

REGION

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PUNJAB BETS ON MULTI-LAYER WELFARE MODEL TO LOCK IN RURAL VOTERS AHEAD OF 2027 POLLS



FW DESK
SAS NAGAR(Mohali)

Captains of industry from across the globe on Friday hailed Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann for transforming Punjab into a major investment destination during the Progressive Punjab Investors' Summit, with leading industrialists praising the policies of the Punjab Government and announcing fresh investments and expansion plans in the state.

Executive Chairman of the world's leading steel company Arcelor Mittal Lakshmi N Mittal said, "It is a great honour for me to be in Punjab because this land teaches hard work, resilience and generosity. Punjab is not only a state but a spirit of energy, courage and the determination to keep moving forward. Punjab has a unique identity wherever they are in the world because of their unprecedented hard work and devotion."

He added, "Punjab has created empires with firm commitment from farms to trades across the globe. The Bathinda refinery is a strong foundation for the upcoming industry in Punjab with the latest technologies. We have made investments



worth more than Rs 60,000 crore in Punjab which is the biggest investment in Punjab so far. In view of the current LPG shortage, the refinery has increased production from 1000 tonnes to 3000 tonnes per day. With the constant support of the Punjab Government, we have also established a mega world-scale petrochemical complex at an outlay of Rs 26,000 crore which is giving a major boost to MSMEs and accelerating social and economic growth in Punjab."

Sharing his views, Hero Enterprise Chairman Sunil Kant Munjal said, "The Punjab Government is making serious efforts to bring Punjab back on the industrial track. Punjab was once a leading state economically in the country and now

strong efforts are being made to transform it again through industrial development, progressive agriculture and focus on technology, education, healthcare and real estate. This event will go a long way in translating an industrial revolution in Punjab with industry-friendly policies."

He further added, "Today India and Indians enjoy a reputation globally like never before and we must take full advantage of this opportunity to build momentum and accelerate growth. It is important to maintain this pace to take Punjab among the leading states of the country, because many sectors depend on each other for development. I also appreciate CM Bhagwant Singh Mann for introducing

CORPORATES & INDUSTRY

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CRUDE OIL MAY TOUCH USD 150 PER BARREL IF STRAIT OF HORMUZ REMAINS CLOSED FOR 4-8 WEEKS



several path-breaking initiatives that are accelerating the economic growth of Punjab."

CEO and Managing Director of Tata Steel Limited T. V. Narandran said, "I compliment the Punjab Government, especially CM Bhagwant Singh Mann, for turning the Tata project in Ludhiana into a reality which is now in the advanced stage of inauguration. We have had an outstanding experience in Punjab. Our project was approved two years ago and it has been smoothly executed due to the constant support and cooperation extended by the Punjab Government."

He further said, "This plant will be among the latest facilities using energy-efficient technologies to produce greener and cleaner steel in the world. Tata is coming with this Rs 3200 crore steel plant and this is just the beginning. Much more investment will follow in the coming time."

Addressing the gathering, Rajya Sabha MP and Trident Group Chairman Rajinder Gupta said, "The Trident Group will invest Rs 5000 crore in Punjab over the next two years and will create more than 10,000 job opportunities in the textile sector including 5,000 jobs for women."

POTPOURRI

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INFOSYS' RS 286 CR PROJECT IN MOHALI WILL PROVIDE DIRECT EMPLOYMENT TO 2,700 YOUTH: MANN



renewed pride in their history and identity. The BJP leadership is expected to highlight issues such as economic development, farmer welfare, industrial growth, action against drugs and corruption, and protection of cultural and religious values during Shah's address.

The rally is also being seen as part of the BJP's larger strategy to expand its political footprint in Punjab. Party leaders are focusing on outreach among Dalit communities, including Ravidassia and Valmiki groups, and have mapped hundreds of religious deras for social engagement. At the same time, the party is exploring possible political alliances in the state, including discussions around future cooperation with factions of the Shiromani Akali Dal.

Political observers describe Punjab as a "key frontier state" for the BJP, which is attempting to build a stronger base after the end of its long-standing alliance with the Akali Dal.

Ahead of the rally, the ruling AAP government launched a counter-offensive. Punjab AAP president and cabinet minister Aman Arora held a press conference in Chandigarh, raising several questions for the BJP-led central government.

Global Industry leaders hail Punjab as Emerging Investment Hub

Amit Shah set to Launch BJP's Punjab Campaign with 'Badlav Rally' in Moga

Massive show of strength planned as BJP eyes 2027 Assembly polls; AAP counters with questions to Centre ahead of Home Minister's visit.

NEERAJ MOHAN
Chandigarh



The stage is set for Amit Shah, India's Union Home Minister, to address the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) mega 'Badlav Rally' in Moga, marking what the party sees as the formal launch of its campaign for the 2027 Punjab Assembly elections.

The rally will be held at Killi Chahlan village in Moga district on March 14 and is expected to draw a massive crowd. Spread over 83 acres, the venue has been prepared with a large pandal, extensive parking facilities and langar arrangements for attendees. Party leaders say this will be Shah's first visit to Punjab in his current role, and the BJP hopes to use the event to demonstrate its growing political presence in the state.

The Bharatiya Janata Party has mobilised its cadre across all 117 Assembly constituencies to ensure strong participation in the rally. State BJP president Sunil Jakhar and working president Ashwani Sharma

Jathedar Gargajji visits Samana to support a protest demanding a strict law to prevent sacrilege of Guru Granth Sahib



JAGMOHAN SINGH
Amritsar

The acting Jathedar of Akal Takht Sahib and Jathedar of Takht Kesgarh Sahib, Giani Kuldip Singh Gargajji, visited Samana in Patiala district to support a protest demanding a strict law to prevent sacrilege of Guru Granth Sahib.

An official statement issued here today stated that on visiting there, he offered an Ardas (prayer) for the success and high spirit of the ongoing protest. He said that the Guru Granth Sahib is the eternal living Guru of the Sikhs, and therefore every Sikh holds deep reverence and devotion towards it. Expressing support for the demand raised by Bhai Gurjit Singh, who has been leading the protest in Samana, the Jathedar said that a special law must be enacted to prevent sacrilege of the Guru Granth Sahib, and those found guilty should receive the strictest possible punishment.

He noted that incidents of sacrilege in Punjab have continued for a long time and have not stopped. Therefore, he said two measures are essential: first, community-based vigilance arrangements in gurdwaras at all times, and second, the enactment of a special law to curb sacrilege incidents. He added that the government had sought six months' time from the protesters to frame a strict law, but nearly eight months have passed and no action has been taken so far.

Gargajji also referred to the 2022 sacrilege attempt at Sachkhand Sri Darbar Sahib, when a man jumped over the barrier during the recitation of Rehras Sahib and attempted an act of sacrilege. He said that the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee had demanded a DNA test of the accused from the government to establish his identity, but even by 2026 no government has been able to reveal who that person was. If the government took such incidents seriously, he said, cases of sacrilege could be prevented. He further stated that since the beginning of the wave of sacrilege incidents, the forces behind these acts must be exposed. He added that the Guru Granth Sahib is the only scripture in the world that has been bestowed with the status of a living Guru.

PM-Kisan Has Become Major Social Security Support for Small Farmers: PM Modi



GUWAHATI: Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday said that the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-Kisan) scheme has emerged as a significant source of social security for marginal farmers across the country, while accusing the Congress party of spreading misinformation about the initiative when it was first launched.

Addressing a public programme in Khanapara in Guwahati, the Prime Minister said, "When the PM Kisan Samman Nidhi Yojana was launched, the Congress party spread rumours suggesting that although Prime Minister Modi was providing financial assistance under this scheme, the recipients would have to return the money after the elections. They have become experts at spreading misinformation."

The Prime Minister added that despite such allegations, the scheme has become a crucial support system for the country's marginal farmers.

Highlighting the government's efforts to strengthen direct financial support to farmers, Prime Minister Modi said that the latest instalment of the PM-Kisan funds had just been credited to the accounts of millions of farmers across the country.

"Just a little while ago, a message has reached the accounts of millions of farmers that the PM Samman Nidhi has been deposited," he said.

The Prime Minister noted that many of the beneficiaries did not even have bank accounts or mobile phones before 2014, but are now directly receiving financial assistance through the government's digital and banking infrastructure.

"More than Rs 4.20 lakh crore have been deposited in the accounts of millions of such farmers so far," he said.

PM Modi also said that over Rs 18,000 crore under the PM-Kisan Samman Nidhi scheme had been transferred to crores of farmers across the country on Friday.

Haryana Congress MLAs Shifted to HP amid Poaching Fears Ahead of Rajya Sabha Polls

Six MLAs along with key leaders stay back

NEERAJ MOHAN
Chandigarh

With anxiety mounting in the Haryana Congress camp over the possibility of cross-voting and alleged attempts to poach its MLAs, the party leadership has moved into damage-control mode ahead of the crucial Rajya Sabha elections scheduled for March 16.

Following the lunch, most Congress MLAs left in a travel bus and were reportedly moved to a secure location in Congress-ruled Himachal Pradesh — a common "resort politics" strategy to isolate them from rival contacts until polling day. However, not all MLAs joined the trip to Himachal Pradesh. According to reports Congress MLAs Chandra Mohan and Mohammad Ilyas will not travel due to health issues, Vinesh Phogat will stay back because her child is very young, Kuldeep Vats will also not go, as there



is a wedding in his family and Paramvir Singh and Bhupinder Singh Hooda will also not travel to Himachal Pradesh. The remaining 32 MLAs have reportedly proceeded to the hill state under tight security arrangements.

With the party holding 37 MLAs in the 90-member Haryana Assembly, even a single instance of cross-voting could derail its plans to secure the lone Rajya Sabha seat it is targeting. Party sources admitted that the entry of a third candidate in the contest has complicated

the electoral arithmetic and heightened concerns about possible defections or pressure tactics. Against this backdrop, Hooda's lunch diplomacy is aimed at reinforcing discipline within the legislative party and ensuring that every vote stays firmly in the Congress camp.

According to insiders, the gathering will not merely be a routine interaction but a closed-door strategy session where voting procedures and possible scenarios will be discussed in detail. Senior leaders are expected to caution

MLAs against falling prey to what they describe as "political poaching" attempts by rival camps.

The Congress leadership is particularly wary of any repeat of past embarrassments that have haunted the party during Rajya Sabha elections in the state. Memories of the controversial 2016 episode—when several Congress votes were declared invalid due to the use of unauthorised pens, resulting in a humiliating defeat—continue to loom large over the party's current strategy.

Sources said arrangements have already been made in the Congress-ruled hill state to host the Haryana MLAs at a secure location until polling day.

Notably, special arrangements are also being made for the party's women MLAs, who are likely to be accompanied by family members during the stay. Several legislators have reportedly begun preparations for the trip, awaiting the final signal from the party high command.

Rupee falls 20 paise to settle at record low of 92.45 against US dollar

NEW DELHI: The rupee slumped 20 paise to close at a fresh record low of 92.45 (provisional) against the US dollar on Friday as crude oil prices crossed USD 101/barrel amid the raging West Asia conflict.

A stronger greenback, heavy foreign fund outflows and sustained selling in the domestic equity markets further weighed on the rupee, according to forex traders. At the interbank foreign exchange, the local unit opened at 92.33 and kept losing ground to hit a fresh intra-day low of 92.47 against the US dollar. It eventually settled at its lifetime low of 92.45 (provisional), down 20 paise from its previous close.

In the preceding session, the rupee lost 24 paise to settle at 92.25 against the US dollar, its lowest-ever closing level until Thursday. "The rupee hit a new record low on Friday on weak domestic markets and a strong dollar. Rising crude oil prices and continued FII outflows also pressured the rupee," Anuj Choudhary, Research Analyst, Mirae Asset ShareKhan, said. "We expect the rupee to



trade with a negative bias on risk aversion in global markets amid the ongoing US-Israel and Iran war. Rising crude oil prices and worries over inflation may further pressurise the rupee. A strong dollar and rising US treasury yields may too weigh on the domestic unit," he said.

Rupee is expected to trade in the range of Rs 92.10-92.80, Choudhary added. The dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading 0.43 per cent higher at 100.17. Brent crude, the global oil benchmark, was trading higher by 1.41 per cent at USD 101.9 per barrel in futures trade. On the domestic equity market front, the 30-share BSE Sensex crashed 1,470.50 points, or 1.93 per cent, to 74,563.92, while the Nifty plummeted to 23,151.10, down 488.05 points, or 2.06 per cent.

FW EXCLUSIVE

The 'Hormuz Exception' — Why India's strategic 'middle-path' and FDI pivot are the ultimate victory in the global Energy war

AAYUSH GOEL
New Delhi

The Strait of Hormuz has officially been opened to India-flagged tankers. The breakthrough follows intensive diplomatic engagement between India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar and Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi.

While global shipping remains paralyzed by escalating tensions between Iran and Western powers, Tehran's decision to grant exclusive safe passage effectively shields New Delhi from the energy crisis currently crippling the West.

We have previously highlighted the geographical and diplomatic advantage India holds in this corridor, and the safe passage of the Pushpak and the Parimal is the physical manifestation of that reality. This is more than just a naval update; it is a clear sign of a shifting global order where New Delhi navigates while others are forced

to anchor.

By navigating the "middle path," India has turned a global energy crisis into a private strategic opportunity. As the closeness with China deepens through capital investment and shared energy security, the "strategic route" India sits upon, has now become the world's most valuable economic asset.

The verdict: A Masterclass in Realpolitik: As first reported by this publication, the global energy vacuum created by Gulf uncertainty didn't just create a "gap"—it created a sovereign opportunity. The verdict is now clear that India has successfully decoupled its economic growth from Western volatility.

By refusing to take a binary side in the Iran-West conflict and instead doubling down on its 'cordial yet strategic' relationship with China, India has emerged as the only major economy capable of keeping the lights on while others face rationing and supply cuts.



Why India won: The Four Pillars of the strategy: Our reporting first identified the specific factors that allowed India to "win" this high-stakes game. These have now been confirmed by the events of March 2026:

The Maritime 'Veto': While US and European vessels are being redirected or restricted, India's diplomatic weight in Tehran secured a literal "free pass" for the Pushpak and Parimal. India won by becoming the neutral guarantor of energy flow in the Strait.

The FDI Trojan Horse: In-

to both the supplier (Iran) and the buyer (China).

The Logistics Monopoly: With the "Hormuz Exception," India is now the safest and most efficient hub for energy transportation. By the time Western powers can negotiate a return to the Strait, India will have already cemented its position as the regional logistics hegemon.

Conclusion: The future is 'Indo-Centric': The narrative of a regional power struggle has been replaced by the reality of an Indian advantage. As we reported first, the "strategic space" was always there for the taking. Through a combination of bold diplomatic maneuvers in Tehran and pragmatic policy shifts toward Chinese investment, India has not just entered the race—it has redrawn the finish line.

The success of the Pushpak and Parimal marks the end of the old energy era and the beginning of the "Strategic Middle Path" where India, and India alone, holds the keys to the kingdom.

Punjab bets on multi-layer welfare model to lock in Rural Voters ahead of 2027 polls

AAYUSH GOEL
Chandigarh

Punjab's AAP government has crafted a multi-layer welfare strategy that repeatedly targets the same rural households across income support, food security, healthcare, education and farm subsidies — an approach that could shape the political battle ahead of the 2027 Assembly elections.

In a state where the electorate remains deeply rooted in agriculture and rural livelihoods, many of the schemes announced in the Rs 2.60-lakh-crore Budget for 2026-27 converge on the same beneficiary families — particularly women, farmers, low-income households and Scheduled Caste communities.

