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Yet another fire accident in Hyderabad, fire in ladies hostel in Alwal

Hyderabad: At least 10 women were hospitalized when they complained of uneasiness when fire broke out in a ladies hostel located on the fourth floor of a building at Alwal on Saturday night.

The incident happened when the air conditioner in the hostel caught fire leading to a lot of smoke and subsequently fire broke out. On noticing it the hostel inmates rushed out. The fire department personnel rushed to the spot and doused the fire.

CM congratulates Padma awardees from Telugu states

Hyderabad: Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy congratulated the Padma Bhushan and Padma Shri award winners from Telangana and Andhra Pradesh.

The Chief Minister expressed delight that State Government Advisor and renowned oncologist Nori Dattatreyyudu was awarded Padma Bhushan. He commended the Padma awardees for their dedication and service to society in the fields of service, arts, and other sectors.



Dharmendra, Achuthanandan, Rohit Sharma, Savita Punia among 131 Padma awardees

New Delhi, Jan 25

On Republic Day eve, the government announced 131 Padma awards for the year 2026, including five Padma Vibhushan, 13 Padma Bhushan and 113 Padma Shri which include two cases in which the award for two individuals is counted as one, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) said.

Related news: Manipur's 100-year-old dance maestro, litter collector from Chandigarh among 45 awarded Padma Shri in 'unsung heroes' category

Chandigarh's 'Broom Warrior' ex-IPS Inderjit Sidhu chosen for Padma

Shri at 88

Former Kerala Chief Minister and veteran communist leader V. S. Achuthanandan and actor Dharmendra have been awarded the second-highest civilian honour, Padma Vibhushan, posthumously for 2026, a government statement said Sunday.

Former Supreme Court judge KT Thomas for public affairs, Hindustani Classical musician and violinist N Rajam in Art, eminent Malayalam journalist P Narayanan in literature and education have been awarded Padma Vibhushan, it said.

Playback singer Alka Yagnik, former Uttarakhand chief minister Bhagat Singh Koshyari, actor Mammootty and banker Uday Kotak are among those awarded Padma Bhushan, the Home Ministry said.

Ad guru Piyush Pandey, JMM founder Shibu Soren and BJP leader VK Malhotra have been awarded Padma Bhushan, while actor and comedian Satish Shah has been awarded Padma Shri, posthumously, it said.

Ninety awardees are women and the list includes six persons from the category of foreigners, NRI,

PIO and OCI, and 16 posthumous awardees, it said.

Tennis legend Vijay Amritraj has been awarded Padma Bhushan; cricketer Rohit Sharma, women's cricket captain Harmanpreet Kaur and hockey player Savita Punia have been awarded Padma Shri, the statement said.

Former JNU VC M Jagadeesh Kumar, former Prasar Bharti CEO Shashi Shekhar Vempati and actors R Madhavan and Prosenjit Chatterjee are also among those awarded Padma Shri, the ministry said.

PM congratulates Padma awardees

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday congratulated all the Padma awardees for their contribution to diverse fields.

"Congratulations to all the Padma Awardees for their outstanding contributions to our nation. Their excellence, dedication and service across diverse fields enrich the fabric of our society," the prime minister said in a post on X.

He said the honour reflects the spirit of commitment and excellence that continues to inspire generations.

India messenger of peace in conflict ridden world: President Murmu in R-Day Address

New Delhi, Jan 25

Amidst geopolitical tensions escalating across multiple continents, President Droupadi Murmu on Sunday said India is spreading the message of peace in the world which is crucial to secure the future of humanity. In her address to the nation on the eve of 77th Republic Day, she spoke about various issues, including Operation Sindoor and women empowerment, and also touched upon the topics of Vande Mataram and growing economy of the country.

President Murmu outlined India's position as a "messenger" of peace while reinforcing ancient civilisational commitment to universal harmony.

"In our tradition, we have been offering prayers for peace to prevail in the entire universe. The future of humanity can remain secure only if there is peace in the whole world.

"In an atmosphere marked by conflicts in many parts of the world, India is spreading the message of peace," she said.

During her speech, the President also underscored a firm commitment to national security by highlighting the recent success of Operation Sindoor, a precision strike that dismantled terror infrastructure across the border.

"Last year, our country launched precision strikes against terror infrastructure...terror centres were destroyed, and many terrorists met their end," she said, highlighting country's "self-reliance" in the field of defence that powered the historic suc-

cess of Operation Sindoor. Reflecting on the strength of the Armed Forces, the President recalled personal visits to the Siachen Base Camp and sorties in the Sukhoi, Rafale, and the submarine INS Vaghsheer.

"Based on the strength of the Army, Air Force, and Navy, people have complete trust in our defence preparedness," she said, linking the military readiness to India's ability to advocate for peace from a position of strength.

In her address, President Murmu hailed the rise of "nari shakti" (women power) as the cornerstone of India's journey toward becoming a developed nation by 2047. She emphasised that the "active and empowered participation of women is extremely important for the development of the country".

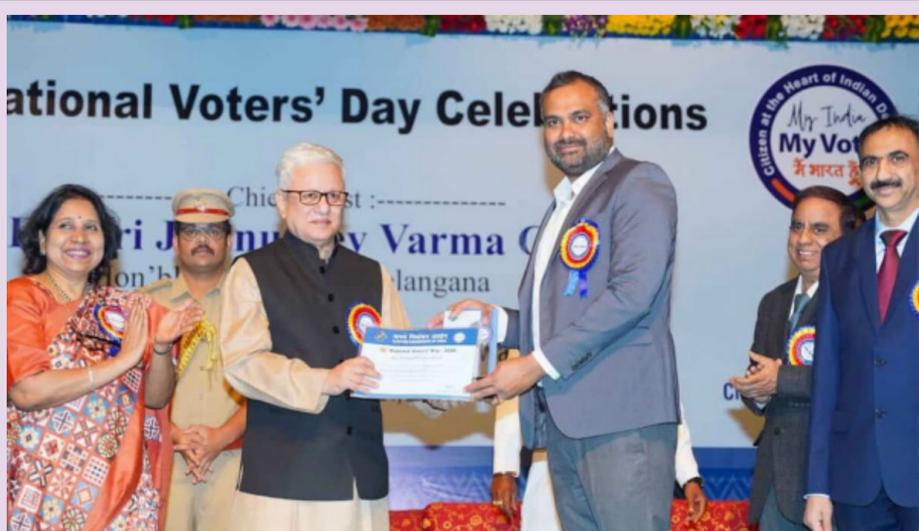
From the depths of rural self-help groups to the frontiers of space and defence, the story of modern India is increasingly being written by its daughters, she said.

The President noted that over 10 crore women associated with self-help groups are currently redefining the grassroots economy.



She said that women now make up nearly 46 per cent of representatives in Panchayati Raj institutions and the Nari Shakti Vandana Adhinyam is set to take political empowerment to "unprecedented heights", ensuring women-led development remains a national priority. The past year served as a "golden chapter" for Indian women in the global arena, the President said, as she took special pride in the dominance of India's daughters in sports, specifically citing the historic win at the ICC Women's Cricket World Cup and victory in the Blind Women's T20 World Cup. President Murmu highlighted that women are making significant marks in the Armed Forces, space research, and entrepreneurship, proving that no field remains a "traditional stereotype" for the women in the country.

The 'Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao' campaign was credited with encouraging girls' education across the country, she said. "With increasing contribution by women, our country will set an example of an inclusive Republic based on gender equality," the President remarked, signalling that the future of Viksit Bharat is inseparable from the empowerment of its female citizens.



Telangana Governor calls upon voters to exercise right on National Voters' Day

Hyderabad, Jan 25

Telangana Governor Jishnu Dev Varma on Sunday, January 25, called upon citizens to actively and responsibly exercise their right to vote, asserting that democratic institutions remain strong only when voters participate with awareness and integrity.

Addressing the state-level celebrations of the 16th National Voters' Day, the Governor said the theme "My India, My Vote" reflected the foundational principle that citizens are at the heart of Indian democracy.

National Voters' Day is observed every year on January 25 to commemorate the establishment of the Election Commission of India (ECI).

Referring to Article 324 of the Constitution, the Governor said the independence and impartiality of the ECI were central to ensuring free and fair elections in a diverse and populous nation.

Quoting BR Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi, he emphasised that political democracy could endure only when supported by social democracy and ethical participation by voters.

Governor Varma appreciated Telangana's election administration for promoting inclusiveness and transparency through initiatives such as assured minimum facilities at polling stations, home voting for eligible voters and the use of modern technology.

Nampally fire: Police arrest owner of furniture shop

Hyderabad: Satish Batcha, owner of Batcha Furniture shop in Nampally, which was gutted in a fire on Saturday, January 24, resulting in five deaths, has been arrested by Hyderabad police.

Assistant Commissioner of Police Praveen Kumar said the cause of the fire was likely due to a short circuit; however, Telangana Fire, Disaster Response,



Emergency and Civil Defence Department Director General Vikram Singh Mann told PTI that the cellar, in which the fire broke out, was being used to store furniture, chemicals, plastics, rexine, cloth and foam mattresses.

Families were also provided accommodation in the cellars, which were meant only for parking.

The victims have been identified as two men, in their 30s, who were workers in the building, two children, aged seven and 11, sons of a security guard of the building, whose family was residing in the basement and a 60-year-old woman who worked as a sweeper-cum-security woman and stayed in another room in the basement.

The children were alone in their room when the

fire broke out, as their father, the security guard, and his wife had gone out for work.

The two workers had rushed inside to save the children and the woman, but as the fire intensified, they were unable to make it out.

Officials were able to recover the bodies after rescue operations of over 20 hours, as thick smoke made it difficult to carry out the operation. Moreover, the approach to the basement was totally blocked due to the dumping of furniture and related raw materials, which made it difficult for rescue personnel to gain access, officials said.

Fire tenders, besides a skylift and a firefighting robot were also used during the rescue operations.

Expressing grief over the deaths, Telangana Revenue Minister P Srinivas Reddy announced an ex gratia of Rs 5 lakh to the kin of each of the deceased.

Indian Chronicle

English Daily

On Governors, their actions

The actions of Tamil Nadu Governor R.N. Ravi and his Kerala counterpart Rajendra Vishwanath Arlekar during their customary Legislative Assembly addresses on January 20 came as no surprise to those who have followed the conduct of Governors in non BJP-ruled States. In Chennai, Mr. Ravi declined to read the speech, which, his office said, had "unsubstantiated claims and misleading statements" to justify his walk out. In the past three years, the Governor has either digressed from the prepared speech or refused to read it out before walking out. In Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan corrected the policy address made by the Governor, who, according to Mr. Vijayan, had skipped portions, as cleared by the Cabinet, and made additions. As long-serving Governors, Mr. Ravi and Mr. Arlekar should be aware that it is a time-honoured constitutional convention for a Governor to read out the exact text of the speech or special address which informs the State of the policies of an elected government. There has never been an incident of the British monarch departing from the official speech; and the Indian system is based on the Westminster model of parliamentary democracy. Yet, they have chosen to violate the convention even though they have no option but to function as "mouthpieces", to quote former President R. Venkataraman, of the State governments. Mr. Ravi's penchant is to court controversies but Mr. Arlekar did not repeat what he did last year, when he stuck to the script, striking an officially punctilious tone.

Apparently tired of Mr. Ravi's repeated violations of the convention, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin has favoured a constitutional amendment to do away with the practice of commencing the first Assembly session of the year with the Governor's address. Articles 87 and 176 of the Constitution require the President and Governors to make special addresses to Parliament and State legislatures, in the new year. About 35 years ago, President Venkataraman had repeatedly recommended to Prime Ministers Rajiv Gandhi and Chandra Shekhar that the practice be deleted through an amendment as he called it a "British anachronism" and a "meaningless formality". This suggestion should be viewed in line with the thinking of the regime at the Centre, which seems to have taken upon itself the task of repealing "outdated colonial laws". The language of the two Articles was borrowed from the rules of the House of Commons. Nothing would be lost if the Articles are scrapped, as the President and the Governors still retain their right to address the legislature under Articles 86 and 175. Importantly, Governors should not assume powers and functions that are not envisaged under the Constitution and should set an example of respecting the letter and spirit of the Constitution.

CPI(M) launches long march in Palghar thousands of participants over tribal and farmer demands



"The marchers will stage indefinite dharna at the Palghar Collectorate until the government accepts our burning and long pending demands in writing along with a definite time bound assurance for their implementation," Communist Party of India Marxist leader Ashok Dhawale who is also national president of the All India Kisan Sabha said.

The Communist Party of India Marxist has undertaken a long march involving thousands of tribals and farmers from all tehsils of Palghar district to press for what it described as several burning and long pending demands including full implementation of the Forest Rights Act and the Panchayats Extension to Scheduled Areas Act PESA. The march which began from Charoti in Dahanu tehsil on Monday is on its way to the Palghar district collectorate where it will reach today. "The marchers will stage indefinite dharna at the Palghar Collectorate until the government accepts our burning and long pending demands in writing along with a definite time bound assurance for their implementation," Communist Party of India Marxist leader Ashok Dhawale who is also national president of the All India Kisan Sabha said. According to the CPI(M) the demands include vesting of all temple inam and government land in the name of actual tillers restoration and strengthening of MGNREGA cancellation of the smart meter scheme repeal of the four Labour Codes and scrapping of the proposed Wadhwan and Murbe port projects. The party said the participants in the march include farmers, agricultural workers, tribals, women and students from across Palghar district. Organisations participating in the march include All India Kisan Sabha Centre of Indian Trade Unions All India Democratic Women's Association Democratic Youth Federation of India Students' Federation of India and Adivasi Adhikar Rashtriya Manch. The CPI(M) said the mobilisation reflects growing discontent among tribal and rural communities over land rights employment and large infrastructure projects in the district.

How a \$1,000 coupon contest launched Shoba Narayan's writing career



It is rare for a writer from Bengaluru not to find at least a passing opportunity to mention the city in their work. Shoba Narayan has gone well beyond this, though. Many of her books are set in Bengaluru, including *The Milk Lady of Bangalore*, *Namma Bangalore*, and *Namma Bangalore 2.0*. With regard to her relationship with this city that has made its way into her books, Narayan says, "My connection to the city is one of an immigrant. I grew up in Chennai but lived in Bangalore for 20 years and raised my children here... I think every city you live in influences your work. The question is to what extent."

She adds, "If I had lived in another city like Delhi or Calcutta, would I have written about the city, definitely. Would I have written entire books? I am not so sure. I did not bargain for the fact that Bengaluru would influence me so much." Narayan remembers having a writing habit since childhood, which evolved into pitching and writing several articles for *The Indian Express* during the 1980s while she was a college student. Like many writers, Narayan ad-

heres to certain habits in her writing, such as noting down interesting ideas in a diary and building on them when inspiration strikes, then converting them into polished articles when the time comes.

An element that has always been very strong in her books is culture and food, rooted in her time in New York as a postgraduate student in journalism at Columbia University. Recalling her very first book, *Monsoon Diary*, she says, "The *New York Times* had announced a competition where you had to write 150 words about food, and the winner would get 1,000 dollars worth of restaurant coupons. I was a poor young student at the time, and the idea was very alluring. To my delight, I won." That 150-word essay was the beginning of what would become *Monsoon Diary*, which wound up being nominated for the prestigious James Beard Award. Cuisine as a topic has also made it into all her works on Bengaluru to some extent, as well as being a central theme in *Food and Faith*, which features Narayan writing about various religious centres and places of worship from different faiths across the country, and the food that is served there, from temple prasadam to the food at langars and dargahs. Currently, she is also researching to write a book on the history of food in Bengaluru, tracing it back to the reign of the city's founder, Kempe Gowda. On the topic of new writers tackling the topic of the city, Narayan says, "It is wonderful that Bangalore has become a city where a number of people are writing about it. There is a flowering of talent. I would tell them to mix their passion with the geography and history of Bangalore. If your passion is acting, look into the Kannada films and theatres... It is a triangle of interests: passion, location and history."

Mutual fund industry seeks lower entry value for ELSS, LTCG benefit for debt schemes



Ahead of the Union Budget 2026-27, the Association of Mutual Funds in India (AMFI) on Tuesday has recommended 27 proposals, including restoration of long-term indexation benefit on debt schemes, separate deduction for investment in Equity Linked Savings Scheme (ELSS) under new tax regime and parity in tax treatment. In its proposals for Union Budget 2026-27, the mutual fund body has suggested an increase in threshold limit of withholding tax (TDS) on income distribution by mutual fund scheme, restoration of earlier tax rates on capital gains and removal of Securities Transaction Tax (STT) on purchase or sale transactions undertaken in financial markets including units of mutual fund.

As part of its suggestions related to fixed income, the industry body urged to restore the long-term indexation benefit for debt schemes of mutual funds which was withdrawn in Budget 2024. It said that post Finance Act 2023, most debt MF gains are taxed at slab rates regardless of holding period basis section 50AA of the Income-tax Act, 1961. This has led to sharp reduction of net inflows into the debt mutual funds over the last three years.

"Restore long-term capital gains (LTCG) with indexation for debt mutual funds held over 36 months by amending Sections 2, 48, 50AA and 112 of the Act (Section 2, 72, 76 and 197 of the Bill)," the industry body said in its proposal. It recommended that the definition of 'Equity Oriented Funds' be revised to include investment in Fund of Funds schemes which invests a minimum of 90 per cent of the corpus in units of equity oriented mutual fund schemes, which in turn invest minimum 65 per cent in equity shares of domestic companies listed on a recognised stock exchange. AMFI said it has suggested that the LTCG on listed equity shares or units of equity-oriented fund schemes held for more than one year and up to three years should be subjected to LTCG tax of 12.5 per cent (plus applicable surcharge and cess) on the capital gains exceeding Rs 2 lakh in a financial year. For schemes held more than three years, it has recommended exemption from capital gains tax years. The industry body has sought an amendment to ELSS Rule 3A so as to permit any amount to be invested in the scheme, instead of in multiples of Rs 500. "Provide a separate deduction (on the lines of Section 80CCD(1B) of the Act (Section 124 of the Bill)) exclusively for ELSS investments under the new tax regime, with a notified cap," the mutual fund body proposed. It has sought parity in tax treatment in respect of intra-scheme switching of units under mutual fund schemes. "It is proposed that intra-scheme switches, i.e., switching of investment within the same mutual fund scheme is not regarded as a 'transfer' under section 47 of the Act (Section 70 of the Bill) and the same should be exempt from payment of capital gains tax," AMFI said in its proposal. In order to increase retail participation in the corporate bond market, AMFI has proposed to introduce Debt Linked Savings Scheme (DLSS).

Do jails spend Rs 85 for 3 meals for prisoners?: Karnataka HC directs state government to provide information

The Karnataka High Court Tuesday asked the state government to reply by Thursday on whether the daily expense incurred in providing food to each under-trial prisoner is Rs 85. Justice M Nagaprasanna directed the state government to produce records of the amounts spent on food for prisoners, while emphasising that nutritious food be provided to every prisoner. Justice Nagaprasanna called for the details after the counsel appearing for Pavitra Gowda, Nagaraju R, and Lakshman M, who are co-accused in the Renukaswamy murder case along with actor Darshan, pointed out to the court that the quality of food served to prisoner was not good, because of which they pleaded before the trial court to grant them the facility of home-cooked food.

"Jail authorities are spending only Rs 85 per prisoner on breakfast, lunch, and dinner. There is no quality food served," the counsel said, and informed the court that someone had obtained the said data under the Right to Information Act, and he can place it on record. Arguing against the Karnataka Government's petition filed challenging the trial court orders directing the prison authorities to provide them home-cooked food once a week, the counsel said, "The Supreme Court in its order, while cancelling bail to actor Darshan and other accused, had said no special treatment be given to the accused, but we are only requesting for basic minimum treatment." "The very same order is passed against another accused in another case, and the jail authorities have not challenged it. I will place on record the order of the court on the next date of hearing. It is only when we filed a contempt petition before the trial court that the court order directing the prison authorities to provide us home-cooked food was not followed; they (state government) approached this court." He also claimed that an elected representative, who is in jail, has been provided a separate cook by the court, and that order is also not challenged by the prosecution. Additional State Public Prosecutor B N Jagadeesha refuted the submission and stated that, to date, no such complaint has been filed by any of the accused and asked the counsel to place on record material to substantiate his claims. Jagadeesha also informed the court that, according to the FSSAI report, the food served in prison has been rated four stars for nutrition. While posting the matter for further hearing Thursday, Justice Nagaprasanna said orally, "You (the counsel for the accused) produce every detail, we will answer everything."

In the meantime, the court issued an interim order staying the trial court's order. While cancelling bail granted to the



accused in the present case, the Supreme Court warned of suspending the jail superintendent and prison officials, if special or five-star treatment was given to the accused in the Renukaswamy murder case. Referring to the same order, Justice Nagaprasanna said, "The concerned court in a complete or blatant ignorance of the Supreme Court order in the very cases of Darshan and other accused,

ELCITA is a public authority and must provide information under RTI: Karnataka Information Commission

The Karnataka Information Commission has held that the Electronics City Industrial Township Authority (ELCITA) is a public authority under the Right to Information (RTI) Act 2005, mandating it to disclose information and meet statutory transparency obligations. In an order dated January 7, State Information Commissioner Rudranna Harthikote said that if information was not shared within 10 days of the order, the commission would take stern action, including the imposition of penalties.

The ruling came on an appeal filed by Ganesh Kumar M, who had requested detailed information in February 2025 concerning works executed by the authority, tender documents, bidder details, and payment records related to tendering processes. ELCITA is the first industrial township area of Karnataka and houses many software and other corporate companies. It is a public-private, self-sustained township that also manages town planning, roads, water supply, and other basic facilities. ELCITA challenged Ganesh's con-

Punjab Cabinet approves Rs 68.50 per quintal sugarcane subsidy to farmers, collaboration with Japan for crop diversification



The Punjab Cabinet Tuesday approved a direct subsidy of Rs 68.50 per quintal, out of the fixed state-agreed price (SAP) for sugarcane growers, making it the state offering the highest sugarcane price in the country. Finance Minister Harpal Cheema, while briefing the media about the decision, said the AAP government's move would go a long way in encouraging diversification. He stated that the subsidy of Rs 68.50 per quintal from the fixed SAP will be paid directly to sugarcane farmers on behalf of private sugar mills for the 2025-26 crushing season.

Punjab already offers the highest SAP for sugarcane in the country at Rs 416 per quintal, up from Rs 401 the previous year. This ensures that Punjab's cane growers remain the best compensated in the country, and the present decision will further strengthen income security for farmers, a government statement said. To promote crop diversification, the Cabinet also approved collaboration with the Japan International Cooperation Agency for introducing Japanese technology to strengthen Punjab's horticulture sector. The collaboration will focus on horticulture development, cold chain infrastructure, water management, and skill development to double horticulture's share in Punjab's economy. As part of the Punjab government's sustained focus on public health and wellness, the Cabinet also approved the creation of 1,000 additional posts of yoga trainers under the 'CM di Yogshala' project. It was stated that a budgetary provision of Rs 35 crore will be made for this initiative during the financial year 2026-27, aimed at promoting a healthy and fit Punjab.

Healthcare measures In another decision to strengthen healthcare services, the Cabinet approved the complete transfer of civil hospitals at village Badal in Muktsar district, Khadoor Sahib in Tarn Taran district, community health centre Jalalabad, and the tertiary care Centre in Fazilka district to Baba Farid University of Health Sciences (BFUHS), Faridkot. The transfer will enable residents of these areas to access improved treatment and diagnostic services, leveraging the university's advanced medical infrastructure and expertise. Cheema said earlier that these were under government control.

