline, the KCC scheme is estimated to have successfully disbursed loans exceeding Rs 10 lakh crore. This substantial financial support is expected to enhance agricultural productivity and improve living standards across rural communities.

As detailed in the March 2024 Economic Survey, there are 77.5 million KCC accounts nationwide, with a total loan balance of approximately Rs 9.81 lakh crore. This impressive figure underscores the positive trend of many farmers breaking free from the cycle of dependency on predatory moneylenders. The KCC initiative has particularly benefited

various sectors, issuing around 12.4 million KCCs for fisheries and an impressive 44.4 million for animal husbandry, thereby reinforcing the agricultural sector and its crucial allied industries. Currently, about 59 million farmers are actively receiving the benefits of the KCC program.

Moreover, with the advent of digital KCCs, farmers can now apply for and receive loans remotely, eliminating the need for time-consuming trips to bank branches. This digital shift, coupled with flexible repayment options, fosters both social and economic empowerment in rural areas. The KCC scheme extends its services not just to land-holding farmers but also to include small and marginal farmers, sharecroppers, tenant farmers, agricul-

ture collectives, and self-help groups. This inclusivity ensures that a broader segment of rural farmers can benefit, accelerating comprehensive development throughout the country.

The overarching goal of the KCC program is to provide timely and adequate credit to ensure the continuity of agricultural practices and related activities. This financial support plays a vital role in reducing dependence on moneylenders and enabling farmers to access affordable financing that boosts their incomes. Additionally, by establishing a connection with the formal banking system, farmers gain direct access to government programs that enhance their livelihoods. The availability of ATMs and RuPay cards enables them to conveniently purchase essential goods from global online marketplaces at competitive prices, thereby reducing the financial risks they face in their daily lives.

Recognising the importance of this initiative, the government and the Reserve Bank of India continually introduce innovative provisions to the KCC scheme. These enhancements aim to strengthen farmers' economic empowerment further, promote financial inclusion, and invigorate the rural economy. It is anticipated that, with the implementation of these new measures, farmers' self-sufficiency will increase, setting the stage for accelerated progress and development across the agricultural sector and the rural economy as a whole.

Investments of nearly \$70 billion are already underway in India's data centre sector, with

an additional \$90 billion in announced projects, highlighting the scale of expansion, the statement said.

Industry estimates indicated that India's cloud data centre capacity has reached around 1,280 MW and is projected to grow four to five times by 2030. Amidst intensifying global competition for AI infrastructure, the policy positions India as a credible and long-term destination for cloud and data centre investment, it added.

United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) estimates suggested that data centres accounted for over one fifth of global greenfield project values in 2025, with announced investments exceeding \$270 billion. Rapid growth in AI compute demand and data-intensive digital services is intensifying international competition to attract such infrastructure.

The Budget also announced the launch of India Semiconductor Mission 2.0 with a provision of Rs 1,000 crore, to focus on design and manufacturing of semiconductor equipment in India as well as components manufacturing useful for semiconductor production. The scheme has received 149 applications, exceeded earlier expectations and reflected strong industry participation.

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FM Sitharaman to bolster economic ties with Norway, meet CEOs and investors

NEW DELHI: Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman was set to meet Jonas Ghar Store, Prime Minister of Norway, and hold bilateral meetings with Norwegian Finance Minister Jens Stoltenberg along with Minister for Trade and Industry, Cecilie Myrseth, it was announced on Monday. She will also hold a roundtable discussion with Norwegian CEO and investors and engage with the diaspora at a community event, according to a Finance Ministry post on X.

"During her two-day visit in Oslo, the Union Finance Minister will call on Jonas Ghar Store, the Prime Minister of Norway; hold bilateral meetings with Norwegian Finance Minister Jens Stoltenberg and Minister for Trade and Industry Cecilie Myrseth, besides engagements at the Oslo Science Park where she will interact with start-ups," the ministry informed.

Earlier, FM Sitharaman met top leaders and industrialists during her visit to Germany and discussed bilateral trade relations in the backdrop of the EU-India FTA deal.

She met Keith Svendsen, Chief Executive Officer of APM Terminals, in Munich. Svendsen spoke about the positive and long-standing relationship of Maersk with India and mentioned key investments and partnerships with India across its maritime ecosystem.

He also conveyed the intention to continue expanding this association across India, said the ministry.



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Budget 2026-27 Fuels India's Rise as a Global Hub for Cloud, AI Infrastructure



MUMBAI: The tax holiday for foreign cloud service providers aims to "provide investment certainty, anchor high-value digital infrastructure within the country, and strengthen India's role in global digital value chains," the government said on Saturday.

The Government has announced a tax holiday till 2047 in Budget 2026-27 for eligible foreign cloud service providers operating through India-based data centre infrastructure. Such companies' income will be exempt from Indian taxation from tax year 2026-27 till 2046-47 subject to conditions.