The strategy reflects a broader national trend where governments have discovered the electoral potency of women-centric welfare schemes. From Maharashtra's Ladki Bahin to Karnataka's Gruha Lakshmi, direct financial support for women has increasingly emerged as a



decisive political tool.

Punjab's Budget, however, goes beyond relying on a single flagship programme. Instead, the government appears to be reinforcing welfare delivery through multiple schemes that affect the same households, creating a layered support structure that touches everyday life at several points.

At the centre of the Budget is the Mukh Mantri Mawan Dhi-an Satikar Yojna, under which women above 18 years will receive Rs 1,000 per month, while women belonging to Scheduled

Caste communities will receive Rs 1,500. With an allocation of Rs 9,300 crore, the scheme is expected to cover nearly 97 per cent of adult women in the state.

Punjab's Social Security, Women and Child Development Minister Dr Baljit Kaur described the initiative as a historic step towards strengthening women's economic independence and enhancing their role in household decision-making. The women-centric welfare push is reinforced by several additional measures. The Budget continues free bus travel for

women, with Rs 600 crore allocated for the scheme that benefits lakhs of women commuting daily for work and education. It also earmarks Rs 932 crore for more than 27,000 anganwadi centres, while Rs 65 crore under the Navi Disha scheme will provide sanitary pads to needy women and adolescent girls.

At the household level, the government has introduced the Meri Raso scheme, allocating Rs 900 crore to provide free quarterly ration kits to around 40 lakh families, with plans to add 10 lakh additional beneficiaries under the food security framework.

Healthcare is another pillar of the welfare strategy. The Budget earmarks Rs 6,879 crore for the health sector, including Rs 2,000 crore for the Mukh Mantri Sehat Yojna, which offers cashless treatment of up to Rs 10 lakh per family for nearly 65 lakh households. The network of Aam Aadmi Clinics, currently numbering 881, will be expanded with the addition of 143 new clinics and the upgradation of

308 health centres. Education spending has also been increased to Rs 19,279 crore, with the launch of Sikhiya Kranti 2.0, a Rs 3,500-crore World Bank-supported programme aimed at improving government school infrastructure, digital learning facilities and career counselling for more than 7.35 lakh students.

Viewed together, these measures suggest that the same household benefiting from the women's cash transfer and subsidised food support is also likely to access Aam Aadmi Clinics for healthcare and improved government schools for their children, reinforcing welfare delivery across multiple aspects of daily life.

Agriculture and rural livelihoods, central to Punjab's economy, have also received substantial allocations. The government has proposed Rs 15,377 crore for agriculture and allied sectors, including Rs 7,715 crore for free power to farmers, along with incentives for crop diversification and machinery support to manage crop residue burning.

BJP cracks the whip, calls MLAs to Chandigarh as party eyes both Haryana RS seats

AAYUSH GOEL
Chandigarh

BJP has cracked the whip ahead of the Haryana Rajya Sabha elections, directing all its MLAs to report to Chandigarh this weekend for a tightly controlled "voting drill," sources told The Financial World.

The move is aimed at ensuring that the party's numerical advantage in the Assembly translates into a flawless voting exercise, and potentially opens the door for both seats to effectively land in the BJP's kitty. The directive comes as the party appears keen to replicate a political script that has worked for it twice before in Haryana—in 2016 and again in 2022—when candidates backed by BJP clinched victories in dramatic contests despite the opposition appearing numerically comfortable on paper.

The Assembly arithmetic partly explains the urgency. In the 90-member Haryana House, BJP has 48 MLAs while Congress has 37. The remaining members include legislators from INLD, JJP and Independ-



BJP's Haryana playbooks: In 2016, media baron Subhash Chandra, an Independent backed by BJP, pulled off a stunning victory after 14 votes were cancelled during the Rajya Sabha election, dramatically altering the result.

A similar twist unfolded in 2022 when Congress candidate Ajay Maken appeared comfortably placed until counting began. The equation shifted after a Congress MLA's vote was rejected due to a technical marking error, while another MLA, Kuldeep Bishnoi, cross-voted in favour of Independent candidate Kartikeya Sharma, who was backed by BJP.

Why the BJP is running a "Voting Drill": Despite holding a clear majority in the Assembly, the BJP leadership appears unwilling to leave anything to chance. MLAs are being briefed on the precise procedure for marking preference votes and following the open-ballot requirement—technical details that have led to votes being cancelled in past Haryana Rajya Sabha contests.

A BJP MLA, speaking on condition of anonymity, confirmed the directive to assemble in Chandigarh. "We have been told to report in Chandigarh and remain available through the weekend. The message is clear—no mistakes during voting. Even a small slip while marking the ballot can change the entire equation," the legislator said.

Haryana police arrested 145 criminals including 22 belongs to most notorious gangs two months, says DGP

Haryana Director General of Police Ajay Singhal while addressing media said several notorious gangs dismantled; police crackdown on organized crime



SATISH HANDA
Panchkula

The Director General of Police Ajay Singhal while addressing media persons said that the Special Task Force (STF) of Haryana police under the guidance of chief Minister Nayab Singh Saini is working on a zero-tolerance policy against organized crime and gangs. He said the Haryana Police has taken a major action by taking a tough stand against organized crime in the state. Special Task Force has cracked down on criminal gangs operating in the state in the past two months of present year, disrupting the network of several notorious gangs, and tightening its grip has arrested 145 accused, including 22 wanted criminals. Taking major police action against hard core criminals also arrested 1048 persons in the state before Holi, involved in anti-social activities due to precise action taken based on intelligence.

DGP disclosed that 145 criminals have been arrested by STF in the two months during January and February 2026, these include 71

gang members and 22 wanted accused which include criminals associated with several notorious gangs. In addition, 20 other criminals involved in organized crime were also apprehended, in which major conspiracies foiled, many high-profile cases exposed. In January 2026, a plot to blow up a Maruti car parked in the Baldev Nagar police station premises in Ambala City was hatched, in which the involvement of a gangster-terrorist network linked to Pakistan was revealed. Police acted promptly and foiled this plot, arresting seven accused to date. Similarly, in the case of a shooting at a film producer's home, the Special Task Force, in a joint operation with the Mumbai Police, arrested four accused and handed them over to the Mumbai Police's anti-extortion unit. DGP Haryana said, in January 2026 the Special Task Force in Karnal arrested four members of a gang with foreign-made pistols.

Haryana CM Saini targets AAP over 'freebie politics' in Punjab

AAYUSH GOEL
Chandigarh



Haryana CM Nayab Singh Saini on Monday accused the AAP government in Punjab of indulging in "election-time freebie politics", alleging that such populist promises had become the hallmark of both AAP and Congress. Addressing a press conference in Chandigarh, Saini said the people of Punjab were increasingly disillusioned with the government led by Punjab CM Bhagwant Mann and would bring about a change in power in the next Assembly elections.

Reacting to the Punjab government's budget announcement of providing Rs 1,500 per month to women from the Scheduled Caste category and Rs 1,000 to other women, the CM said the promises were being made with the upcoming polls in mind. However, he asserted that such announcements would not benefit the ruling party politically.

Taking a swipe at AAP convenor and former Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal, Saini said Kejriwal too used to make attractive announcements during elections and claimed that the Bhagwant Mann government would face the same fate in Punjab as AAP did in Delhi.

He also expressed confidence that under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi,

Punjab CM Bhagwant Mann calls proposed Indo-US trade deal 'more dangerous than farm laws'

AAYUSH GOEL
Chandigarh

Punjab CM Bhagwant Singh Mann on Tuesday warned that the proposed India-US trade agreement could severely damage Indian agriculture, calling it "even more dangerous than the three black farm laws", as the Punjab Vidhan Sabha unanimously passed a resolution condemning the proposed pact.

Speaking while winding up a debate on a resolution moved by Agriculture Minister Gurmeet Singh Khudian, the CM said opening India's agricultural markets to heavily subsidised American produce would make it extremely difficult for farmers in Punjab and across the country to compete.

"The India-US agreement can destroy Indian agriculture and must keep the farm sector completely outside its ambit,"



Mann said, warning that allowing large-scale imports of American farm products would effectively place the country's agriculture at the mercy of foreign powers.

The CM said American products such as soyabean, maize and cotton, which are produced on large farms with higher subsidies, would enter Indian markets at much

lower prices, adversely affecting farmers in Punjab. He pointed out that the average farmer in the US owns around 500 acres of land, whereas farmers in Punjab typically cultivate two to two-and-a-half acres, making competition highly unequal.

Highlighting sector-specific concerns, Mann said large-scale imports of feed substi-

tutes such as DDGS and soybean oil could depress prices of maize and soybean, thereby affecting Punjab's crop diversification efforts. He noted that maize is cultivated on about 1.25 lakh hectares in the state, while cotton grown on nearly 2.5 lakh acres in the Malwa region could also face price pressure if cotton imports from the US increase.

The CM also warned that easing non-tariff barriers could increase the risk of the entry of genetically modified material, invasive weeds, pests and plant diseases, posing a threat to Punjab's agricultural ecosystem. He further expressed concern that stricter intellectual property provisions could prevent farmers from saving seeds for the next crop cycle, effectively making them dependent on multinational corporations.

Punjab's "Guarantee" Budget: AAP bets on Rs 9,300 Cr Women's dole and Universal Health Cover amidst rising Debt trap

AAYUSH GOEL
Chandigarh

In a high-stakes fiscal gamble ahead of the 2027 Assembly elections, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) government in Punjab on Sunday unveiled a record-breaking Rs 2,60,437 crore budget for the 2026-27 financial year, centering its strategy on a massive universal cash transfer for women while the state's debt continues to spiral toward the Rs



4.47 lakh crore mark. Presenting the budget on International Women's Day—marking the first time in Punjab's history a budget was tabled on a holiday—Fi-

nance Minister Harpal Singh Cheema termed it the «Saari Guarantian Puri Karan Wala Budget» (Budget that fulfills all guarantees). The centerpiece is the "Mukh Mantri Mawan Dhi-an Satikar Yojna," a landmark initiative with a Rs 9,300 crore outlay under which the gov-

ernment will transfer Rs 1,000 per month to all adult women in the state, with an enhanced benefit of Rs 1,500 per month for those from the Scheduled Caste (SC) community. The scheme is designed to cover approximately 97% of Punjab's adult female population—excluding only government employees, income tax payers, and legislators—while notably allowing current social security pensioners to collect this as an additional benefit.

Punjab targets drug money, freezes Rs 600 Crore assets

13,355 held in anti-gangster drive so far; Sunday raids at 477 locations, 88 smugglers arrested

AAYUSH GOEL
Chandigarh

Punjab Police has frozen over Rs 600 crore worth of illegally acquired properties linked to drug traffickers in the last two years, accounting for more than half of the nearly Rs 1,000 crore worth of such assets frozen in Punjab since 2017, officials said on Monday.

According to police, assets worth about Rs 330 crore were frozen in 2024 and around Rs 270 crore in 2025, reflecting an intensified push in recent years to dismantle the financial infrastructure sustaining the narcotics trade in the state. Officials said the bulk of the asset-freezing action has taken place in the last two years, which they said reflects the government's sharpened focus on targeting the financial networks behind drug trafficking.

Investigations are now tracking the proceeds of drug crime through bank accounts, shell companies, benami holdings, residential houses, commercial



establishments, agricultural land and luxury vehicles, which are being identified and frozen under relevant provisions of law.

A senior Punjab Police officer said the crackdown on illegally acquired wealth is aimed at dismantling the incentive structure sustaining the drug trade. "We are not only catching smugglers but dismantling the financial empires built on drug money. Drug trafficking thrives on the promise of huge illegal profits. By targeting properties and assets created through narcotics trafficking, we are weakening the economic foundations of

the drug trade," the officer said. Meanwhile, the ongoing anti-gangster campaign 'Gangstran Te Vaar' has so far led to the arrest of 13,355 individuals across Punjab. As part of the drive, police teams on Sunday conducted 477 raids at identified and mapped locations linked to associates of gangsters across the state. During the operation, 147 individuals were arrested and two weapons recovered. Police also took preventive action against 77 persons, while 80 individuals were verified and released after questioning.

Chandigarh cracks down on school book-uniform nexus, issues strict rules for private schools

AAYUSH GOEL
Chandigarh

In a move aimed at curbing the alleged nexus between schools and select vendors selling books and uniforms, the Chandigarh Education Department has issued fresh directions to all private unaided recognised schools, barring them from forcing parents to purchase prescribed items from specific shops.

The revised instructions, issued by the District Education Officer (DEO), U.T. Chandigarh, mandate schools to publish the complete class-wise list of prescribed textbooks and uniforms for the 2026-27 academic session online within three days of the circular's issuance which seeks to prevent commercialization and harassment of parents during the start of the academic session.

PU protest over Sikh lecture; Kang slams police action

AAYUSH GOEL
Chandigarh

A protest by students at Panjab University against a lecture on Sikh history featuring speakers associated with BJP and RSS turned tense on Monday, with students alleging a police lathicharge and several protesters detained during the clash.

The lecture, titled "Sacrifice, Equality and Moral Authority: Sikh History, Guru Tegh Bahadur and the Panj Pyare in the Indian Civilisational Ethos," was scheduled at the university's Law Auditorium. It listed BJP leader and former National Commission for Minorities chairperson Iqbal Singh Lalpura as keynote speaker and Banveer Singh, RSS Uttar Kshetriya Pracharak Pramukh, as chief guest.

Student groups gathered outside the venue raising slogans against the RSS and accusing the organisers of attempting to interpret Sikh history through an ideological lens. As the protest intensified, police personnel deployed and detained several students.

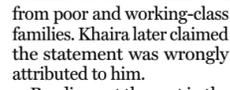
Videos circulating on social media from the campus showed



from poor and working-class families. Khaira later claimed the statement was wrongly attributed to him.

Reading out the post in the Assembly, Cheema said Khaira not only insulted women but also used personal attacks against him. According to Cheema, the Congress MLA referred to him as a "bandua mazdoor" (bonded labourer) when he objected to the remarks. Cheema said such language was unacceptable and unbecoming of a legislator. Speaking to the media outside the Assembly, he said the Congress leadership must take responsibility and issue an official apology. "I have appealed to the Speaker to take strict disciplinary action. If Sukhpal Singh Khaira does not apologise publicly for his offensive and unparliamentary language, his membership of the Assembly should be cancelled," Cheema said.

The Finance Minister also defended the dignity of labour, referring to his own modest background and the legacy of Punjab's working-class communities. He said many elected representatives come from hard-working families and such remarks insult their dignity.



protesters confronting police personnel, with students alleging that force was used to disperse the gathering. Protesters claimed turbans were pulled off and kirpans seized during the police action, allegations that quickly triggered political reactions.

The controversy had been building over the past few days after student organisation SATH objected to the participation of RSS functionaries in a programme related to Sikh Gurus. The group argued that inviting such speakers violated the 2004 Akal Takht directive discouraging RSS involvement in Sikh religious affairs and accused the organisers of promoting a particular ideological narrative.

PM Modi Slams Congress, Highlights Bodoland Development in Virtual Rally in Kokrajhar

GUWAHATI: Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday virtually addressed a large gathering in Kokrajhar from Guwahati after inclement weather prevented him from travelling to the Bodoland area as scheduled.

Addressing the people of Bodoland through a virtual link, the Prime Minister said he had started from Delhi with the intention of reaching Kokrajhar, but could not do so due to adverse weather conditions.

"That is why I am addressing the people of Bodoland from Guwahati," he said. Highlighting the transformation of Assam over the past decade, PM Modi said the state had witnessed decades of violence in the past but is now moving steadily towards peace and stability. "Assam has witnessed violence for decades, but today the state is peaceful. In the last 10 years, the state has seen tremendous development," the Prime Minister said.