The Cabinet also accorded approval for the formulation and notification of directives under Section 4 of the Punjab Management and Transfer Municipal Act, 2020, to facilitate the transfer of municipal properties belonging to Punjab government departments, boards, corporations, and other public sector undertakings for public purposes. This decision is expected to give fresh momentum to development projects across the state, ensure uniformity in land allocation, and prevent misuse of public land. A committee headed by the Deputy Commissioner of the district concerned will recommend the allotment process, subject to approval by the state government. Land resources utilisation To accelerate development by optimising the utilisation of land resources, the Cabinet approved a policy for the transfer, by sale or exchange, of abandoned and active paths (rastas) or water courses (khals) located within all government-licensed projects within municipal limits. This policy aims to unlock stalled development potential and improve urban planning outcomes.

The Cabinet also approved the extension of the time period for PAPRA (Punjab Affordable Property Registration Act) licensed projects by one year, from January 1 to December 31. The extension will be granted at an extension fee of Rs 25,000 per acre per year, for a maximum period of up to three years, and will be allowed by the concerned competent authorities on the same terms and conditions applicable earlier. Earlier, it was Rs 10,000 per year and was renewed each year. In another decision relating to urban development, the Cabinet approved the formula for calculating charges for additional floor area ratio (FAR) for properties proposed for auction from January 2026 onwards. It also approved amendments to Para 10.2 of the e-auction Policy 2025, notified on February 20, 2025, making the revised provisions applicable to all categories of properties to be auctioned by development authorities in future. The Cabinet further approved amendments to the Punjab Civil Services (General and Common Conditions of Service) Rules, 1994, by inserting Rule 6A. The amendment stipulates that the cut-off date for determining eligibility criteria, including minimum educational and other qualifications, shall be the last date for submission of application forms, unless specifically provided otherwise in the relevant service rules.

tion, stating that it was not a public authority and cited Supreme Court and high court judgments on cooperative societies. It argued it was neither substantially financed nor controlled by the Government, claiming that mere regulatory or supervisory oversight would not bring it within the RTI Act's scope. The commission rejected these arguments and observed that Electronics City was developed by the Karnataka Government through KEONICS in 1970 and that ELCITA is a statutory body constituted under Section 364 A of the Karnataka Municipalities Act 1964 via a 2013 government notification. The commission emphasised that ELCITA performs essential civic functions, including providing roads, water supply, sanitation, and critically, collecting property tax—a core governmental function. The panel further noted that ELCITA collects taxes following government guidelines and transfers 30 per cent of revenue to three gram panchayats within its jurisdiction. Government officials from various departments serve on ELCITA's board, and the authority operates under state legislative frameworks.

Heavy lifting for first NEP college batch, new school textbooks: Things to look forward to in 2026



The upcoming year will see significant changes in the education sector in Maharashtra. The first batch of students studying under the New Education Policy structure in autonomous colleges under the Savitribai Phule Pune University (SPPU) will complete their third-year in the academic year 2025-26, with options to exit or to continue for a fourth year of research. In school education, the Maharashtra State Board is also scheduled to introduce new textbooks based on the NCERT curriculum for four school grades for the 2026-27 academic year. If these changes are to be rolled out as per schedule, the next few months will call for some heavy lifting.

Autonomous colleges awaiting guidelines for 4th year Under the NEP structure, three-year bachelor degree students are provided with an option to continue for a fourth year. The NEP structure was first implemented in autonomous colleges under SPPU in 2022 and a year later, in affiliated colleges. With just a few months remaining for the 2025-26 academic year, autonomous colleges in Pune are still awaiting guidelines regarding implementation of the fourth-year programme for students.

Professor Avinash Moharil, principal of the autonomous Sir Parashurambhau College (S.P. College), told The Indian Express that his institute is ready with the syllabus for many courses for the fourth year. However, guidelines from the government and SPPU about whether the course will be offered to the granted section of students and appointment of teachers for the same are still not clear. "One thing is quite clear that only the departments having a post-graduate department will offer this kind of course. We now need clarity from the government whether the course is to be offered to the granted section. Then will it be considered as a course in natural growth? Because in the government resolution itself is written that it will not be considered as a granted course or additional workload. We still need to appoint teachers for it. So whether we are going to at least get clockhour bases (CBH) teachers as we get for the graduate courses is yet to be clarified," said professor Moharil.

Inside 87-year-old Karfule, Mumbai's last Art Deco petrol pump in Ballard Estate



Walk through Ballard Estate in South Bombay, and it feels as if time has stopped. The quiet streets lined with stately buildings, the air of stillness — everything seems to belong to another era. Among its stone facades stands Karfule, Mumbai's last surviving Art Deco petrol pump, where you can fuel your car and, perhaps, your curiosity. Built in 1938, Karfule — a blend of car and fuel — is more than just a service station. It's a slice of Mumbai's architectural and cultural heritage, representing the city's Art Deco movement, which marks its centenary this year with exhibitions, heritage walks, and talks under the banner Art Deco Alive!

A stone's throw from the Enforcement Directorate office, the station has been run by three generations of the Sequeira family. Its founder, Gabriel Sequeira, a Goan who migrated to Bombay in the 1920s, began modestly with a kerbside petrol kiosk where he would manually fill cars with fuel. By 1932, he had partnered with Burmah Shell to open his first pump in Ballard Estate. A few years later, when American company Caltex entered India, he joined hands with them. "But he wasn't allowed to operate two stations for competing companies," recalled his son Kevin Sequeira, now 75. "So he sold his stake in the first and launched Karfule with Caltex on October 3, 1938, at 3 Sprot Road." Karfule, Art Deco petrol pump, Ballard Estate, Daniel (left) and his father Kevin at the 'Karfule' petrol pump in Mumbai. (Express Photo by Amit Chakravarty) The building, constructed in concrete and faced with stone to match the surrounding Edwardian neoclassical structures, was designed by Gajanan B. Mhatre (GB Mhatre) — one of Mumbai's most prolific Art Deco architects, known for designing Empress Court at Oval Maidan and residential landmarks such as Marble Arch, Shangri-La and Normandie at Cumballa Hill. The central kiosk, with its umbrella-like canopy and tower, is the heart of Karfule's design. The large octagonal canopy is supported by inverted beams in reinforced concrete, while the tower above it — distinctly Deco

The professor explained that feedback from students and how many of them want to opt for the fourth year course is also very important. "Right now, students are cautiously taking decisions or they are a little confused about the whole scenario. But in my opinion, everything will probably get settled in a month." Making a similar point, a student studying at an autonomous school, said, "We have no clarity from our professors at this point as they are themselves confused. I will be graduating very soon and I am not able to make a decision about whether to opt for the fourth year or not." Pro Vice Chancellor of SPPU Parag Kalkar told The Indian Express, "We have our guidelines ready and we just have to pass them in the academic council. Some guidelines will be given by the state government. They have a MahaSARC committee led by the Vice Chancellors. Their guidelines are also ready and once they will come, we will release our guidelines within a week. The government guidelines have to come first as we have to make sure both the guidelines don't clash and that our guidelines cover the aspects that are remaining." The release of the guidelines will happen in a month's time at most, said Kalkar, adding that any colleges reaching out with queries have already been given clarity. Kalkar also shared a five-point academic vision for SPPU for the next academic year — pioneering NEP 2020 implementation by transitioning to a fully multidisciplinary framework, digital governance excellence by 100 per cent paperless administration, democratic access to education by scaling the Centre for Distance and Online Education (CDOE), bridging the employability gap by integrating Apprenticeship Embedded Degree Programmes (AEDP), and innovation-led research.

The Maharashtra state board has planned a shift to a new curriculum based on NCERT textbooks till 2029. In the coming academic year, the new syllabus will be implemented for Classes 2, 3, 4 and 6. Milind Naik, a member of the Maharashtra NEP steering committee and principal of Jnana Prabodhini School, told The Indian Express that the course material for the first version of textbooks for Classes 2, 3 and 6 are ready with only the designing, adding of pictures, and other such details remaining, while the work on the Class 4 textbook is ongoing. These textbooks have been prepared on the draft curriculum released by the State Council of Educational Research and Training. The final curriculum with public feedback incorporated is yet to be released. Any changes in the draft curriculum will require a change in the textbooks prepared as well, confirmed Naik. He said the books for the Marathi medium should be ready in time but other mediums might take time. Naik added that a change in examination pattern is also expected from the next year. "Competency-based examination should start from the next year. As per NEP, the questions asked in the question paper should not be based on memory. The question should not be like who and when, instead they should be based on how and why. Because the books are designed on similar principles."

— features an aerodynamic spine with a circular disc that once functioned as a clock. "The building had always been there, but we didn't know about its architectural significance until 2015," said Daniel Sequeira, Gabriel's grandson. "Someone mentioned that it had Art Deco elements and that's when I started researching and recognised them." Inside the kiosk, the original star-shaped terrazzo flooring still gleams, showing little sign of wear.

The kiosk, octagonal in plan, allows a 360-degree view of the station through its seven windows. Its lower walls are clad in red marble and black kadappa stone, and the exterior bears Deco lettering and grilles modelled after car headlamps and radiator grilles from the era. Horizontal red bands run along the service bays, completing the design's streamlined aesthetic. When Karfule turned 80 in 2018, Daniel marked the milestone with an exhibition on the premises, displaying memorabilia collected over eight decades. Among the treasures were original invoices and a hand-rendered drawing of the station's elevation, showing the central kiosk ringed by driveways and garages. Also preserved were a payment certificate showing a construction cost of Rs 34,000, a Rs 5,000 receipt from Simplex Concrete Works & Construction Co., and photographs from the inaugural day, when His Grace Dr Thomas D Roberts, Bishop of Bombay, blessed the station. Guests were served small cakes, cheese straws, and sausage rolls, a menu Daniel recreated for the 80th anniversary high tea. "The exhibition was so well received that it became a permanent fixture," he said, adding, "Architecture students and heritage enthusiasts often visit, and we guide them through the display." Daniel also conducts walks around Ballard Estate, narrating stories of its Art Deco past and leading visitors to Karfule, a living piece of that history. Over decades, the Sequeiras have worked to maintain Karfule's architectural character with minimal alterations. The edges of the canopy, once painted red, now wear HPC's blue branding, but the original Deco lettering survives, as does one metal grille from the 1930s. "The others were stolen during the '70s and '80s, when Ballard Estate saw frequent petty thefts," shared Kevin. In 1995, when HP insisted that the facade be painted white, Kevin resisted, and the company stopped their petrol supply and they had to cave in. When they repainted the structure for the 80th anniversary, they retained the white but accenting it with red and dark blue, resulting in a facade that nods to classic Deco palettes. Inside, much of the original equipment still works, including two Manley hydraulic lifts, a Devilbiss compressor, and an analog air gauge, all from the 1930s, lovingly maintained by the father-son duo.

NIMS to launch three sub-specialty Urology clinics from January

Hyderabad: The Urology and Renal Transplantation wing of Nizam's Institute of Medical Sciences (NIMS) will soon launch three sub-specialty clinics, including Uro-oncology, Renal Transplantation, and Paediatric Urology. Under the supervision of Dr Rahul Devar, Head, Urology, the specialised clinics will be operational starting January 1. Director, NIMS, Prof Nagari Beerappa said. The services will be available every Friday from 10 am to 1 pm at the Urology department located on the 6th floor of the Specialty Block. Director Beerappa stated that these clinics will provide advanced medical care for urological cancers, kidney transplants, and pediatric urological issues.



Vadodara man dies after falling into open drain; VMC to file FIR



On Saturday, VMC Corporator and Congress leader Ami Ravat wrote a letter to the VMC Commissioner seeking an FIR against the engineers and the contractor concerned for culpable homicide. On Saturday, VMC Corporator and Congress leader Ami Ravat wrote a letter to the VMC Commissioner seeking an FIR against the engineers and the contractor concerned for culpable homicide. The Vadodara city police Saturday began a probe into the death of a man, who fell to his death in a 15-foot deep water drainage chamber near the Manjalpur sports complex on Friday evening while on an outing with his family. Even as the Manjalpur police station said it has sought details from the Vadodara Municipal Corporation (VMC) regarding the work that had been undertaken in the area to require the manhole of the drainage chamber to be left open, allegedly without a warning, VMC Commissioner Arun Mahesh Babu told The Indian Express that the civic body has decided to lodge an FIR against the agency.

The incident occurred late on Friday evening when the deceased, identified as Vipulsinh Zala, 40, son of a retired Gujarat police officer, had stepped out with his family for dinner. According to Zala's relatives, he had decided to park his vehicle near the site of the accident and walk back to the eatery where the family was waiting. "When he did not return for a few minutes, we tried calling him but could not get through... Then we decided to go and look for him. We spotted the open drainage chamber and thought of checking. Our fears came true when we saw his shoes floating on the water in the chamber; we immediately called the

emergency services," Giriraj Chudasma, a relative of the deceased, said. Although the fire and emergency response team pulled out Zala within 10 minutes of the call, he was declared dead on arrival at the hospital. Primary probe, police officials said, has revealed that there was no warning sign near the open chamber, which had been left uncovered after the work had been completed.

Pranav Katariya, Assistant Commissioner of Police, F Division, told this newspaper, "We have registered a case of accidental death and initiated a probe into the possibility of negligence... We have communicated to the VMC to submit documents of the agreement with the agency, if they have hired one, as per their primary information. The terms of the agreement will be examined to see if the agency was asked to place warning signs and it failed to comply... Based on the probe and the decision of the family members of the deceased, we will proceed with an FIR if negligence is established." The police said the process to record statements of the locals is also underway to ascertain facts regarding the VMC work and the open manhole, as well as scanning of CCTV footage to determine how the incident happened on Friday evening. "The body of the deceased has been sent for post-mortem. Once the family has completed the last rites, we will call them to record their statements," Katariya said. The incident caused widespread outrage in the city. On Saturday,

VMC Corporator and Congress leader Ami Ravat wrote a letter to the VMC Commissioner seeking an FIR against the engineers and the contractor concerned for culpable homicide. Ravat said in her letter, "It is high time that the VMC takes up its responsibility for such accidents which occur due to dark spots, inadequate lighting on construction sites, potholes, open manholes... Several people have lost their lives due to such incidents in the past too. We demand that the Mayor and the ruling party accept the responsibility and issue a public apology... and (declare a) compensation for the family of the deceased." When contacted, VMC Commissioner Babu said, "I have ordered a preliminary inquiry with the water department, and we have fixed the responsibility of the contractor... The VMC will file an FIR against the contractor, and we are also blacklisting them..."

Nepalese national among 2 women killed in leopard attacks in UP's Balrampur



Two women, including a 28-year-old Nepalese national, were killed in suspected leopard attacks in Uttar Pradesh's Balrampur district. The incidents took place in a span of eight hours, in the Bhawar range of Suhelwa Wildlife Sanctuary, on Thursday. The victims have been identified as Urmila (28), a resident of Kapilvastu district in Nepal, and Kamla Devi (25). Officials said both women, who were alone, were attacked when they had gone to collect firewood from the forest. Officials suspect Urmila was on her way to her relative's house in Balrampur after collecting firewood when the animal attacked her. Forest

department officials are investigating the circumstances surrounding the incidents. Manoj Kumar, Sub-Divisional Officer of the Suhelwa Wildlife Sanctuary, said after the incident, some Nepalese residents who were present in the forest attempted to take Urmila's body. They had reached the no-man's land near the border when forest and police teams, alerted about the situation, rushed to the spot and stopped them. The body was subsequently taken into custody and sent for post-mortem examination, said Kumar. Urmila's family members later arrived in India to take custody of her body. Rakesh Kumar Jayant, Sub-Divisional Magistrate of Tulsipur, said the Nepal embassy has been informed about the death, adding that the body will be handed over to the family only after all mandatory legal and administrative formalities are completed. Officials said although the Indo-Nepal border in Balrampur is largely open and permits free movement of people from both countries, the death having occurred on Indian territory necessitates the completion of official procedures before the body can be released to the family. The animal had attacked and injured two people in Chanaini village of Nawabganj block, confirmed Dr Ram Singh Yadav, Divisional Forest Officer (DFO) Bahraich.

Confident that trial in Pune Porsche crash case will begin next year despite defence's 'tactics', says SPP



IT engineers Aneesh Awadhiya and Ashwini Koshta, 24, were killed on May 19, 2024, when a speeding Porsche Taycan, allegedly driven by a 17-year-old from a Pune realtor family, hit their motorcycle at Kalyani Nagar Junction.

As the calendar turns to 2026, the prosecution in the high-profile Porsche car crash in Pune is confident that trial in the case will finally get underway, marking a crucial step towards obtaining justice for two young IT professionals Aneesh Awadhiya and Ashwini Koshta — who were killed in the crash — and their families. Advocate Shishir Hiray, the Special Public Prosecutor (SPP) in the case, expressed confidence that in spite of the "delaying tactics" used by the defence lawyers, the trial will begin in the coming year. The lives of young IT engineers Awadhiya and Koshta, both Madhya Pradesh natives aged 24, ended abruptly at 2.30 am on May 19 last year when a speeding Porsche Taycan allegedly driven by a 17-year-old from an influential Pune realtor family, rammed into their motorcycle at Kalyani Nagar Junction. The accident took place after the minor and his friends celebrated their Class 12 exam results at a pub. The luxury car allegedly driven by the minor did not have number plates. Speaking to The Indian Express, SPP Hiray said they filed the chargesheet against the accused in August 2024 and the draft charges in October 2024. "After that, the defence started using delaying tactics deliberately. In spite of this, the prosecution went on pressing for arguments on the draft charges," he said.

"When those arguments concluded, two of the accused in the case — those linked to the blood swapping of the minor co-passengers — filed an application seeking all the CCTV footage from Sassoon General Hospital from

the time of the offence. Such a demand was made when even the prosecution had not relied on all the CCTV footage from Sassoon Hospital. The defence took time arguing for this, but still got the ruling against them," Hiray added. The police investigation following the accident unravelled alleged cover-ups, bribery, abuse of power, and tampering of blood samples at the government-run Sassoon General Hospital. Multiple arrests followed, including that of the minor's 50-year-old realtor father and 49-year-old mother; Dr Ajay Taware, then head of the Forensic Medicine Department at Sassoon Hospital; Dr Shrihari Halnor, then casualty medical officer; Atul Ghatkamble, a staffer at the hospital's morgue; and Ashpak Makandar and Amar Gaikwad, who allegedly acted as middlemen between the minor's father and the doctors. The accused have been charged with tampering of evidence, forgery, criminal conspiracy and corruption. The then minor driver has been arraigned before the Juvenile Justice Board (JJB) where he faces charges of culpable homicide, among others.

The Pune police have also arrested and charged a 37-year-old man who had given his blood to be swapped with that of a minor co-passenger, along with the father of that co-passenger. The 52-year-old father of another minor co-passenger was also arrested earlier for giving his own blood sample to be swapped with his son. "When framing of charges was to begin, the defence obtained a stay on the process from the high court. And now the framing of charges is being delayed. At present, a hearing is scheduled in the high court on January 8. After we clear this hurdle, we can immediately move the lower court seeking framing of charges. And even after that, we cannot say for sure that the defence will not move the high court again. In spite of this, we are confident that the trial will begin in 2026," the SPP stated. Hiray said they are pressing for the trial to begin soon because it is the key to the process of obtaining justice for the victims and their families. "This was a case in which a fraud was committed with the judicial system by completely changing the evidence. And that is what we have brought out in our case," he said. "If we look at the witnesses, we can see that they belong to weaker sections of the society, as against the accused who belong to the higher strata of society. And it is very likely that the accused could influence the witnesses. Currently, of the total 10 accused in the case, nine are still behind bars, while the mother of the minor driver is out on bail. We will soon be moving court seeking cancellation of her bail," Hiray added. Recently, two officers — Police Inspector Rahul Jagdale and Assistant Police Inspector Vishwanath Tokari — who were suspended for dereliction of duty in connection with the initial response to the accident, were dismissed from service.

When a mission to neutralise a disobedient rocket spurred unexpected sprinting glory

My sympathetic boss wasn't idle while I was outrunning the hound of Baskervilles in Hisar. The place may be arid, but it still has enough trees, wheat shoots, and dust to make one feel alive. Apparently, my "desert experience" needed further enrichment. So my boss promptly lined up another "temporary duty". Trouble duty, actually, but who's splitting hairs? I'd just finished my stint at Hisar and was looking forward to the pavilion when my WhatsApp pinged. It wasn't the usual family forward but a derailment letter from headquarters: "Move to Mahajan Field Firing Ranges ASAP." My mission was to neutralise a disobedient rocket that refused to fly.

The Bard almost said, temporary duties never come singly but in battalions. Having barely reached home after four days of travel fatigue, I was to report at the Mahajan field firing ranges in Rajasthan within twelve hours. I painfully noted the lack of a personal helicopter. Thankfully, my bomb disposal non-commissioned officer was a man of rare resourcefulness. He unearthed ancient railway routes, odd, serpentine lines likely last used by the British cavalry, to get us there. After a long, aloo-poori-fuelled journey, our train screeched into a one-camel railway station at five in the morning. It was pitch-dark. Tanks, BMPs, and trucks slumbered on flatbeds around us. Not a soul stirred. We walked to the tiny station building, shivering in the cold. Soon, a spanking new Scorpio appeared, sent by the rocket unit along with a junior commissioned officer (JCO). The driver sped like a Concorde through the misty desert roads as I kept urging him not to cross seventy. We arrived at the Mahajan camp just as dawn pinked the dunes, jaal trees, scrub bushes, and army trucks completing the desert tableau. At the rocket unit, I was cheerily informed that they hadn't brought any demolition stores. They had dispatched a "begging party" to Ganganagar to borrow some. Until then, I was invited to watch their rocket firing. I obliged. After the exercise, they held a debriefing under a camouflaged shamiana. Officers took turns praising each other and listing "lessons learnt". I waited for someone to highlight the glaring one, never come to field firing without demolition stores, but it never arrived. Half past five, the borrowing party returned, laden with the required explosives. I was sum-

moned to dispose of the rebellious rocket. A small crowd had gathered around the pit where the heavy beast had been lowered. My assistant and I climbed in, set the charges, and used my phone torch to check the connections. We climbed out, attached the detonators to the safety fuze, and shooed away the gawkers. Trucks roared off toward safer dunes. Only one Scorpio remained, ready to whisk us out of harm's way. Once the fuze was lit, we double-checked the junction box and jumped into the Scorpio. We'd barely driven a hundred metres when we saw a white Gypsy ahead, stuck in the sand, engine dead. A few jawans were pushing, a few tying tow ropes, completely oblivious to the ticking clock. I bellowed at them to abandon the vehicle and run. "A Gypsy can be replaced. You can't." They stared for a second before I unleashed my best sergeant-major voice. The desert finally erupted into motion. One unfortunate fellow lagged behind, shuffling like a camel in slow motion. Our Scorpio's bumper nearly grazed him as he staggered along. The JCO beside me was euphoric, clapping and shouting, "Pandian is running! Pandian is running!" I ignored him, preoccupied with the hope that my detonation hadn't misfired. We soon reached the tarmac road, safely outside the debris range. I checked my watch. The explosion should have happened by now. My brain started replaying the procedure: two fuses, a backup charge. Had something gone wrong? I was about to suggest going back when the night sky erupted into a shower of golden sparks. A few seconds later, the comforting boom followed. The JCO pounded my back, jubilant. "Congratulations, Sahib! Even our CO has never achieved this!" He shook his head in disbelief. "No, Sahib. Not even the CO could make Pandian run. In BPET runs, he walks after five steps. Today you made him run a full kilometre in desert sand." By evening, the miracle had spread through the unit grapevine. "Pandian actually ran today!" echoed like breaking news across tents and mess lines. Temporary duty over, I returned to the pavilion, back to paperwork and babugiri. Yet sometimes, in idle moments, my mind drifts back to those two days in Mahajan, the rocket, the desert wind, the scrambling jawans, and the slowest runner in Rajasthan spurred into sprinting glory.