"The proposed tax framework extending to 2047 provides long-term policy visibility for such capital-intensive investments. The tax holiday for foreign cloud providers complements broader other Budget 2026-27-led initiatives, including India Semiconductor Mission 2.0 and enhanced allocation for the Electronics Components Manufacturing Scheme," an official statement said. Together, these initiatives address different layers of the technology value chain, from semiconductor design and materials to electronics components, IT services and digital infrastructure.

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INTERNATIONAL

Iran Warns of 'Decisive' Response if Subjected to Military Aggression

UNITED NATIONS: Iran will respond "decisively and proportionately" to any military aggression, exercising its right to self-defence under the UN Charter, its UN ambassador Amir Saeid Iravani said in a letter to the secretary-general and the president of the Security Council.

Citing US President Donald Trump's recent remarks on Diego Garcia, Iravani wrote: "In such circumstances, all bases, facilities, and assets of the hostile force in the region would constitute legitimate targets in the context of Iran's defensive response. The United States would bear full and direct responsibility for any unpredictable and uncontrolled consequences."



Trump on Wednesday called Britain's lease of Diego Garcia, a key US-British military base in the Indian Ocean Chagos archipelago, a "big mistake," noting it "may be necessary for the United States to use Diego Garcia" if nuclear talks

with Iran fail. Under a deal announced in May 2025, Britain agreed to transfer sovereignty of the Chagos Islands to Mauritius while leasing back Diego Garcia for 99 years at 101 million pounds (\$136 million) annually, Xinhua news agency

reported. "Given the volatile situation in the region and the persistent movement and build-up of military equipment and assets by the United States, such a belligerent statement... must not be treated as mere rhetoric," the letter said. "It signals a real risk of military aggression."

"The Security Council and the Secretary-General must act without delay, before it is too late," it said, warning that threats of force and acts of aggression must not be normalized, legitimized, or treated as instruments of foreign policy.

It also reaffirmed Iran's commitment to a mutually acceptable, results-oriented solution with the United States in nuclear talks.

South Korea Attends Inaugural Meeting of Trump's Peace Board for Gaza



SEOUL: South Korea has joined the first meeting of the Board of Peace for Gaza proposed by US President Donald Trump, the foreign ministry said Friday, reaffirming its support for efforts to enhance peace in the war-torn region.

Former Ambassador to Egypt Kim Yong-hyon attended the meeting held in Washington on

Thursday (local time) as an observer, according to the ministry.

More than two dozen countries have joined the Board of Peace, an organization leading efforts for peace in Gaza. South Korea is not a member, Yonhap news agency reported.

"Including the participation in the inaugural meeting, the government has supported Pres-

ident Trump's leading efforts to enhance peace at Gaza," the ministry said. "We plan to continue to join efforts for Middle East peace and security by the international community."

When asked about the possibility of South Korea officially joining the initiative as a member, ministry spokesperson Park Il said Thursday the government will "prudently review" the matter to "take everything into consideration."

Originally proposed to address the conflict in Gaza, the board intends to broaden its scope to other global conflicts, limiting member states to three-year terms unless substantial funding is provided for permanent membership. Key figures such as US Secretary of State Marco Rubio and former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair have joined the executive board.

AI must not replace human potential, but augment it: UN chief



UNITED NATIONS: Warning about the challenges of Artificial Intelligence, Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Thursday that AI must not replace human potential, but supplement it. "We must invest in workers, so AI augments human potential - not replaces it," he said, addressing a major fear about AI. At the inauguration of the India AI Impact Summit at the Bharat Mandapam in New Delhi, he called for tackling the looming social, economic, and ecological problems from the proliferation of AI. "Real impact means technology that improves lives and protects the planet," he said. "So, let's build AI for everyone - with dignity as the default setting."

On the impact on global warming and the environment, he said, "As AI's energy and water demands soar, data centres and supply chains must switch to clean power - not shift costs to vulnerable communities."

He emphasised that "AI must be safe for everyone." That requires protecting "people from exploitation, manipulation, and abuse," he said. Amid the controversies on the deleterious effects of social media on children, he looked ahead to AI and said, "No child should be a test subject for unregulated AI."

France's President Emmanuel Macron, who took over the presidency of the G7, the group of major industrialised democracies, referred to Guterres' call to protect children. "One of our G7 priorities will be, as well, children's protection against AI and digital abuse," he said.

"You just mentioned it, Mr Secretary General, there is no reason our children should be exposed online to what is legally forbidden in the real world," he said. Making AI accessible and democratising it was a recurring theme in Guterres' speech before presidents, prime ministers, and CEOs of tech giants. "AI must belong to everyone," he said while pointing to the risk of countries and peoples being marooned away from the promises of the technology.

"Without investment, many countries will be logged out of the AI age," he said. He reiterated his call for a Global Fund on AI - this time setting a goal of \$3 billion - "to build basic capacity everywhere: Skills, data, affordable computing power, and inclusive ecosystems." The \$3 billion, he said, is less than one per cent of the annual revenue of a single tech company. That is "a small price for AI diffusion that benefits all - including the businesses building AI," he said.