He said Kokrajhar and the Bodoland region are poised to emerge as important centres of economic activity and business in the coming years. The Prime Minister also launched a sharp attack on the Indian National Congress, accusing the party of betraying the people of Bodoland and Assam for years.

"Bodoland was a witness to the betrayal of Congress. When Congress was in power at the



Centre, they only signed agreements on paper but did not implement them," he said.

PM Modi said that real progress began only after the Congress was voted out of both the Centre and the state. "When Congress was routed from both the state and the Centre, the double-engine government of the BJP started working with full commitment to fulfil the aspirations of the people," he said.

He alleged that Congress had a history of making false promises. "Congress is a machine of false promises. They never had the intention to fulfil their promises, whereas the BJP has been honestly trying to implement every commitment made to the people," the PM said.

Referring to earlier initiatives for Bodoland, he recalled that during the tenure of former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the Centre had taken significant steps for the region. "In

2003, the Vajpayee government formed the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) and launched several development projects in the region," he said.

PM Modi further said that the signing of the historic Bodo Peace Accord in 2020 marked a major step towards lasting peace in the region. He added that several cadres of insurgent groups have shunned violence and joined the mainstream, leading better lives.

"Many cadres of terror outfits have laid down arms and joined the mainstream. They are now leading a good life and contributing to the development of society," he said.

The Prime Minister also highlighted the expansion of healthcare infrastructure in Assam, noting that several new medical colleges are being established across the state.

Reaffirming the Centre's commitment to the development

of Bodoland, PM Modi said the BJP government remains dedicated to improving the lives of the people of the region. He also accused the Congress of compromising national security and supporting infiltrators.

"Congress has done a sin by compromising national security. They have always stood behind infiltrators and continue to do the same," he said. The Prime Minister warned that the situation in Assam's Dhubri and Goalpara districts was becoming dangerous due to infiltration.

He said the present government has taken decisive steps to reclaim land occupied by infiltrators and restore the rights of indigenous people. "Our government has taken a big step to bring back lands occupied by infiltrators. Now the indigenous people of Assam are getting their land rights," the PM said.

Appealing to voters ahead of the upcoming Assembly elections, PM Modi urged people to reject the Congress. "I appeal to the people to punish the Congress in the upcoming Assembly polls. Together we are building a prosperous Assam," he said.

During the programme, the Prime Minister virtually launched a series of development initiatives aimed at boosting infrastructure and economic growth in the Bodoland region and across Assam.

States Getting Adequate Supply of Fertilisers: Union Minister JP Nadda

NEW DELHI: Union Minister for Chemicals and Fertilisers Jagat Prakash Nadda informed Parliament on Friday that no shortage of chemical fertilisers has been reported across states during the kharif 2025 and the ongoing rabi 2025-26 seasons.

The minister stated that the availability of major fertilisers such as Urea, DAP, MOP and NPKS has remained adequate across the country.

The minister highlighted that 41,24,000 metric tonnes of urea were produced by IFFCO units during April-January of FY 2025-26, up from 40,66,000 Metric Tonnes during the corresponding period of FY 2024-25, indicating steady production levels.

With regard to urea, the Government had announced the New Investment Policy (NIP) - 2012 on January 2, 2013 and its amendment on October 7, 2014, to facilitate fresh investment in the urea sector and to make India self-sufficient in urea production. Under NIP-2012, a total of six new urea units have been commissioned, including four units set up through Joint Venture Companies (JVCs) of nominated PSUs and two units established by private companies, he explained.

The units set up through JVCs include the Ramagundam urea unit of Ramagundam Fertilisers and Chemicals Ltd (RFCL) in Telangana, and three units of HURL located at Gorakhpur (Uttar Pradesh), Sindri



(Jharkhand), and Barauni (Bihar).

The private sector units include the Panagarh urea unit of Matix Fertilisers and Chemicals Ltd (Matix) in West Bengal and the Gadepan-III urea unit of Chambal Fertilisers and Chemicals Ltd (CFCL) in Rajasthan.

Each of these units has an installed capacity of 12.7 Lakh Metric Tonne per annum (LMTPA) of urea production capacity, the minister said.

Together, they have added 76.2 LMTPA of urea production capacity, the minister said. The Lok Sabha was also informed that the Government of India has taken stringent steps to ensure the availability of quality fertilisers to farmers and to curb the manufacture and sale of fake fertilisers in the country.

In a written reply in the Lok Sabha, the Minister of State for Chemicals and Fertilisers Anupriya Patel, informed that the Fertiliser Control Order administered under the Essential Commodities Act strictly prohibits the manufacture or sale of fertilisers that do not meet prescribed standards. State Governments are the designated enforcement

authorities responsible for taking action against violations, including cancellation or suspension of licences and penal action under the Essential Commodities Act, which provides for imprisonment ranging from three months to seven years.

The Government of India monitors enforcement action taken by States against cases of black marketing, hoarding, sub-standard fertilisers and diversion on a weekly basis. Since April 2025, a total of 4,30,541 raids have been conducted across the country, resulting in 15,544 show-cause notices, 6,620 licence suspensions or cancellations, and 794 FIRs being registered against defaulters, the minister explained.

Further, as per the information received from the State Governments, most States have reported that no factories and companies have been involved in the manufacturing of fake chemical fertilisers during the last five years.

However, a few States have reported such cases, and action was taken by them. These include Chhattisgarh, Haryana, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, which reported 16 cases, Maharashtra registered cases against 19 manufacturers involved in fake fertilisers while Rajasthan took action against 42 manufacturers of suspicious fertilisers; and Uttar Pradesh reported 36 cases during the last five years, the minister added.

'No fuel shortage', avoid creating fake narratives says Hardeep Puri



NEW DELHI: There is no fuel shortage, and India has sufficient crude oil stock at the moment, Petroleum and Natural Gas Minister Hardeep Singh Puri said on Thursday, adding that people should not spread rumours and avoid creating fake narratives.

Geographic Reference-Speaking in Parliament, the minister stressed that the volume of energy in India is secure.

"India's crude supply position is secure, and the secured volume exceeds what Hormuz would have delivered. Thanks to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's outstanding diplomatic outreach and goodwill, India has secured crude volumes that exceed what the disrupted Strait of Hormuz could have delivered in the same period," Puri emphasised.

India is securing its energy needs by diversifying import sources beyond West Asia amid rising geopolitical tensions in the region, he said, adding that domestic gas supplies remain stable.

The country continues to receive energy imports through different sources and supply routes (India now imports crude from around 40 countries), ensuring stability in the country's fuel availability despite the ongoing conflict in the region. According to Puri, the government has ensured that domestic consumers continue to receive full supplies of compressed natural gas (CNG) and piped natural gas (PNG).

The minister emphasised that the government remains committed to ensuring an uninterrupted supply of affordable energy for households across the country.

"There is no shortage for domestic consumers, and there is no reason to panic," Puri said.

Earlier, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said India continues to work extensively on extending assistance to Indian nationals in Iran and at the same time is also addressing issues pertaining to the safety of shipping and the country's energy security amid the ongoing conflict in West Asia.

Responding to a question regarding the movement of vessels around the Strait of Hormuz, the MEA spokesperson said: "The External Affairs Minister and the Foreign Minister of Iran have had three conversations in recent days. In the last one, they discussed issues pertaining to the safety of shipping and India's energy security. Beyond that, it would be premature for me to say anything."

Railways Deploying AI-Based Inspection Systems, Drones, Other Technologies: Ashwini Vaishnav

NEW DELHI: Indian Railways is deploying and piloting several advanced technologies, including artificial intelligence-based inspection systems and drone monitoring to enhance safety and efficiency across its network,

the Parliament was told on Thursday. In a written reply in the Lok Sabha, Railways Minister Ashwini Vaishnav said technological improvement in the national transporter is a continuous process and several systems have been introduced or tested on a pilot basis. He highlighted several systems deployed over Indian Railways, such as the Machine Vision Inspection System (MVIS), the Wheel Impact Load Detector (WILD), the Online Monitoring of Rolling Stock (OMRS), the Integrated Track Monitoring Systems (ITMS), and the Overhead Equipment (OHE). The minister described the MVIS as an AI and machine learning-based solution designed to detect hanging, loose, or missing components in moving trains.

Export Promotion Mission to Boost MSME Exports: Textiles Minister



NEW DELHI: The government has launched an Export Promotion Mission with a total outlay of Rs 25,060 crore to strengthen India's export ecosystem with particular focus on micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs), Textiles Minister Giriraj Singh said. In a written reply to a question in Rajya Sabha, the Minister said the export mission is aimed at improving access to finance and enhancing global market footprint. He noted that the mission aims to create a comprehensive, flexible and digitally driven framework for export promotion. The export promotion mission is being implemented through two integrated sub-schemes—Niryat Protsahan and Niryat Disha—designed to address both financial and non-financial barriers faced by exporters. The Niryat Protsahan component focuses on improving access to affordable trade finance for MSME exporters.

Govt Allocates Rs 20,000 Cr for Small Modular Reactor Development under Nuclear Energy Mission

NEW DELHI: The government has allocated Rs 20,000 crore under the Nuclear Energy Mission announced in the Union Budget 2025-26 to support the research, design, development and deployment of Small Modular Reactors (SMRs), the government informed the Rajya Sabha.

Minister of State for Personnel, Public Grievances and Pensions Jitendra Singh said the Department of Atomic Energy (DAE) is currently developing three indigenous SMR technologies. These include the 220 MWe Bharat Small Modular Reactor (BSMR-200), the 55 MWe Small Modular Reactor (SMR-55) and a high-temperature gas-cooled reactor of up to 5 MWth capacity designed for hydrogen generation. The lead units of these reactors will be established at DAE sites for technology demonstration, the minister said.

The BSMR-200 and SMR-55 projects have received in-principle approval, while the proposal for administrative and financial sanction for the BSMR-200 project has been cleared by the Atomic Energy Commission for submission to the Union Cabinet. For the high-temperature gas-cooled reactor,



a Detailed Project Report (DPR) has been prepared, and siting consent along with terms of reference for environmental clearance has been received from the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change.

The government said several critical technologies required for SMR deployment have already been developed domestically. A special material known as Advanced Purified Reactor Vessel Alloy (ApuRVA) for reactor pressure vessels has been developed indigenously in collaboration with Indian industry, while the control rod drive mechanism has been developed in-house.

A special material known as Advanced Purified Reactor Vessel Alloy (ApuRVA) for reactor pressure vessels has been developed indigenously in collaboration with Indian industry, while the control rod drive mechanism has been developed in-house

Most of the equipment required for these reactors falls within the manufacturing capability of Indian industry, with technical support from the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC).

The government has also drawn up a roadmap to achieve 100 gigawatts (GW) of nuclear power capacity by 2047 under the Nuclear Energy Mission.

India's current nuclear power capacity stands at 8.78 GW, excluding Rajasthan Atomic Power Station.

With ongoing projects expected to be completed progressively, nuclear capacity is projected to reach around 22 GW by 2031-32.

Beyond 2032, the government plans to add another 32 GW of capacity through the Nuclear Power Corporation of India Limited (NPCIL) using indigenous Pressurised Heavy Water Reactors and Light Water Reactors, taking the total to about 54 GW.

The remaining 46 GW is expected to be developed through public sector enterprises, state governments, private sector players and joint business models and technologies.

The BSMR reactor is being jointly developed by BARC and NPCIL, and is expected to take around 60 to 72 months for construction after receiving administrative and financial approval, the minister said.

Rahul Gandhi raises LPG crisis issue in LS: 'pain has just started'

NEW DELHI: Lok Sabha Leader of Opposition (LoP) Rahul Gandhi, on March 12, flagged the issue of LPG shortages hitting the hotel industry, in the wake of West Asia crisis and claimed that this was the "beginning of pain" that will only aggravate in days to come.

Speaking in Lok Sabha over 'LPG crisis', the Congress MP took potshots at the Union government over its alleged surrender to the US administration's diktats and asked how could the US President Donald Trump decide "from where and from whom India makes its oil purchases". Rahul Gandhi reiterated his 'compromise' charge, holding it to be the key reason for petrol and LPG shortages in the country. These claims were subsequently countered by the Union Petroleum Minister Hardeep Singh Puri, who declared that the country's oil reserves were full and there was no looming crisis before the country.

LoP Rahul Gandhi, while speaking on the West Asia crisis, said the US-Israel and Iran war will have far-reaching consequences for everyone, including India, and it has started becoming evident.

"The central artery through



which 20 per cent of the global oil flows, the Strait of Hormuz, has been closed. And this is going to have tremendous repercussions, particularly for us (India), because a very large portion of our oil and natural gas comes through the Strait of Hormuz."

"The pain has just started. Restaurants are closing, there is widespread panic about LPG, the street vendors are affected, and as I said, this is only the beginning," the Lok Sabha LoP added.

Questioning United States 'interference' in India's petroleum pacts, LoP Rahul Gandhi asked "how could a third nation decide who we buy oil from, whether we can buy oil from Russia or not, and whether our relationships with different oil

suppliers can be decided by us — this is what has been bartered". He went to add that this issue puzzled and perplexed him for long, however, he has now understood it and such 'capitulation' is because of India compromising its interests.

"It is a very puzzling fact why a nation the size of India would allow any other nation, or the President of another nation, to give us permission to buy Russian oil and decide who our relationships are with."

"I have figured the puzzle out, and the puzzle is about compromise," the Lok Sabha LoP said.

The LoP's mention of Epstein however did raise eyebrows as well as the hackles of the ruling Treasury benches.

Kashmiri students in Iran seek urgent evacuation amid ongoing strikes

FW DESK Jammu

Hundreds of Kashmiri students stranded in Iran have appealed for urgent evacuation as continuing US-Israel strikes and uncertainty over travel routes leave them fearful for their safety.

Around 600 Kashmiri students who were moved from Tehran to Qom for safety by the Indian Embassy are now unsure about their return to India. The students say there is still no clarity about a possible evacuation or whether they will be allowed to exit through Armenia.



Currently staying in hotels arranged by the Indian Embassy in Tehran, the students said the absence of clear evacuation plans has caused severe anxiety for them and their families back

home. A video shared by the students on social media claimed that several strikes had occurred close to where they were staying. The students said the hotel

building where they are staying "shook" due to the impact of nearby explosions.

The students were earlier shifted from Tehran, which has been heavily affected by the ongoing conflict, to Qom, considered relatively safer. However, they said the violence has now spread to other cities as well, increasing concerns among foreign nationals.

Communication with their families had also been disrupted due to internet restrictions in Iran, and many students said they were able to speak with their families only after about a week.

Empowered Women Key to Building Nation's Future: President Droupadi Murmu

NEW DELHI: President Droupadi Murmu said on March 8, that empowered women play a very important role in social progress and are the greatest force needed for building the country's future.

She added that educated, self-reliant women are builders of India, which is not just a piece of land, but a living nation.

President Murmu expressed these views while addressing the concluding session of the two-day national conference of women thinkers titled "Bharti — Naari Se Narayani" held at Vigyan Bhawan in New Delhi.



The conference brought together women thinkers from different fields across the country. The President said that in

Indian tradition, women are not seen only as protectors of the family but also as symbols of knowledge, strength and pros-

perity. She added that today Indian women are achieving remarkable success in many fields such as education, science, administration, sports, entrepreneurship and social service, and are contributing significantly to nation building.

President Murmu said that the real progress of any society is possible only when women receive equal opportunities, respect and security. She emphasised that women must get the freedom to make decisions, the opportunity to live with self-respect, and equal access to education and employment.