Excise raid during party at pub in Pune's Viman Nagar, items worth over Rs 3.6 lakh seized



EMS News Agency, Jan 23

The Maharashtra excise department raided an alleged illegal night party at The Noir pub in Viman Nagar area of

Pune city in the early hours of Saturday. Acting on a tip-off, a team led by Atul Kanade, Superintendent of the State Excise Department, Pune, raided the pub on Airport Road around 5 am. Kanade said, "A party was going on at the pub illegally. Legal action was taken against 52 persons found at the party. They included 42 men and women, who participated in the party. An offence was lodged against ten managers of the pub. Of them, two managers have been remanded to judicial custody by a court." Search is on for the main accused, Amarjeet Singh, the pub owner," said Kanade. The state excise department team has seized furniture, a sound system, a computer, a laptop, about 178 foreign liquor bottles, and other items, all worth Rs 3.67 lakh, during the raid at the pub. In view of several night parties planned for the New Year Celebration, the state excise department has formed 21 flying squads to take action against illegal liquor parties in the city.

Jatayu vulture released in Pench Tiger Reserve, soaring near Anjaneri hills in Nashik

A Jatayu (long-billed vulture) that was released in the Pench Tiger Reserve on December 11 reached 38 km away from Anjaneri on Saturday. A Jatayu (long-billed vulture) that was released in the Pench Tiger Reserve on December 11 reached 38 km away from Anjaneri on Saturday. (Express Photo)

The Anjaneri hills near Trimbakeshwar in Maharashtra's Nashik district are known as the birthplace of Lord Hanuman. Named after his mother, the hills hold mythological importance in the Ramayana. It has been a famous habitat for vultures too. In an interesting coincidence, J132, a Jatayu (long-billed vulture) that was released in the Pench Tiger Reserve on December 11 reached 38 km away from Anjaneri on Saturday. Researchers from the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) are monitoring the bird and disclosed its interesting journey. This Jatayu has used the Nagpur-Wardha-Yavatmal-Hingoli-Washim-Buldhana-Jalna-Chatrapati Sambhaji Nagar route and spent 15 days



No 'legacy' needed: How CAA certificates are bridging voter registration gap for Matuas in West Bengal



The Election Commission of India (ECI)'s decision to recognise citizenship certificates issued under the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) as valid documentation for voter registration will be beneficial for the Matua community in West Bengal. Following the release of the draft electoral list after Special Intensive Revision (SIR), Matuas who have recently secured citizenship may now apply for voter inclusion using Form 6, specifically citing their CAA certificate as proof. Many voters faced deletion because they lacked family records in the 2002 electoral rolls. The ECI has clarified that the CAA certificate—which contains comprehensive

personal data—is sufficient to bridge this "no mapping" gap and establish eligibility. As per the rule, voters are typically required to show a "linkage" to the 2002 electoral rolls, either through their own name or a family member's record. Many residents, particularly within the Matua community, lack these historical records, putting them at risk of being deleted from the voter list. The ECI has clarified that a CAA certificate is sufficient to establish this linkage. Because the certificate contains verified personal and background data, it serves as a stand-alone document to prove eligibility for the final voter list. The BJP has generally supported the move. BJP leader Jagannath Chatterjee said, "Approximately 70,000 people have already applied for the CAA certificate. The inclusion of these names in the voter list is a victory for refugee rights. For Hindu refugees, the BJP is there like Himalaya to protect them." This follows previous controversies where BJP leader Shantanu Thakur faced criticism for suggesting he would accept the deletion of one lakh Matua names from the rolls in the process of deletion of illegal infiltrators from Bangladesh. "Those who have come after 2014 are normally eligible for the CAA certificate. Also, those who have a CAA certificate will normally have their names in the electoral roll. What is so special about it?" said TMC Spokesperson Aroop Chakraborty.

From apartments to global scams: Inside Maharashtra's fake call centre boom



Fake call centres, once largely confined to metros such as Mumbai and Pune, have quietly spread into Maharashtra's hinterland, operating out of tier 2 cities and industrial townships. Drawn by cheaper real estate, reliable internet connectivity and a steady pool of English-speaking youth with prior BPO experience, these operations are now running global scams far from the scrutiny faced in major cities. For law enforcement agencies, the shift has exposed systemic gaps: weak monitoring of internet services, lax verification of business registrations, fragmented regulatory oversight and limited coordination between the local police and Central agencies. These loopholes, officers said, allow fraudulent call centres to resurface almost as quickly as they are shut down. Over the past year, the Maharashtra Police have busted several such operations in Igatpuri, Nashik and Aurangabad. A senior IPS officer who has led multiple raids on fake call centres said their growth is largely enabled by unregulated internet access. "These bogus call centres are running because they get internet facilities easily from service providers. There are no restrictions or monitoring agencies overseeing internet services. All that is required is a registered firm. The accused register firms using bogus documents, and no one verifies whether the company actually exists at the address submitted. It is enough to submit a company certificate to the internet service provider to get a connection," the officer said. Concerned by the scale of fraud and the possibility of official complicity, Central agencies have also stepped in. This year, in August and September, the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) raided two call centres in Nashik and Igatpuri, suspecting the involvement of public servants, including police and bank offi-

cial, and arrested several people. Last month, following large financial transactions linked to these cases, the Enforcement Directorate's Mumbai unit initiated proceedings to trace the money trail. An official explained that setting up such operations requires little more than basic infrastructure. "After registering a firm on bogus documents and obtaining a licence under the Shop and Establishment Act from the local municipal authority, operators rent an apartment and equip it with chairs, tables, electricity and an internet connection. From there, they start calling people overseas using VoIP numbers," the official said. With no dedicated authority in India to monitor such businesses, operators often function from small apartments in residential buildings, employing only a handful of people working on laptops, he added. The police broadly classify fake call centres into two categories, financial and non-financial, both of which require basic networking knowledge and prior experience in legitimate call centres. Financial call centres are allegedly involved in high-value frauds, including trading scams, loan and insurance fraud, impersonation of US tax officials, and debit and credit card scams. Victims are lured into fake investments in mutual funds and insurance products, including health and home insurance. Non-financial call centres typically target customers facing software or router-related issues. Operators register with Google AdWords, placing advertisements that prompt overseas customers to call them. Victims in the US, UK and Canada are also targeted for the illegal sale of Viagra and other banned medicines. Communication is carried out using VoIP services. In both models, a partner abroad provides a local address and contact number. For instance, a group targeting US residents will use American contact details in online advertisements to gain credibility, while the operation itself runs from India. The police said the rapid spread of fake call centres in smaller towns is closely linked to the availability of computer-literate, English-speaking youth in semi-urban districts. With growing access to IT courses, BPO training institutes and basic technical education, these regions offer a low-cost workforce that scam operators readily exploit. A senior IPS officer said that nine illegal call centres were busted in Mumbai in 2024. But in spite of heightened vigilance, the number has slightly increased, with 10 such centres being raided this year. "Lakhs of people use the internet, so monitoring each individual or entity is difficult unless there is specific intelligence," the officer said.

Congress and VBA announce tie-up for BMC polls; Prakash Ambedkar's party to contest 62 seats

After days of discussions and disagreements, the Congress and the Prakash Ambedkar-led Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi announced on Sunday that they would fight the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) elections together.

"Both parties are natural allies with a common agenda of safeguarding constitutional values. The Congress and the VBA, in its earlier form of Bharip Bahujan Mahasangh, had fought elections together before 1999, and the results were that they won the majority of Lok Sabha seats. That tradition was discontinued in the meantime. I am happy to announce that we both have decided to fight the Mumbai elections as an alliance," Maharashtra Congress chief Harshavardhan Sapkal said at a joint press conference held at the state party headquarters. As per the understanding between the parties, the VBA will contest 62 out of the 227 seats in Mumbai. The Congress is also stitching up an alliance with the Left parties in certain pockets of the city. However, Mumbai Congress chief and MP Varsha Gaikwad and Ambedkar were not present at the press conference due to prior commitments. The two parties contested the recent municipal council and municipal panchayat elections together in some districts of Maharashtra. The Congress hopes to consolidate its Dalit vote bank with an alliance with the VBA across the state. In addition, the aggressive



ground-level workers of VBA could also be a boost for the Congress. On the other hand, the VBA, which has zero electoral presence in municipal corporations, aims to enter urban local bodies. VBA vice-president Dhairavardhan Pundkar said the alliance would be beneficial to both parties. "Had two of us formed the alliance earlier, the BJP could not have made the inroads in Maharashtra. But it is better that we have decided to join hands now," he said. VBA spokesperson Siddharth Mokale said the party had given its local units the authority to finalise alliances at their level.

Bengaluru newlyweds cut short honeymoon in Sri Lanka, die by suicide 1,000 km apart

A devastating chain of events has unfolded across two states, starting with the death of a 26-year-old woman in Bengaluru, allegedly driven by harassment from her husband and in-laws. Her suicide Thursday was followed by her husband's death and a suicide attempt by his mother in Nagpur. The woman's death had triggered protests outside her husband's residence in Bengaluru, where her parents and relatives demanded immediate arrests. Police sources said that she had faced rejection and mistreatment from her husband's family, pushing her to take the extreme step.

Following a First Information Report (FIR) over the woman's death, her husband fled to Nagpur with his mother and brother. Thereafter, he died by suicide in Nagpur on Friday, while his mother attempted to end her life at a relative's home. She was rescued and remains hospitalised in critical condition. Reacting to the developments, the deceased woman's mother said, "They realised their mistakes. My daughter showed him so much love; he couldn't have



lived after her death." couple got married in a lavish ceremony in Bengaluru recently. During their honeymoon in Sri Lanka, disputes erupted after the husband allegedly discovered the woman's past relationship. The arguments forced them to cut short the trip and return home on December 21. Back in Bengaluru, the woman is said to have endured continued humiliation from her in-laws. Relatives claimed that she resisted divorce due to concerns over family honour.

Railways in Punjab in 2025: big investment, new trains and revival of stalled links

With a railway budget allocation of Rs 5,421 crore for 2025-26 and projects worth around Rs 25,000 crore underway, 2025 emerged as a decisive year for Punjab's rail infrastructure. The Railways introduced three new train services from the state between June and November, expanded long-distance connectivity through extensions, and pushed ahead with the redevelopment of 30 railway stations under the Amrit Bharat scheme at a cost of Rs 1,122 crore. Minister of State for Railways Ravneet Singh Bittu said, "Average annual investment from 2009-14 was Rs 225 crore. However, annual investment only in 2025-26 is Rs 5,421 crore, which is 24 times higher than during the previous Government." While the announcements marked one of the biggest railway pushes Punjab has seen in recent years, most projects are still at execution stages, making timely completion the key challenge ahead. Three new train services were started from Punjab in 2025, strengthening religious, regional, and high-speed connectivity. The Firozpur Cantt-Hazur Sahib Nanded Weekly Express commenced operations on June 13, departing from Firozpur every Friday and returning from Nanded on Sundays. Shortly thereafter, the Firozpur Cantt-Haridwar Weekly Express was introduced on June 18, with the train leaving Firozpur every Wednesday night and operating the return journey from Haridwar on Thursdays, catering largely to pilgrims. The most significant addition came later in the year with the inauguration of the Firozpur Cantonment-New Delhi Vande Bharat Express on November 8. Operating six days a week except on Wednesdays, the train became

the first high-speed service for the Malwa region. The Vande Bharat has scheduled halts at Dhuri, Barnala, Bathinda, Faridkot, and Patiala in Punjab before entering Ambala in Haryana. A stop at Barnala was added a week after the inauguration, following demands from local residents. The train covers a distance of 486 km in six hours and 40 minutes and is being seen as a major addition to Punjab's railway network, particularly for the Malwa districts, which received their first high-speed train. In regional services, the Intercity Superfast Express, which earlier operated between Moga and New Delhi, has been extended to originate from Firozpur from November onwards. The extended service runs twice a week on Mondays and Fridays, improving direct rail connectivity between Firozpur and the national capital. Apart from new trains, the Railways continued to strengthen connectivity by extending existing long-distance services from Firozpur. The Firozpur-Rameswaram Humsafar Express, inaugurated on October 2, 2018, was extended to start from Firozpur on October 3, 2023. The weekly service departs from Rameswaram on Saturdays and operates the return journey from Firozpur on Tuesdays. Similarly, the Tripura Sundari Express, introduced in July 2016, operates on a weekly basis between Firozpur and Agartala. The extension of this train to Firozpur was also carried out from 2023 onwards, providing Punjab with direct rail connectivity to the northeastern states. Station redevelopment remained a key focus area during the year. Under the Amrit Bharat railway station scheme, redevelopment work is underway at 30 stations across Punjab, expanded from the initially announced 22 stations.

Thailand-Cambodia clashes reignite; one Thai soldier, four Cambodian civilians killed



Thailand launched air strikes Monday on its neighbour Cambodia, with both sides trading blame for renewed fighting on their disputed border that has killed four Cambodian civilians and a Thai soldier. Around 35,000 people in Thailand have been evacuated from border areas, the country's Second Army Region said in a statement. Five days of combat between Thailand and Cambodia this summer killed 43 people and displaced around 300,000 on both sides of the border before a truce took effect.

But last month Thailand paused a follow-on deal backed by U.S. President Donald Trump to wind down hostilities, saying a landmine blast at the border had wounded several soldiers. Since then, Cambodian and Thai officials have reported sporadic skirmishes along their frontier, which reignited Sunday and Monday, sending thousands of civilians on both sides fleeing their homes. "The village head told us to evacuate, and given what happened in July, I complied immediately," said farmer Pannarat Woratham who lives just a few kilometres from the border in Thailand's Surin province and evacuated Sunday afternoon to a temple sheltering the displaced. It was the second time the 59-year-old had fled since late July when open combat was waged with fighter jets, missile strikes and ground troops, killing both civilians and soldiers. "Of course many of us thought the conflict was finally over. It shouldn't have happened again like this," Pannarat told AFP. Around 35,000 people in Thailand have been evacuated from areas along the border since the renewed fighting, Thailand's Second Army Region said in a statement. Cambodia's information minister Neth Pheaktra told reporters at least 1,157 families had evacuated to safety in the border province of Oddar Meanchey. Military objectives Both sides reported a brief skirmish on Sunday, which Thailand's military had said left

two soldiers wounded. But the fighting escalated early Monday morning. Thai Army spokesman Winthai Suvaree told reporters on Monday that one soldier was killed and eight were wounded in attacks by Cambodian troops near the border. Thailand had launched air strikes against its neighbour in an act of self-defence, he said.

"The Thai air power is being used only against Cambodian military targets, which allows damage to be contained and halts Cambodia's supporting fire that caused Thai casualties," Winthai said at a press conference. "The air strikes are highly precise and aimed solely at military objectives along the clash line, with no impact on civilians." Cambodia's defence ministry spokeswoman Maly Socheata, however, said Thai forces had attacked Cambodian troops in Preah Vihear and Oddar Meanchey provinces early Monday, accusing Thailand of "firing multiple shots with tanks at Tamone Thom temple" and other areas near Preah Vihear temple. Maly Socheata later told reporters that the Thai military attacked Cambodian forces in Preah Vihear with an F-16 jet at around 9:00 am. She added that Thai military fire in the two provinces had wounded some civilians and burned their homes, while forcing others to flee. A Cambodian journalist was wounded by shrapnel from a Thai rocket in Oddar Meanchey, Neth Pheaktra, the minister, told AFP. A soldier in Preah Vihear said Monday morning that Thai forces were firing shells across the border into Cambodia. He declined to be identified because he was not authorised to speak to the media. Met Measpheakdey, a spokesman for the Oddar Meanchey provincial administration, said gunfire was reported in the areas of the centuries-old Tamone Thom and Ta Krabei temples. The Thai army also accused Cambodian forces of firing BM-21 rockets towards civilian areas in Buri Ram province, with no casualties reported. "Cycles of confrontation" The United States, China and Malaysia, as chair of the regional bloc ASEAN, brokered the cessation of fighting in July. In October, Trump co-signed a follow-on joint declaration, touting new trade deals with Thailand and Cambodia after they agreed to prolong their ceasefire. But Thailand suspended the agreement the following month, and the two sides then traded accusations of renewed clashes in which Cambodia said a civilian was killed. Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim urged both sides on Monday to halt the fighting and utilise diplomacy. "Our region cannot afford to see long-standing disputes slip into cycles of confrontation," Anwar said in a statement. The conflict centres on a century-old disagreement over borders mapped during France's colonial rule in the region, with both sides claiming a smattering of boundary temples.

Water leak at Paris Louvre Museum damages books at Egyptian antiquities department

A water leak last month damaged hundreds of books in the Egyptian antiquities department at the Louvre, underscoring the deteriorating state of the world's most visited museum just weeks after a daring jewel heist exposed security flaws. Specialist website La Tribune de l'Art reported that around 400 rare books were affected, blaming poor pipe conditions. It said the department had long sought funds to protect the collection from such risks without success. Le Louvre's deputy administrator, Francis Steinbock, told BFM TV on Sunday (December 7, 2025) the water pipe leak concerned one of the three rooms of the library of the Egyptian antiquities department.

"We have identified between 300 and 400 works, the count is ongoing," he said, adding the books lost were "those consulted by Egyptologists but no precious books." He acknowledged the problem had been known for years and said repairs were scheduled for September 2026. Four burglars made off in broad daylight with jewels worth \$102 million on October 19, exposing glaring

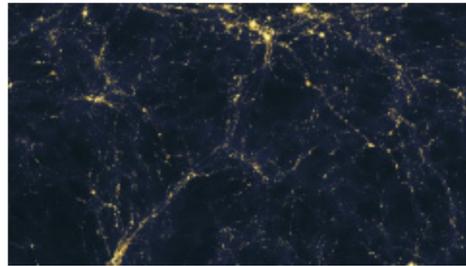


security gaps at Le Louvre. In November, structural weaknesses prompted the partial closure of one of the gallery hosting Greek vases and offices. A report published in October by France's public audit body, known as the Cour des Comptes, said the museum's inability to update its infrastructure was exacerbated by excessive spending on artwork.

What are cosmic filaments?

Cosmic or galaxy filaments are the largest 'threads' in the universe's cosmic web. A single cosmic filament is a structure spanning hundreds of millions of lightyears, formed as a result of gravity pulling in gas, dark matter, and galaxies into long, thin strands that link giant clusters of galaxies. Filaments also surround large, empty regions of space called voids. A filament forms where sheets of matter intersect and collapse; they're also highways along which gas and smaller galaxies 'flow' towards big clusters. As material falls in, it can spin up both the filament and the galaxies embedded in it. Because of this, filaments help decide where galaxies form, how fast they grow, and how much fresh gas they receive over billions of years.

Astronomers map filaments by measuring the positions and distances of many galaxies and then tracing the patterns they form in the sky. Computer simulations have shown similar webs, giving astronomers confidence that these structures arise naturally from small ripples in the early universe and grew under gravity's influence into the vast, connected network we see today. On December 3,



University of Oxford researchers reported a roughly 50-million-lightyear-long filament traced by at least 14 galaxies. In particular, the team found the way the galaxies were spinning lined up with the filament, suggesting the entire filament was slowly rotating. Thus the team has claimed it is "one of the largest spinning structures ever found in the universe".

Israel, Qatar and U.S. hold trilateral meeting in New York



The United States, Israel and Qatar held a trilateral meeting in New York Sunday (December 7, 2025), a senior White House official told AFP, months after Israeli jets conducted an airstrike in Doha, unsuccessfully targeting Hamas leadership. The White House official confirmed that the meeting had taken place but did not provide any further details. Two sources told U.S. news outlet Axios it was "the highest level meeting between the countries since the deal to end the war in Gaza, for which Qatar served as a key

mediator." Axios also reported White House envoy Steve Witkoff hosted the meeting, with Mossad spy chief David Barnea representing Israel and an unnamed senior Qatari official in attendance. Qatar, along with Egypt and the United States, helped broker a comprehensive ceasefire between Israel and Hamas, which remains delicate as both Israel and Hamas accuse each other of breaching its terms. On Saturday (December 6, 2025), Qatar and Egypt both called for the withdrawal of Israeli troops and the deployment of an international stabilization force to fully implement the fragile agreement to end the conflict in Gaza.

Speaking at a diplomatic conference in Doha, Qatari premier Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani said "a ceasefire cannot be completed unless there is full withdrawal of the Israeli forces (and) there is stability back in Gaza." Axios reported that the main focus of Sunday's meeting was largely "on the implementation of the Gaza peace agreement."

The Israeli strike on Doha on September 9 unsuccessfully targeted top Hamas negotiator Khalil al-Hayra and others in the Palestinian militant group.

This hidden addiction keeps us glued to smartphones. Here's how to fix it



I've been thinking deeply about the forces that keep us glued to our phones. Why do we pick up the phone and become oblivious to time, watching endless streams of reels or doomscrolling down X feeds. I noticed that the real culprit isn't just the algorithmic fine-tuning of social media applications. It's texting. Yes, that quiet, polite, seemingly harmless act we do everyday on our smartphones. Texting via WhatsApp is clearly the hidden engine of our smartphone fixation. It is the thing that keeps the device within arm's reach even when no notification pops up.

We often talk about social media addiction as if the platforms themselves are pulling every string, but when I'm honest with myself, the behaviour that most reliably brings my phone to my hand is the arrival of a text on WhatsApp. Deep down, my brain responds to the text the way it would to someone tapping me on the shoulder. It feels like a social cue that signals me to reply. And because ignoring a cue like that creates friction, I find myself checking more often than I ever intended to. That stress becomes the gateway to all other distractions. I'll respond to the message, yes, but then I'll check one more thing, then another, and before long the entire digital carnival has unfurled itself in front of me.

So, here's how I decided to tackle my own dependency

at its root, not by fighting dopamine loops or deleting apps, but by renegotiating my relationship with the device itself. The first rule was to break my "all-day available" habit. This was making me slave to the machine and keeping me on an 'always ready' mode to respond to an incoming text. Once I broke this habit by enforcing a time-in and a time-out period, I noticed that my nerves felt cooler. This also made me stop nursing the idea of someone waiting for my response. Then, I stopped carrying the phone around everywhere I go. For instance, when I go for a walk or jog, I don't take the phone with me anymore. That gives me rough forty-fifty minutes of no-device time. This phone-free time has clearly helped me connect deeply with my inner thoughts. Thirdly, I started batching my replies. Instead of responding in real-time, I handle messages in bulk, in focused intervals. At first it felt rude. But the truth surprised me; most people didn't notice, and the ones who did, adapted quickly. Just as we learn a doctor's availability without resenting it, people learn ours as soon as we consistently signal it. To make this batching work, I had to change how I replied. Rather than firing off short, back-and-forth exchanges, I started sending messages that answered the next two or three likely questions. Fewer loose ends means fewer reasons for both parties to reopen the conversation an hour later. And for genuine emergencies, I set up narrow avenues for instant reachability: specific contacts who can get through Do Not Disturb, or a simple rule that if something is urgent, they should call, not text. These three simple rules have helped me be more focused and provide. And most importantly, what surprised me most wasn't the practical change, but the emotional one. When I reduced the constant trickle of digital chatter, my communications were fully developed. Today, with texting via WhatsApp, we have created this illusion of connection that lacks substance. Texting may be the most invisible driver of our smartphone dependency, but once we see it clearly, we can choose a different relationship with it, and with our own minds.