Holding AI Summit in India Has 'Special Meaning' For Shaping Its Future: UN Chief



NEW DELHI: United Nations (UN) Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Thursday that holding the AI summit in India has a "special meaning" because shaping the future of Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology cannot be monopolised by a coterie of few countries or billionaires.

"AI must belong to everyone. We must replace hype and fear with shared evidence - and close knowledge gaps", he said during the inauguration of the India AI Impact Summit at the Bharat Mandapam in New Delhi.

"Meeting in India has special meaning", he said. "It brings this conversation closer to the realities shaping much of the world because the future of AI cannot be decided by a handful of countries - or left to the whims of a few billionaires". Speaking before world leaders, tech titans, and participants from over 100 countries, he thanked Prime Minister Narendra Modi and France's President Emmanuel Macron for convening the summit. The discussions at the New Delhi summit will lead to the UN's Global Dialogue on AI Governance in Geneva to be held in July, he said. The meeting was convened by the General Assembly. The dialogue "will give every country a voice" in discussions on the "guardrails that preserve human agency, human oversight - and human accountability", he said. That meeting will aim "to advance on common safety measures - the foundation for interoperability, that builds trust across borders - for regulators and businesses - and turns compatibility into opportunity".

India's global weight is rising: Estonia President after meeting PM Modi

NEW DELHI: President of Estonia Alar Karis on Wednesday stated that India's global weight is rising, highlighting the country's growing influence in changing world order.

"India's global weight is rising - boosted by the EU-India free trade deal. I spoke with Narendra Modi about the changing world order and how new technology affects democracy. I welcomed India cutting Russian fossil fuel imports, increasing pressure to end aggression against Ukraine," Karis posted on X after meeting Prime Minister Narendra Modi in New Delhi. During the bilateral meeting, both leaders reaffirmed India-Estonia relations and explored new opportunities for cooperation in technology, trade, and global affairs.

Karis arrived in New Delhi



on Tuesday to join the India-AI Impact Summit. He was warmly welcomed at the airport by Raksha Khadse, Minister of State for Youth Affairs and Sports. Extending a warm welcome to the Estonian President, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) took to X, stating, "The visit will further strengthen the longstanding India - Estonia ties." Karis also

spoke at two high-level events organised by Estonia in New Delhi together with UNICEF and the Netherlands, which focused on the use of AI in education and the economy. He mentioned that Estonia started with Artificial Intelligence in the field of education. "It is important to understand that Artificial Intelligence will change learning and

education. It is not the technology itself, it is people, teachers and students who will do it," said the Estonian Head of State.

The Estonian President is accompanied on the visit by a business delegation. The AI Impact Summit is one of the most important international AI forums, with over 15,000 participants expected. The summit follows the AI Summit held in Paris the previous year and is the first time that such a large-scale AI summit has been organized by a country in the Global South, bringing more regional perspectives to the international debate. The focus of the summit is on inclusive, responsible and socially impactful AI, and strengthening international cooperation in a rapidly changing technological environment.

Bangladesh following his party's decisive victory in the 13th Parliamentary elections. After he took the oath, other members of the cabinet - including BNP leaders Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, Amir Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury, Salahuddin Ahmed, Iqbal Hasan Mahmud, Hafiz Uddin Ahmed and others - were also sworn in. President of Bangladesh, Mohammed Shahabuddin, administered the oath at the South Plaza of the National Parliament in Dhaka. The BNP's 50-member cabinet comprises 25 ministers and 24 state ministers, with three technocrats. Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla represented the Indian government at the swearing-in ceremony of the newly elected government in Dhaka.

Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla Meets Bangladesh PM, Invites Him to Visit India

DHAKA: Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla met new Bangladesh Prime Minister Tarique Rahman following the swearing-in of the BNP government in Dhaka on Tuesday. "Glad to attend the swearing-in ceremony of the new Government of Bangladesh led by Prime Minister Tarique Rahman in Dhaka today. India stands ready to support Bangladesh's endeavours to build a democratic, progressive and inclusive nation," Birla posted on X after the meeting. During the meeting, Birla extended wishes to Rehman on assuming office and also invited him to visit India. The two leaders expressed optimism to work together for well-being of the people of India and Bangladesh.

In a statement shared on X,



Bangladesh High Commissioner to India, Riaz Hamidullah, stated, "Prime Minister, H E Tarique Rahman, conveys his greetings to India and PM Hon. Narendra Modi to the visiting Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla, at courtesy meet following swearing-in of the new Government." "Hon Speaker conveyed wishes from

India and Invitation to India. Both leaders expressed optimism to work together for wellbeing of the people of Bangladesh and India pursuing people-centric menu of cooperation," he added.