Buoyant GST numbers mask an import-led boost

February's Goods and Services Tax (GST) collections have once again delivered a strong headline number. Gross revenues touched about Rs 1.83 lakh crore, marking an 8.1% year-on-year increase. Much of this rise has been attributed to stronger consumption following the rationalisation of GST into a simpler two-tier structure of 5% and 18% in September 2025. Lower rates on consumer non-durables helped sustain demand in sectors such as automobiles, appliances, mobile phones and tourism-linked services. At first glance, the numbers appear to confirm a resilient consumption cycle. A closer look at the composition of these revenues, however, reveals a more complex picture. A significant share of February's GST growth came from import Integrated GST (IGST), which rose sharply by more than 17% compared with the same month last year. Import IGST collections reached approximately Rs 47,800 crore, up from about Rs 40,800 crore in February 2025. Over a longer horizon, the rise is even more striking: February collections have increased by nearly 41% since FY22. This surge must be viewed alongside another development—the steady depreciation of the rupee. The currency weakened by roughly 4% against the U.S. dollar between February 2025 and February 2026, and by about 6.2% between April 2025 and February 2026. Because most imports are dollar-denominated, a weaker rupee automatically raises the taxable value on which IGST is levied. India's import dependence amplifies this effect. The country imports more than 90% of its semiconductor requirements and relies heavily on crude oil, copper and aluminium—commodities that together accounted for about 35% of merchandise imports in February 2026. Rising global prices, along with a shift in crude sourcing from discounted Russian barrels to supplies from the U.S. and West Asia, have likely increased the average import bill. The result is a paradox. While GST collections appear buoyant, a growing share of revenues is being driven by higher import values rather than uniformly strong domestic demand. Durable tax buoyancy must ultimately rest on broad-based domestic consumption, not merely on rising import valuations driven by currency weakness and global price cycles.

LETTERBOX

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“When everything seems to be going against you, remember that the airplane takes off against the wind, not with it.”
— Henry Ford

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P. SARAVANAN & A. PAUL WILLIAMS ON HOW GCCS EVOLVE FROM SUPPORT CENTRES TO INNOVATION HUBS

Beyond the back office



The narrative of India as the 'world's back office' has been officially retired. By early 2026, a profound transformation had occurred. India has become a strategic-nerve-centre for the global corporate elite. What were once known as captive centres are now Global Capability Centres (GCCs), which are sophisticated hubs that do not merely support the parent company but also define its future. This transition from cost-cutting centres to global growth engines marks a watershed moment in India's economic history.

The evolution of Indian GCCs has progressed through four distinct waves, culminating in the current GCC 4.0 era. Initially, centres were established to exploit labour arbitrage and handle routine IT and business process tasks. However, in the last few years, there has been a decisive move toward end-to-end product ownership.

Today, nearly 58% of GCCs in India are investing heavily in Agentic AI, which are autonomous Artificial Intelligence (AI) systems that can reason and execute complex tasks, thereby moving beyond mere experimentation to enterprise-scale deployment. These centres now manage global strategy leadership, high-end research and development (R&D), and proprietary intellectual property (IP) creation, making them indispensable nodes in the global value chain.

Benefits for companies and the nation

For multinational corporations (MNCs), the Indian GCC offers a unique competitive advantage: access to a multi-dimensional talent pool at a scale found nowhere else. With India housing over 1,800 GCCs and employing nearly two million professionals, companies can now drive faster innovation cycles through a follow-the-sun model. Beyond technology, these centres have be-

come global "Centres of Excellence" (CoEs) for finance, legal, and human resources, allowing parent companies to centralise their most critical functions in a high-skill, high-efficiency environment.

Today, Indian GCCs act as global CoEs that drive high-end R&D in fields such as quantum computing, semiconductor design, and Agentic AI. These centres no longer support the parent company. They have end-to-end product lifecycles, from initial conceptualisation and architecture to global deployment and customer feedback loops. This evolution means that the shadow leadership housed in Indian GCCs often possesses greater technical depth and execution power than the traditional headquarters.

For the Indian population, the GCC boom has catalysed high-value employment and regional development. These roles are intellectually stimulating and offer compensation far above that of traditional service-sector jobs, creating a new class of global professionals. Perhaps, most significantly, growth is finally trickling down into Tier-II and Tier-III cities such as Coimbatore (Tamil Nadu), Indore (Madhya Pradesh), and Kochi (Kerala). This geographic diversifica-

tion reduces the strain on saturated metros such as Bengaluru and Hyderabad while stimulating local real estate, infrastructure, and retail economies across India.

Steering through challenges

Despite the record growth, the GCC ecosystem faces challenges that could threaten its momentum. The primary risk is the widening of the talent gap. Although India produces millions of engineers, the demand for niche skills in AI security, cloud architecture and quantum-resistant cryptography vastly outstrips the supply. This has triggered a fierce war for talent, leading to wage inflation that could eventually erode the value proposition of multinational corporations (MNC).

Furthermore, GCCs hold more critical global data and have become prime targets for state-sponsored cyber-attacks. With the implementation of the Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act, the pressure on GCCs to maintain flawless cybersecurity governance has reached unprecedented levels. Simultaneously, the introduction of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Global Minimum Tax (Pillar Two) fundamentally alters the tax arbitrage benefit that many MNCs previously enjoyed. With a global floor of 15% tax and the continued bone of contention regarding India's 24% markup for software R&D under Safe Harbour rules, fiscal predictability has become a top-tier board concern.

Finally, geopolitical volatility and protec-

tionism pose long-term risks to investment. As of early 2026, global trade professionals are increasingly wary of United States tariff volatility and reshoring policies that encourage MNCs to return critical data operations to their home markets.

While India remains an attractive destination, owing to its scale, any shift toward digital sovereignty in western nations could slow the pace of new GCC setups. Additionally, as India-based centres now handle 13.7% of global cyber-attack incidents (Cyfirma Report, 2023), the threat of state-sponsored espionage and intellectual property theft has made cybersecurity the most expensive operational mandate for modern GCCs.

Need for proactive policymaking

To secure India's position as the world's innovation capital, policymakers must transition from regulators to active facilitators. The National GCC Policy Framework, proposed in the 2026-27 Budget cycle, is a step in the right direction, but execution is the key. The government should introduce a "Single-Window Clearance" system specifically for GCCs to streamline the establishment of legal entities. Additionally, rationalising transfer pricing norms and providing tax safe harbours for R&D-intensive operations will provide the fiscal certainty that global boards demand. By fostering deeper industry-academia collaborations to upskill the workforce in deep tech and offering capital subsidies for Tier-II expansion, India can ensure that its GCC revolution remains sustainable for the next decade.

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RENJINI RAJAGOPALAN EXPLORES HOW INDIA'S CARE SYSTEM DEPENDS ON UNDERPAID WOMEN WORKERS

Building a care economy on invisible labour

The Union Budget 2026-27 proposes to build a 'strong care ecosystem' by training 1.5 lakh multiskilled caregivers in geriatric, core care and allied skills through programmes aligned with the National Skills Qualification Framework (NSQF). As India's care needs expand, such a move is both timely and necessary.

However, the Budget reveals a deeper paradox; even as the state prepares to train a new cadre of certified care professionals, it makes little mention of the five million plus women who already run India's health, nutrition and childcare systems. Our Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs), Anganwadi workers and helpers, and mid-day meal workers continue to deliver essential public services every day, yet remain classified as 'volunteers', excluded from the very ecosystem the state now seems determined to strengthen.

A shadow labour force

From the Anganwadi worker ensuring a child is fed to the ASHA worker tracking a pregnancy in a remote village, these women constitute the backbone of India's welfare architecture. Their work is essential, continuous and indispensable to the state, yet they labour in a deeply precarious space, earning meagre monthly honorariums, without formal contracts, paid leaves or maternity benefits. What little support they receive come from small and fragmented responses by individual States such as honorarium hikes (which vary from State to State) and gratuity benefits, or coverage under national schemes such as Ayushman Bharat and Pradhan Mantri Shram Yogi Maandhan. But these piecemeal measures



do little to address the contradiction that lies at the core of India's care economy — that the state relies on a vast, feminised shadow labour force of women to deliver essential public services but classifies them as 'honorary workers' to limit protections typically associated with formal employment.

A gendered form of work

This contradiction is rooted in deeper structural norms surrounding care. The 'care penalty' in India is not just a sociological concept, it is a statistical reality. Insights from the 2024 Time Use Survey highlighted in the Economic Survey 2025-26 reinforce Indian women's role as primary caregivers, with 41% of females aged 15-59 spending 140 minutes daily on household caregiving, compared to just 21.4% of males at 74 minutes.

This pattern mirrors India's welfare architecture. By outsourcing its care responsibilities to women labelled as 'volunteers', the state draws on long-standing social norms that view care work as an extension of a woman's domestic duty rather than skilled labour deserving fair compensation. Since care is seen as 'natural' to women, it is rendered cheap and informal. This creates a vicious cycle — the less care work is recognised as skilled, the less compulsion there is to pay for it, trapping a predominantly female workforce in insecure employment. Against this background, the recent Budget's emphasis on investing in a new cohort of care workers exposes the absence of clear avenues to integrate its existing workforce; these workers already perform complex, multi-skilled tasks that demand emotional labour, field coordination, and deep knowledge of community dynamics. So why is the state not looking to upgrade and secure the livelihoods of those who already perform such critical work?

India's so-called 'volunteer' care workers are in reality the permanent pillars of our welfare state. The country cannot realise its ambitions to be a global powerhouse for health while the women who sustain such systems remain underpaid, unprotected and largely invisible. But reimagining India's care economy requires both financial investment and a cultural shift.

Reimagining the care economy

To begin with, India must move beyond the 'volunteer' label. In the Supreme Court's 2025 ruling in *Dharam Singh & Anr. vs State of U.P. & Anr.*, the Court upheld that work which is recurrent and central to an institution's functioning cannot be treated as temporary indefinitely. For India's cadre of 'volunteer' care workers who perform duties that are indispensable and continuous in nature to the state, this judgment offers a strong basis to demand that their honorary roles be converted into permanent posts.

Combined with the renewed Budgetary focus on skilling, this creates an opportune moment to revisit employment norms governing India's existing care workforce, and nudge the state towards the creation of clear transition frameworks that help move these workers from honorariums to fair wages and formal contracts. Perhaps the first step could be to extend the proposed NSQF-aligned programmes to ASHA and Anganwadi workers as well.

For years, these workers have mobilised across the country to demand dignity and recognition of their work. It is now past time that the state responds by fulfilling the final two commitments — Reward and Represent — of the International Labour Organisation's 5R Framework for Decent Care Work. Our care workers who perform tirelessly need to be properly compensated and given a genuine voice in employment and policy decisions: in short, a real seat at the table.

Renjini Rajagopalan is a lawyer and research lead at the Centre for Gender Analysis, JustJobs Network (JJN). Views are personal.

BOOKS: REVIEW

Ana Paula's novella uncovers how punishment becomes barbarism

Longlisted for the International Booker Prize, *On Earth As It Is Beneath* is a bleak and unsettling novella that pushes readers into the moral shadows of society. Brazilian writer Ana Paula Maia, known for her stark depictions of brutality and marginal lives, delivers a short but powerful work that examines violence, punishment and the fragile boundary separating civilisation from savagery. First published in Portuguese and later translated into English, the book continues Maia's exploration of the darker corners of human existence.

The story unfolds in a remote penal colony built deep in a wilderness far removed from ordinary society. The prison stands on land already haunted by a brutal past—once a site where enslaved people were tortured and killed before the state converted it into an institution supposedly devoted to rehabilitation. Over time, however, that mission has collapsed. The colony has become little more than a warehouse for forgotten men, a place where punishment persists long after society has

ceased to care about reform.

As the colony approaches closure, the atmosphere inside grows increasingly unstable. The sadistic administrator, Melquiades, begins staging grotesque rituals during the full moon: inmates are released into the surrounding wilderness and hunted like animals. What begins as a spectacle of cruelty gradually transforms the prison into a theatre of terror, drawing guards and prisoners alike into a cycle of escalating violence. Authority and captivity begin to blur, leaving the institution itself to drift toward barbarism.

At the centre of the narrative stands Bronco Gil, a taciturn and imposing prisoner whose quiet presence anchors the otherwise chaotic environment. Bronco is no conventional hero; he is a multiple murderer whose past is neither softened nor excused by the narrative. Yet Maia renders him with a curious tenderness that contrasts sharply with the cruelty surrounding him. Through Bronco, the novel refuses simplistic moral divisions. Guards and

inmates mirror one another in brutality, and the reader is left to confront the unsettling possibility that the difference between them may be largely circumstantial.

One of the most striking aspects of Maia's writing is its restraint. Her prose is spare, direct and almost severe, refusing sentimentality or elaborate psychological explanation. Instead, the narrative advances through stark scenes and clipped observations, giving the book an almost parable-like quality. Moments of shocking violence appear alongside brief flashes of vulnerability, producing abrupt emotional shifts that unsettle rather than console the reader.

This stylistic economy reinforces the novel's broader themes. The penal colony becomes a metaphor for institutions that isolate undesirable populations and then abandon them. In Maia's vision, violence is not an aberration but a structural feature of systems designed to enforce order. Society hides its cruelty behind distant walls, convincing itself that punishment occurs somewhere else



On Earth As It Is Beneath
By Ana Paula Maia;
Translated by Padma Viswanathan
Charco Press;
106 pages; Rs 1,265.

and therefore carries no collective responsibility. By immersing readers in the daily routines of incarceration, Maia dismantles that comforting illusion.

The setting's historical echoes deepen this critique. The prison occupies land scarred by slavery, suggesting an uneasy continuity between past and present forms of oppression. The warden's macabre hunts recall the pursuit of escaped slaves, collapsing historical distance and implying that cruelty evolves rather than disappears. In this sense, the novella operates as a bleak allegory about the persistence of violence within social institutions.

Yet despite its grim subject matter, *On Earth As It Is Beneath* is not merely a catalogue of brutality. Maia occasionally punctures the darkness with fleeting moments of empathy—small gestures, memories or reflections that

hint at the humanity buried beneath the characters' hardened exteriors. These brief glimpses of tenderness are vital. They remind the reader that what violence destroys is not only life but also the fragile possibility of compassion.

The book's brevity—barely more than a hundred pages—works to its advantage. Rather than constructing an expansive narrative, Maia offers a concentrated experience that resembles a fable or philosophical thought experiment. The story advances quickly, building a sense of inevitability as the colony descends further into chaos. By the final pages, readers are left not with resolution but with unsettling questions: who is responsible for the brutality of such institutions, and can a society that hides its violence truly claim to be civilised?

Ultimately, *On Earth As It Is Beneath* is a difficult yet compelling work. Its stark vision of humanity offers little comfort, but it forces readers to confront uncomfortable truths about power, punishment and complicity. Maia demonstrates how literature can illuminate spaces society prefers to ignore, reminding us that the darkest corners of human behaviour are rarely as distant as we imagine.

Crude oil may touch USD 150 per barrel if Strait of Hormuz remains closed for 4-8 weeks

NEW DELHI: Global crude oil prices could surge to as high as USD 150 per barrel if the Strait of Hormuz remains closed for the next four to eight weeks, according to a report by Nuvama.

The report highlighted that the continued closure of the Strait of Hormuz (SoH), which handles around 20 million barrels per day (mbpd) of oil flows, could significantly tighten global supply and push crude prices into the range of USD 110-150 per barrel within four to eight weeks.

It added that the disruption has already slowed maritime traffic in the region to a near halt, tightening the global crude balance. The market had initially priced in a disruption of about two weeks, but expectations are now shifting toward a longer outage.

According to the report, if the closure continues for an



extended period, particularly up to eight weeks, crude prices could approach around USD 150 per barrel. However, it noted that such high price levels would likely trigger demand destruction and encourage alternative supply responses in the market.