China positive on Putin's India visit; calls for stronger trilateral cooperation



reacted positively to Russian President Vladimir Putin's visit to India, framing the three countries as an important part of the Global South and said sound trilateral ties are conducive to regional and global peace and stability

China on Monday (December 8, 2025) reacted positively to Russian President Vladimir Putin's visit to India, framing the three countries as an important part of the Global South and said sound trilateral ties are conducive to regional and global peace and stability, besides their own national interests. "China, Russia and India are emerging economies and important members of the Global South," Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Guo Jiakun told a media briefing in Beijing, reacting for the first time to Mr. Putin's high-profile visit to New Delhi last week and his interactions with Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Mr. Guo said that the three countries maintaining sound relations are not only in line with their own interests but also conducive to regional and global peace, security, stability and prosperity. Mr. Putin's visit was watched here

closely, considering Beijing's close and strong ties with Moscow. Responding to a question about Mr. Putin's comments about New Delhi and Beijing ahead of his visit, Mr. Guo said that China stands ready to work with Russia and India to continue promoting the development of bilateral relations. In an interview ahead of his visit, Mr. Putin had said, "India and China are our closest friends — we treasure that relationship deeply." On India-China relations — currently on a path of normalisation after the Eastern Ladakh confrontation which resulted in a freeze in ties from 2020 until last year — Mr. Guo said China wants to promote sustained and strong ties with New Delhi with a long-term perspective. China stands ready to work with India to view and handle bilateral relations from a strategic height and a long-term perspective, promote sustained, strong and steady development of ties to benefit the two countries and their peoples, and make a due contribution to peace and prosperity in Asia and beyond, he said. Besides terming New Delhi and Beijing as close friends of Moscow, Mr. Putin, in the interview with an Indian news channel, also expressed confidence that the leaderships of India and China are committed to finding solutions to their issues, and Russia has "no right" to interfere in their bilateral affairs. Chinese official media highlighted Mr. Putin's comments on India-China relations. The state-run Xinhua news agency carried his remarks refuting U.S. accusations over India's purchases of Russian oil. For its part, China tops the list of countries purchasing Russian oil and gas, and rejected U.S. calls to halt the imports to penalise Moscow for continuing its war on Ukraine. During his visit, a host of agreements were signed to boost trade and economic ties between the two countries. Both sides also worked out an Economic Cooperation Programme to increase trade volume to \$100 billion by 2030.

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Thailand releases 18 Cambodian prisoners of war as part of ceasefire agreement

Bangkok: Thailand on Wednesday released 18 Cambodian prisoners of war held for five months, fulfilling the terms of a ceasefire agreement the two countries signed to end bitter fighting along their border. The release was stipulated in the ceasefire agreement signed Saturday by the defence ministers of the two countries at the same border checkpoint between Thailand's Chanthaburi province and Cambodia's Pailin province where the soldiers were released. "The repatriation of the 18 Cambodian soldiers was undertaken as a demonstration of goodwill and confidence-building, as well as in adherence to international humanitarian principles," Thailand's Foreign Ministry said in a statement. Cambodia's Defence Ministry said the release "creates an environment conducive to peace, stability, and the full normalisation of relations for the benefit of both nations and their people in the near future." The soldiers' release removes a major impediment toward that goal after two rounds of destructive combat over competing territorial claims. Thailand had insisted it was allowed to hold the men under provisions of the Geneva Conventions governing the rules of war, which says they could be detained until the

end of hostilities. The prisoners were allowed visits by the International Committee of the Red Cross and other rights covered under international humanitarian law, Thai authorities said. Their continued detention was used effectively by Cambodia's government to rally nationalist sentiment in the conflict against Thailand. Wednesday's statement from Cambodia's defence ministry said the government "has remained steadfast in the promise made to the families of the 18 soldiers and the Cambodian people: that no soldier would be left behind." The ceasefire agreement said the soldiers would be freed if the end of combat was sustained for 72 hours after it came into effect at noon on Saturday. The 72 hours passed on Tuesday, but Thai authorities said they needed to evaluate the situation, claiming that 250 Cambodian drones had been active along the border. The two countries had given differing accounts of the circumstances of the men's capture, which took place on the same day the initial ceasefire came into effect at the end of July. Cambodian officials say their soldiers approached the Thai position with friendly intentions to offer post-fighting greetings,

Ludhiana's PAU reaffirms its status in rankings, farmer-focused extension, and global engagement



Ludhiana's Punjab Agricultural University (PAU) reaffirmed its status as India's leading agricultural university through excellence in rankings, research, farmer-focused extension, and global engagement in 2025, the university has said in a press statement. PAU secured the top position among state agricultural universities in the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) for the third consecutive year, ranking first among such universities and second nationally in NIRF 2025. Globally, it entered EduRank's Top 100 Agricultural Institutions, ranking 93rd in agricultural sciences and emerging as the only Indian state agricultural university on the list. Its education model also earned the Indian Institutional Ranking Framework (IIRF) Education Impact Award 2026 for experiential and extension-linked learning.

With sustained support from the Punjab Government, including a Rs 20-crore capital grant, PAU expanded key infrastructure. Finance Minister Sardar Harpal Singh Cheema inaugurated the Agro-Processing Complex and Jaggery Processing Plant and laid the foundation stone of the Plant Acclimatisation Facility. Hostels and a swimming pool were upgraded, and a gymnasium was established. A field of wheat variety developed by PAU. (Express Photo) A field of wheat variety developed by PAU.

Crime spree grips Punjab's Doaba region, over 12 thefts and robberies reported in a few days

Jalandhar woke up on Monday to a robbery at a jewellery shop, marking the latest incident in a worrying pattern where several parts of Punjab's Doaba region have witnessed repeated cases of thefts, armed robberies, cyber fraud, and an ATM break-in over the past few days—in Jalandhar, Kapurthala, Hoshiarpur, and Shaheed Bhagat Singh Nagar districts. In one of the most high-profile incidents, a gang of around a dozen thieves looted gold and silver ornaments worth Rs 70-80 lakh from Babbar Jewellers, located in Jalandhar's Shahid Babu Labh Singh Nagar in the early hours of Monday.

Citing CCTV footage, the police said the gang arrived at around 2.30 am wearing masks and gloves. Using iron rods and a shawl, they uprooted the shop's shutter and gained entry within minutes. The theft lasted barely 10 minutes, during which the thieves targeted both the safe and jewellery kept at the counters. The shop's owner, Gurpreet Singh, said he had closed the shop around 9 pm on Sunday. He was informed about the theft in the morning. The police were alerted around 6 am after locals noticed the damaged shutter. CCTV footage is being analysed to trace the thieves and their movement, the police said, adding that they suspect the gang had prior knowledge of the shop's layout. Robbers attempt to barge into the house of Lakhwinder Singh. On December 28, two masked men armed with pistols attempted a robbery at a jewellery shop in a densely populated market area in Jalandhar West, the police said. The robbers pretended to enquire about a silver bracelet but soon brandished weapons at the woman present at the counter. Her husband Vipin Verma reacted swiftly by climbing over the counter and pushing the robbers out of the shop, while his wife followed. The robbers fled the spot as locals gathered. The police reached the scene immediately, and former MLA Sheetal Angural was also present. The incident has heightened fear among local traders, who are demanding stronger security measures and increased police presence. Around 1.30 am on December 26, armed robbers barged into the house of Lakhwinder Singh in the Awalpur area and looted cash worth Rs 1 lakh, 100 g of gold worth Rs 12-13 lakh, and other valuables at gunpoint. The same day, multiple other incidents of theft and looting were reported across the region.

In Rampur Jagir village on December 25, thieves struck four houses during the day, stealing gold and silver jewellery weighing around 70 g along with cash. Ironically, a police post is located barely one kilometre from the affected area. ATM heist, cyber fraud and armed robberies across Doab in Phagwara's Khajurala village, unidentified thieves uprooted an ATM machine of State Bank of India and made away with Rs 27 lakh in cash between 3 and 3.30 am on December 28. They reportedly arrived in a Swift car. Deputy Superintendent of Police Bharat

In research and innovation, PAU delivered field-ready technologies and patents, including a portable maize dryer to reduce post-harvest losses, a magnetic field-assisted freezing process for horticultural produce, and a stable zinc phosphide bait for safer rodent control. Advances in precision and digital agriculture included GNSS (global navigation satellite system)-based tractor auto-steering, sensor-based paddy transplanters and internet of things-enabled irrigation systems. In 2025, PAU released 20 new crop varieties and hybrids across cereals, pulses, oilseeds, vegetables, fruits and ornamentals. Several PAU wheat and maize varieties topped the national trials of the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR), while the university earned multiple Best Centre awards under All India Coordinated Research Projects. Farmers procuring the seed from the PAU project. Farmers procuring the seed from the PAU project. (Express Photo) PAU also strengthened its global footprint, appointing 22 honorary visiting professors, including World Food Prize laureates, and hosting delegations from Japan, the US, Argentina, South Sudan, and the Food and Agriculture Organisation. New collaborations, including a memorandum of understanding with BITS Pilani, expanded work in precision agriculture and agritech through Kisan Melas, Krishi Vigyan Kendra programmes, crop residue management drives and flood-relief seed distribution, PAU ensured large-scale technology adoption. Its innovations, including a remotely operated paddy transplanter, gained national attention. Academic excellence was highlighted at PAU's annual convocation, held in the presence of Punjab Governor and Chancellor Shri Gulab Chand Kataria, under the chairmanship of Vice-Chancellor Dr Satbir Singh Gosal, along with college-level convocations where hundreds of students received degrees, medals, and merit certificates. Overall, 2025 marked PAU's integrated leadership in research, education and farmer-first extension, advancing sustainable and climate-resilient agriculture for Punjab and the country, said V-C Gosal.



Bhushan said investigations are underway in connection with the incident. And in Jalandhar's Jain Colony, a resident named Amritpal Singh told the police that he had been defrauded out of Rs 12.17 lakh through an online investment app. He initially invested Rs 7.5 lakh, was shown fake profits, and was asked to pay additional "taxes" and "service charges". When he attempted to withdraw the money, the fraud was exposed, the police said. The police arrested three robbery suspects following a brief encounter near Garhshankar in Hoshiarpur district on December 27. Police teams spotted a suspicious motorcycle without a number plate in the forest area of Rampur Bildon village. When signalled to stop, the suspects opened fire, according to the police. One of them, Onkar Singh alias Gora, sustained a bullet injury in the leg in police retaliation and was hospitalised, while Ram Asra alias Shami and Arman alias Manga were arrested on the spot. The police further said they had recovered two country-made pistols and ammunition from the suspects. Sandeep Malik, Senior Superintendent of Police, Hoshiarpur, told the media that the three people were linked to a robbery at a money changer's shop in Mahilpur (Hoshiarpur) on December 16, where over Rs 4 lakh was looted, and another gunpoint robbery in Hoshiarpur Sadar. Police sources said the robbers are taking advantage of the dense fog. CCTV footage has emerged as a critical tool for investigators in these cases, helping them track suspect movements and vehicles. Authorities say intensified patrols and intelligence-based operations are ongoing, but residents and business communities continue to voice serious concerns over safety, demanding faster action, stronger policing, and improved surveillance infrastructure. Pargat Singh, Congress MLA for Jalandhar Cantt, alleged that law and order in Punjab had deteriorated under the Aam Aadmi Party Government. He said that incidents of firing, killings, and armed robberies had created fear among residents and traders.

to slap non-bailable sections but could not. I spoke to the officers and then they became a bit soft. Anyone can make allegations against me and my son, but without notice how can they come to my residence with such force? They could not give any answer." He added, "We are used to all this. Let them take the CCTV footage; they are investigating and experts were also brought."

Alleging harassment of his family, Kabir said, "If anyone thinks that by getting orders from Calcutta, they will file false cases against me or my party workers in 27 police stations in Murshidabad, they are wrong. In Lalgola, police have been roaming around my daughter's in-laws' place with measuring tape for the last four days. They have five properties. Let them touch my son-in-law, my daughter or their properties. What I have said, I will do. I will take the police to task." Questioning the use of government funds for Durgaangan projects, Kabir said, "Government money cannot be spent like this. Why is the BJP quiet now? Why are they not going to court? Then it must be understood that Mamata Banerjee and the BJP have some understanding. The state administration is completely spineless and will act only on the Chief Minister's orders." Tanusree Bose is a dedicated journalist reporting for The Indian Express from Kolkata.

Amid fears of rebellion, BJP makes personal calls to PMC poll candidates instead of announcing list



Confident of winning the Pune Municipal Corporation (PMC) polls for the second consecutive time after having inducted many leaders from other political parties, the city unit of the BJP now appears apprehensive over possible rebellion from within the party as it quietly distributed letters of candidature to a few of its leaders before declaring the final list of candidates. The filing of nominations for the municipal polls ends on Tuesday afternoon and the city is witnessing hectic political activities with many aspirants, mainly from the BJP, filing their nominations following a personal call from party leaders who have refrained from declaring an official list of candidates.

"The party will declare its list of candidates soon," said Ganesh Bidkar, who has filed his nomination for the PMC election. He is also the BJP convenor for the civic polls in Pune. The party is contesting the PMC polls in alliance with the Eknath Shinde-led Shiv Sena. Bidkar said he filed the

nomination after the BJP sent him an official letter to contest the civic polls. "I am thankful to all the senior leaders of the party, including the chief minister, for giving me the opportunity to contest the civic polls," he added. While there are only 165 seats in the PMC, the BJP is facing a "problem of plenty" as it received over 2,500 applications from various aspirants, even as it has set aside a few seats for alliance partners Shiv Sena and the Republican Party of India (Athawale). An office-bearer of the BJP said, "The party has called up official candidates personally and asked them to file their nomination for the Pune civic polls. Many candidates are filing their nomination today (Monday)." Leaders who have filed their nominations so far include the BJP's Yogesh Mullick and Mahesh Wabale, and the Shiva Sena's Ulhas Bagul. The polling will take place on January 15, and the results will be declared on January 16.

According to a BJP source, "It was obvious that there will be disappointed leaders who would not get candidature. A few may jump to other political parties to contest civic elections." Meanwhile, RPI(A) party workers held a protest outside the city BJP office on Monday, accusing alliance partner BJP of "fooling" them. "There is no information on how many seats the BJP has allotted for the RPI(A) even as their candidates are filing nominations," an RPI(A) worker said. A leader of the Ajit Pawar-led Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) said the party will also delay announcing its final list of candidates as part of a strategy to rope in rebels from the BJP and its allies to contest on behalf of the NCP wherever possible. The BJP had won 98 seats in the 2017 PMC elections in which it had targeted to win 125 wards.

Maharashtra and Bengaluru police seize illegal drugs worth Rs 1.2 crore during raids in Karnataka

Karnataka Home Minister G Parameshwara said on Sunday that illegal drugs worth Rs 1.2 crore were seized in Bengaluru in an operation conducted by the Mumbai Police, Maharashtra's Anti-Narcotics Task Force (ANTF), the Bengaluru City Police, and the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB), leading to multiple arrests over the illicit manufacture and trafficking of mephedrone and raw materials.

The raids were conducted in Kothanur, Bagalur, and Yerappanahalli on December 24 and 25. One of the arrests was made in Mumbai, another in Belagavi, and two others in Bengaluru. The four people were produced before a Devanahalli court on December 26, the police said. According to the Bengaluru police, on December 21, one Abdul Khader was arrested in Mumbai by the city police on charges related to the possession of approximately 1.5 kg of mephedrone. Based on his statements, Prashanth Patil of Belagavi was arrested, and he provided information regarding the source of the drug, which led the investigators to Bengaluru city.

The Maharashtra ANTF, in coordination with Bengaluru police and NCB officials, later arrested Suresh Yadav at Kankanhalli in Yelahanka and Malkhan Ramlal Bishnoi at Kannur in Bagalur. The joint operation led to the seizure of 4.2 kg of mephedrone at a house in Yerappanahalli, a village in the Avalahalli police station limits, along with 17 kg of raw material (in liquid form), other chemicals, barrels, mixers, and other equipment. One more mixer was recovered at N G Gollahalli in Kothanur. No functional lab or factory



was located at any of the raided places. Raw materials stocked at a carpenter shed in Kannur were also seized, said the police. "We conducted tests on the finished 4.2 kg substance. The general test was positive for amphetamine, but a specific test for meth/MDMA was negative. It could be an impure substance. In all, 4.2 kg of mephedrone worth 1.2 crore and 17 kg of precursor or raw material were seized. The total worth of the raw materials is yet to be verified. The NCB has fixed the price of 1 kilogram of mephedrone at Rs 30 lakh," said Seemanth Kumar Singh, Commissioner of Police, Bengaluru. While Parameshwara said that drugs worth Rs 1.2 crore were seized, the Maharashtra ANTF claimed that they had seized narcotics worth Rs 55 crore.

'Virtual court of Justice Chandrachud': Woman duped of Rs 3.71 crore in 'digital arrest'; Surat garment trader arrested for providing mule account



The fraudster allegedly claimed that the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) was investigating the case, and that if she was innocent, her hearing would be conducted as soon as possible and she would be granted bail. He allegedly said that a judge named Chandrachud would conduct her hearing. (Express Photo) The fraudster allegedly claimed that the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) was investigating the case, and that if she was innocent, her hearing would be conducted as soon as possible and she would be granted bail. He allegedly said that a judge named Chandrachud would conduct her hearing. The West Cyber police in Mumbai recently arrested a 46-year-old garment trader who allegedly allowed a fraudster to use his bank account to receive Rs 1.71 crore in connection with a 'digital arrest' case in which a 68-year-old woman was allegedly duped of Rs 3.71 crore. The fraudster allegedly threatened the woman, claiming her hearing was held in a 'virtual court of Justice Chandrachud' and forced her to transfer all her savings to multiple bank accounts.

The arrested accused has been identified as Jitendrabhai Dhanjibhai Miyani, 46, a resident of Surat. As directed by the fraudster, he and his associate allegedly registered a garment trading firm four months ago and, using the firm's details, opened a bank account. Miyani then handed over his bank details to the fraudster after withdrawing his commission of Rs 6.40 lakh on the same day when the victim's money was credited into his account, said a police officer. The fraudster then transferred the entire amount to another account, and the person who was in touch with him fled abroad, said the police. A senior officer involved in the probe said the police have been gathering details about the other members of the syndicate and will apprehend them.

How the 'digital arrest' unfolded According to the police, the complainant is a resident of Veera Desai Road, Andheri (West). She told the police she received a call from an unknown number claiming to be from the Colaba police station and that the caller disconnected. Later, she allegedly received a WhatsApp video call, and the caller again claimed

to be calling from the Colaba police station. The caller allegedly told her that her Aadhaar card was used to open a Canara Bank account, which was then used for illegal transactions totalling Rs 6 crore. The fraudster allegedly told her that one Nareesh Goyal had been arrested in connection with a money laundering case, in which her name had also been mentioned.

The fraudster allegedly claimed that the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) was investigating the case, and that if she was innocent, her hearing would be conducted as soon as possible and she would be granted bail. He allegedly said that a judge named Chandrachud would conduct her hearing. Soon, a person in a black coat appeared on the video call and asked her whether she was involved in a money laundering case, she told the police. When the woman replied that she had done nothing wrong, he allegedly refused her 'bail', got up from his chair, and left. The accused then allegedly demanded that she deposit all her savings for verification. According to the FIR, the woman transferred 3.71 crore from her bank account between August 29 and October 6, per their instructions. When the accused demanded more money and started giving excuses for not returning her money, she realised she had been duped. The woman approached the cyber police station and submitted all the chats, transactions, screenshots and the bank statements to the police. They verified the facts, registered a case in November, and began an investigation.

Telangana govt doctors seek CM's intervention over long-pending salary, service issues

Hyderabad: Government doctors from across Telangana on Monday sought Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy's intervention for a permanent and sustainable solution to the long-standing salary and service-related issues faced by the doctors working in hospitals under Telangana Vaidya Vidhan Parishad (TVVP). The members of Telangana Government Doctors Association (TGDA) also submitted a memorandum to Principal Secretary, Health, Dr Christina Z Chongthu, urging the State government's quick action on this matter. The core issue of bringing TVVP under Directorate of Secondary Health Services (DSHS) has remained unresolved. As a result, doctors continue to face uncertainty in salary disbursement, administrative ambiguity, cadre stagnation and lack of parity with their counterparts in other government health departments, the members of TGDA on Monday said.

Suspended TMC MLA Humayun Kabir alleges police harassment after he laid masjid foundation stone

"In 2026, the minority vote will come to us. Mamata Banerjee will not get it. The minority wants their own representative. If required, I will give 200 candidates and 90 will be Muslim candidates. In 2026, it will be Hindus versus Muslims. Suwendu is doing Hindu politics and Mamata is also doing Hindu appeasement — Jagannath, Durga Carnival, Durga Puja doles," he said. "I will be the leader for Muslims. In 2026, the division between Hindu and Muslim votes will come out clearly in the open. Our main target is the Muslim vote," Kabir said.

Kabir alleged that the police began "targeting" him after he laid the foundation stone for a Babri-style mosque in Murshidabad. "Since the day I laid the foundation stone for the Babri-style masjid, the police have been after me. Why is there no role of the police today when the Chief Minister lays the foundation stone of a Durgaangan? I will start construction once all paperwork is completed," he said. Responding to TMC general secretary Abhishek Banerjee's comment that those building religious places should do so "outside politics", Kabir said, "If this suggestion is for me, then it should also apply to his aunt (Mamata Banerjee)." A day after Saktipur police detained Kabir's son Ghulam Nabi Azad, popularly known as Robin — who was later released — on allegations of assaulting Kabir's personal security officer (PSO), Kabir said, "They attempted

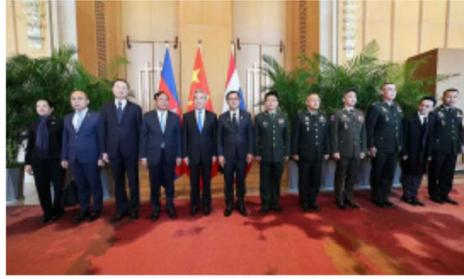
Top diplomats of China, Cambodia and Thailand meet as Beijing seeks to strengthen role in dispute

Hong Kong: Foreign ministers from Cambodia and Thailand convened with their Chinese counterpart on Monday as the Beijing government, building on its expanding presence in the world diplomatic arena, sought to play a stronger mediating role in the violent border dispute between the two Southeast Asian countries. The trilateral meeting, held in a southwestern Chinese province north of the contested border, came two days after Thailand and Cambodia signed a fresh ceasefire agreement to end weeks of fighting that killed more than 100 people and forced hundreds of thousands to be evacuated on both sides of the border.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi called for joint efforts to promote regional peace, stability and development, which is language typical for China in such situations. "Allowing the flames of war to be reignited is absolutely not what the people of the two countries want, and not what China, as your friend, wants to see. Therefore, we should resolutely look ahead and move forward," Wang said during the meeting Monday in Yunnan province. It was noteworthy that the meeting was held there, nearer to the dispute and to Southeast Asia, rather than in Beijing, the Chinese capital and seat of government about 1,300 miles (2,500 kilometers) northeast.

Cambodian Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn said he believed the latest ceasefire would last and would create an environment for both countries to work on their relations and resume the previously agreed-upon ways to settle their differences, according to a Chinese interpreter. Thai Foreign Minister Sihasak Phuangketkeow also expressed hopes for peace with neighboring countries, the interpreter said. The Thai Foreign Ministry later said in a statement that China volunteered to be a platform to support peace between the two countries and Thailand reiterated that adjustments of ties should be conducted "on a step-by-step basis." "The Thai side will consider the release of 18 soldiers after the 72 hours ceasefire observation period and requests that Cambodia facilitate the return of Thais along the border," the ministry said.