Earlier in the day, Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) Chairman Tarique Rahman was sworn in as the 11th Prime Minister of

TRUMP'S BITTER CRITICISM

Prompts Governor Newsom to Aspire for US Presidency in 2028

GOPAL MISRA
US President Donald Trump's recent

bitter criticism of the California Governor Gavin Newsom on the signing of an energy pact, a non-political environmental issue, with the British Government has triggered a political storm across the country. It was just an issue for a better environment, but Trump has made it a national issue with international ramifications.

Trump appears to be deliberately accentuating political fever generally witnessed during presidential campaigns. It is being asked whether Trump's outbursts symptom indicates shrinking of his political clout, especially in the highly charged political environment in his country. The raising of the political fever generally indicates an election mood, but the presidential elections are due in 2028, therefore Trump's impolite comments are being interpret-

ed as a part of his strategy to salvage the declining political fortune of his party as well as his personal image.

With his comments against the Governor of California, Gavin Newsom, perhaps, has made him a possible Presidential nominee of the Democratic Party in 2028.

Trump has made sharp criticism of the signing of the British-California Net-Zero Pact, indeed a non-political issue. However, in the country's political circles, it has not only become a joke and being ridiculed across America, it appears to have exposed the decline of political prospects of the ruling Republican Party. There is a general feeling that Trump's statement betrays the growing apprehensions among the members of the ruling party regarding their dismal prospects at the next polls. The fear of losing elections appears to have gripped the Republican Party, which might not get its candidate made to the White House.

Trump's bitter reaction against the pact on 16 February



also reflects the weakening of his personal political influence on the country's changing political mood in recent months despite the tariff drama.

In his harsh statement, Trump has not only criticised the net-zero cooperation agreement between the UK and California, but also warned Britain against partnering with California's Democratic Party Governor, Newsom.

Interestingly, with the signing of this agreement, California has joined several other U.S. states, including Illinois,

Florida, and New York for emphasizing clean energy in signing similar agreements with foreign governments in recent years. It may be noted that since 2019, New York State has been pursuing aggressive zero-carbon goals under the 2019 Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act (CLCPA). It is aiming for 40 percent reduction in emissions by 2030 and at least 85% by 2050.

Trump's Humiliation
Many consider that the

victory of a Democratic Party nominee, Mamdani on four November 2025 in the keenly contested election for the coveted post of Mayor of New York has triggered a county-wide challenge to Trump's "regressive economic and social policies" being challenged in the US in recent weeks. Mamdani is the son of Meera Nayar, a well-known film maker from New Delhi, now settled in the US. His mother is a Hindu and father a Muslim academic of Uganda, this he is the first Muslim and representative of inter-racial and interfaith marriage ever elected Mayor of New York. He won the election despite Trump's aggressive impolite threats. Also, he is the city's youngest mayor since 1892.

According to political observers these political developments are challenging Trump's stress on the America First, which many consider a pro-white and pro-Christian policy for protecting the White Christian settlers in the US.

Interestingly, in spite of Washington's non-cooper-

ation, the New York State has already decided to invest over 28 billion US dollars in renewable projects, mandating 100 percent zero-emission new passenger cars by 2035, and decarbonizing buildings via heat pumps in the city, which houses the UN.

Political Implications

Trump's criticism against the UK-California Net-Zero Pact has also amused political observers across the continents. He has stated that the British decision to sign an agreement with Governor Newsom, is the very worst thing the UK can do. "It includes setting up of the wind turbines at the Altamont Pass wind farm in Livermore, California. It is being widely believed that Trump is also unhappy that the British are partnering with the state's Democratic Party governor, who could be a Presidential nominee in 2028 polls.

The agreement, signed by Newsom and British Energy Secretary Ed Miliband in London on February 16, is intended to "accelerate the global race for clean power and tackle the

climate and nature crisis" and to promote more close link the UK's renewable-energy sector to the Californian market.

Trump has further stated that Newsom's state has gone to hell, and his environmental work is a disaster. However, Newsom's press team has reacted to Trump's critical remarks with a rare caution. According to its post on X, the President was shocked to learn that "leaders can work with people other than him."

The prospects for the British businesses in California are expected to be a showcase that before the world "how to" turn innovation and ambition into a big business and cooperation.

Also, Newsom, a potential Democratic presidential contender, has recently been touring Europe. Last week, he was at the Munich Security Conference; a few weeks prior, he was in Davos, Switzerland, at the World Economic Forum.

During his tour, he even told his audience that "I hope, if there's nothing else I can communicate today: Donald Trump is temporary. He'll be

gone in three years."

The agreement, signed by Newsom and British Energy Secretary Ed Miliband in London is intended to "accelerate the global race for clean power and tackle the climate and nature crisis" and to work to more closely link the UK's renewable-energy sector to the Californian market.