The report added that releasing strategic oil reserves could provide short-term relief but may also create demand

for future restocking. It noted that releasing around 300-400 million barrels could ease supply pressures in the near term.

At the same time, export limitations from West Asia could force shutdowns of around 6-7 mbpd, equivalent to more than 200 million barrels in March, which would keep the global crude market tight.

The report highlighted that Asian economies are expected

to be the most affected by the disruption. Around 13 mbpd of oil shipments to countries such as China, India, Japan and South Korea pass through the Strait of Hormuz.

While some countries may rely on their strategic reserves to cushion supply shocks, those with limited reserves could be forced to reduce refinery runs.

The report also discussed the potential impact on global gas markets. It noted that Qatar's LNG production could restart within two weeks after the reopening of the Strait of Hormuz, as facilities remain undamaged.

The report further pointed out that India remains highly vulnerable to disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz. While crude supplies may remain manageable in the short term, higher LNG prices could lead to reduced imports.

India's Mobile Phone Exports Jump 127 Times in Last Decade: Ashwini Vaishnav



NEW DELHI: India's mobile phone exports have surged sharply over the past decade, rising more than 127 times from about Rs 0.01 lakh crore in 2014-15 to nearly Rs 2 lakh crore in 2024-25, the Parliament was informed on Wednesday.

Replying to a question in the Lok Sabha, Union Electronics and IT Minister Ashwini Vaishnav said the sharp growth in exports reflects the success of the government's push to expand electronics manufacturing under initiatives such as 'Make in India' and 'Atmanirbhar Bharat'. The policies aim to build a complete ecosystem for electronics production in the country. According to the government, India has transformed from being a net importer of mobile phones to becoming a net exporter over the past 11 years.

"The country is now the world's second-largest mobile manufacturing hub," he said. During the same period, the overall production of electronics goods in India increased about six times from around Rs 1.9 lakh crore in 2014-15 to about Rs 11.3 lakh crore in 2024-25. "Electronics exports also rose nearly eight times from Rs 0.38 lakh crore to around Rs 3.3 lakh crore," the minister mentioned. Vaishnav said India started its electronics manufacturing journey by producing finished products, and the focus has now moved towards developing modules, sub-modules, components and even raw materials, tools and machinery used in the manufacturing process. The government has launched several schemes to strengthen domestic electronics manufacturing.

These include the Production Linked Incentive Scheme for large-scale electronics manufacturing and IT hardware, the Scheme for Promotion of Manufacturing of Electronic Components and Semiconductors, and the Electronics Manufacturing Clusters Scheme.

India Poised For Best Scalable Indigenous AI Products Starting With Voice Led Apps: Report

NEW DELHI: India's large digital user base and low user acquisition costs provide foundation for scalable artificial intelligence products, and the first consumer AI app to reach 200 million users in India will likely be voice led rather than English prompted, a report said on Friday.

The report from venture capital firm Arkam Ventures said the country's data depth could enable three or more AI native services companies built in India to scale to over \$1 billion revenue within five years. The firm forecasted that AI native lending platforms will originate more consumer credit than all private banks combined over the next decade.

Besides the infrastructure-related push through over \$2.5



billion committed to Indian AI data centres, Indian startups would enjoy a three to four times cost advantage versus global peers and access to global revenue pools, making capital more productive, the report added.

"With over 850 million digital users in India and one of the largest developer ecosystems in the world, India is powering the growth of global AI platforms — not just as a consumer but also as a builder of AI-driven platforms," the report said.

The firm identified four pil-

lars for India's AI future such as population scale consumer AI with Indic, voice first design; B2B AI products; globally competitive products and AI-native services built by Indian engineering teams and indigenous infrastructure. "AI represents one of the most important technological shifts of our time and has the potential to exponentially expand the benefits of digitisation at population scale," said Bala Srinivasa, Managing Director at Arkam Ventures.

"Challenges in terms of GPU supply, cost of compute, and lack of indigenous AI infra are in fact opportunities being addressed by founders which is also creating fertile ground for a new generation of India focused AI consumer and enterprise startups," he added

IndiGo CEO Pieter Elbers Resigns Months After Airline's Worst-Ever Flight Crisis

NEW DELHI: Pieter Elbers has resigned as the CEO of IndiGo, the country's largest airline operated by InterGlobe Aviation Limited, following the low-cost carrier's worst-ever flight crisis in December last year, it was informed on Tuesday.

In a filing to exchanges, the airline said that Rahul Bhatia, Managing Director of InterGlobe Aviation, has taken charge of the airline's management on an interim basis.

"With immediate effect, Pieter Elbers will be stepping down as IndiGo CEO. The Board of Directors would like to thank Pieter for his contribution and service to the organisation and wishes him well in his future endeavours," the low-cost airline said. "Rahul Bhatia, Managing Director of IndiGo, shall in the interim assume management of the affairs of the airline until such time that the Company announces the arrival of a new leader, which is expected in short order," it added in its regulatory filing.

Vikram Singh Mehta, Chairman of the Board, said that Bhatia returns to assume management of the affairs of the airline to strengthen the company's culture, reinforce operational excellence and deepen its commitment to delivering exceptional service of care, reliability and professionalism to its customers.



"Having founded and nurtured IndiGo for twenty-two years, I feel a deep sense of personal commitment and responsibility towards our nation, and towards the airline's customers, employees, shareholders and all other stakeholders", Bhatia said. Elbers, who took over as IndiGo CEO a little over three years ago, oversaw a period of strong growth for the airline. During his tenure, IndiGo crossed the \$10 billion revenue mark and expanded its fleet to more than 440 aircraft. The airline also placed a historic order for 500 A320-family aircraft with Airbus, one of the largest aircraft orders in aviation history. However, despite these achievements, Elbers' tenure was overshadowed by a major operational crisis in December 2025.

The disruption was triggered when the airline struggled to implement new rules aimed at preventing pilot fatigue. Between December 3 and December 5, IndiGo cancelled more than 2,500 flights and delayed nearly 1,900 others, affecting over 300,000 passengers across the country.

Over 300 factories and dyeing houses in Panipat have closed due to a lack of LPG supply

Crisis also visible in Ambala scientific glassware industry.

SATISH HANDA
Panipat/Ambala

Impact of the LPG shortage on Panipat's textile industries is visible. More than 300 factories and dyeing houses have already shut down their shutters in Panipat due to LPG shortage. The situation is worsening in several industrial units likely to be closed down due to the ongoing Israel-Iran war. The disruption of LPG supply and the imposition of PNG limits have deepened the crisis for industries in Haryana. Nearly 300 factories in Panipat have been closed. The remaining 200 have less than a week's stock left. Entrepreneurs are left with no option but to use coal instead of gas. The Central Pollution Control Board seals the operation as soon as it switches to coal, the industry entrepreneurs of Panipat textile industry said while talking to the media persons.

There are more than 300 units in 'Science City' Ambala manufacturing scientific glassware used in educational institutes scientific research centres and industries adversely affected due to shortage of LPG, which is widely used in manufacturing such glassware

Various Schemes Rolled Out to Strengthen MSME Sector, Says MoS Shobha Karandlaje



NEW DELHI: The government has launched several schemes including Emergency Credit Line Guarantee Scheme (ECLGS) and Credit Guarantee Scheme (CGS) for Micro and Small Enterprises (MSEs) to strengthen the micro, small and medium enterprises (MSME) ecosystem in the country, Minister of State (MoS) for MSME Sushri Shobha Karandlaje said in Lok Sabha.

In written reply to a question in the Lower House of Parliament, Karandlaje outlined various schemes and institutional measures aimed at improving credit access, digital integration and market support for MSMEs.

Among the key initiatives taken by the government for the sector is the Credit Guarantee Scheme (CGS) for Micro and Small Enterprises. The scheme provides collateral-free credit guarantee support for loans extended to micro and small businesses, with the guarantee coverage ceiling set at Rs 10 crore.

The government has also established the Self-Reliant India (SRI) Fund with a target corpus of Rs 50,000 crore to provide equity funding to MSMEs. This includes Rs 10,000 crore contributed by the Government of India and Rs 40,000 crore mobilised through private equity and venture capital funds.

In the Union Budget 2026-27, an additional Rs 2,000 crore has been announced to top up the fund to continue support for micro enterprises and maintain their access to risk capital.

The Emergency Credit Line Guarantee Scheme (ECLGS), launched in May 2020 as part of the Aatmanirbhar Bharat package, supported MSMEs and business enterprises affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The scheme remained operational until March 31, 2023.

According to data from the Department of Financial Services, a total of 1.13 crore guarantees worth Rs 2.42 lakh crore were extended to MSMEs under the scheme during its implementation period.

To address delayed payments to MSMEs, provisions under the Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises Development (MSMED) Act, 2006 mandate that payments to micro and small enterprises must be made within 45 days.

Micro and Small Enterprises Facilitation Councils (MSE-FCs) have been established across states and Union Territories to resolve such disputes. Additionally, the government launched the SAMADHAAN Portal in October 2017 to enable MSMEs to file and moni-

tor cases related to delayed payments.

The Minister said that retail and wholesale traders were included under the MSME category for the purpose of Priority Sector Lending (PSL) from July 2, 2021. To bring Informal Micro Enterprises (IMEs) into the formal financial system and enable them to access PSL benefits, the government launched the Udyam Assist Platform in January 2023.

The government has also extended non-tax benefits for three years in cases where enterprises move to a higher MSME classification.

Under the Digital India programme, various digital infrastructure and service initiatives are being implemented to support MSME digitalisation.

These include platforms such as the Udyam Portal, MSME Champions Portal, Government e-Marketplace (GeM), Trade Receivables Discounting System (TReDS), MSME Trade Enablement and Marketing Scheme, MSME Sambandh, PMEGP Portal, Khadi and Village Industries Commission Online, PM Vishwakarma Portal and the Online Dispute Resolution portal.

The Prime Minister's Employment Generation Programme (PMEGP) provides margin money subsidy of up to 35 per cent for setting up new micro enterprises in the non-farm sector, with project costs of up to Rs 50 lakh for manufacturing units and Rs 20 lakh for service enterprises.

The government also launched the PM Vishwakarma Scheme on September 17, 2023 to provide holistic support to artisans and craftspeople engaged in 18 traditional trades. The scheme includes provisions for collateral-free loans of up to Rs 3 lakh with interest subvention of up to 8 per cent.

KV Ramana Murty Appointed as SEBI's Whole Time Member



MUMBAI: Kompella Venkata Ramana Murty, a 1991 batch Indian Defence Accounts Service officer and former Additional Controller General of Defence Accounts, has been appointed as a whole time member of the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) for a three year term, the Department of Economic Affairs said in an official statement.

The government's Appointments Committee of the Cabinet approved Murty's appointment for a period of three years from the date he assumes charge, or until further orders, the announcement said. Murty had previously served on the SEBI board as a part time member representing the Ministry of Corporate Affairs. His appointment brings the number of whole time members on the SEBI board to four after vacancies last year. The other whole time members include Kamlesh Chandra Varshney, and Sandip Pradhan who are from the Indian Revenue Service (Income Tax) cadre and Amarjeet Singh who rose through the ranks at SEBI.

The SEBI board comprises a chairman, four whole time members and four part time members. Tuhin Kanta Pandey, the current chairman of the board, assumed office on March 1, 2025. Whole-time members play an important role in decision-making, investigations and implementation of policies crucial for the development of India's capital markets. The part time members of SEBI Board include Deepthi Gaur Mukerjee (Secretary, Ministry of Corporate Affairs), Anuradha Thakur (Secretary, Department of Economic Affairs), Shirish Chandra Murmu (Deputy Governor, Reserve Bank of India) and N. Venkatram.

Air India Revises Fuel Surcharge on Domestic & International Routes amid Gulf Tensions



NEW DELHI: Air India group on March 10 announced a phased expansion of fuel surcharge on its domestic and international routes, saying the move is "necessitated by the steep rise in jet fuel prices" arising from the geopolitical situation in the Gulf region.

The new fuel surcharges are being implemented in three phases, covering travel on all flights, including those operated by Air India Express.

In Phase 1 (for all new bookings made from 0001 hours India Standard Time on March 12, 2026), the revised fuel surcharge will be Rs 399 for domestic flights; Rs 399 for SAARC region; \$10 for the West Asia/Middle East region; \$60 for Southeast Asia region; and \$90 for the Africa region. In phase 2, the revised fuel surcharge will be \$125 for Europe; \$200 for North America and \$200 for Australia, said Air India.

"Phase 3 will apply to and from Far East markets, namely Hong Kong, Japan, and South Korea, which will be announced in due course," the airline added.

Tickets that have already been issued prior to the above times will not attract the new surcharge unless customers seek date or itinerary changes that require a recalculation of the fare, it noted. Air India said it "regrets the need to increase fuel surcharges in this manner but emphasises that it is necessitated by factors outside its control".

"Absent such fuel surcharges, it is likely that some flights would be unable to cover operating cost and would have to be cancelled. Air India will review its surcharges periodically and make appropriate adjustments as the situation requires," the airline said.

India's Annual Food Exports Nearing Rs 5 Lakh Crore Mark: Piyush Goyal

NEW DELHI: Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal on Tuesday called upon stakeholders from the food, agriculture and hospitality sectors to work collectively towards making India the world's largest exporter of agricultural and processed foods, highlighting the vast opportunities created by India's expanding trade agreements and the growing global demand for the Indian products.

Addressing the gathering at the inauguration of the 40th edition of AAHAR - The International Food & Hospitality Fair in the national capital, Goyal said that India's exports of food and agricultural products — includ-



ing farm produce and fisheries — have reached nearly Rs 5 lakh crore (over \$55 billion) annually, making the country the seventh largest exporter of agricultural produce in the world.

He noted that over the past 11 years, from 2014 to 2025, In-

dia's agri and food exports have witnessed significant growth. Exports of processed foods have increased fourfold, fruit and pulses exports have tripled, processed vegetable exports have quadrupled, cocoa exports have tripled, and cereal exports have

doubled. Rice exports alone have grown by 62 per cent during this period. Goyal said these achievements should inspire India to aspire for the top position globally in agricultural and processed food exports. He emphasised that the goal is achievable and aligns with the vision of Prime Minister Narendra Modi that India should become the "food basket of the world." The Minister highlighted that the nine Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) concluded by India over the past three and a half years have opened access to 38 developed and prosperous countries, providing vast market opportunities for Indian exporters.

India's Retail Inflation Edges up to 3.2 Per Cent in February

NEW DELHI: India's inflation rate, based on the new Consumer Price Index (CPI) series with 2024 as the base year, edged up to 3.21 per cent for February compared to the same month of the previous year, according to data released by the Ministry of Statistics on Thursday.

There was an increase of 0.47 per cent in the CPI inflation in February compared to the revised figure of 2.74 per cent for January this year, when the new series was launched.

However, there was a more than 10 per cent decline in the index of key vegetables, including tomato, peas, and



cauliflower, in February compared with January, the figures showed.

Overall food inflation for the month of February compared to the same month of the previous year stood at 3.47 per cent, while housing inflation was estimated at 2.12 per cent.

Real-time price data are collected from selected 1407 urban markets (including online markets) and 1465 villages covering

all states and UTs through personal visits by field staff of the Field Operations Division of the NSO, MoSPI, on a weekly roster. During the month of February, 2026, prices were collected from 100 per cent rural and urban markets, while the market-wise prices reported therein were 99.89 per cent for rural markets and 99.78 per cent for urban markets, the official statement explained. The base for the Consumer Price Index has now been revised from 2012 to 2024 using the Household Consumption Expenditure Survey 2023-24 for the first time in January this year.