A day after the fresh pact was signed, Sihasak and Prak Sokhonn held separate meetings with Wang on Sunday, the first day of the two-day gathering. The meetings



represented China's latest efforts to strengthen its role as an international mediator and, in particular, its influence in Asian regional crises. As China grows and becomes more of an economic and political force regionally and globally, Beijing has spent the past decade and more working in various ways to increase its voice as a third party in diplomatic matters. The two Southeast Asian countries originally reached a ceasefire in July. It was brokered by Malaysia and pushed through under pressure from U.S. President Donald Trump, who threatened to withhold trade privileges unless Thailand and Cambodia agreed. The preliminary pact was followed by a more detailed October agreement.

But Thailand and Cambodia carried on a bitter propaganda war, with minor, cross-border violence continuing. The tensions erupted into heavy fighting in early December. The Saturday agreement calls for Thailand, after the ceasefire has held for 72 hours, to repatriate 18 Cambodian soldiers who have been held prisoner since the earlier fighting in July. Their release has been a major demand of the Cambodian side. The agreement also calls on both sides to adhere to international agreements against deploying land mines, a major concern of Thailand. Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet on Monday issued a statement to all Cambodian combatants along the border with Thailand. "Even though we can still fight," he said, "as a small country we still have nothing to gain from prolonging the fighting for a long time."

13 killed, 98 injured after passenger train derails in Mexico



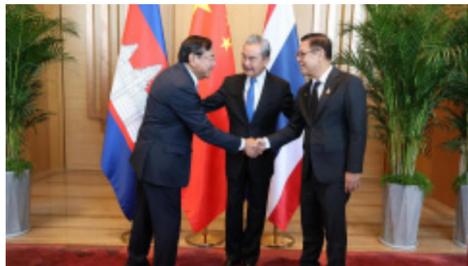
Mexico City: A passenger train carrying 241 passengers and nine crew members derailed on a bridge near Nizanda in southern Mexico on Sunday, leaving at least 13 people dead and 98 others injured, the Secretariat of the Navy said on social media. The accident occurred on the Interoceanic Train, which links the Pacific port of Salina Cruz with Coatzacoalcas on the Gulf Coast, as it rounded a bend near the town of Nizanda in Oaxaca. The train, consisting of two locomotives and four passenger cars, partially toppled off the tracks, with several carriages tilting down the side of a cliff. Of the 98 injured, five

were in serious condition.

Most have been admitted to hospitals run by the Mexican Social Security Institute (IMSS) in Matas Romero and Salina Cruz, while others were treated at IMSS-Wellbeing hospitals in Juchitán and Ixtépec. Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum Pardo posted on X, "The Secretariat of the Navy has informed me that in the Interoceanic Train accident, unfortunately 13 people died; 98 are injured, five of them seriously." Rescue workers were seen helping passengers alight from the derailed train, while local and federal authorities coordinated relief and medical assistance. Governor Salozm Jara Cruz expressed deep regret over the accident and assured that state authorities were cooperating fully with federal teams to assist the affected families.

Mexico's Attorney General has launched an investigation into the cause of the derailment. The Interoceanic rail link, inaugurated two years ago under former President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, was designed to strengthen regional connectivity, boost passenger and freight transport, and create a strategic trade corridor across the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. Authorities continue to monitor the situation closely, focusing on the safety of passengers and providing urgent medical care to the injured. The accident underscores the need for rigorous safety measures on this vital rail corridor through Oaxaca's challenging terrain.

Top diplomats of China, Cambodia and Thailand meet as Beijing seeks stronger role in dispute



Foreign Ministers from Cambodia and Thailand convened with their Chinese counterpart on Monday (December 29, 2025) as the Beijing government, building on its expanding presence in global diplomacy, sought to play a stronger mediating role in the violent border dispute between the two Southeast Asian countries. The trilateral meeting, held in a southwestern Chinese province north of the contested border, came two days after Thailand and Cambodia signed a fresh ceasefire agreement to end weeks of fighting that killed more than 100 people and forced the evacuation of hundreds of thousands on both sides of the border. "We haven't resolved everything, but I think we are making progress in the right direction, and we have to keep up the momentum," Thailand Foreign Minister Sihasak Phuangketkeow told reporters after the meeting in Yunnan province. He said the chief priorities are to ensure a sustained ceasefire and continue rebuilding trust. It was noteworthy that the meeting was held in Yunnan, nearer to the dispute and to Southeast Asia, rather than in Beijing, the Chinese capital and seat of government, about 2,500 kilometers (1,300 miles) northeast. The meetings represented China's latest efforts to strengthen its role as an international mediator and, in particular, its influence in Asian regional crises. As China grows into an economic and political force globally, Beijing has spent the past decade and more working in various ways to increase its voice as a third party in diplomatic matters. Hopes for peace expressed

During the meeting on Monday (December 29), Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi called for joint efforts to promote regional peace, stability and development — language typical for China in such situations. "Allowing the flames of

war to be reignited is absolutely not what the people of the two countries want and not what China, as your friend, wants to see. Therefore, we should resolutely look ahead and move forward," Mr. Wang said. Cambodian Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn said he believed the latest ceasefire would last and would create an environment for both nations to resume previously agreed-upon ways to settle differences, according to a Chinese interpreter. Sihasak also expressed hopes for peace with neighboring countries. After the meeting, Chinese official news agency Xinhua quoted Wang as saying the three nations reached a consensus to move forward with the ceasefire without reversal, maintain dialogue and restore ties between the two Southeast Asian countries step by step. A statement released by Xinhua, the Cambodian state news agency Agence Kampuchea Presse and the Thai Foreign Ministry said the three sides had in-depth exchanges on maintaining the ceasefire. The next key step was to work toward resuming normal exchanges, it said. China said it was ready to provide immediate humanitarian assistance for displaced residents, the statement said. The countries also agreed to take more robust measures to combat transnational crimes, including telecom and online scams, the statement said. Sihasak and Prak Sokhonn had also held separate meetings with Wang on Sunday, the first day of the two-day gathering. The two Southeast Asian countries originally reached a ceasefire in July. It was brokered by Malaysia and pushed through under pressure from U.S. President Donald Trump, who threatened to withhold trade privileges unless Thailand and Cambodia agreed. The preliminary pact was followed by a more detailed October agreement. But Thailand and Cambodia carried on a bitter propaganda war, with minor, cross-border violence continuing. The tensions erupted into heavy fighting in early December. The Saturday (December 27) agreement calls for Thailand, after the ceasefire has held for 72 hours, to repatriate 18 Cambodian soldiers who have been held prisoner since the earlier fighting in July. Their release has been a major demand of the Cambodian side. The agreement also calls on both sides to adhere to international agreements against deploying land mines, a major concern of Thailand. Sihasak said Thailand would start repatriating the 18 Cambodian soldiers if the ceasefire could be maintained for 72 hours with no additional incidents. Thailand would also ask Cambodia to facilitate the return of remaining Thais in the Cambodian border city of Poipet, he said.

China's military to conduct 'Justice Mission 2025' live fire exercises around Taiwan

The Chinese military said on Monday (December 29, 2025) it was dispatching air, navy and rocket troops to conduct joint military drills around Taiwan, a move it called a "stern warning" against separatist and "external interference" forces. The drills came after Beijing expressed anger at a statement by Japan's Prime Minister, Sanae Takaichi, that its military could get involved if China were to take action against Taiwan, the self-governing island that the world's second-biggest economy says must come under its rule. But the Chinese military did not mention Japan in its statement on Monday (December 29, 2025) morning.

Taiwan, an island off the southeastern coast of China, separated from the mainland in 1949 amid Civil War. It has operated since then with its own government, though the mainland's government claims it as sovereign territory. Senior Col. Shi Yi, spokesperson of the People's Liberation Army's Eastern Theatre Command, said the drills, code-named "Justice Mission 2025", would be conducted in the Taiwan Straits and areas to the north, southwest, southeast and east of the island. Mr. Yi said the activities will focus on sea-air combat readiness patrol, "joint seizure of comprehensive superiority", blockades on key ports and deterrence outside the island chain. "It is a stern



warning against 'Taiwan independence' separatist forces, and it is a legitimate and necessary action to safeguard China's sovereignty and national unity," the command said in a statement released on WeChat. Beijing last week also imposed sanctions against 20 U.S. defence-related companies and 10 executives, a week after Washington announced large-scale arms sales to Taiwan valued at more than USD 10 billion. If approved by the U.S. Congress, it would be the largest-ever American weapons package to the self-ruled territory.

U.S. offers Ukraine 15-year security guarantee as part of peace plan, Zelenskyy says

The United States is offering Ukraine security guarantees for a period of 15 years as part of a proposed peace plan, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said on Monday (December 29, 2025), though he said he would prefer an American commitment of up to 50 years to deter Russia from further attempts to seize its neighbour's land by force. U.S. President Donald Trump hosted Mr. Zelenskyy at his Florida resort on Sunday (December 28) and insisted that Ukraine and Russia are "closer than ever before" to a peace settlement.

Negotiators are still searching for a breakthrough on key issues, including whose forces withdraw from where and the fate of the Russian-occupied Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, one of the 10 biggest in the world. Mr. Trump noted that the months-long U.S.-led negotiations could still collapse. "Without security guarantees, realistically, this war will not end," Mr. Zelenskyy told reporters in voice messages responding to questions sent via a WhatsApp chat. Ukraine has been fighting Russia since 2014, when it illegally annexed Crimea and Moscow-backed separatists took up arms in the Donbas, a vital industrial region in eastern Ukraine.

Details of the security guarantees have not become public, but Mr. Zelenskyy said on Monday (December 29) that they include how a peace deal would be monitored as well as the "presence" of partners. He didn't elaborate, but Russia has said it won't accept the deployment in Ukraine of troops from NATO countries. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Monday (December 29) that Russian Presi-



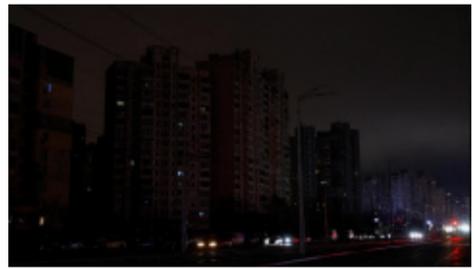
dent Vladimir Putin and Mr. Trump were expected to speak in the near future, but there was no indication the Russian leader would speak to Mr. Zelenskyy. French President Emmanuel Macron said Kyiv's allies will meet in Paris in early January to "finalise each country's concrete contributions" to the security guarantees. Mr. Trump said he would consider extending U.S. security guarantees for Ukraine beyond 15 years, according to Mr. Zelenskyy. The guarantees would be approved by the U.S. Congress as well as by parliaments in other countries involved in overseeing any settlement, he said. Mr. Zelenskyy said he wants the 20-point peace plan under discussion to be approved by Ukrainians in a national referendum. However, holding a ballot requires a ceasefire of at least 60 days, and Moscow has shown no willingness for a truce without a full settlement.

Russia strikes Ukraine's capital killing one, day before Zelenskyy-Trump meeting

Russia attacked Ukraine's capital with ballistic missiles and drones on Saturday (December 27, 2025), killing at least one person and wounding 27, a day before talks between the leaders of Ukraine and the United States, authorities said. Explosions boomed across Kyiv as the attack began in early morning and continued for hours.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy prepared to meet with U.S. President Donald Trump in Florida on Sunday for further talks on ending the nearly four-year war. Mr. Zelenskyy told reporters that he and Trump plan to discuss several matters, including security guarantees and territorial issues in the Donetsk and Zaporizhzhia regions. "This attack is Russia's answer on our peace efforts. It really shows that (Russian President Vladimir) Putin does not want peace," Mr. Zelenskyy said after stopping in Canada to meet with Prime Minister Mark Carney in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Carney announced \$1.8 billion worth of economic assistance to Ukraine that helps unlock financing from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank for reconstruction and development. "The barbarism that we saw overnight, the attack of Kyiv, shows just how important that we stand with Ukraine during this difficult time," Mr. Carney said. The Russian Defence Ministry said it carried out a "massive strike" overnight, using "long-range precision-guided weapons from land, air and sea, including Kinzhal hypersonic aeroballistic missiles" and drones. It said it targeted energy infrastructure facilities used by Ukraine's forces and military-industrial enterprises.

Earlier on Saturday, the ministry said air defences shot down seven Ukrainian drones over the Russian regions of Krasnodar and Adygeya overnight. On Saturday afternoon, the ministry said 147 more drones were shot down over a number of Russian regions. Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin said air defences intercepted more than 20 drones "flying towards" the Russian capital on Saturday. He did not report any damage or casualties. It was not immediately clear whether those were included in the Defence Ministry's count. Russia claims territorial gains in what could be viewed as an effort to further ramp up pressure on Ukraine before the Zelenskyy-Trump talks, the Kremlin on Saturday night released a video of Mr. Putin in military fatigues receiving reports from top military officials in an unidentified military command post. Russia's General Staff chief, Gen. Valery Gerasimov, reported to Putin that the Russian troops have taken full control of Myrnohrad in the Donetsk region — Russia uses the old Soviet name of the city, Dimitrov — the city of Huliaipole in the Zaporizhzhia region, and a few other settlements. There was no immediate comment from Ukrainian officials. Ukraine's General Staff reported attempts by Russian forces "to push Ukrainian defenders from their positions" in a number of areas, including Myrnohrad, and Kyiv's forces repelling "enemy attempts to advance" in the areas of Huliaipole and Bilohiria. Mr. Putin said that "if Kyiv authorities are not willing to end the matter peacefully, we will achieve all the goals we have in the special military operation by military means". Poland scrambled fighter jets and closed airports in Lublin and Rzeszow near the border with Ukraine for several hours during the Russian attacks, the country's armed forces command said on social media. There was no violation of Polish airspace, it said. Civil



aviation authority Pansa later said the airports had resumed operations. It was unclear what caused the alert in Poland when the Russian attacks were focussed on Kyiv, which is far from the border. Russia targeted Ukraine with 519 drones and 40 missiles, Ukraine's air force said. The main target was energy and civilian infrastructure in Kyiv, Mr. Zelenskyy said. In some districts of the region, there is no electricity or heating because of the attacks, he said. More than 10 residential buildings were damaged, Ukrainian Interior Minister Ihor Klymenko said on social media. Olena Karpenko, 52, said she heard a man as he burned to death. "His scream is still in my ears. I cannot believe it," she said, weeping. Karpenko said they heard an explosion at the nearby thermal power plant, followed by a stronger blast that shook the windows of her home. Then came the strike on her building. Two children were among those wounded in the attack, which hit seven locations across the capital, the head of the Kyiv Military Administration, Tymur Tkachenko, said on social media. A body was found under the rubble of one damaged building, he said. It was not immediately clear if that person was the man who burned to death. A fire broke out in an 18-story residential building in the Dnipro district, and emergency crews rushed to contain the flames. A 24-story residential building in the Darnytsia district was also hit, Tkachenko said, and more fires broke out in the Obolonskyi and Holosiivskyi districts. In the wider Kyiv region, the strikes hit industrial and residential buildings, according to Ukraine's Emergency Service. In the Vyshhorod area, emergency crews rescued one person found under the rubble of a destroyed house. Ukraine's largest private energy company, DTEK, said on X on Saturday evening that the Russian attack caused "extensive power outages" in Kyiv, saying that hundreds of thousands of customers remained without power. Security guarantees prioritised Mr. Zelenskyy told reporters he would aim to ensure there were "as few unresolved issues as possible" in talks with Trump, while respecting Ukraine's red lines. Speaking by audio note in a WhatsApp chat with journalists, Mr. Zelenskyy said he would prioritise discussing security guarantees for Ukraine. He has said that in the draft peace plan, the US has committed to providing guarantees that mirror the NATO alliance's Article 5, which means an attack on Ukraine would trigger a collective military response from the US and its allies. Territorial concessions are the most sensitive of issues the two leaders will discuss, including the Donetsk region and the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant. Mr. Zelenskyy reiterated that Ukraine would never recognise any territory as Russian "under any circumstances".

There's something in the Mumbai air



Shabnam Abdul Gaffar Shah, 35, is wheezing. The air around her in the slums of Mumbai's Mankhurd, a few hundred metres from an under-construction metro project, smells of soot and dust. "Everyone in the house — my three children, husband, and I — has been ill for the past month. We went to the doctor. He said, 'Hawa kharab hai (The air is bad).' The cough and cold would 'not go,'" she says, sitting just outside her single-room home on a road down which rush schoolchildren, honking two-wheelers, BEST buses trying to navigate dug-up peripheries, and street-side vendors jostling for space in the same chaos. Medical expenses have become a challenge, she says. "Kitni dawa-daru karenge? (How much will we spend on medicines?)" Around 15 km away, in Matunga, an area dotted with several top ranking colleges, including Podar and Ruia, professors of Khalsa College are worried about their students who commute by public transport and walk down dusty roads to reach the campus. The construction of high-rise structures to replace old four-storeyed ones is in full swing in the area.

A study by the Maharashtra Pollution Control Board (MPCB) in 2023 to find out the sources of air pollution in 10 cities in the State showed that dust contributed to 30% of PM10 pollution in Mumbai. PM is a reference to particulate matter, which can be inhaled, defined by its diameter: 10 micrometres and 2.5 micrometres, for instance. These can enter the lungs and have an adverse effect on health, both immediate and in the long-term, if exposure is constant.

Mumbai's air quality over the past three years has frequently ranged from 'moderate' to 'severe', with PM2.5 and PM10 levels often exceeding safe limits, driven up by vehicular emissions, dust, and winter conditions that lead to stagnation of air. Respirer Living Sciences, a climate tech start-up, released a report this year that stated that Mumbai saw a 2.6% increase in PM2.5 levels from 35.2 g/m³ in 2019 to 36.1 g/m³ in 2024, reflecting a persisting air quality issue for India's financial capital. It added that Mumbai witnessed remarkable improvement in the number of 'good' days, increasing from 164 in 2021 to 184 in 2024. However, the persistence of 'moderate' and 'poor' days in 2022 and 2023 highlighted the presence of localised pollution sources, particularly during construction-heavy periods, it stated. Barely 3 km away, advocate Shweta Mehta stays in a neighbourhood touted to be the next big connectivity hub of coastal Mumbai: Wadala. Located less than 2 km from the upcoming New Cuffe Parade area, where metro, monorail, and key infrastructure projects are coming up, the dust in the area is thick.

Mehta, who lives in an apartment block, says, "Due to poor air quality over the past few months, I have been restricting my parents from stepping out. They have lung-related ailments and I have asked them to stay indoors." She is aware that her ageing parents are beginning to feel frustrated and lonely, with their social life disrupted, but for Mehta, it's a difficult choice. Doctors and lawyers speak out. Dr. Asmita Mahajan, consultant and head of the Department of Paediatrics and Neonatology at Mahim's Fortis Raheja Hospital, feels there should be a pollution lockdown in the city. "When did you last see clear skies?" she says. Until a few years ago, she would see a seasonal spike in the number of children coming to the hospital with allergic respiratory conditions. "Allergic coughs take months to go away. Children with asthma see an exacerbation of symptoms." Until last year, Mahajan says, she used to see two children per week with respiratory problems. It has now gone up to six per week. "There are repeat hospital admissions, especially of children with asthma. Some need hospitalisation and ICU admission too," she says. Dr. Samir Garde, a pulmonologist in Mumbai, says 25 years ago, the leading cause of lung cancer was smoking. Now, many non-smokers contract serious lung diseases, including cancer. He attributes one of the reasons to air pollution. He hopes the government will prioritise public health. Looking at the persistent air quality problem, the Bombay High Court took suo motu cognisance of the matter in 2023. It initiated a public interest litigation plea to address deteriorating air quality levels and rising pollution from construction dust. In October 2023, the court issued detailed orders, including 28 guidelines to be implemented by the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) at construction sites. These included mandatory installation of air quality sensors and wa-

ter sprinklers, and placing covers on vehicles transporting construction material. On November 27 this year, the court flagged the sharp decline in the air quality index (AQI) (up to 270, classified as 'poor') and rejected the 'volcanic ash from Ethiopia' theory. Amicus curiae and senior advocate Darius Khambata highlighted the worsening of air quality since 2023 and non-compliance at construction sites. Of nearly 1,000 construction sites in the city, only 400 have installed sensors mandated by the court's earlier order, and 117 of those are non-functional. Moreover, these sensors are yet to be linked to a central monitoring system, he pointed out. The court stressed that Mumbai needed a sustained plan to combat rising pollution and ordered the formation of a committee to ensure strict compliance with existing guidelines for construction sites. It also noted that earlier committees had failed to submit weekly compliance reports since March 2025. The new committee is expected to submit its findings within a week, after which the matter will be heard again on December 15. Data points This month, BMC Commissioner Bhushan Gagrani announced Project MANAS, in collaboration with IIT Kanpur, to install a hyperlocal sensor-based ambient air quality monitoring system. "What will you do even when monitors are installed? Do we not have enough air quality data already?" says Rakesh Kumar, president of the non-profit Society for Indoor Environment, and former director of the Council of Scientific & Industrial Research's National Environmental Engineering Research Institute (CSIR-NEERI). He says the real problem is not the unavailability of data for measuring ambient air quality, but translating that data into action.

He also points out that the data is generic. "Let's talk about the transportation sector. You have a mix of vehicles of different vintages. Of the 100 vehicles that are on the road, 50-60 are regularly on the road. Some are there for construction activities: vehicles carrying material and debris. They go to different construction sites. That is the data we need," he says.

He adds that it is necessary to go into granular data on road movement. Banning all construction activities suddenly and implementing curbs under Stages III and IV of the Graded Response Action Plan overnight are knee-jerk reactions, he feels. "We are missing some piece of information. That will not come from ambient air quality measurement," he says. Tuhin Banerji, former scientist at CSIR-NEERI and current coordinator of the non-profit International Center for Climate and Sustainability Action, feels the government knows the solutions but isn't willing to invest in them. "Everyone is only talking about monitoring. Nobody is doing anything about removing these pollutants. There are molecular filters that can selectively remove pollutants from the atmosphere," he says. He gives a list of interventions like electrostatic precipitators to remove particulate matter; WAYU (wind augmentation purifying unit), an outdoor air purifying device developed by the CSIR-NEERI to combat air pollution in high-traffic zones; and Techno Green Yuka Yantra, a patented solution for air quality. He, too, laments "the lack of bureaucratic will" to implement them. People walk at Girgaon Chowpatty as city skyline is seen engulfed in smog on December 5, 2025. People walk at Girgaon Chowpatty as city skyline is seen engulfed in smog on December 5, 2025. | Photo Credit: Emmanual Yugini Environmentalists have accused authorities of obfuscating crucial data on air quality. Sumaira Abdulali has been tracking air quality for years. As part of her awareness campaign, she used to put out PM2.5 level data every day for over a year. Then, suddenly, in May this year, PM2.5 data was not available on the Central Pollution Control Board's (CPCB) Sameer app, which gives real-time updates on AQI and other parameters. "Till May 2025, all the readings were in red. In fact, in April this year, the PM2.5 level in Kandivali [a Mumbai suburb] was 434, way above the red zone," she says. Abdulali raised the issue of data unavailability with authorities, asked questions for a while, but says she got no answers. "We know that PM2.5 is more dangerous. The structure of your nose can stop PM10. But PM2.5 particles go into your lungs. They can cause all sorts of problems: coughing, wheezing. Long-term exposure can cause cancer," Banerji says. Asked why PM2.5 data was no longer available on the Sameer app, MPCB officials say the data was controlled by the CPCB. "You will have to ask them," says MPCB Joint Director (Air) Satish Padwal. "There has to be one monitoring centre per 10 lakh population. There are excess stations in Mumbai at present," he adds. The Sameer app shows that 23 of the 30 stations were active. Gagrani admits that air quality is a critical public health and governance priority. "Stop-work notices have been issued to 321 sites. We are carrying out road watering, mist spraying, site-wise visits, and urging bakeries to switch to clean fuel," he says. However, experts say mist spraying does not work to curb air pollution. The BMC has deployed 94 flying squads to ensure strict adherence to the 28 guidelines formulated for construction sites. Show-cause notices were issued to the bullet train project and Dharavi redevelopment project, says Ashwini Joshi, Additional Municipal Commissioner of BMC.