Trump has also claimed that "His state California has gone to hell, and his environmental work is a disaster. Newsom said that California would

"continue showing the world" how to "turn innovation and ambition into climate action." It is quite known that Trump has been a strong advocate of increasing U.S. energy production, with particular emphasis on oil, gas, coal, and nuclear energy. The United States officially left the Paris Agreement in January this year

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

'My Faith in Justice is Restored': Mother Reacts as Supreme Court Overturns Allahabad High Court Order

FW DESK

Expressing relief and happiness over the recent Supreme Court judgment, the mother of the minor girl today said that by setting aside Allahabad High Court order, the apex court has reinstilled her faith in the system and she finally feels vindicated. Last year in March, the Allahabad High Court had held that grabbing the minor victim's breast and breaking the string of her pyjama did not amount to an attempt to commit rape, but merely "preparation". Just Rights for Children, a network of NGOs, had immediately filed a petition representing the victim in the Supreme Court against the order. Acting on the petition, a three-judge Bench comprising Chief Justice of India Surya Kant, Justice Jyotsna Singh and Justice N.V. Anjaria set aside the High Court's ruling, terming it a "patently erroneous application of the settled



principles of criminal jurisprudence," and restored the original stringent charge of attempt to rape against the two accused under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act.

"This decision has restored my faith that the law can protect children and victims. I hope no other child has to struggle to be believed, and that this judgment helps many others who cannot speak for themselves," said the mother, whose daughter was 11 years old at the time of the crime. She also said that the network stood beside them when they felt

unheard and powerless. "Their support gave us the courage to continue seeking justice," she said.

In November 2021 in Kasganj, the two accused dragged her daughter under a culvert and attempted to undress her. She was rescued after two witnesses rushed to the spot on hearing her cries. However, in March 2025, the Allahabad High Court held that the allegations amounted only to preparation and were not sufficient to establish the offence of "Attempt to Rape or Rape," and so the charges were whittled down.

Challenging this order, Just Rights for Children, one of the country's largest networks with over 250 NGOs working on child protection, filed a Special Leave

Petition representing the victim before the apex court. The petition also urged the Court to lay down guidelines to ensure greater sensitivity while handling such cases.

Besides setting aside the High Court order, the Bench has now directed the National Judicial Academy, Bhopal, to constitute a Committee to prepare a comprehensive report on developing guidelines to inculcate sensitivity among judges and within judicial processes when dealing with cases involving vulnerable victims of sexual abuse.

In its order, the Court observed, "When an attempt is being made to explain and clarify the different concepts, rights, procedures, and best practices to be followed, the Committee must ensure that the report is comprehensive and exhaustive, including appropriate and adequate explanations and illustrations wherever necessary." The Academy has been granted three months to submit the report.

Kitab Jatra Festival boosts India-Nepal literary ties



FW DESK
New Delhi

Literary and cultural engagement is crucial to strengthening people-to-people connections and fostering long-term understanding between India and Nepal, Dr Shankar Sharma, Ambassador of Nepal to India, said.

He was speaking as Chief Guest and keynote speaker at the fifth edition of the Kitab Jatra New Delhi Festival 2026.

The two-day literary festival, held at PHD House in New Delhi, was organised by the Kitab Yatra Foundation and the BP Koirala India-Nepal Foundation under the aegis of the India-

Nepal Centre, with the PHD Chamber of Commerce and Industry (PHDCCI) as industry partner. The event sought to deepen bilateral cooperation through literature, dialogue and cultural exchange.

Bringing together writers, diplomats, policymakers, publishers and journalists from both countries, the festival reaffirmed literature's role as a bridge between the two neighbours.

Among those present were Manjeev Singh Puri, Chair of the India-Nepal Centre, PHDCCI; Atul K. Thakur, Senior Secretary, India-Nepal Centre, PHDCCI; Yugal Joshi; Anand Jha; senior journalists Akanshya

Shah, Tikaram Yatri and Sama Thapa; and Nirmal Kanti Bhat-tacharjee. Prominent literary figures from Nepal and India also participated, including authors Nayan Raj Pandey, Amar Neupane and Anurag Baset; poets Mahesh Babu Timalaina, Mallika Shakya and Viplob Pratik; and authors Dr Shreedhar Khana and Rishi Ram Adhikari, among others.

The festival featured panel discussions, literary conversations and poetry sessions focusing on shared traditions, the growing global presence of Nepali literature, the role of translation in cultural exchange and the evolving significance of storytelling in shaping regional and cross-border identities.

Organisers said the Kitab Jatra New Delhi Festival has emerged as an important platform for sustained intellectual exchange between India and Nepal. By bringing together voices from literature, media, diplomacy and publishing, it continues to promote cross-cultural understanding and celebrate the region's rich literary heritage.

Goa's Portuguese "Carnaval" thrills global tourists



DOMINICK RODRIGUES
Goa

All roads led to the erstwhile Portuguese state of Goa as global and domestic tourists rocked to the musical beat of the famed "Carnaval" from February 14 in the capital Panjim, Mapuca, Margao, Vasco and Porvorim.

While Brazil's 'samba' Carnival tops the global celebrations, Goa follows next as a top "Carnaval" destination that captures the tourists imagination.