Indian Banks Benefit From AI Driven Operating Models: Report

NEW DELHI: Indian banks are benefiting from sustained credit growth, deeper digital public infrastructure and rapid adoption of AI driven operating models, and heightened regulatory focus on climate risk, cyber resilience and governance, a report said on Friday.

The report from KPMG International said the sector is at par with global peers scaling from pilots to enterprise AI use, investing in workforce reskilling and strengthening cybersecurity and ESG frameworks to support long term resilience.

Based on a survey of 110 global Banking and Capital Markets CEOs, the report found 83 per cent are confident about growth over the next three years and 65 per cent ranked AI as a top investment priority.

Around 70 per cent CEOs



said they plan to allocate 10-20 per cent of next 12 month budgets to AI, while 59 per cent expect agentic AI to have a transformational impact and 69 per cent expect returns within one to three years.

"Around 83 per cent banking and capital market CEOs are prioritising reskilling for AI; 79 per cent say AI has

redefined entry level skills whereas 78 per cent warn AI workforce readiness could negatively impact the organisation if not addressed," the report said.

"As global banking leaders respond to rising operational and regulatory costs by pursuing scale and strategic M&A, the same imperative is increas-

ingly shaping the Indian banking sector," said Sanjay Doshi, Partner and Head, Transaction Services and Financial Services Advisory, KPMG in India.

Doshi said that scale is more than just size for India but a catalyst for expanding distribution, accelerating digital transformation and enhancing cost efficiency.

As banks deepen their investments in technology and modernize their operating models, selective consolidation and partnership led growth can unlock new markets, strengthen value propositions and build long term competitive resilience, he added.

Around 86 per cent CEOs cited cyber insecurity as the top growth threat, 56 per cent cited ethical challenges, and 55 per cent pointed to data readiness and regulatory gaps.

RBI Allows Compounding of Metrocom Infrastructure's FEMA Case



NEW DELHI: The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) issued a compounding order, on February 10, under the Foreign Exchange Management Act, 1999 (FEMA), in the case of Metrocorp Infrastructure Limited, which has resulted in termination of adjudication proceedings against the company for contraventions of provisions of the law, according to an official statement issued on Thursday. The order has been passed by

the RBI after issuance of "No Objection" by the Directorate of Enforcement (ED).

The ED investigation was conducted after credible information was received in the case. After completion of the investigation, the ED filed a complaint under FEMA before the Adjudicating Authority for the late reporting of foreign inward payments to the tune of Rs 110.62 crore.

As per the provisions of

FEMA, the adjudication proceedings were initiated by the Adjudicating Authority by issuance of a Show Cause Notice dated January 10, under FEMA, to the company and its directors who were in charge and responsible for the conduct of the business of the company during the relevant period of contravention.

The company, later on, filed an application before the RBI for compounding of the said contraventions under FEMA as per the provisions of Section 15 of the Act. On reference from the RBI, the ED issued no objection for such compounding in line with the true spirit of the Act, the statement said.

Accordingly, the RBI, on the basis of no objection issued by the ED, has compounded the said contraventions vide compounding order with a one-time payment of Rs 1, 03,320.

India's Digital Payments Push Creates A 'Model For Developing Economies': Report



NEW DELHI: India undertook an "ambitious financial technology transformation in modern history," to become "one of the world's most advanced digital payment ecosystems" creating a model for developing economies, a report has said.

India's model shows how "government policy, technological innovation and widespread mobile connectivity can combine to create efficient payment infrastructure," the report from Azerbaijan-based News.az said.

India's digital payment revolution has attracted global attention, with economists and technology experts studying it as a "model for other developing economies."

A combination of digital identity systems, expanding mobile connectivity, innovative payment platforms and supportive government policies, created one of the world's largest and most efficient digital ecosystems, it noted.

The report credited the meticulous planning of the government saying state-run programs that expanded financial inclusion and provided digital identity to millions of citizens provided the base for the system.

Rapidly improving mobile internet access and affordable smartphones, drove the mass adoption. Public internet access has also expanded through the Prime Minister Wi-Fi Access Network Interface (PM-WANI) programme. As of February 2026, the initiative had enabled 4,09,111 Wi-Fi hotspots, supported by 207 PDO Aggregators and 113 app providers, aimed at delivering low-cost, high-speed internet connectivity, particularly in rural and remote areas.

These developments created the conditions necessary for large scale digital financial services.

RBI authorizes CRED to operate as a payment aggregator



**FW DESK
Mumbai**

CRED has received final authorisation from the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) to operate as a Payment Aggregator (PA). The approval is an endorsement of CRED's operational discipline, safeguards, and governance.

With this, the RBI has formally authorized CRED (Dreamplug Paytech Solutions Private Limited) to operate a payment system directly under the regulator's supervision. The license enables CRED to onboard merchants, collect payments on their behalf across instruments, and handle settlement and refunds. CRED and its subsidiaries now hold two licenses from the RBI: the Prepaid Payment Instrument (PPI) license secured earlier, and the PA license. Group companies also hold a corporate agency license by IRDA, a registered investment advisor license from SEBI, and a TPAP license from NPCI, signifying comfort among multiple financial sector regulators with CRED's operating model and practices. In FY2024-25, CRED managed payments of over Rs 8.5 lakh crore, on behalf of 1.5 crore creditworthy and affluent Indians. Over a third of credit card bill payments in India are made on CRED. It is one of the few Indian fintechs with both ISO 27001 and ISO 27701 certifications, which are globally accepted security standards. It undergoes and passes 100+ external regulatory and partner audits annually. With CRED now authorized to directly manage core payment flows, members can expect a faster, more seamless, and reliable payment experience. It signifies that CRED is trusted for its ability to responsibly manage large volumes of customer funds and data securely and transparently.

IDFC First Bank pays Rs 645 crore in claims



NEW DELHI: IDFC First Bank on Tuesday said it paid Rs 645 crore in claims linked to the fraud at its Chandigarh branch, about Rs 55 crore more than its initial estimate, and confirmed no further discrepancies have been found.

IDFC First Bank said in an exchange filing that "against the initial estimate of principal of Rs 590 crore, the bank has received claims and paid the net principal amount of Rs 645 crore."

The claims "pertain to the same incident and linked to the same branch and not a new incident," the statement said, adding that reconciliation of all relevant accounts has been completed and zero claims have been received nationwide since February 25, 2026.

"The bank has made the said payment to the concerned clients in line with our principled approach on this matter of making good the client payments," it said.

The bank added that it will continue to pursue actions against the perpetrators to recover its dues.

IDFC First Bank said its deposit base remains stable at Rs 2, 92, 381 crore as of February 28, compared to Rs 2, 91, 133 crore at the end of December. "We thank our customers for their understanding that this is an isolated incident linked to one branch in Chandigarh," it said, adding that the average liquidity coverage ratio is "comfortable" at 114 per cent for the ongoing quarter and said it expects deposit and loan growth to continue broadly in line with past trends.

The bank had earlier reported a fraud of Rs 590 crore in Haryana government accounts involving certain employees and has appointed KPMG for a forensic audit with a final report expected in four weeks. The bank also suspended four officials pending investigation.

The Haryana government de-empanelled IDFC First Bank and AU Small Finance Bank for government business with immediate effect after the incident.

Indian Economy Seen Growing 7.1% in FY27; West Asia Crisis a Risk: Crisil

NEW DELHI: India's real GDP growth is expected to moderate to 7.1 per cent in FY27 from 7.6 per cent in FY26, according to rating firm Crisil.

The forecast assumes a normal monsoon, moderate food inflation, Brent crude prices of USD 75-80 per barrel and steady global growth, despite tariff and geopolitical uncertainties.

Growth will remain supported by domestic demand, public infrastructure capex and a gradual pick-up in private investment, even as the global environment stays uncertain.

Fiscal measures such as income-tax cuts, GST rationalisation, higher direct benefit transfers and adequate liquidity are supporting consumption by improving household disposable incomes and lowering borrowing costs. Amish Mehta, Managing Director and CEO, Crisil, said, "India has grown steadily in an environment buffeted by exogenous uncertainties.

Our fiscal 2027 forecast reflects its strong domestic counterweights, especially consumption, infrastructure capex, uptick in the private investment cycle led by emerging sectors and gradually improving trade competitiveness."

"However, continuing geopolitical conflicts, the proliferation of technology-driven disruptions, public debt levels and climate vagaries will need close monitoring," Mehta added. Private consumption, accounting for about 57 per cent of GDP, will remain the main growth driver, though the pace may moderate as one-off tax benefits taper.

Consumer Price Index inflation is expected to average 4.3



per cent in FY27 as food prices normalise, though the lower food weight in the CPI basket should help contain headline inflation.

Dharmakirti Joshi, Chief Economist, Crisil, noted, "Domestic demand is expected to stay supportive in fiscal 2027, with fiscal measures lifting disposable incomes and private investment seeing a mild pick-up. That said, risks remain tilted to the downside, given renewed geopolitical flare-ups and lingering trade-related uncertainty that can transmit

through commodity prices, trade and capital flows."

Exports are expected to remain steady, supported by services exports and recent trade agreements, although geopolitical tensions in the Middle East pose risks.

Corporate revenue growth is projected at 8-9 per cent, while Ebitda margins may decline by 40-60 basis points due to subdued realisations and supply disruptions.

Public capex, estimated at around 3.1 per cent of GDP, along with lower borrowing costs, will continue to crowd in private investment.

Priti Arora, President and Business Head, Crisil Intelligence said industrial capex could reach about Rs 9.1 lakh crore annually between FY27 and FY31, a 1.5x increase, driven by sectors such as electronics, semiconductors, electric vehicles, solar PV, defence and AI infrastructure.

India's exports are projected to double to about Rs 80 lakh crore by FY31, supported by improvements in infrastructure, technology adoption, skill development and localisation initiatives, the report said.

India's Private Market Deals Hit \$207 Bn in 5 Years

NEW DELHI: India is approaching towards 'top pick' in Asia-Pacific private markets, providing global investors scale and resilience as activity in the Asia-Pacific slows, according to a report.

According to an analysis by McKinsey & Company highlighted that about 31 per cent of the more than 50 limited partners surveyed ranked India first and 76 per cent placed it in their top three picks.

This indicates a shift in regional capital flows as investors reassess Asia and look beyond China for longterm growth, according to the report. "More than half expect to increase allocations to India-focused funds," it said. Moreover, private markets already account for about 64 per cent of limited partner allocations to India and investors expect buyout and growth strategies to draw the most interest over the next five years, reflecting a preference for approaches that offer more control.

The report also said from 2021 to 2025, private equity and ven-



ture capital deal value in India has risen over one-and-a-half times to \$207 billion compare to the previous five-years, with exits more than doubling to around \$120 billion. Sector-wise, technology, IT and financial services, pharmaceuticals and healthcare, and consumer sectors accounted for nearly three-quarters of private capital deployed between the aforesaid period.

The report also noted that India's Asia-Pacific private equity and venture capital deployment jumped around 21 per cent in 2020-24 which was about 12

per cent in 2015-19. According to research by McKinsey & Company, investors are increasingly leaning into private markets with growing confidence and are seeking deeper, more strategic partnerships, said Kunal Sood, a partner at private equity firm Pantheon.

India's attractiveness to investors is largely driven by its structural growth story, with market participants pointing to the country's entrepreneurial talent, strong economic momentum and rising domestic consumption as key growth drivers.

Cabinet Eases FDI Norms for Chinese Investments, Companies from Other Countries Sharing Land Borders with India

NEW DELHI: The Union Cabinet, chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has relaxed foreign direct investment (FDI) rules for companies from China and other countries which share land borders with India.

An official statement said that the change in FDI rules is aimed at unlocking greater FDI inflows from global funds for startups and deep techs.

Citing opportunistic takeovers of Indian companies due to Covid pandemic, the government had in 2020 changed FDI rules so that companies or investors from countries sharing a land border with India can invest only with prior government approval. The move was largely seen as the one targeted at China.

The revised framework introduces a clear definition and criteria for determining 'Beneficial Owner', aligning it with provisions under the Prevention of Money Laundering Rules, 2005. The beneficial ownership test will be applied at the investor entity level.

Under the new rules, investors from land-bordering countries with non-controlling beneficial ownership of up to 10 per cent will be permitted to invest through the automatic route, subject to applicable sectoral caps, entry conditions and reporting requirements by the investee company to the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade.

The government has also introduced expedited approval timelines for certain investment proposals. Investments from land-bordering countries in specified manufactur-



The policy revision follows the earlier restrictions introduced through Press Note 3 (2020), which mandated government approval for investments from countries sharing a land border with India. The measure was introduced in April 2020 to prevent opportunistic acquisitions of Indian companies during the COVID-19 pandemic.

ing sectors, including capital goods, electronic capital goods, electronic components, polysilicon, and ingot-wafer, will now be processed within 60 days.

A Committee of Secretaries under the Cabinet Secretary will have the authority to revise the list of eligible sectors for fast-track approvals.

The revised guidelines stipulate that in such cases the majority shareholding and control of the investee entity must remain with resident Indian citizens or Indian-owned and controlled entities at all times.

The policy revision follows the earlier restrictions introduced through Press Note 3 (2020), which mandated government approval for investments from land-bordering countries in specified manufactur-

in April 2020 to prevent opportunistic acquisitions of Indian companies during the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, the government noted that applying the restrictions even to minority and non-strategic investments, particularly by global private equity and venture capital funds, had affected investment flows.

According to the government, the updated framework is expected to improve regulatory clarity, reduce procedural delays and enhance ease of doing business.

The changes are also aimed at facilitating greater foreign direct investment, technology inflows, domestic value addition and deeper integration of Indian firms with global supply chains, while supporting the objectives of Atmanirbhar Bharat.

India's Deal Volume Rises 34 Pc in February, Records 278 Transactions Worth \$5.4 Billion

NEW DELHI: India's deal activity remained resilient in February, recording 278 transactions worth \$5.4 billion — up 34 per cent sequentially in terms of volumes, a report said on Tuesday.

The report from Grant Thornton Bharat said the surge was led by private equity and venture capital participation, which recorded 169 deals worth \$2.8 billion, the highest monthly deal count in four years.

"While overall deal values saw only a modest recovery, the surge in volumes signals renewed investor conviction and broader



capital deployment across sectors," the report said.

"Mergers and acquisitions regained traction with 104 deals totalling \$2 billion. Domestic M&A dominated, with strategic and scale-driven consolidation as a defined theme across core sectors," said Shanthi Vijetha, Partner, Growth, Grant Thom-

son Bharat. Domestic consolidation dominated, accounting for 69 per cent of volumes and 78 per cent of total M&A value.

Escalating geopolitical tensions in the Middle East alongside a weakening rupee, introduce incremental risks to capital flows and cross-border sentiment. "Despite these uncertainties, strong domestic liquidity, resilient corporate balance sheets, and growing global investor preference for India will likely support continued deal activity in 2026," Vijetha said.

PE/VC activity anchored deal momentum, with significant rise in volumes but average deal size fell to \$16.6 million from \$21.6 million in January, indicating a shift toward smaller-ticket investments.

IPO and QIP activity showed moderation with three IPOs raising \$436 million, and two QIPs mobilising \$139 million, reflecting selective capital formation amid cautious sentiment.

Energy and Natural Resources led performance, with volumes rising 217% and values tripling month-on-month.

INTERNATIONAL

Tehran to Give Safe Passage to Indian Ships in Strait of Hormuz: Iran Envoy



NEW DELHI: Iran's Ambassador to India, Mohammad Fathali, on Friday, indicated that Indian ships could soon get safe passage through the Strait of Hormuz amid escalating tensions in the Middle East, which has brought transit through the crucial waterway to a standstill.

Pointing out that India and Iran share common interests in the region, Fathali said, "Yes, because India is our friend. You will see it within two or three hours. We believe that Iran and India share common interests in the region."