What are the concerns over the draft ISI Bill, 2025? | Explained

On September 25, the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) released the draft Indian Statistical Institute Bill, 2025. The Bill has been met with strong protests by academicians as well as students of the Indian Statistical Institute (ISI) who claim that the move is aimed to strip the institute of its academic autonomy by converting it from a "registered society to a statutory body corporate".

What is the significance of the ISI?

The ISI was founded in December 1931 by P.C. Mahalanobis in Kolkata and has since grown into one of India's most prestigious academic and research institutions. The institute was originally registered in April 1932, under the Societies Registration Act of 1860, and later re-registered under the West Bengal Societies Registration Act of 1961. Being a society provided the institute its own memorandum of association, bye-laws, and regulations. Parliament enacted the Indian Statistical Institute Act, 1959, declaring ISI as an Institution of National Importance (INI). Many scholars link the origin of the institute to the Bengal renaissance and credit the institute with shaping India's planning and policy apparatus. The National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) was developed at ISI, establishing the foundation of India's official statistical system. Other than P.C. Mahalanobis, the institute has produced legendary scholars such as Professor C.R. Rao and S.R.S. Varadhan. With about 1,200 students and six centres across India, ISI offers undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in Statistics, Mathematics, Quantitative Economics, Computer Science, Library and Information Science, Cryptology and Security, Quality Management Science and Operations Research.

Why are academicians protesting? The primary concern of those opposing the draft Bill is how the ISI's institutional status will change, from a "a registered society to a

statutory body corporate". A recent letter by about 1,500 academicians to Rao Inderjit Singh, Minister of State (Independent Charge) MoSPI, stated that there is no transparent reason that MoSPI should repeal the (1959) Act, abolish the society and introduce a Bill which violates the basic spirit of the agreement between the general body of the society and the government. The letter also states that the move to bypass the society registered under the WB Societies Registration Act to a "statutory body corporate" infringes upon the jurisdiction of the Societies Registration Act and is against the spirit of cooperative federalism. On November 28, hundreds of students and staff of ISI formed a human chain and held a public meeting near the institute's campus on B.T. Road in North Kolkata. Those opposing the draft Bill point out that the governance structure, as in the existing 1959 Act, vested authority in a council with academic representation, and procedural safeguards against government overreach. The proposed 2025 Bill, however, gives power to the Board of Governors (BoG), defined under Section 15 of the Act, which is heavily dominated by government nominees sidelining the authority of faculty and academic stakeholders. Former professor of ISI and chairman of West Bengal Infrastructure Development Finance Corporation Abhirup Sarkar said that the ISI is a place of doing basic research which is a long-term process where immediate results may not be visible. Since there is a push for a corporate model of funding in the draft Bill, getting funds for basic research projects could be a problem in the future. Section 29 of the proposed 2025 Act deals with 'power to generate revenue' which includes student fees, consultancy services and sponsored research projects among others. Another critical area raised by those opposing the Bill is that all appointments will be controlled by the Union government, through the BoG. Earlier there were 10 representatives from ISI (eight elected, one worker and one scientific worker) out of the 33 representatives on the council, a little less than one-third.

Rupee hits record low of 90: Calculated move by RBI or a sign of losing control?



Last Wednesday, the rupee slipped past the ₹90 per dollar mark. While this drop is labelled as 'psychologically significant', the underlying economic factors haven't changed much. Yet a specific set of recent events has added fresh momentum, decisively tipping the scales against the currency. The rupee's rise or fall depends on two main factors: what's happening in the market, and how the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) responds. Some of the major movements in the market that are weakening the rupee include pressure on exports owing to U.S. tariffs; a sudden surge in gold and silver imports adding weight to the ballooning import bill; and most importantly Foreign Portfolio Investors (FPIs) pulling out in large numbers from Indian equity. And what is the RBI doing? Till just a year ago, the RBI was firefighting by selling dollars to help arrest the slide of the rupee. But this year the RBI has changed its tactics. It has decided to intervene less and less and let the rupee seek its own level. More than market dynamics, this change in RBI's tack has allowed the rupee to breach the 90 mark. Exports sliding First, exports. The 50% tariff on Indian goods announced by U.S. President Donald Trump has had a tangible, bruising impact. When Indian goods became 50% more expensive for American buyers, demand dropped and exporters earned fewer dollars, creating a scarcity that drove the rupee down.

The damage is visible in recent data. Exports to the U.S. — India's largest partner — fell by over 12% in September and 9% in October this year, dragging total monthly exports down by nearly 12% year-on-year in October 2025. Yet, a wider lens reveals a surprising resilience. Despite the U.S. slump, cumulative exports for the April-October period actually rose marginally by 0.5% to \$253.8 billion in 2025, compared to 2024. This divergence suggests that while the U.S. door is closing, Indian exporters are finding windows elsewhere. It is this resilience that leads economists like Dr. Pronab Sen to downplay the panic. "It's not just the trade deficit with the U.S., it's the overall trade position," Dr. Sen argues, noting that the export decline is not large because 'we've made up in other countries.' However, historical data offers little comfort for the future. Warning signs for November are flashing red: India's manufacturing Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI) has fallen to a nine-month low, and the new export orders sub-index has slipped to a 13-month low, suggesting the worst of the tariff pain may be yet to come. Imports surging Second, imports. While falling exports are a concern, a massive surge in precious metal imports have also played a role in the depreciation of the rupee. In September and October, Indian purchases went vertical. Data shows that gold imports skyrocketed by roughly 200% year-on-year in October to hit nearly \$14.7 billion. Silver imports were even more dramatic, surging by 528% to \$2.7 billion. Despite record-high global prices, importers aggressively stocked up — paying premiums in September and October — driven by both the festive season demand and a domestic flight to safe-haven assets. Dr. Sen diagnoses this specific frenzy not as typical festive consumption, but as a classic 'flight to safety.' "It's not that we suddenly developed a fascination for gold," Dr. Sen explains. "But what we've seen recently is an unexpected surge because people are worried about alternative assets." He argues that domestic investors, spooked by volatility, are pulling money out of the stock market and parking it in bullion. Economically, this created a 'dollar drain.' To finance these massive purchases, businesses sold rupees to buy dollars, flooding the market with local currency. Thus, the rupee's depreciation was driven less by the tariff hit to ex-

ports and more by this structural trade imbalance — the chronic necessity to spend dollars on imports such as gold and silver. FPI flight

Third is Foreign Portfolio Investors (FPIs) — the global heavyweights who pour money into Indian stocks. By December 3, these investors had pulled out a staggering \$17 billion from Indian equities in 2025 alone (Chart 3). This marks the highest calendar-year outflow in at least two decades, surpassing the sell-offs of 2022 and 2008. When foreign investors leave, they sell rupees to take their dollars home. On this front, 2025 has been exceptionally harsh, accelerating the currency's weakness. These combined forces — stalling exports, surging imports, and fleeing capital — explain why there is immense pressure on the rupee. But they don't fully explain why the rupee breached the 90 mark. As economist Dr. Zico Dasgupta argues, market pressure is merely the fuel; the central bank determines whether to let it burn. "I would like to distinguish between the deterioration of current account and capital account flows and the slide of the rupee," Dr. Dasgupta says. "All three factors that you mentioned have contributed to the deterioration of the current and capital account flows, putting adverse pressure on foreign exchange reserves." However, he notes that the currency's actual value is a policy decision. "The slide of the rupee reflects RBI's present policy of maintaining a managed float," Dr. Dasgupta explains. "This is in contrast to RBI's earlier policy between mid-2022 and late 2024, when it largely kept the dollar exchange rate unchanged despite a negative pressure on the current account and capital account."

What did RBI do?

To understand the rupee's current trajectory, it is essential to analyse the central bank's actual market activity. The definitive record of this intervention is found in the Balance of Payments data, specifically under 'Reserve Assets.' In this accounting framework, the signs indicate the direction of flow: a negative figure means the central bank is buying dollars to increase reserves, while a positive figure means it is selling dollars to support the currency. By tracking these net flows from 2022 through late 2025, the data reveals a clear shift in strategy — from active defense to a significant reduction in market intervention. Data confirms this calibration. In previous high-pressure episodes, the central bank aggressively defended the currency, selling over \$30 billion in the quarter ending September 2022 and nearly \$38 billion in the quarter ending December 2024.

By comparison, the RBI's hand is now much lighter. In the quarter ending September 2025, amid similar turmoil, the central bank sold just \$10.9 billion — a significant sum, but far below the 'firefighting' peaks of the past. This reduced intervention signals that the RBI is no longer fighting to hold a specific level, but merely smoothing the inevitable slide. The central bank's calculated gamble is that a weaker rupee will act as a shock absorber, making Indian goods cheaper abroad, and offset the tariff pain. Experts, however, are divided on whether this textbook theory will work in reality. Dr. Sen offers a pragmatic endorsement of the strategy, provided the execution is controlled. "Is that healthy for the economy? Yes," Dr. Sen argues, viewing the depreciation as a necessary adjustment. His concern is velocity, not value. "Sharp jerks will be very disruptive," he warns. "But if you gradually let it depreciate and find its own level, then it's fine because people then have time to adjust... to renegotiate contracts." For Dr. Sen, a slow bleed over three or four months is preferable to a sudden 15% amputation. Dr. Dasgupta, however, is skeptical about the very premise of the RBI's gamble. He points to a troubling post-COVID anomaly: for years, the rupee fell in nominal terms, yet Indian goods didn't get cheaper in real terms due to domestic price hikes. "Depreciation of the nominal exchange rate does not guarantee real exchange rate depreciation," Dr. Dasgupta cautions. While he acknowledges that low inflation has recently helped the Real Exchange Rate fall, he remains sceptical that a cheaper currency can overcome the massive wall of weak U.S. demand. "The negative effect of weak U.S. import demand can negate the positive effect of exchange rate depreciation," he argues. For Dr. Dasgupta, the slide isn't a solution, but a symptom of larger structural problems that a simple currency adjustment may not be able to fix.

Health security se National security: Why does Centre want to levy cess on tobacco?

Story so far: Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman introduced the Health Security se National Security Cess Bill, 2025 on Thursday (December 4, 2025), kicking off the Centre's reform agenda for Parliament's Winter session. The Bill proposes to levy cess on "machines installed, or other processes undertaken in the manufacture of pan masala" to fund India's "health and national security". The Lok Sabha has already passed the Central Excise (Amendment) Bill, 2025 and the amended Manipur Goods and Services Tax (GST) Bill, 2025 while the above-mentioned Bill is currently slated for debate and passage. Introduced as a money Bill, the Health security se National security Cess Bill, 2025 need only be passed by the Lok Sabha. The Upper House has 14 days to provide its recommendations on such a Bill which may or may not be accepted by the Lok Sabha.

What does the Bill propose?

Termed the 'Health Security se National Security Cess', the Centre proposes to tax all those people who have machines installed for production of pan masala. The machines include fill and seal machines and any packing machine used to fill pan masala in pouches, tins or other containers. The cess will be decided as per number of pouches (tins or containers) produced by the machine per minute and pan masala weight packed in a pouch, tin or container. It will be collected at the beginning of each month, but no later than the seventh. Those paying the cess can self-declare the machine installed or processes undertaken in their factories producing pan masala. Centre can exempt anyone or any class from this cess, if it deems necessary in public interest. The cess has been classified into four categories based on the number of pouches it produces per minute — upto 500, 501-1000, 1001-1500 and above 1500. Correspondingly based on the weight of pan masala packed in each pouch (varying from 2.5 grams to above 10 grams), the cess varies from ₹101 lakh per month per machine to ₹2.5 crores (approximately). It also criminalises any violations upto 5 years imprisonment. India's tobacco use According to the Global Adult Tobacco Survey (GATS-2), nearly 42% of men and 14% of women in India use tobacco. Moreover, India amounts to 70% of the world's smokeless tobacco (SLT) users i.e. gutkha, pan masala and among smoked tobacco, bidis are preferred over cigarettes, especially in rural and lower income families. As both SLT and smoked tobacco use increase cancer risk in lung, head, neck, stomach, and pancreas, India ranks first glo-



bally in male cancer deaths. Experts found that the economic cost of both SLT and smoked tobacco amounted to ₹1.77 lakh crore in 2016-17. Centre's ban on use of gutkha has more or less remained ineffective as the tobacco industry has ensured wide accessibility of its products via policy interference, pricing tactics, targeted marketing and dense tobacco shop networks. Though WHO has recommended taxing tobacco products at 75% of its MRP, very few have followed through. Also, studies has shown that affordability of cigarettes and bidis remain the main hamper. 87% of Indian cigarette vendors sell single sticks, frequently operating near tea stalls, found research. This practice is banned in 88 countries but not in India.

What are the issues raised?

While titled 'Health security se National security', the Bill does not have any provisions to allocate the cess collected to anti-tobacco campaigns/schemes. In Parliament, many MPs raised this policy gap, stating that the increased cess will affect incomes of tobacco farmers and labourers working in beedi rolling factories — mostly women. Opposition MPs also highlighted that the Bill was aimed to fill a fiscal hole in the Centre's coffers due to the discontinuation of 'compensation cess'. Several members also highlighted that the Bill will not curb tobacco usage and only increase its illegal smuggling. Non-BJP MPs shed light that the Bill does not speak of the devolution of cess to States, while non-expenditure of other cess collected by Centre remain at an all-time high. TMC MP Sougata Roy pointed out that the Bill only focused on the machines and not the actual amount produced and decried the criminalisation of any violations. Indirect campaign has been used effectively to advertise their products by these tobacco producing companies, adds Mr. Roy.

Arundhati Roy's beedi and the Republic of What-if



These were the words of a senior lawyer making his case against an image of Arundhati Roy smoking a beedi on the cover of her new book — and by the time he's finished speaking these words, you realise the case isn't really about tobacco. It's about panic, particularly the Indian variety that sees a woman with a beedi and immediately imagines the collapse of civilisation, national health policy, and possibly the rupee.

The facts are boring. A book cover shows Ms. Roy with a beedi. The publisher adds a disclaimer saying this isn't meant to promote smoking. But that doesn't stop petitioners from invoking tobacco advertising. Fortunately the courts look at the cover, recall the law, and say "relax". Panic is rarely about facts. It's about the delicious freedom of not knowing. "We don't know if it's a ganja beedi," the lawyer says, and in that one sentence manages to confess both ignorance and certainty. He doesn't know — but he knows enough to be frightened. And the less he knows, the more frightened he's allowed to be. Soon, the courtroom is no longer dealing with a photograph. It's dealing with a fantasy — a country where a book cover overpowers public-health campaigns, parental guidance, school curricula, and common sense. Prove the unprovable. Unfortunately for this fantasy (and fortunately for us), the law doesn't operate on what-ifs. It cares about "what is". COPPA's provisions on advertising are concerned with promoting tobacco products, not with whether a person somewhere might mistake a work of literature for a cigarette commercial and panic about imaginary ganja. The judges to their credit keep dragging the case back from the Republic of What-If to the Republic of India. Is this an advertisement? No. Is the photograph being used to sell tobacco? No. Is there already a disclaimer precisely to avoid confusion? Yes. Then the law has nothing further to say. What speculative fears do power is moral policing. If the state can't quite ban something on the law as written, someone can always stand up and say, "We don't know if..." and invite the court, or the media, to fill in the gaps with anxiety. Nothing has actually happened yet, and that's the point. The harm is always potential, latent, "out there". The work of art is treated as a time bomb whose existence the

artist must justify while the fear is treated as self-evidently legitimate, warranting no evidence at all. Ordinarily, if you want to censor something, you must show that it crosses some legal line, e.g. obscenity. But in the new culture of "we don't know if..." the artist needs to prove the unprovable: that no unknown hurt sentiment will ever surface. The fragile parent

The disclaimer on Roy's book, offered in good-faith to signal that the image isn't an ad, is immediately reimagined as "anticipatory bail", a confession of guilt. It isn't enough to clarify your intent: your very attempt to clarify becomes proof that you've got something to hide. Heads, the moral police wins; tails, free expression loses.

None of this is accidental. These speculative anxieties sit inside a larger political project. Call them the hidden structures (to borrow a term from physics) of our current culture wars — the background assumptions that are never litigated directly yet which shape which images are called "too much". Some of these structures are easy to spot. Creative freedom is becoming suspicious by default. An artist or filmmaker isn't just making something. They're presumed to be smuggling in an agenda that corrupts youth and attacks the nation. Women's autonomy in particular is always too visible! A male author with a cigarette is a trope; a female author with a beedi is "too much" — too much of a woman being at ease, too much of an author refusing to pose as a safe and respectable figure, too much of literature threatening to look like life instead of staying inside the classroom. Ultimately the state is reimagined as a fragile parent on the brink. The government's anti-tobacco campaigns, we're told, can be derailed by one cover. National resolve is no stronger than a matchstick. When right-wing nationalists fight liberal ideas, they rarely say "we want fewer dissenting books". Instead, they say: we're concerned about the youth, about women, about social harmony, about public health. The enemy isn't the novel or the painting but the imaginary riot. The beedi on Roy's cover thus becomes part of a script in which liberal expression is always one step away from catastrophe. And the court is invited not just to read the law but to share in the anxiety. "We don't know if it's a ganja beedi" is a request: please, Your Lordships, join our panic. What's really "too much" in this episode isn't the beedi. It's the ambition of a politics that wants to supervise not just what the law forbids but what your imagination is allowed to settle on without immediately reporting itself to the nearest steering committee. But when you strip away the performance you're left with something oddly small: a misreading of a law and a plea that the courts protect citizens from the risk of misinterpreting a photograph. In fact the Supreme Court's response is the real satire, a measured reminder that renowned authors and publishers don't need a beedi to sell books — and that "we don't know if" is not a legal standard.

Trump's Pentagon chief under fire as scandals mount



U.S. Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth is under mounting pressure from scandals surrounding strikes on alleged drug boats and his use of Signal to discuss sensitive military information, sparking growing criticism and calls for him to quit. Mr. Hegseth — a former Army National Guard major who went from Fox News co-host to leader of the world's most powerful military — is no stranger to controversy and was only narrowly confirmed by the Senate earlier this year. The strikes on alleged narcotics smugglers — especially an incident in which survivors of an initial attack were subsequently killed — and his use of commercial messaging app Signal to talk about an impending operation in Yemen, have fuelled further opposition to Mr. Hegseth. "He's in another difficult position. In fact, his two big problems have now merged," said Mark Cancian, a retired U.S. Marine colonel and senior advisor at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

"But he seems to retain [U.S. President Donald] Trump's confidence, even as he's lost support of some Republicans. So I don't think he's in... [a] fatal situation," Mr. Cancian said. Jim Townsend, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defence for European and NATO policy during the Obama administration, said Mr. Hegseth is "on thin ice," and that Mr. Trump has "a Secretary of Defence that is giving him lots of headaches." Mr. Townsend agreed that Mr. Hegseth is unlikely to be fired immediately, but said if something happens that "really riles up the Republican Party" or embarrasses Mr. Trump's Make America Great Again movement, "they'll probably try to move him somewhere else." Yemen strikes Mr. Hegseth came under fire during his

confirmation process over alleged financial mismanagement at veterans' nonprofits where he previously worked, reports of excessive drinking, and allegations that he sexually assaulted a woman in California. His time as Secretary of Defence has also been marred by scandals, including one related to strikes on Yemen that were launched in mid-March. The Atlantic magazine revealed that its editor-in-chief had been inadvertently included in a Signal chat in which officials, including Mr. Hegseth, discussed the upcoming operation. The Pentagon chief sent messages on the timing of strikes hours before they happened and information on aircraft and missiles involved. The incident sparked an investigation by the Pentagon's independent inspector general's office, which concluded in a report released on Thursday (December 4, 2025) that Mr. Hegseth's actions could have resulted in "potential harm to U.S. pilots." Targeting alleged drug boats. Another controversy stemmed from a September 2 attack on an alleged drug-smuggling boat in the Pacific. An initial strike left survivors, with a follow-up attack killing those two people. Mr. Hegseth and the White House have repeatedly said the decision for the second strike was made by the operational commander, Admiral Frank Bradley, rather than the Defence Secretary. Lawmakers attended a classified briefing on Capitol Hill this week in which they were shown extended video footage of the incident — only a brief part of which has been publicly released — but there are conflicting views about whether the follow-up strikes were justified. The footage showed "the United States military attacking shipwrecked sailors — bad guys, bad guys — but attacking shipwrecked sailors," said Democratic Representative Jim Himes. Republican Senator Tom Cotton — another briefing attendee — described all four strikes on the boat as "entirely lawful and needful," and said the survivors were attempting to flip the drug-laden vessel back over and "stay in the fight." Mr. Hegseth has faced calls from some Democratic lawmakers for his resignation or firing over the follow-up strikes and the Signal controversy, but his job seems safe for the moment. Mr. Cancian, however, said that another scandal could push the Trump administration to remove him as Defence Secretary. "If there's maybe another one after this... the White House might lose its patience," he said, describing the controversies that have already occurred as "very embarrassing."

The price of breathing



Delhi is facing winter, and with it the familiar air of emergency — schools closing, flights getting diverted, masks reappearing, and the skyline dissolving into a grey wall. The pollution is not the only worry. The deeper concern is that, like every year, we have arrived here after violating all deadlines meant to prevent this crisis. Firecrackers were banned, but burst in full splendour; stubble-burning cut-off dates were set, but ignored; construction norms exist, but get flouted. Even the decision to create artificial rain — at enormous cost — came only after the air had turned toxic. This raises a deeper question: why are deadlines and public-interest rules so routinely broken in India?

A common psychological belief is that individual actions are too small to affect an entire city. Farmers burning a few acres of straw, motorists skipping a pollution control test, or residents lighting "just a few" crackers — the reasoning is the same: My crackers can't pollute the whole city, can they? But when millions act on this belief, we get exactly what follows Deepavali every year: a massive spike in PM2.5 levels (particulate matter with a diameter of 2.5 micrometres or less), sharp drops in visibility, and children with breathlessness being rushed to clinics. Behavioural scientists call this the tragedy of the commons — where each individual's small gain creates a large, shared loss.

India is a country of festivals, but our "celebrations" have expanded into noisy and toxic dimensions. Firecrackers — once limited to simple phool jharis and diyas — have now turned into industrial-scale explosives. The sentiment "This is a once-a-year event; let's enjoy without restrictions"

prevails. But pollution is not a one-day event. Its effects linger — spikes in asthma and respiratory distress within 24 hours of Deepavali, and air quality sliding into "hazardous" overnight. Cultural introspection is overdue. Laws and bans exist, but enforcement is inconsistent. An unenforced rule rarely becomes a real law. When people see neighbours lighting crackers or farmers burning stubble without consequences, compliance collapses. Contrast this with Delhi's behavioural shift after seat belts and speed cameras became the norm. Compliance rose sharply because enforcement was visible. Pollution rules need similar visibility — real-time challans for cracker violations, drones monitoring hotspots, and ward-level pollution reports displayed publicly. Civic pride. Can culture change? Yes — and there is precedent. Indore turned waste segregation, once resisted everywhere, into a badge of civic pride. Cleanliness was reframed as identity. School campaigns, neighbourhood competitions, and public celebration of compliance created a culture where following rules was socially rewarded. Delhi's air crisis demands a similar rethink. Clean air must be linked to shared identity, not just individual sacrifice. A cultural shift cannot rely on bans alone. You cannot take something away without offering something equally joyful in return. Cities around the world are replacing fireworks with drone shows, laser and projection-mapped light festivals, and low-smoke, low-noise regulated pyrotechnics. These are not dull alternatives — they are spectacular, photogenic, and family-friendly. India has already experimented with drone shows at the G20 Summit and in several State capitals. Imagine Indian cities hosting grand, free, open light festivals every Deepavali — creating a true community celebration without toxicity. Children are among the strongest forces for cultural change. When schools run "Green Deepavali" campaigns, families listen. When children calculate the cost of air pollution — school disruptions, health impact, emergency expenses — they bring the moral clarity adults often lack. Delhi's worsening air is not inevitable. It is the sum of our choices. This winter, we must ask: can we celebrate without poisoning the air our children breathe? If we can shift even one festive habit — from noise to light, from smoke to spectacle — we would not just be keeping the air clean. We would be redefining celebration, responsibility, and civic sense in modern India.