Floats representing different topics ranging from environment, fishing, waste management, partytime and even the 'Central Bureau of Investigations (CBI) +Anti-Corruption+ drive made their presence felt through their messages like "No Bribe, No Fear - CBI is Here."

Inaugurating the Carnival from Porvorim on February 14, Goa's Tourism Minister Rohan Khaunte recalled nostalgic moments of the past Carnivals, saying "The Carnival parades started a long time ago with +King Momo+ and his queen - riding a humble bullock cart - to give the clarion call for four-day celebrations highlighting traditional communal harmony -- beginning of the LENT season. +

Emphasizing "saving Goa's Heritage," Clowns and children literally ushered in a "Disneyland" Carnival moment as they dressed and danced as "Peter Pan" kids in "Froggieland," and amidst "Indian Safari" wildlife environment settings that were colourfully depicted with tigers, rhinos, bisons, storks, cranes, flamingos, turtles and hornbills.

Six-year-old 1st std student Shreyansh Pednekar chose to highlight Goa's traditional fishing industry by dressing as its famed Goan fisherman 'Pele.'

"Welcome to Bollywood" read one float with imitation popular actors dancing to popular Bollywood tunes.

"Drag Queens" too had their day with *Rosaline Fernandes* from 'Dhobi Talao' in Mumbai highlighting the Carnival with the legend "Goa- Land of Sand, Sea and Sun- Have Fun."

"Space - The Final Frontier" was also seen as the Jedi and Judge Dredd costumers made their presence felt.

One float highlighted a grim message - a 'helmetless' corpse lying atop a jeep after a fatal accident and sign "Helmet is Compulsory."

ASM Group of Institutes Ignites Statewide AI Skilling Revolution with Groundbreaking Digital Twin Launch

Simultaneous AI Avatar Address Across 10 Campuses Marks the Beginning of a Massive AI Transformation Drive

FW DESK
New Delhi

In a defining moment for Indian higher education, the ASM Group of Institutes launched ASM AI Fest 2026 on 9th February with a pioneering technological milestone — a live, synchronised keynote delivered simultaneously across 10 campuses through the AI Digital Twin of its Chairman.

While Dr. Sandeep Pachpande observed the proceedings, his highly realistic AI avatar addressed thousands of students, faculty members, and administrative teams in real time, setting the tone for a transformative, institution-wide AI movement. The initiative aligns strategically with the Government of India's IndaAI Mission and the broader Digital India vision, reinforcing ASM's commitment to developing globally competitive, future-ready AI talent.

Running from 9th to 28th February 2026, the festival stands as one of the region's largest academic AI skilling drives, engaging over 6,000 students in immersive, hands-on training experiences.

Anchored in the theme "Learning Today. Leading Tomorrow.", AI Fest 2026 transcends conventional academic frameworks by embedding artificial intelligence across classroom learning, research methodologies, institutional administration, skill development programs, and operational systems.

What distinguishes this initiative is its structured, level-wise integration of AI across the entire educational spectrum. Management students



pursuing MBA and PGDM programs at ASM's IBMR, ASM's IPS, and ASM's IIBR are being trained in AI-driven business analytics, marketing automation, and financial modelling, enabling them to make sharper, data-backed strategic decisions. MCA and Engineering students at ASM's IBMR and ASM's NextGen Technical Campus are engaging with machine learning tools, AI coding assistants, and real-world AI project implementations, strengthening their technical expertise and industry readiness.

At the undergraduate level, students at ASM's CSIT are applying AI concepts to entrepreneurship, digital business models, and data-driven decision-making, fostering innovation at an early stage. Extending the vision even further, school and junior college students at ASM's GEMS, ASM's EMPROS International School, ASM's CSIT Junior College, and ASM's GJC are being introduced to foundational AI literacy along with ethical awareness, ensuring responsible technology adoption from a young age.

In a rare and forward-thinking move, the initiative also includes non-teaching and administrative staff, ensuring AI adoption permeates every operational layer of the

institution. The result is not isolated digital experimentation, but the creation of a fully AI-enabled academic ecosystem.

Workshops led by industry leaders focus on real-world implementation, productivity enhancement, and applied innovation. The central objective remains clear: every graduating student must cultivate an AI-First Mindset, positioning artificial intelligence not as a replacement for human capability, but as a force multiplier that enhances creativity, strategic thinking, and ethical responsibility.

Speaking on the occasion, Chairman Dr. Sandeep Pachpande stated: "AI Fest 2026 represents our commitment to preparing students not merely for employment, but for leadership in an AI-driven economy. At ASM, we firmly believe that technology must enhance human potential, creativity, and ethical responsibility. Our mission is to ensure that every learner becomes confident, capable, and future-ready, because learning today is what empowers us to lead tomorrow."

Over the course of the festival, campuses have witnessed enthusiastic participation, cross-disciplinary collaboration, and a visible cultural shift toward AI adoption.