"As ambassador in India, I say that the Indian government in this situation, after the war, helped us in different fields," he added.

The Ambassador's statement comes a day after Iranian

Deputy Foreign Minister Majid Takht-Ravanchi said that Tehran has permitted ships from some countries to transit the Strait of Hormuz.

He also dismissed allegations about Iran laying mines in the Strait, saying "this is not true, it is closed during the war".

The Minister said Iran will not let enemy countries use the Strait.

"As far as Iran is concerned, we feel that those countries that joined the aggression should not benefit from safe passage through the Strait of Hormuz," he added.

The Strait of Hormuz, is one of the world's most vital shipping lanes through which 20 per cent of the world's oil and gas exports transit.

The Ministry of Ports and Shipping said on Thursday

that the number of Indian-flagged vessels operating in the Persian Gulf region, remains unchanged at 28 and all Indian vessels and crew are being actively monitored for their safety and security.

As many as 24 of these Indian ships are located west of the Strait of Hormuz, carrying 677 Indian seafarers, and four vessels are on the east of the Strait with 101 Indian seafarers on board.

"Authorities, ship managers, and recruitment agencies are closely coordinating with Indian embassies and local authorities to ensure safety, and render medical assistance," the statement said.

Advisories issued on precautionary measures to safeguard Indian seafarers, Indian-flagged vessels and maritime trade operations issued by Director General Shipping on February 28, 2026, remain in force.

The Ministry continues to closely monitor the prevailing maritime situation in the Persian Gulf region and has strengthened monitoring and preparedness measures in view of the evolving maritime situation in that region, the statement added.

Iran's New Leader Mojtaba Khamenei Wounded: U.S. Defence Secretary



WASHINGTON: U.S. Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth said on Friday that Iran's newly installed supreme leader, Mojtaba Khamenei, had been wounded and forced into hiding as the country's military leadership struggled amid intense American strikes. Speaking at a Pentagon briefing, Hegseth said Iran's leadership was under growing pressure as the military campaign continued. "Iran's leadership is in no better shape, desperate and hiding," he said. Hegseth said the newly appointed leader had issued a written statement calling for unity but had not appeared publicly. "We know the new so-called not-so-Supreme leader is wounded and likely disfigured," Hegseth said. "He put out a statement yesterday... but there was no voice, and there was no video. It was a written statement." The defence secretary questioned why the leader had not addressed the country directly despite access to communication tools.

White House Rebutts Claims of Shifting Iran War Aims



WASHINGTON: The White House pushed back against reports that the Trump administration has shifted its goals in the war with Iran, as it released a compilation of remarks by President Donald Trump and senior officials outlining what it said have been the campaign's consistent objectives.

The compilation brings together statements made over the past ten days by Trump, Vice President JD Vance, Secretary of State Marco Rubio, senior Pentagon leaders, and the White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt, describing what officials say are the unchanged goals of Operation Epic Fury.

"Our objectives are clear," Trump said on March 2. "First, we're destroying Iran's missile capabilities... and their capacity to produce brand new ones — pretty good ones they make. Second, we're annihilating their

ballistic missiles and the threat posed by their navy... That is the clear objective of this mission," Rubio said. Military commanders said the campaign also seeks to weaken Iran's ability to project military power beyond its borders. "Our military in the Middle East is undertaking an unprecedented operation to eliminate Iran's ability to threaten Americans, as they've been doing for nearly half a century," US Central Command Commander Admiral Brad Cooper said. Pentagon officials said Iran's expanding missile forces had become a growing security concern. Under Secretary of War for Policy Elbridge Colby said the operation was focused on addressing Iran's ability to project military power.

"The objectives of the military campaign... are focused on addressing the ability of the Islamic Republic to project military power... And that's primarily the missile forces of the Islamic Republic, which has obviously been growing substantially and posed a very serious threat," Colby said. Secretary of War Pete Hegseth said the mission aimed to dismantle key pillars of Iran's military capability. "The mission is laser-focused: obliterate Iran's missiles and drones and facilities that produce them, annihilate its navy and critical security infrastructure, and sever their pathway to nuclear weapons. Iran will never possess a nuclear bomb," he said.

Secretary of State Rubio said the military effort was designed to eliminate the immediate threats posed by Iran's missile forces and naval capabilities.

"The United States is conducting an operation to eliminate the threat of Iran's short-range

Iran Declares Week of National Unity after New Supreme Leader's 1st Message



TEHRAN: Iranian First Vice President Mohammad-Reza Aref said the administration has declared the coming week as the "Week of National Unity and Solidarity for Iran," according to the official news agency IRNA.

Aref said he had made the decision on behalf of the administration and was inspired by the first message of Iran's new Supreme Leader Mojtaba Khamenei. The message was released earlier in the day and highlighted the need to maintain unity among the Iranian people, Xinhua news agency reported.

Aref said, as stressed by Iran's supreme leader, the people's "effective presence on the scene and maintaining national unity" are the most important props for the country's power and security.

Meanwhile, Amir Saied Iravani, Iran's permanent representative to the United Nations, said Thursday that it is his country's "inherent right" to preserve peace and security in the Strait of Hormuz.

Iravani told reporters that Iran "fully respects and remains committed to the principle of freedom of navigation under the law of the sea."

"However, the current situation in the region, including in the Strait of Hormuz, is not the result of Iran's lawful exercise of its right of self-defence. Rather, it is the direct consequence of the destabilizing actions of the United States in launching aggression against Iran and undermining regional security," he said.

Iran's new Supreme Leader Mojtaba Khamenei on Thursday called for the continued closure of the Strait of Hormuz, saying that "the lever of blocking the Strait of Hormuz must definitely continue to be used."

On February 28, Israel and the United States launched joint attacks on Tehran and several other Iranian cities, killing Iran's then Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, along with senior military commanders and civilians. Iran responded by launching waves of missile and drone strikes targeting Israel and US bases and assets in the Middle East.

UN chief outraged over drone-attack killing of UNICEF staffer in Congo

UNITED NATIONS: UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres was outraged over the drone-attack killing of a UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) staffer in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), a UN spokesman said.

"Our colleague Karine Buisset was killed in a drone strike on a building that was housing aid workers," said Stephane Dujarric, chief spokesman for Guterres on Wednesday. "Karine was a dedicated humanitarian who worked tirelessly to support children and families impacted by conflict and crisis."

Peacekeepers from the UN mission in the DRC responded for emergency support and conducted an initial assessment of the strike in Goma, he said.

The spokesperson said Buisset is the second humanitarian worker killed in the DRC this year, citing the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Since January, at least 92 incidents impacting humanitarian workers have been reported



across the country. Parties to the DRC conflict must ensure the protection of civilians and those providing life-saving assistance, Dujarric said. "Humanitarian personnel must never be a target. This is international law. It is not up for debate, nor is up for negotiation. It must be respected." He said the mission also called on all parties to immediately cease hostilities, in accordance with their commitment to respect the ceasefire, to prioritise the path toward the political solution and to capitalise on the gains recently achieved within the framework of peace efforts. In a post on X, French President Emmanuel Macron had confirmed the death of Karine Buisset, who worked for the UN children's charity Unicef, and urged "respect for humanitarian law."

US lawmakers press Trump on Tibet policy

WASHINGTON: A bipartisan group of US lawmakers has urged the Trump administration to make Tibet a priority in its foreign policy, pressing the State Department to advance dialogue on the region's future, defend religious freedom in the Dalai Lama's succession, and counter Chinese disinformation about Tibet.

In a letter to Riley M. Barnes, the US State Department's Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues, the lawmakers said Washington should strengthen efforts to implement existing laws and reinforce long-standing American support for the Tibetan people.

The letter was led by Congressman Jim McGovern, a Democrat from Massachusetts, and Congresswoman Young Kim, a Republican from California, along with eight other House members from both parties.

"We know what is possible when the Administration and Congress work together to promote America's interests regarding Tibet," the lawmakers wrote. "We look forward to working



with you as Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues to implement these laws and appropriations provided by Congress, to advance a renewed and reinvigorated push to peacefully resolve the dispute over Tibet's future, and to continue the US government's unwavering support for our Tibetan allies."

The lawmakers outlined eight areas where Congress and the administration could collaborate to advance US policy on Tibet in line with existing American law.

Among the top priorities is promoting dialogue between the People's Republic of China and representatives of the Dalai

India and US discuss Indo-Pacific security, ways to bolster defence partnership

NEW DELHI: Lieutenant General Joel B Vowell, Deputy Commanding General, United States Army Pacific (USARPAC) held a meeting with Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Upendra Dwivedi in New Delhi on Thursday, discussing ways to further strengthen the defence partnership between both nations.

The discussions between two officials focused on regional security in the Indo-Pacific, enhancing interoperability through joint military exercises and exploring new avenues of engagement to deepen military-to-military cooperation across various domains.

"Lieutenant General Joel B Vowell, Deputy Commanding General, United States Army Pacific (USARPAC), called on General Upendra Dwivedi, COAS and discussed avenues to further strengthen the India-US defence partnership," Indian Army's Additional Directorate General of Public Information (ADGPI) posted on X.

"The interaction focused on regional security in the Indo-Pa-

cific, enhancing interoperability through joint military exercises and exploring new avenues of engagement to deepen military-to-military cooperation across multiple domains. The meeting reaffirmed the growing strategic convergence and shared commitment of both armies towards addressing emerging security challenges," it added.

Earlier in the day, Lieutenant General Joel B Vowell met Vice Chief of Army Staff Lieutenant General Pushpendra Singh and discussed avenues to further strengthen cooperation between armies of two nations. The talks between two officials focused on regional security dynamics in the Indo-Pacific, enhancing military-to-military engagement and increasing interoperability through joint training and exercises.



India and US discuss Indo-Pacific security, ways to bolster defence partnership

Region Faces Immense Labour Pain, Before Delivering New States

GOPAL MISRA

The erstwhile European colonial powers in their new avatar or incarnation as the symbol of the free world under the US leadership are preparing for further fragmentation of the oil-rich Gulf and West Asia.

Indians are quite aware of the techniques of the US-led West. In 1947, a white mother i.e. the House of Commons had delivered twins in 1947—India and Pakistan, thus fragmenting India. Similarly, in 1979 December, USSR, a formidable super power was destroyed on the basis of religious and ethnic differences.

Earlier, soon after the conclusion of World War-I, nearly a century ago, the epitaph of the Ottoman Empire was scripted. It had ended the centuries old conflict with the Islamists and Christians. However, this time, the issue was not a conflict between the cross and the crescent, but was commercial to enable European powers to access and exploit the prosperous rich regions of South Asia and the far-east.

During the past 100 years, West Asia has become their priority to extract the oil and gas, because its belly has world's best oil and gas reserves. The ongoing conflict cannot be understood without

the detailed understanding of the oil business and related issues

The scholars of strategic affairs in New Delhi, who have been closely watching the political developments and ongoing clashes in the region, are convinced that for the first time during the post World War-II years new states are being carved out in the region. Interestingly, two big powers of Asia.

China's Love for the US

China and India have common concerns on these developments. They are convinced that after redefining boundaries of new sovereign states in West Asia, the US-led West will be focusing on India and China for reasserting their supremacy in the region. If necessary, they would be further fragmenting the region to serve their strategic and financial interests.

It may be recalled that thirty five years ago, the official dissolution of the USSR took place on December 26, 1991 without any violence. It ended with the birth of 15 new sovereign states. However, one of them, Ukraine, is at war with the Russian Federation, because the US wants to erase the Russian influence in the region.

It reminds us about the India-Pakistan wars. The two countries having common eth-



nicity and culture were divided on the basis of religion in 1947. The Islamists were funded for decades to partition India. In recent months, the US is seen promoting radicals in Bangladesh.

It cannot be denied that the process of the weakening of the USSR had begun with the undeclared war between the USSR and China regarding their geographical dispute on an island, Damansky or Zhenbao during March 2-15, 1969. Two years later, US President Richard Nixon's visit to Beijing finally brought China and the US together, thus ending the ideological ties between Moscow and Beijing. Therefore, in this context, it is not difficult to assess the reasons for China's subdued reaction regarding the US-Israeli joint military operations against Iran.

New Boundaries

The process of redefining the existing boundaries of the sov-

erign states by fragmenting them for ushering in new states in the region. The American agenda became much more pronounced on February 22, 2026, when as many as five major Iranian Kurdish groups formed the Coalition of Political Forces of Iranian Kurdistan (CPFIK), specifically aimed at toppling the Iranian regime and achieving self-determination for themselves. Also, the Iranian Kurdish opposition groups based in Iraq have also emerged as a pivotal, perhaps risky, as a key component of the United States' strategy to counter Iran amidst this ongoing direct conflict. In spite of a few attacks by some opposition leaders, the 'wait and watch' policy of the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi should be understood in a larger context. It should include the reasons for the reluctance of New Delhi to condemn the killing of Iran's supreme leader,

Ali Khamenei, and also against the ongoing joint military operations against Iran. India's apprehensions regarding the West's agenda in the region are being closely studied

There are reports, which indicate that the American deep state comprising CIA and its proxies in the region are seeking to utilize these groups to spark an internal uprising against Tehran and, if necessary, launch ground incursions. In spite of bold statements, Russia and China have not offered substantial military support to Tehran. Also, it is to be assessed yet whether Turkey would be aligned with the US in the fragmentation of Iran. Meanwhile, the Iranian Kurdish opposition groups (Peshmerga) are emerging as a key U.S.-backed proxy force, with the CIA reportedly supplying arms to spark an uprising and stretch Iranian military resources.

In spite of the Turkish reluctance, the Trump administration is working to unite Kurdish factions to overthrow the Iranian regime, with plans for "extensive air cover" and intelligence support for Kurdish offensives.

Meanwhile, there are reports that the Taliban Government in Kabul and the Pakistani army may allow autonomy to the Baloch and others self-governance to the

regions being carved out from the control of Iran and their respective territories.

Iraq's Reaction

Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein has stated that "Iraq has become one of the countries directly affected by the ongoing conflict." The country, Hussein said, is facing attacks from "both sides of the conflict". Iran has carried out near-daily attacks on US assets in the energy-rich Gulf country, causing a spike in oil prices and threatening the global economy.

Earlier, in the third week of March, a suicide drone was intercepted near the US Consulate in Erbil, and loud explosions were heard in the area. On the same day, a drone attack in Iraq's semi-autonomous Kurdistan region killed a member of an Iranian Kurdish opposition group, the Komala Party. The party blamed Iran for the attack, which Iran has not denied so far.

Similarly, a drone strike on a key US diplomatic facility in Iraq is suspected to be a local retaliation by pro-Tehran armed groups over the US-Israeli war on Iran.

The report further added that six drones were launched towards the compound in Baghdad, one of which hit the US facility while five were shot down. The security official, according to media reports,

spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss a sensitive security situation, but was not aware of any casualties. Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IGRC), however, has claimed that they successfully hit a US base in Iraq's semi-autonomous Kurdistan region, the headquarters of the invading US army in Al-Harir Air Base. It was targeted with five missiles. Earlier on the same day, the Iran-backed Kataib Imam Ali group, affiliated with the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), claimed that four of its members were killed and 12 injured in air attacks in northern Iraq that it blamed on the US. It stated that its fighters were killed in the "American aggression" against their position in the Dibis district of Kirkuk province.

Iraq's Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani has told US Secretary of State Marco Rubio that his country should not be used as a launchpad for attacks in the Middle East war. But Iraq has already become a proxy battleground between the US and Iran. It has been drawn into the conflict from the outset, with attacks attributed to the US, Iran-backed groups and the IRGC.