Shrinking space for the Humanities



Higher education across the world has, of late, been witnessing a significant shift toward disciplines such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). These disciplines foster technical knowledge and analytical skills and are much sought after because they are considered job-oriented. Modern universities, driven by global economic uncertainties and market forces, and seeking external funding and research grants, seem to be under pressure to prioritise programmes based on these disciplines. Besides, elite private universities, eager to justify exorbitant tuition fees, offer state-of-the-art courses aligned with the STEM trend.

It is unfortunate that the excessive patronage extended to such new-generation programmes is at the expense of the Humanities, which includes subjects such as history, philosophy, language and literature. There has been a systematic and organised attempt to marginalise and deprioritise such academic disciplines. Such discrimination is evident in the slashing of departmental funding and downsizing of the faculty — developments that inevitably lead to declining student enrolment, programme termination, and, ultimately, the closure of entire departments. The Humanities engage with human culture, history, and experience through critical and interpretive enquiry. They explore human values, expressions, and societies to deepen our understanding of what it means to be human. Studying the Humanities develops critical thinking, cultural awareness, empathy, ethical intelligence, and strong communication skills, shaping learners into well-rounded individuals. Endowed with historical perspective, moral sensibility, and creativity, such individuals stand ready to bring qualitative changes to social life.

Though these attributes may not always ensure lucrative jobs, unemployment is not particularly widespread among Humanities graduates. Their versatility, general awareness, leadership qualities, and flair for languages are indeed marketable. They have the potential to become great teachers who can mould the minds of millions; statesmen who think about the next generation and not just the next election; intellectuals who raise the level of public discourse; and social activists driven by justice, equality, and democratic values. The decline and devaluation of the humanities and the shrinking space they occupy on university campuses does not augur well for social harmony and peace. The trend reflects a moral ambivalence and cultural degeneration, often camouflaged by the ostentatious display of material prosperity. The diminishing role assigned to disciplines other than science, technology and business studies can undermine the cause of social justice and bring about cultural disintegration and moral corruption. It might spawn a generation that is too positivist and desensitised. A system that focuses solely on the creation of a knowledge economy would produce enormous wealth but promotes endless mass consumption, an outcome of a commercialised education system. A better understanding of the complementarity of science and the Humanities is essential for a functional and progressive society. A convergence of the head and the heart, intellect and emotion, what Matthew Arnold called "sweetness and light" would be the panacea for a wounded civilisation. Scientific temper blended with creativity is essential for the modern man. In this context, it might not be out of place to recall the insightful observations made by Jawaharlal Nehru, the visionary

leader of India, on the need to combine scientific temper with the emancipatory potential of the Humanities. According to Nehru, a university must stand for humanism, tolerance, reason, adventure of ideas, and the quest for truth. He visualised the harmonious coexistence of the Humanities and science and technology on Indian campuses. He believed that critical thinking, humanism and social responsibility would humanise technology. Herbert Marcuse, the German-American social critic and political theorist of the 'Frankfurt School', posited that denial of the study of Humanities and the broader philosophical capacity for critical thinking, contributes significantly to the creation of the "one-dimensional man", who seldom questions the status quo and always accepts the dominant social order. Modern society, propelled by technological rationality and consumerism, focuses on what is immediately useful. The prevailing education system that dispenses with critical thinking will promote a utilitarian culture that produces individuals who are unable to recognise their own alienation or challenge the social control under which they are reduced to blissful slaves. Scientists seek to unravel the mysteries of the physical universe. But empathy, emotional intelligence and intuition nurtured by the Humanities are needed to know the inner universe, to strike a chord with the "still sad music of humanity" and to probe the possibility of a more fulfilling existence on this planet.

Kremlin welcomes end to 'direct threat' label in U.S. national security strategy: report

The Kremlin welcomed a move by U.S. President Donald Trump's administration to revise its national security strategy and stop calling Russia a "direct threat," spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Sunday (December 7, 2025). Since Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and its 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, U.S. strategies have designated Moscow as a major threat. However, the updated U.S. policy, announced on Friday, adopts a softer tone, urging limited cooperation. Mr. Peskov told the state-run TASS news agency the updated document dropped language describing Russia as a direct threat and instead urged cooperation with Moscow on strategic stability issues. "We considered this a positive step," he said, adding that Moscow would examine the document closely before drawing broader conclusions. "We certainly need to look at it more closely and analyse it," Mr. Peskov was quoted as saying.

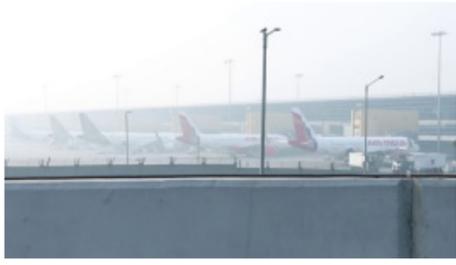
The new 29-page strategy set out Trump's foreign policy vision as one of "flexible realism" and said U.S. policy would be driven above all by "what works for America", according to the document. Washington would seek a quick resolution to the conflict in Ukraine and aimed to re-establish "strategic stability" with Moscow, while maintaining that Russia's actions in Ukraine remained a central security concern, the document said. The strategy was released amid a stalled U.S. peace initiative, in which Washington presented a proposal that endorsed Russia's main demands in the nearly four-year-old war. Mr. Trump has often made positive and admiring comments about Russian President Vladimir Putin, prompting critics to accuse him of being soft on Moscow even as his administration maintained sanctions over Russia's actions in Ukraine. European allies, reliant on U.S. military support to deter Russia, have watched the shift closely and voiced concern that softer U.S. language might weaken efforts to confront Moscow as the war in Ukraine continues.

Japan, Australia urge calm after Chinese radar locks on Japanese jets

Japan and Australia urged calm on Sunday after Chinese military aircraft locked radar on Japanese fighter jets, a month after the Japanese leader's recent remarks on Taiwan that stirred tensions between Tokyo and Beijing. Defence Minister Shinjiro Koizumi said Japan formally protested the incident, calling it "an extremely regrettable" act and "a dangerous" one that "exceeded the scope necessary for safe aircraft operations." "We have lodged a strong protest with the Chinese side and demanded strict preventive measures," Mr. Koizumi said. Japan's Defence Ministry said China's military aircraft J-15 took off from the Chinese carrier Liaoning near the southern island of Okinawa on Saturday (December 6) and "intermittently" latched its radar on Japanese F-15 fighter jets on two occasions, for about three minutes in the late afternoon and for about 30 minutes in the evening. It was not made clear whether the radar lock incident involved the same Chinese J-15 both times. Japanese fighter jets had been scrambled to pursue Chinese jets that were conducting aircraft takeoff and landing exercises in the Pacific. They were pursuing the Chinese aircraft at a safe distance and did not take actions that could be interpreted as provocation, Kyodo News agency said, quoting defence officials, when the radar lock happened. There was no breach of Japanese airspace, and no injury or damage was reported from the incident. Senior Colonel Wang Xuemeng, spokesperson for the Chinese Navy, defended China's flight training near the Miyako island on Saturday (December 6), saying Beijing announced the exercises beforehand and accused Japanese aircraft of "harassment". Mr. Wang, in a statement posted Sunday (December 7) on the Chinese Ministry of Defence website said, "We solemnly asked the Japanese side to immediately stop slandering and smearing, and strictly restrain its frontline actions. The Chinese Navy will

take necessary measures in accordance with the law to resolutely safeguard its own security and legitimate rights and interests." Relations between Japan and China have worsened after Japan's Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi said in early November its military could get involved if China were to take action against Taiwan, the self-governing island that Beijing claims as its own. Japan and Australia, whose Defence Ministers held their scheduled talks in Tokyo on Sunday (December 7), expressed worry over the development. "We are deeply concerned by the actions of China in the last 24 hours," Australian Defence Minister Richard Marles told a joint news conference on Sunday (December 7) after holding talks with Mr. Koizumi. "We expect those interactions to be safe and professional." Australia does "not want to see any change to the status quo across the Taiwan Straits", Mr. Marles said, adding that China is his country's largest trade partner and he wants to have productive relations with Beijing. "We continue to advocate to China about these issues again, in a very calm, sensible and moderate way," he said. Talks deepen between Japan and Australia amid rising China tensions. Japan and Australia, during Sunday talks, agreed to bolster military ties to lead the region's multilateral defence cooperation. The two Ministers agreed to form a comprehensive "framework for strategic defence coordination" and discuss further details. Tokyo has been accelerating its military buildup while expanding its defence ties beyond its only treaty ally, the United States. It now considers Australia to be a semi-ally. Mr. Marles also visited a Mitsubishi Heavy Industries shipyard in Nagasaki on Saturday (December 6) to observe production of the upgraded Mogami-class frigate that his country chose in September as a replacement for its aging fleet.

IndiGo, Air India warn of flight cancellations as dense fog blankets Delhi IGI Airport



The Delhi Airport and major airlines — IndiGo and Air India — have warned of possible flight cancellations and delays due to the dense fog conditions prevailing across North, East and Northeast India. In an advisory on Monday morning, the Delhi airport authority said it had activated CAT-3 procedures for flight operations due to poor visibility. Aviation regulator, DGCA, has announced 10 December 2025-10 February 2026 as the official fog window this season.

The general visibility at Indira Gandhi International Airport in Delhi on Monday was reduced to barely 50 metres, with the temperature hovering around 11 degrees Celsius. This prompted the airport to activate CAT-3 measures. This is a specialized navigation system used when visibility is very low, allowing equipped aircraft and trained pilots to land in thick fog. While CAT III allows for landings, the low visibility often causes a backlog. Passengers should expect delays and potential cancellations, the airport said in a statement. "Do not head to the airport without confirming your flight status first. Contact your airline directly via their app, website, or customer service helpline," Delhi IGI airport advised. Dense fog in Noida POV — You are driving in Delhi-NCR on Monday morning amid the dense fog that reduced visibility to only a few metres. If your flight is still scheduled, allow extra time for your commute to the airport, as road visibility is also poor. On Monday morning most vehicles in Delhi-NCR had their hazard lights on as the visibility on the roads were barely a few metres. The country's largest airline IndiGo said early-morning fog is expected to hit visibility across Delhi, Amritsar, and Chandigarh. "During these hours,

visibility can reduce suddenly, impacting flight operations. Our teams will remain fully prepared through the night, monitoring the weather minute by minute," it said. Dense fog in Jammu continues to affect visibility, impacting flights operating to and from the airport. "As conditions evolve, some services may experience delays, and a few may need to be cancelled depending on clearance and operational feasibility," the airline said. It also warned of disruptions due to low visibility and fog in Kolkata, Guwahati, Dehradun, and Hindon. IndiGo flyers across the country are advised to keep checking the status of their flights before heading to the airports. IndiGo rescheduling or refunds claims can be done at <https://goindigo.in/plan-b.html>.

Air India said flight routes in North India, including the airline's primary hub Delhi, are likely to be hit due to dense fog-induced low visibility. It warned of a cascading impact on flight schedules across the network in India. "Passengers also have the option to avail complimentary rescheduling or opt for full refund without penalty through Air India Fog Care: <https://www.airindia.com/in/en/manage/fog-care.html>, ” the airline said in a statement. Air India flyers can check the status of their flights at <https://www.airindia.com/in/en/manage/flight-status.html> or reach out to 0116 932 9333 for queries. SpiceJet, too, said due to poor visibility in Delhi, all departures and arrivals and their consequential flights might get affected. Passengers are requested to keep a check on their flight status via <http://spicejet.com/#status>. The Airports Authority of India warned of disruptions due to fog and issued helpline numbers for all airlines. In a statement, it said: "Due to fog today on 29.12.2025 visibility levels in Northern India has reduced at select airports potentially impacting flight schedules, including delays. Passengers are advised to stay in touch with their respective airlines through official communication channels for the latest flight updates and to plan their travel accordingly by allowing additional time for airport arrival and check-in procedures." "AAI has activated passenger facilitation measures and deployed assistance teams at affected airports to support travellers on the ground. We remain committed to ensuring passenger safety, convenience, and smooth airport operations during adverse weather conditions," it added.

US deal alone insufficient to secure India's long-term trade, export growth: CII Director General Chandrajit Banerjee



While valuable, a free trade agreement (FTA) with the US in itself will not be enough to secure India's long-term trade and export growth, according to Chandrajit Banerjee, Director General of the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII). Having concluded agreements with UK, New Zealand, and Oman in 2025, Banerjee said the industry is hopeful 2026 will see a "broader and more strategic push, both through early conclusion of other key negotiations, including with the European Union, and through effective implementation of already-signed agreements to ensure tangible benefits for exporters, especially Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs)." In an interview with The Indian Express, Banerjee also discussed India's macroeconomic situation, the government's reform push, and the weakening of foreign fund flows into the country. Edited excerpts:

2025 has been a great year for the Indian economy looking at GDP growth and inflation. What is your outlook for 2026 for these key macro indicators? Recent data point to sustained strength, with real GDP growth exceeding 8 per cent in the first half of the fiscal year, continued expansion in manufacturing and services PMIs (Purchasing Managers' Index), resilient services exports, recovery in rural demand, and steady traction in government capital expenditure. Reinforcing this positive assessment, the latest CII-Business Confidence Index rose for the third consecutive quarter to 66.5 in Q3, up from 66.0 in Q2 and 66.2 in the same quarter last year, marking the highest level in the past five quarters and signalling sustained improvement in business sentiment. What adds to our confidence is the increasingly broad-based nature of growth. Public capex is effectively crowding in private investment, corporate balance sheets remain healthy, and capacity utilisation is gradually improving. The lagged impact of tax reforms, regulatory measures, and monetary easing is beginning to support consumption and investment decisions, even as global conditions remain uncertain. Looking ahead, India's domestic demand engines, led by investment, infrastructure-driven activity and a strong services sector, are expected to provide stability to growth. At CII, we expect GDP growth in the range of 7.3-7.5 per cent in the current fiscal year, higher than our earlier assessment. This momentum is likely to carry into the next year as well, with growth expected to remain in a similar range, reflecting the underlying strength of domestic drivers. Inflation, meanwhile, is likely to remain anchored below the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) target of 4 per cent next year, providing a stable macroeconomic backdrop. Private consumption, led by income tax and Goods and Services Tax (GST) rate cuts, has helped push growth. Do you see domestic demand continuing to grow at the current pace of 8 per cent or more? Urban demand is gradually gaining traction on the back of these measures, aided by improving consumer confidence and stable inflation that has preserved real purchasing power. At the same time, rural

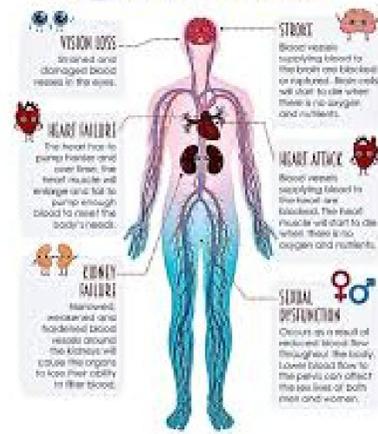
demand remains resilient, underpinned by a favourable monsoon that has supported higher agricultural activity, strengthened farm incomes, and improved overall income prospects in rural areas. This combination of strengthening urban consumption and resilient rural demand provides a solid foundation for domestic demand growth.

Looking ahead, as the full impact of GST, repo rate cuts, tax relief and regulatory measures plays out, private consumption is likely to sustain a healthy pace in real terms. While maintaining growth of 8 per cent or more will depend on continued income gains, the underlying drivers of domestic demand remain firmly in place. What about private capex? Companies continue to sit on a lot of cash, make financial investments, as seasonally adjusted capacity utilisation is stuck around 75 per cent. CII's analysis suggests that private capex in India has clearly moved beyond a tentative phase and is gaining momentum, supported by the strength in household consumption that provides a durable demand outlook. An assessment of around 1,600 non-financial firms using CMIE's (Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy) Prowess database shows that corporate capex rose to about Rs 12.1 lakh crore in FY25, up from Rs 8.1 lakh crore in FY24 and Rs 5.5 lakh crore in FY19, implying a healthy 14 per cent CAGR (compound annual growth rate) since the pre-pandemic period. This points to firms increasingly committing capital to productive assets rather than merely accumulating cash. Strong new project announcements and a moderation in project stalling rates further indicate improving investment confidence and execution discipline. Although overall manufacturing capacity utilisation remains in the mid-70 per cent range, several infrastructure-linked segments, particularly cement, select steel categories, and digital infrastructure, are already operating at relatively tight levels, signalling rising investment readiness and the onset of the next capex cycle.

For 2026, industry is looking for greater certainty, in a very uncertain world. The need for greater ease of doing business remains, even as the governments at the Centre and states have already done quite a bit in this area. The global trade environment was difficult in 2025. What are your hopes from 2026 — will a trade deal with the US be enough? As we look ahead to 2026, there is cautious optimism that the global trade environment will stabilise, supported by India's growing competitiveness and proactive trade policy. A trade deal with the US would certainly be valuable as it is one of India's most important export destinations, and a balanced agreement could help address tariff and non-tariff barriers, enhance predictability for businesses, and unlock new opportunities in high-value sectors such as manufacturing, digital trade, and services. However, from an industry standpoint, a US deal alone will not be sufficient to secure India's long-term trade and export growth. The government's recent success in concluding FTAs with the UK, New Zealand, and Oman is a significant step forward and sends a strong signal of India's commitment to deeper global integration. Building on this momentum, industry hopes that 2026 will see a broader and more strategic push, both through early conclusion of other key negotiations, including with the European Union, and through effective implementation of already-signed agreements to ensure tangible benefits for exporters, especially MSMEs. Equally important is strengthening domestic competitiveness through logistics reforms, easier access to export finance, faster regulatory clearances, and support for compliance with global sustainability and quality standards. This year we saw the government get active on the reforms front: GST 2.0, labour codes, and nuclear law amendments, among others. How do you assess their impact and what are the others the government should prioritise? The reforms announced this year will strengthen India's competitiveness. The momentum of next generation structural reforms should gather further pace, to accelerate long-term growth. Sustaining capital expenditure should be a key priority. CII recommends a strengthened National Infrastructure Pipeline with a target investment of Rs 150 lakh crores. The NIP should identify shovel-ready, revenue-credible projects and deploy faster dispute-resolution mechanisms to crowd in private investment and enhance productivity across sectors.

This is what happens to the heart, brain, kidney, and eyes when you have untreated high blood pressure

Complications of High Blood Pressure



High blood pressure usually has no dramatic symptoms, but it can quietly harm the body for years. Many people feel fine, not realising their hearts, brains, kidneys, and eyes are under stress. Dr Prabhat Ranjan Sinha, Senior Consultant in Internal Medicine at Aakash Healthcare, says this lack of clear warning signs is what makes untreated hypertension so risky. "Most people with high blood pressure appear fit and well," explains Dr Sinha. "But internally, vital organs are being gradually damaged. If hypertension is not detected and treated early, it can eventually lead to serious complications such as a heart attack, stroke, or kidney disease."

Dr Sinha points out that delayed diagnosis is a significant problem. Symptoms such as headaches, tiredness, or a fast heartbeat are often ignored or blamed on work stress, especially by people in cities. "In many cases, people only visit a doctor when the condition becomes severe. That's why regular health check-ups after age 30 or 35 are now often recommended," he adds. Uncontrolled hyperten-

sion places extra pressure on almost every system in the body, according to Dr Sinha. The heart, in particular, is forced to work harder to pump blood against increased resistance. Over time, this can cause the heart muscle to thicken and enlarge. "Initially, the heart compensates by growing bigger, but if the pressure is not controlled, it eventually becomes weaker and less efficient," Dr Sinha explains. The brain is another major organ at risk, he adds. "Persistently high blood pressure can damage blood vessels supplying the brain, significantly increasing the chances of a stroke. Long-term uncontrolled hypertension may also affect memory and cognitive function. These changes happen slowly, which is why people don't immediately connect them to blood pressure." Kidney damage caused by hypertension is often gradual and silent, much like the condition itself. As kidney function deteriorates, symptoms may show up elsewhere in the body. The eyes, too, are vulnerable—damage to the delicate blood vessels in the retina can impair vision over time. "The progression is slow, but the damage can be permanent if left unchecked," warns Dr Sinha.

While any sustained elevation in blood pressure is concerning, certain levels significantly raise the risk of life-threatening complications. "A reading of 140/90 mmHg is itself a red flag," says Dr Sinha. "The risk increases substantially when blood pressure goes beyond 160/100." Even mildly elevated blood pressure, if chronic, can damage the kidneys, heart, and brain. Notably, he points out that otherwise healthy individuals are not immune. "We do see unexpected heart attacks or strokes in people who thought they were fine. Regular medication, along with lifestyle changes, can dramatically reduce these risks," he notes.

Are lifestyle changes enough?

Dr Sinha stresses the importance of quitting smoking, reducing salt intake, cutting down on oily and processed foods, and engaging in regular physical activity. "These measures are essential for maintaining good heart health and controlling blood pressure," he says. However, lifestyle changes alone may not be sufficient, especially if organ damage has already begun, he adds. "In such cases, medication and regular monitoring become necessary to prevent further complications. With rising work-related stress, unhealthy diets, and sedentary habits, cases of hypertension—and even strokes—are increasingly being reported among younger professionals." The message, he emphasises, is clear: don't wait for symptoms. "Monitoring blood pressure, especially after the age of 30–35, and seeking timely medical advice can make a critical difference. High blood pressure is manageable—but only if it is taken seriously."

Bharti Singh says doctors asked her about sterilisation after birth of second son, admits feeling scared after her water broke: 'Aisa lagta hai, ek aur...'; expert on making informed choices



Comedian Bharti Singh, who recently gave birth to her second son, opened up about being asked about sterilisation at the operating table after giving birth. While she replied with a stern no, she expressed her long-standing desire for a daughter in a heartfelt conversation with her husband and screenwriter, Haash Limbachiyaa. In the family's YouTube blog, Bharti, 41, said, "Ek baat hai... aap logon ko bata du. Doctor ne poocha tha sterilisation ke liye. Maine bola, 'nahi.' Unhone poocha nahi ki Harsh ki karwani hai ya nahi, main toh nahi (I wanted to share with you all... doctor had asked me about sterilisation to which I responded no... they didn't ask about whether Haash wants to get one)."

She also opened up about her desire for a daughter. "Pata nahi... jab bachcha ho jaata hai, aisa lagta hai... ek aur... ek ladki honi chahiye thi... ek ladki ho jaaye toh mazza aajaaye. Par teesra bhi ladka hogaya na, main ganji ho jaungi (When a child is born, you feel you want another one... I wish to have a daughter, but another son would be too much to handle)," said Bharti at the hospital. During the conversation, a teary-eyed Bharti also admitted feeling scared when he water broke early in the morning at 6, and they had to rush to the hospital in an emergency. Let's understand more about female sterilisation and the road toward making the choice.