Talking Points

Narvijay Yadav



India's land crisis reflects difficulties between cities and ancestral soil. As Delhi introduces the Land Aadhaar system, the transition explored in The Fading Roots signals hope for clarity.

Land touches the deepest roots of human life. It is identity, memory, inheritance, shelter, and livelihood. But across India, land is also confusion, dispute, bureaucracy, and loss. For millions, owning land should provide security. Yet in practice, it often creates stress, legal entanglement, and generational disconnect.

The Delhi government is working on a long-awaited land modernisation initiative. Every land parcel in the capital will soon receive a unique Land Aadhaar, a 14-digit identification code for deeds, rights, and records. The aim is to reduce disputes, clarify ownership, and make the land marketplace transparent. If this system works as designed, it will become a model for other states struggling with old records and protracted litigation. The initiative is a needed step toward clarity and confidence in property transactions.

The very idea of a universal identifier for land speaks to the core problem. India's land records have never been fully reconciled with human mobility. For decades, paper deeds, inconsistent surveys, missing maps, unclear boundaries, and overlapping claims have made land one of the most contested assets in the country.

This issue becomes more acute when we look at migration patterns. Millions of Indians born in villages have moved to cities, towns, or even abroad for education, employment, and business opportu-

nities. These are often well-educated, skilled individuals. They have earned diplomas, degrees, and global exposure. But they also carry ancestral lands in villages that remain opaque in terms of ownership and rights.

Outdated Terminology: For the migrant, maintaining ancestral land turns into a logistical nightmare. One generation works far from the village. Another generation inherits documents that are misfiled, shared in portions, or written in outdated terminology. The physical proximity needed to manage, survey, or regularize land never existed. Resolving disputes requires frequent travel, money, and time; commodities that migrants seldom have in abundance. Many have to rely on agents, acquaintances, or intermediaries whose motivations may not align with the family's best interests.

Land in rural India is not just property. It is emotional capital. Scaling that emotional asset into a functional financial asset has always been difficult. Land markets, unlike digital or paper assets, are illiquid. They are slow to transact. They require physical verification and countless checks. Even today, buying or selling a property often feels more complicated than trading shares or digital currencies. The friction lies not only in legal systems, but in human systems: trust, documentation, accessibility, and interpretation.

Real estate has long been

The Fading Roots of Indian Land



marketed as one of the "solid" investments, a benchmark of stability. But when markets aren't transparent, and records aren't cohesive, this belief becomes questionable. A land parcel without a clear title is not an asset, but a potential liability. The migrant who left the village to improve life for the next generation often finds that the very piece of land meant to be safety becomes a source of worry instead.

A Game Changer: The "Land Aadhaar" plan in Delhi is not a silver bullet. It does not instantly resolve fractured documentation practices across states. It does not replace the need for legal reforms or timely adjudication. But it does signal a shift, that is, digital clarity over paper clutter, transparency over opacity, accessibility over exclusion. A unique identifier makes land records searchable, traceable, and easier to litigate or verify. This is the kind of structural change that can ease the burden on families who live far from their

ancestral homes.

My upcoming book, *The Fading Roots - Between Cities and Confusing Rural Lands*, examines exactly this tension; the push and pull between the mobility of modern life and the fixed identity of rural land. Throughout this narrative, one thread becomes clear — rootedness without clarity becomes a burden, not a blessing.

If future generations are to live with confidence about their inherited assets, India needs a nationwide approach to land records that combines modern technology, legal harmonisation, and inclusive access. The goal must be to let land serve its purpose — security, not stress. Land is memory. Clear records build confidence. Clarity creates choice. Modernisation of land documentation can turn confusion into possibility. Bliss On.

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

Build Connect 2026 Highlights Industry Shift Toward a Next-Gen Dealer-Distributor Network



KAVITA SHARMA
New Delhi

As India's steel production crosses 160 million tonnes and installed capacity moves toward 300 million tonnes by 2030, the industry's growth narrative is entering a new phase. While capacity expansion remains strong, the focus is increasingly shifting to a critical pillar of the value chain — India's dealer and distributor network.

With nearly 50 million tonnes of finished steel in FY26 flowing through trade-led channels, dealers and distributors now account for a significant share of market movement. As steel demand is projected to rise steadily in the coming years, industry leaders note that distribution, digital, financial resilience, and capital readiness will determine how effectively this growth translates into market reach.

This industry-wide conversation took centre stage at Build Connect 2026, held on February 19-20 at Yashobhooni, New Delhi. The platform was organised by BigMint, a commodity market intelligence firm, in association with the Akhil Bhartiya Loha Vyapar Sangh (ABLVS) as Supporting Association. The event recorded over 1,500 footfall, including 500+ confirmed participants and 1,000+ registered visitors, representing 400+ companies across 72 cities and 15+ states. Nearly 48% of attendees were senior decision-makers, including Directors, Managing Directors, and business owners.