Meanwhile, Iran's drone and rocket attacks have hit Baghdad International Airport, which houses a military base and a US diplomatic fa-

ility, as well as oilfields and facilities. Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan region, has also come under multiple attacks.

Interestingly, the recent statement of Babasheikh Hosseini, secretary-general of the Khabat Organisation of Iranian Kurdistan, is being extensively quoted in the media that the US had made contact with the group and it was considering a campaign, ending the threat to the global economy.

Meanwhile, the Erbil Air Base in the Kurdistan region serves as a hub for US and coalition forces conducting training exercises and battle drills. The base supports US military efforts by providing a secure location for training, intelligence sharing, and logistical coordination in northern Iraq, according to a Congressional report. The countries in the region such as Lebanon and Jordan, have also been pulled into the conflict, but Iraq is different because Iranian influence runs far deeper there. Apart from Iraq, the Strait of Hormuz has become an Achilles heel due to its near closure causing adverse impact on the world economy.

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

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Chandigarh becomes fully literate; Literacy rate reaches 99.93%



AAYUSH GOEL
Chandigarh

Punjab Governor and UT Administrator Gulab Chand Kataria on Tuesday announced that Chandigarh has achieved 'fully literate' status, with the Union Territory's literacy rate reaching 99.93%.

The milestone, achieved under the ULLAS (Understanding Life-long Learning for All in Society) programme, was announced at the ULLAS-Nav Saksharon ka Alankaran Samaroh, a felicitation ceremony organised by the Education Department of the Chandigarh Administration to honour newly literate citizens. Kataria said the achievement has helped Chandigarh surpass the 95% literacy benchmark set under the National Education Policy 2020. With this, Chandigarh has become the sixth state or UT in the country and the second Union Territory to achieve full literacy, he said.

According to official data shared at the event, 15,556 citizens participated in the literacy programme and 14,711 successfully cleared the literacy assessment, raising the UT's literacy rate from 93.7% to 99.93%. Highlighting the social impact of the programme, Kataria

said women's literacy in Chandigarh rose from 90.7% to 99.89%, describing it as a significant step towards women's empowerment.

The Governor credited the achievement to the collective efforts of the Chandigarh Administration, the Department of School Education, teachers, volunteers, NGOs and social organisations who worked to identify and educate non-literate citizens. He also noted that the programme enabled participants to acquire both academic and digital literacy. Emphasising that literacy is the foundation of lifelong learning, Kataria said education would play a crucial role in achieving the vision of "Viksit Bharat 2047."

Among those present on the occasion were H. Rajesh Prasad, Chief Secretary of Chandigarh Administration; Prema Puri, Secretary, Education Department, UT Chandigarh; Nitish Singla, Director School Education, UT Chandigarh; and Surender Singh Dahiya, Director, State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT), UT Chandigarh, along with neo-literate citizens and officials of the Chandigarh Administration.

Haryana Women's Commission Orders Badshah's Arrest Over 'Tateeree' Song Row, Seeks Passport Seizure

FW BUREAU
Chandigarh

The Haryana State Commission for Women has ordered the arrest of popular Bollywood rapper and singer Badshah (Aditya Prateek Singh Sisodia) and directed the police to seize his passport after he failed to appear before the Commission in connection with the controversy surrounding his recently released Haryana hip-hop track Tateeree.

The Commission, chaired by Renu Bhatia, had asked the singer to appear in person at the Superintendent of Police's office in Panipat by 3 pm on Friday. However, after Badshah failed to turn up, the Commission directed the Superintendents of Police in Panchkula and Panipat to immediately arrest him and ensure that his passport is confiscated so that he cannot leave the country.

The controversy erupted after the song Tateeree, released on March 1, drew sharp criticism from various quarters in Haryana. The track, sung by Badshah along with vocalist Simran Jaglan and composed by Hiten, was accused of containing obscene and vulgar lyrics and visuals that allegedly objectify women and minors. Several social organisations, khap panchayats and members of the public claimed that certain scenes in the music video, including those involving girls in school uniforms and suggestive gestures in a Haryana Roadways bus setting, were offensive and disrespectful to Haryana's culture and women's dignity.

Taking suo motu cognisance of the controversy after receiving multiple complaints, including



from Savita Arya and Shiv Kumar, the Women's Commission issued a notice to Badshah on March 6 directing him to appear personally before the authorities and explain the allegedly objectionable content.

However, Badshah's legal team, comprising three lawyers, sought more time and requested that he be allowed to appear through video conferencing. They cited his prior professional commitments and security concerns. His lawyers also pointed out that the singer had already issued a public apology video regarding the matter.

"Badshah has already uploaded a video addressing the issue. While mistakes can happen, he is not a criminal and has contributed to promoting Haryana's name," one of the lawyers said. Advocate Akshay Dahiya also stated that professional commitments had prevented the singer from appearing in person.

The Commission, however, rejected the request and insisted that Badshah must appear physically as directed in the summons. Chairperson Renu Bhatia described the song as "uncivilised" and said its content objectifies women.

Meanwhile, police have registered three FIRs against the singer in districts including Panchkula and Jind for allegedly promoting obscene content and hurting cultural sentiments. Panchkula police also managed to get the song and its video removed from YouTube following a government legal complaint.

Infosys' Rs 286 cr project in Mohali will provide direct employment to 2,700 youth: Mann

RAKESH KUMAR PATIAL
Mohali

Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Singh Mann on Thursday asserted that Punjab is witnessing a decisive turnaround in its industrial fortunes, with global investors returning to the state after years of extortion and arm-twisting that had driven industry away before 2022. Speaking after performing the groundbreaking ceremony of Infosys' Rs 286 crore campus in Mohali, the Chief Minister stated the project alone will generate direct employment for 2,700 youth and thousands of indirect jobs.

The Chief Minister highlighted that the Punjab Government has already attracted investment proposals worth more than Rs 1,55,000 crore since March 2022, creating employment opportunities for over 5,44,000 young people. He added that the upcoming Progressive Punjab Investment Summit from March 13 to 15 in Mohali will mark a defining moment for the state's industrial resurgence, with the next three days set to script a new success story for Punjab's economic growth.

Welcoming representatives of the global technology company Infosys, Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Singh Mann thanked them for expressing confidence in the Punjab Government's industry-friendly policies. He also recalled the immense contribution of Infosys founder N. R. Narayana Murthy to the economic progress of the nation.

"Today is a historic day for Punjab, especially for the industrial sector. I warmly welcome the representatives of the global company Infosys



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Today is a historic day for Punjab, especially for the industrial sector. I warmly welcome the representatives of the global company Infosys and thank them for showing confidence in our government's industry-friendly policies."

and thank them for showing confidence in our government's industry-friendly policies. I also recall the immense contribution of the founder of Infosys NR Narayana Murthy towards the economic progress of the nation," said Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Singh Mann.

Describing Narayana Murthy as a legendary figure widely known as the father of the Indian IT sector, CM Bhagwant Singh Mann said, "It is a matter of immense pride and satisfaction that this legendary figure is widely known as the Father of the Indian IT Sector. Today is a red-letter day as the Ground Breaking Ceremony of Infosys'

new project worth Rs 286 crore is being held in Mohali.

This project will provide direct employment to 2,700 youth while thousands of indirect employment opportunities will also be generated."

Punjab Chief Minister stated, "Under this project, an Integrated Campus will be established in the first phase which will include a Software Development Block, Food Court and other facilities.

The campus will have a built-up area of 3,50,000 square feet with a seating capacity of 3,000 people. The Punjab Government will extend fulsome support and cooperation to Infosys for this project, which will encourage more companies to invest in Punjab and create greater employment opportunities for our youth."

Highlighting the global stature of Infosys, CM Bhagwant Singh Mann noted, "Infosys is a globally renowned company in technology and digital services and currently has 3,37,034 employees worldwide. In the financial year 2025-26, the company has recorded revenue of 15.12 billion dollars in the first nine months. Punjab has now emerged on the global industrial map."

Jammu and Kashmir: February 2026 among driest in the UT in over half a century

FW DESK
Jammu

February 2026 was among the driest months on record across Jammu and Kashmir, with several weather stations reporting their lowest rainfall totals for the month in decades. Data from the India Meteorological Department (IMD) shows that the persistent absence of active western disturbances led to an acute precipitation deficit across the region during the month.

In Srinagar, only 5.3 mm of rainfall was recorded in February. With meteorological records for the city dating back to 1901, this was the lowest February rainfall since 1960, when 5.8 mm was measured.

In Jammu, the situation was even more unusual, with no rainfall recorded during the entire month. Historical data dating back to 1925 shows that a completely dry February has occurred only once before — in 1945 — making this only the second zero-rainfall February in 101 years.

Kidney Health for All – Caring for People, Protecting the Planet

PARMINDER KAUR
Panchkula

Every year, millions of people around the world observe World Kidney Day 2026, which falls on March 12, 2026. This global health awareness campaign focuses on the importance of kidney health and aims to reduce the impact of kidney diseases worldwide. The 2026 theme, "Kidney Health for All – Caring for People, Protecting the Planet," highlights the growing connection between environmental sustainability and kidney health. It calls for both better healthcare access and environmentally responsible medical practices.

Understanding the Importance of Kidney Health: Kidneys play a vital role in maintaining overall health. They filter waste and excess fluids from the blood, regulate blood pressure, balance electrolytes, and support red blood cell production. When kidneys become damaged, harmful toxins can build up in the body, leading to serious health conditions such as Chronic Kidney Disease and Kidney Failure.



According to global health estimates, millions of people suffer from kidney diseases, many of whom remain undiagnosed until the condition becomes severe. Early detection and lifestyle changes can significantly reduce the risk and progression of kidney disease.

Theme 2026: Linking Kidney Health and the Environment : The theme "Kidney Health for All – Caring for People, Protecting the Planet" emphasizes that environmental factors can have a direct impact on kidney health. Climate change, pollution, and rising global temperatures can increase the risk of kidney damage.

Exposure to contaminated water, heavy metals, pesticides, and air pollution can affect kidney function. In addition, extreme heat and dehydration — often linked with climate change — may contribute to kidney stress and long-term kidney problems.

The campaign encourages individuals, communities, and healthcare systems to recognize how protecting the planet can also protect human health.

Environmental Impact of Kidney Treatments : Another important focus of World Kidney Day 2026 is the environmental footprint of kidney treatments, particularly Di-

alysis. Dialysis is life-saving treatment for patients with kidney failure, but it requires significant resources.

A single dialysis session can consume large amounts of water, electricity, and medical supplies. Across the world, thousands of dialysis centers operate daily, creating considerable environmental impact. The campaign promotes the development of greener healthcare solutions such as:

- * Water-efficient dialysis systems
- * Renewable energy use in hospitals
- * Reduced medical waste
- * Sustainable healthcare infrastructure

These initiatives aim to ensure that life-saving treatments remain accessible while reducing harm to the environment.

The Need for Early Detection and Equal Access : One of the main goals of World Kidney Day initiatives is to improve early detection of kidney disease. Many people are unaware they have kidney problems until the disease has progressed significantly.

Simple screening tests — such as urine and blood tests — can detect early signs of kidney damage. However, access to these tests remains limited in many low- and middle-income regions. The 2026 campaign therefore calls for equitable access to kidney screening, education, and treatment worldwide.

Raising awareness about risk factors such as diabetes, high blood pressure, obesity, and unhealthy lifestyles is also essential in preventing kidney disease.

What Individuals Can Do
Everyone can play a role in protecting kidney health and the environment.

- * Staying well hydrated
- * Maintaining a healthy diet and lifestyle
- * Managing blood pressure and blood sugar levels
- * Avoiding excessive use of painkillers
- * Reducing exposure to pollutants and toxic chemicals
- * Supporting environmentally responsible healthcare initiatives

By adopting healthier habits and supporting sustainable practices, individuals can contribute to both personal health and environmental protection.

Global Awareness and Community Participation

The campaign encourages individuals and organizations worldwide to participate through awareness events, educational programs, and social media engagement. People are invited to share information and support the cause using the hashtags #WorldKidneyDay and #OurKidneysOurPlanet.

These activities help spread knowledge about kidney disease prevention while encouraging communities to adopt eco-friendly health practices.

Conclusion : World Kidney Day 2026 reminds us that human health and environmental health are closely connected. Protecting the planet also helps protect our kidneys and overall well-being. By promoting early detection, equitable access to treatment, and sustainable healthcare practices, the campaign aims to create a healthier future for people everywhere.

Through awareness, education, and responsible action, individuals and healthcare systems can work together to ensure kidney health for all while caring for the planet we share.

ASMITA League organised in Chandigarh to mark International Women's Day



AAYUSH GOEL
Chandigarh

The ASMITA League was organised at the Sports Complex in Sector 46 here on Saturday to mark International Women's Day, witnessing enthusiastic participation from girls and women across different age groups.

The event was organised by MY Bharat Chandigarh and the Sports Authority of India in collaboration with the Sports Department of the Chandigarh Administration. Held under the ASMITA

courage wider participation and create a festive sporting environment.

Participants ranging from five-year-old girls to women up to 60 years of age took part in the events, reflecting the inclusive spirit of the initiative and the growing interest among women and girls in sports and fitness.

The event was attended by Suman Sharma, Deputy Mayor of Chandigarh, Mahinder Singh, Joint Director Sports, Chandigarh Administration, and Vinay Kumar, District Youth Officer, MY Bharat Chandigarh, who encouraged the participants and appreciated the efforts being made to promote sports among women and girls.

Winners of the various events were awarded medals and certificates in recognition of their performance.

Officials said the ASMITA League served as a platform to celebrate women's empowerment through sports while fostering a culture of fitness, confidence and community participation among women and girls in Chandigarh.



Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann and Aam Aadmi Party national convener Arvind Kejriwal, along with their wives, pay obeisance at Sri Darbar Sahib on Thursday, March 12, 2026. PHOTO-PRABHJOT SINGH GILL

Haryana Govt to Provide Free Pilgrimage for Senior Citizens Via Train

MoU Signed Between Haryana Government and Railways

GULSHAN KUMAR
Chandigarh

Under the Mukhyamantri Teerth Yatra Yojana, the Haryana Government will now facilitate free train travel for eligible elderly devotees to visit various pilgrimage sites. For this purpose, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) has been signed between the Haryana Government and IRCTC (Indian Railway Catering and Tourism Corporation).

On behalf of the Haryana

Government, Director General of Information, Public Relations and Languages Department, K. Makarand Pandurang, and on behalf of IRCTC, Circle Regional Manager (CRM) Harjot Singh Sandhu signed the MoU.

Director General K. Makarand Pandurang stated that the Haryana Government launched the Mukhyamantri Teerth Yatra Yojana to facilitate free visits for eligible elderly devotees of the state to various religious places. Under this scheme, thousands of eligible senior citizens from different districts have already



T20 World Cup: India Make History by Clinching Third Title after Beating New Zealand in Final | Photo: Social Media

signed between the Haryana Government and IRCTC. On this occasion, Harsh Deep and Nitin Sharma from the Railways and Additional Director of the Information, Public Relations and Languages Department, Sh. Ranbir Singh Sangwan, along with other officials, were also present.

Pilgrimage Destinations -Pandurang informed that under the agreement with IRCTC, devotees from Haryana will be taken to several major pilgrimage destinations including Ayodhya, Varanasi, Patna Sahib, Nanded Sahib, Pushkar Ji, Vaishno Devi, Shirdi, and Shani

Shingnapur. Additional pilgrimage sites may also be included in the future as required.

Free Food and Accommodation Arrangements

He further informed that each train will consist of 11 coaches, out of which 10 coaches will be reserved for devotees and one coach will be for the serving staff. During the journey, arrangements for food and beverages, transportation from the nearest railway station to the pilgrimage sites, and accommodation will also be provided free of cost by the Haryana Government.