The platform also saw participation from SAIL as Strategic PSU Partner, alongside institutional and industry support from the AIIFA Sustainable Steel Manufacturers Association, National Institute of Secondary Steel Tech-

nology (NISST), Bureau Veritas, and prominent trade and construction organisations including BAI, GISF, CFL, RISTA, and BIMA — reflecting broad alignment across manufacturing, trade bodies, and technical institutions.

The inaugural ceremony featured senior industry figures including Shri V. R. Sharma (Member Advisory Board, Jindal Steel & Power), Shri Bimlendra Jha (Ex-MD, JSP & Ambuja Cements Ltd.), Mr. Anurag Sinha (Executive Director, Engineers India Limited), Mr. Vishesh Shabra (Chairman, Shreyam Power & Steel Industries Ltd.), Mr. Vivek Adukia (Chairman, SRMA), and Mr. Amit Gupta (President, ABLVS).

Across 12 focused sessions and 40+ expert addresses, discussions spanned infrastructure demand, GST compliance, green steel adoption, supply chain finance, digital transformation, e-commerce integration, quality standards, branding impact, and payment recovery mechanisms. A recurring industry view emerged: expanding production capacity must be complemented by a more structured and financially empowered distribution ecosystem.

Vidya Balan Inspires Young Minds at Alliance Literary Festival 2026: "There is Only One You"

ARUN KUMAR RAO
Bengaluru

The fifth edition of the Alliance Literary Festival (ALF) 2026 opened on a powerful and inspiring note as acclaimed actress Vidya Balan inaugurated the festival at Alliance University's Central Campus in Anekal.

The festival, themed "HerStory: Celebrating Naari Shakti," is being held alongside Alliance ONE 2026, the university's flagship inter-college techno-cultural and sports fest dedicated this year to "Solving for Bengaluru." With over 5,000 attendees and more than 200 speakers and judges from literature, arts, media, sports, entrepreneurship and public policy, the three-day mega event has transformed the campus into a vibrant hub of ideas, dialogue and empowerment.

"I Am All My Characters, Yet Uniquely Me"

Greeting students from across regions, Vidya expressed gratitude for the warm welcome and said she felt ener-



gised by the young audience. The session unfolded as an intimate exploration of her cinematic journey and her reflections as a woman navigating the film industry. When asked which version of herself she brought to the stage — given her many powerful on-screen personas — Vidya responded with characteristic wit. "Actors experience a kind of multiple personality disorder — but in a good way," she laughed, adding that while she carries shades of every character she has portrayed, she remains uniquely herself. Frames of Freedom: The Ongoing Quest Responding to the idea of "Frames of Freedom," Vidya reflected that freedom, for her, is about the ability to be authentic — to laugh wholeheartedly and live unapologetically.

India's 1st Private Helicopter Assembly Line Takes Off in Karnataka

ARUN KUMAR RAO
Bengaluru

India's helicopter manufacturing ambitions have entered a historic new phase with the inauguration of the country's first private-sector helicopter Final Assembly Line (FAL) for the Airbus H125 at Vemagal, Karnataka.

Set up by Tata Advanced Systems Limited (TASL) in partnership with Airbus, the state-of-the-art facility was virtually inaugurated by Narendra Modi and Emmanuel Macron, underscoring the strategic importance of Indo-French collaboration in advanced aerospace manufacturing. The Vemagal Final Assembly Line represents a watershed moment for India's aerospace sector. For the first time, a private Indian company will undertake the full-spectrum manufacturing, integration, testing, and maintenance of a rotary-wing platform within the country. The facility will produce the civil H125 helicopter and may also manufacture its military variant, the H125M, strengthening localised production capabilities and lifecycle support. This development significantly

enhances operational readiness for both civil and defence missions while reducing dependence on imports.

The initiative aligns strongly with the Government of India's AatmaNirbhar Bharat vision, reinforcing India's goal of becoming self-reliant in critical defence and aerospace technologies. The 'Made in India' H125 is set to play a pivotal role in nation-building. In the civil domain, it will support emergency medical services, disaster management, law enforcement, and regional connectivity under the Government's UDAN scheme, bridging last-mile connectivity for tourism and passenger transport. The H125M variant, optimised for high-altitude and extreme weather operations, is designed to serve as a force multiplier. It excels in tactical reconnaissance and surveillance, thanks to its low acoustic and thermal signatures, while also providing critical high-altitude logistics support to remote front-



line outposts. Its rapid-response capability makes it invaluable for search-and-rescue and medical evacuation operations.

Notably, the H125 remains the only helicopter to have landed on the summit of Mount Everest, demonstrating a performance ceiling unmatched by existing light utility fleets. For Indian forces operating in some of the world's most challenging "high-and-hot" environments, this capability is a decisive differentiator. The helicopter assembly line further deepens industrial ties between India and France. It follows the successful establishment of the C295 military transport aircraft Final Assembly Line in India, marking the second major Tata-Airbus aerospace collaboration.