A closer look at Sikkim Sundari, the Himalayan flower that blooms once in decades and then dies

High in the cold, windy parts of the eastern Himalayas grows a plant so rare that it seems almost mythical. Locals call it Sikkim Sundari, and scientists know it as *Rheum nobile*. This remarkable plant is one of Sikkim's best-kept secrets, waiting as a quiet reward for travellers who make the climb to higher altitudes. In a viral post, business baron Anand Mahindra has described the Sikkim Sundari as "a masterclass in patience." Thriving at 4,000 to 4,800 metres, this plant belongs to a fascinating group often referred to as "glasshouse plants." Its tall, translucent bracts act like natural greenhouses, trapping heat and protecting the delicate flowers inside from freezing winds and intense UV radiation. Against the stark Himalayan landscape, the plant appears almost luminous—like a glowing tower rising from rock and snow. What makes the Sikkim Sundari truly special is its unique life cycle. This plant is monocarpic, so it flowers just once in its life. For 7 to 30 years, it stays close to the ground as a small rosette of leaves, quietly saving energy in tough mountain conditions. Then, in one last, dramatic moment, it grows up to two metres tall, blooms into a pagoda-shaped tower, spreads its seeds, and dies," Mahindra noted in his post. Few plants show the idea of waiting for glory as clearly as this one. The Sikkim Sundari is both a privilege and a poignant reminder of the fragility of Himalayan ecosystems. It is typically found along high-altitude trekking routes in North Sikkim, particularly near alpine passes and glacial valleys.



Dr Richa Bharadwaj, consultant obstetrician and gynaecologist, Wockhardt Hospitals, Mumbai Central, said sterilisation is a permanent choice, so informed counselling is essential. "Couples should make sure their family is complete and that their decision is not influenced by emotional, social, or financial stress, especially right after childbirth. We talk about age, number of children, overall health, future uncertainties, and whether both partners feel comfortable with the choice. Timing is also important; while sterilisation can be performed soon after delivery, it should not be rushed," said Dr Bharadwaj.

How does female sterilisation compare with male vasectomy in terms of safety and recovery? From a medical standpoint, vasectomy is simpler, safer, and involves a quicker recovery, said Dr Bharadwaj. "It is a minor outpatient procedure with few complications and does not impact sexual performance or masculinity, which are two common concerns. Female sterilisation is safe when performed correctly, but it is still a surgical procedure that requires anaesthesia and a longer recovery time. Health-wise, vasectomy places much less physical strain on the family." Doctor Here's what you should consider (Photo: Getty Images/Thinkstock) According to Dr Bharadwaj, many men are apprehensive about vasectomy due to myths about weakness or loss of sexual function, while women are often expected to "adjust." "As doctors, we increasingly promote shared responsibility because contraception should be a joint decision, not a sacrifice by one partner," said Dr Bharadwaj.

What options exist for couples who are unsure about permanent sterilisation?

Notably, there are several effective long-term but reversible options today. "These include intrauterine devices (IUDs), hormonal implants, injectables, and oral contraceptives. These methods give couples time to decide without making a permanent commitment," said Dr Bharadwaj.

'We act as if nothing affects us': Najmul Hossain Shanto on uncertainty over Bangladesh's participation in T20 World Cup in India



Bangladesh's Test skipper Najmul Hossain Shanto said that even though the uncertainty around the team's participation in the upcoming T20 World Cup in India is affecting the players, they are acting as if everything was ok. Shanto also slammed Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) Director M Najmul Islam for calling former captain Tamim Iqbal an agent of India. "First of all, if you look at our World Cup results, we've never really played consistently good cricket. Last year, we did play well, but there were even better opportunities, and we couldn't capitalise on them. But you'll see that something always happens before every World Cup. I can say this from my experience of three World Cups – it does have an effect. Now, we act as if nothing affects us, that we are fully professional cricketers. You guys also understand that we are acting – it's not easy. Of course, it would be better if these things didn't happen,

but this is partly beyond our control," he said on Saturday. Bangladesh's involvement in the showpiece event is under a cloud after the board demanded that their matches be moved to Sri Lanka after pacer Mustafizur Rahman was released from the IPL on instructions of the BCCI, which cited unspecified "developments all around" to justify the decision.

"I don't know the details of how it happened, or how it could have been controlled. Still, I'd say that even acting in such circumstances (is difficult). With the right mindset if we go to the World Cup and play anywhere, we should focus on how to do our best for the team," Shanto said. The World Cup gets underway on February 7 and Bangladesh are scheduled to play four games (three in Kolkata and one in Mumbai) in India. Shanto also expressed deep anguish over BCB director M Najmul Islam calling former captain Tamim Iqbal "an Indian agent". "Very sad, very sad because such comments were made about a cricketer – a former captain, and in my opinion one of Bangladesh's most successful cricketers whom we grew up watching. As players, we expect respect – whether someone is a former captain, a regular player, successful or not. At the end of the day, a cricketer hopes for respect," he said. Shanto the BCB is "is supposed to be our guardian" but ended up making an unacceptable statement. "Parents should correct you at home, not in front of everyone. So such a comment from someone who is supposed to be our guardian is very difficult to accept. I completely reject it as a player," he concluded.

Neeraj Chopra splits with Czech coach Jan Zelezny

Two-time Olympic medal-winning javelin throw star Neeraj Chopra on Saturday announced an end to his partnership with Czech coach Jan Zelezny after just one season, which the Indian said was marked by "progress, respect, and a shared love for the sport." Chopra did not specify the reason for ending the stint with Zelezny, a bonafide legend of the sport who holds the world record and under whose tutelage the Haryana-lad breached the 90m mark last year. Reflecting on their work, Chopra said to learn directly from an athlete he had admired since childhood was a dream come true and gave him a completely new "toolbox of exercises, technical ideas, and fresh perspectives".

"Working with Jan opened my eyes to so many new ideas. The way he thinks about technique, rhythm, and movement is incredible, and I learned a lot from every single session we had together," Chopra said. "What I'm most proud about is the friendship I've built with someone who has been my idol all my life. Jan is not only the best javelin thrower of all time, but also one of the best human beings I have ever met," he added.

The 59-year-old Zelezny also reflected warmly on the partnership and the progress they made together. "Working with an athlete like Neeraj was a great experience. I'm glad we met and were able to work together, that I got him to break the 90-metre barrier for the first time. "Apart from the World Championships, he finished at worst second and that is not a bad record. Unfortunately, the back injury 12 days before Tokyo significantly affected his chances," he said



in a press release. Zelezny said Chopra has huge potential for the coming years. "Our relationship is very positive also on the human side and we will continue to stay in touch, we will definitely meet at some training camp or, for example, on vacation with our families in Europe or India," Zelezny said.

Looking ahead, Chopra said he plans to take the lead in shaping his own coaching direction. "I'm looking forward to what 2026 has in store. I started my preparation in early November. As always, the goal is to stay healthy, and I am already excited to be competing again soon," Chopra said. "At the same time, I'm especially looking ahead to the year with the World Championships in 2027, and the big goal beyond that is the Olympic Games in 2028," he added. Chopra had finished eighth in the world event after the 90m high achieved in the Doha Diamond League last year.

Jemimah Rodrigues says Virat Kohli's words rang in her head during World Cup semi-final winning knock



Indian cricket team star Jemimah Rodrigues has revealed that Virat Kohli's words about his own match-winning knock against Pakistan at the T20 World Cup in Melbourne were ringing in her ears during her game-changing innings at the recent Women's World Cup when she dragged India to the final with an unbeaten 127 against Australia. India were chasing a target of 339 runs set by the formidable Australian team, when Rodrigues joined forces with captain Harmanpreet Kaur (89) put on 167 for the third wicket on the way to completing the highest successful run-chase in women's ODI history. Rodrigues

Kohli had dragged India to victory over arch-rivals Pakistan with an unbeaten 82 from 53 balls in a game of the T20 World Cup in 2022. What had been remarkable about that innings was that Kohli had dragged India to victory from being 31/4 at one stage while chasing 160. "I once spoke to Virat Kohli about this. I asked him about that Melbourne knock. I said, 'You know, this knock is something else... it was a crazy knock. What was going on in your head? How did such a knock even happen?' What he told me was, 'You know Jemimah, even if I want to take credit for that knock, I can't. If you ask me to replicate that knock, I can't. I was just grateful that God chose me at that moment to be the person to take India through.' "And when that World Cup semifinal happened, I just remembered what he said. Because I didn't change anything in my practice. My preparation was the same. Everything was the same, but it's just... you know, you are just chosen for that moment. And things just happen. I think that was one moment for me where I can't take credit," Rodrigues said in an interview for Breakfast With Champions. Rodrigues said that when she was batting in that semi-final against Australia, she had gone into "zen mode". "When I was playing that match, it was just like... sometimes you go into a 'Zen mode' where you don't know much about what's happening around you. You are just so focused on, 'Oh, we just have to win this match and make it happen.' Usually, you know when you're about to win—like when there are two runs left in nine balls, you know you're supposed to cross the line. Usually, I always have a

celebration ready—I'll jump, I'll do this or that. But until that final run was scored, I had nothing. I was blank. And the moment that ball went for a boundary—Amanjyot hit that shot—I hugged her, I picked her up, and I just burst into tears. I hadn't planned that. I didn't even think I would cry. But I don't know, it was just that moment: a World Cup semifinal at home, in front of my home crowd, with my parents there. After everything that happened over the last month, I think all of that was just bottled up and it finally came out," Rodrigues said.

"One thing that happened before the semifinal was that when we found out we'd be playing Australia after we played New Zealand, there was a different kind of peace about it. Someone even spoke about it, saying, 'Actually, Australia is more vulnerable in a semifinal than a final.' They lost to South Africa in a T20 semifinal in Dubai, and when Harman scored that 171, they lost in a semifinal too. So we were like, 'Maybe everything that has happened is for the best.' That was the conversation we had. Rodrigues said: "Honestly, even when Australia scored 339 in the semifinal... when Phoebe Litchfield and Ellyse Perry started batting the way they were, I was like, 'Man, it's going to be 400 today.' Genuinely! I started stressing out a bit because it's a do-or-die game. It's a semifinal. I was thinking, 'How will we chase 400?' Then I told myself, 'I can't control that. Don't think so far ahead. Just field and let's see what happens.' "But then, for our bowlers to pull it back the way they did in the last 10 overs—even against such a strong batting order—and hold them to 339, it became a matter of perspective. I was like, 'Oh no, I was preparing for 400, but I got a 339 discount!' It felt feasible. It didn't feel too bad. Even when I went in, and I think Richa was there, we were like, 'Actually, they are 20 runs short.' That was the conversation," Rodrigues said.

Fourrise Premier League Hyderabad launched

Hyderabad: Fourrise Sports LLP officially launched the first season of the Fourrise Premier League (FPL) – Hyderabad on Friday night.

The official FPL poster was unveiled by the chief guest Mr. Ch. Kiran Kumar Reddy, MP, in the presence of senior corporate leaders, sports administrators, and dignitaries. Mr. Paidi Rakesh Reddy, MLA, Armoor, also graced the occasion and extended his support to the league's vision of promoting corporate sports alongside social responsibility.

The league is founded and promoted by Mr. Nangi Devendar Reddy, Chairman & Founder, and Dr. Sriprakash Vinnakota, Founder & President, FOURRISE Sports LLP, with a vision to build a transparent, professionally managed corporate cricket ecosystem across the Telugu States.

England's Ashes debacle prompts 'WILD thought' from Kevin Pietersen for Brendon McCullum's replacement: 'He gets Test cricket'



Kevin Pietersen knows a thing or two about how a bad Ashes can end careers. Although his final dismissal from the England squad was seen as a culmination of multiple events in the years leading up to it, the fact remains that the management pulled the plug on him after they received a 5-0 drubbing in the 2013/14 Ashes. Another casualty of that tour was then-head coach Andy Flower, with whom Pietersen had a tumultuous working relationship. However, the 45-year-old has now said that maybe it is time that Flower returned to the role after England's 4-1 defeat to Australia in the 2025/26 Ashes. "This is a WILD thought. I reckon one of my wild-est," Pietersen posted. "Can England bring back Andy

Flower now that he's changed and in line with the modern day player? He gets Test Cricket. I've been told by many players that he's changed his ways since our drama. He's winning leagues so really does get the modern day player. VERY IMPORTANT! Wild, I know! Thoughts?"

Pietersen's post comes amid uncertainty over the future of England's current head coach Brendon McCullum. The England and Wales Cricket Board announced a "thorough review" of a campaign in which the players have been accused of ill discipline at various levels. England's decision to not play any proper practice game in Australia before the series was questioned throughout the duration of the Ashes, with the number of catches they dropped being seen as a symptom of poor preparation. Their mid-series trip to Noosa, a beach town, and rumours of a drinking culture within the team have also come up. All if it was only exacerbated by the emergence of news that star batter Harry Brook had got into an altercation with a bouncer outside a club during England's ODI series in New Zealand that preceded the Ashes. "We will take many lessons from this tour and are determined to improve quickly. Our focus is on regaining the Ashes in 2027. A thorough review of the campaign is already underway. This will cover tour planning and preparation, individual performance and behaviours, and our ability to adapt and respond effectively as circumstances require," said ECB chief executive Richard Gould in his statement.

'That's your job': James Anderson tears into Ben Stokes' comments on England players' efforts during Ashes

Questions continue to be asked of the overall culture prevalent in the England cricket team after their 4-1 humbling at the hands of Australia in the Ashes. There was a considerable gulf in quality between the two sides, with England playing almost no warm-up games in the run-up to the series and consequently being accused of slacking off between the Tests in terms of discipline. Fast bowling great James Anderson has said that he was puzzled with captain Ben Stokes appreciating the efforts of the players in his squad.

"When I saw Stokes come out and say, the way (Josh) Tongue and (Brydon) Carse have just run in like consistently, I had a Roy Keane moment," said Anderson on BBC Radio. "I was like, that's your job. If you're not willing to run in all day for your team, don't bother. You're in the wrong sport." Anderson took the example of Australia pacer Mitchell Starc, who was player of the series for taking 31 wickets and even scoring 163 runs. "Starc, for me, was the absolute standout of the series. He bowled on Day 5 of the final Test as quick as he had bowled all series long. He was consistent with his speeds. But that is what you expect from all your bowlers. That is the standard. It always annoys me (when someone says) 'can't fault your efforts'. Well, the effort shouldn't be a thing. It



should just be in you." Stokes had said in the press conference after the fifth Test that England's efforts in the Ashes can't be questioned and that they lost due to shoddy execution. "We've dropped a lot of catches on this tour which have been very costly to the overall situation of the games. In terms up of stepping up, I can never fault anyone's commitment or energy that they've given into this. We haven't performed well, we know that, we hold our hands up to that. But no one should question the care and commitment to try and go out there and give it your absolute best. It's just been down to the lack of execution," Stokes said.

Shubman Gill breaks silence on getting omitted from T20 World Cup squad: 'I am where I have to be'



India's Test and ODI captain Shubman Gill has said that he respected the selectors' decision to omit him from the T20 World Cup squad last month. The 26-year-old, who was made the T20I vice-captain last August, was omitted from the 15-member squad with Axar Patel reinstated as the deputy to Suryakumar Yadav. "I respect the selectors' decision. All the best to the team for the T20 World Cup. I am where I have to be, and whatever is written in my destiny, no one can take that from me. A player always believes he will try his best for the country, and the selectors have taken their decision," Gill told reporters before the first ODI against New Zealand. Gill took over India's ODI captain in October, but has been out of 50-over action after suffering a neck injury in the Test series against South Africa. The 26-year-old said that it was frustrating to be on the sidelines and watch the team play while being out injured.

"Never easy, especially whenever you get injured, watching your team play, and you feel like you are missing out on all those games, especially when you have just been named the captain." "There are so many things that you want to do, and when you set out, it is definitely very frustrating, but at the same time, you just have to focus on what are the things that you need to do in that moment and kind of build on that," Gill said.

The right-hander revealed that he had suggested more practice in red-ball cricket, especially when the team was practicing in white-ball cricket. "One of the suggestions that I was very keen on is that, if you would see in the last two test series that we played, we didn't have that much time to prepare. It's not easy playing in India and playing another match in a different country on the fourth day. Especially when you are travelling on long tours." "And yes, I feel even if we would have won the series against South Africa, it still wouldn't have made that much of a difference because we know we need to prepare well to be able to win test matches all over the world. And preparation for me is really big and I didn't think that we had that much time to prepare when we came back from Australia, or even after the Asia Cup, when we played the West Indies series. I think it's important to at least have some bit of preparation, some time." "Especially changing from the white ball format to red ball. So this was one of the things that I was very keen on, and I think we'll take some action and we'll keep it in mind to be able to prepare well before the start of any red ball series," Gill said.

'Started regaining confidence after implementing what Mahi bhai told me': Axar Patel reveals MS Dhoni's role in his batting transformation

Axar Patel has gone from being considered a spinner who can bat and a backup to Ravindra Jadeja to a senior all-rounder himself, particularly in T20Is where he has been sent as high up as No.3 in recent games. The 31-year-old has said that legendary former India captain MS Dhoni, under whom Axar had started his international career, had a role to play in getting him to change his attitude towards batting.

"I started as a batter but became a full-time spinner when I reached the NCA. In my early days I didn't do well with the bat and started doubting myself," Axar told the Times of India. "When I got dropped in 2018, I worked very hard on my batting. When MS Dhoni was mentor of the 2021 T20 World Cup team, he told me that in my earlier days, under his captaincy, I put pressure on myself by thinking I had to perform all the time, rather than simply believing that I was a capable batter. Slowly I started implementing what Mahi bhai had told me and I regained my confidence"

Axar's reliability as a batter was on full display in the

final of the 2024 T20 World Cup. India were in dire straits batting first, having lost three wickets inside the first five overs for 34 runs. Axar then struck up a 72-run partnership off 54 balls with Virat Kohli which steadied the Indian ship. He was expensive with the ball but took one wicket as well, all of which contributed to India's remarkable victory in the final. "After the T20 WC final, I never thought I would be dropped again," said Axar. India's current approach of having a flexible batting order has resulted in Axar playing in a variety of positions.

However, he has been trusted to play in and around the top order more often than not in recent games and Axar says that in those moments, the team management trusts him to provide stability. "If I've been sent up the order, that means the team trusts me and I have the talent to perform this role. When I go out to bat, I don't think I am a floater. The team management tells me that I'm not sent to blindly accelerate the scoring or play out a difficult spell or target a particular spinner. I am given a role like any other specialist batter," he said.

‘Cast a Muslim superstar, but protagonist has to be Hindu’: Honey Trehan recalls how film with ‘Muslim hero’ was nixed; says Haider can’t be made today



This year, Honey Trehan completes 14 years as a casting director, 10 years as a producer, and five years as a director. He began his directorial journey with the 2020 Netflix India whodunit Raat Akeli Hai. His next was the sequel, Raat Akeli Hai: The Bansal Murders, which released last month. Between both films, Honey was busy directing Panjab '95, a period investigative thriller based on true events. However, the film, headlined by Diljit Dosanjh, who plays late human rights activist Jaswant Singh Khalra, has been stuck with the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) for months. On this edition of SCREEN Spotlight, Honey details the turbulent journey of Panjab '95, and looks back at his past stint as a casting director.

With Panjab '95 still stuck with the CBFC, has the reception of Raat Akeli Hai: The Bansal Murders come as relief that there's still scope for socio-politically aware films?

That's always been the case. In fact, the reception to Raat Akeli Hai 2 is even bigger than that of the first part. That was really surprising for me. I think that's because the points we're making are very relevant in today's times. There's a section of society you should not neglect. They're not a small section of India. In fact, they're India themselves.

Raat Akeli Hai writer Smita Singh told me she's getting reactions like "Oh, the servant did it! How predictable." What's your response to that?

These are some things people do because they're being over smart. But what they don't realize is they're killing the viewers' interest in watching the film. When you watch Raat Akeli Hai 2, you also intend to neglect that person. It's only when he reappears that you think the reasoning is correct. Though I don't endorse what Om Prakash did, but that's the poor guy. If we don't pay attention, what would he be left with?

How much having been a casting director help in being a better filmmaker?

It does, to an extent. When I'm developing a film, it always helps if you know who will play these characters. Luckily, I got everyone I wanted in my film. Who would've thought Deepti Naval could play Guru Maa? Even she said, "I have a 50-year career. You're putting me in this kind of a getup!" But eventually, when I showed her how it's going to look, she got so thrilled. And she said, "Let's do it." Even with Revathy ma'am, we chopped off her long hair. She told me, "It's great Dr. Panicker is a woman because it's a character with a certain kind of muscle, so directors would tend to cast a man." But I give that credit to Smita. When I went to Rajat Kapoor, he even said, "Can Dr. Panicker not be a male character so that I can play that one?"

Panjab '95 could've been your sophomore directorial. What's the current status of that film?

I'm still waiting for the answers. The cuts that have been given to me are 127. See, I'm not against the cuts. I'm very happy to do even 150 cuts if they're legitimate or being given to me by the court of law. But if any government or people in power say this doesn't suit our politics, then it's very subjective. I'd really wish my freedom of expression be protected, which seems very difficult in today's times. Probably, it's not a propaganda film. It doesn't work in the favour of the sitting government. It's 10 years of your producing partner Abhishek Chaubey's Uda Punjab (2016), which also had its fair share of troubles with the CBFC. How has the situation changed over the past decade? It's become worse, for sure. Those at the CBFC are definitely taking advantage of what they do. They're misusing their power. They're trying to please the sitting government so much that they're trying to control the narrative. Uss poori chakki mein koi na koi toh pis hi raha hai. Not only me, there must be other filmmakers also.

What helped Uda Punjab get a rightful release, which isn't possible for Panjab '95 today?

There was a tribunal, FCAT (Film Certification Appellate Tribunal), which was abolished by the Indian government in 2021). After that, we went to the court, fought a legitimate legal battle, and won. I'd like to believe we'd have won this time as well, but my producer (Ronnie Screwvala of RSVP Movies) was pressurized — or a better word is, threatened — to pull out the case from Bombay High Court. If one isn't even allowed to fight in the court, the government is taking power in their own hands by snatching my constitutional right. That's ridiculous! You don't know where to go in this kind of a scenario.

How are you so sure that you'd have won had the case not been withdrawn?

In the course of the trial period, the CBFC changed their lawyers just to buy time. It gives you the impression that something is fishy. When the fourth lawyer was presenting his arguments, the Lordship asked him to watch the film first since he had newly joined. The Lordship's reading of the film was completely different from the learned lawyer, who said there's a separatist/Khalistan angle. The Lordship asked if they'd even watched the same film. "Since when have the courts started working on assumptions?," they asked. When the learned lawyer

argued there could be a law and order situation in Punjab, the lordship said that's the state government's lookout, not the CBFC's. The Lordship said the film should come out without a single cut because it's based on legal documents. My producer was then called to Delhi, and asked to also withdraw the film from Toronto International Film Festival. We don't even need a CBFC certificate for screening our film there. But that's what happens with abuse of power. The arm-twisting never ends.

Would you have done things differently had you been the sole producer on Panjab '95?

That's very difficult to say. Ronnie has been a very gracious and great producer, whom I truly admire. I'm still very hopeful that possibly, it's happening at a very low level. The actual people in power may have not even watched the film yet. I've discussed the matter with people in government departments in Delhi, and they have no idea. We'd requested the I&B Ministry to watch the film. Ronnie and I were called to their office and told, "When the right time comes, we'll tell you." We were ready to release the film overseas, but days before that, Ronnie got a call by somebody that it wouldn't be taken in a good taste. So, we had to withdraw the release.

Do you think the Hindi film industry was also far more united at the time of Uda Punjab?

Yes, I believe so. You can't make Uda Punjab or Haider in today's times. Whoever from the film industry has watched the film privately has loved it. Now, I'm not even allowed to do my private screenings. I was told the Punjab law and order situation can get affected, but I fail to understand then how can very sensitive films like The Kashmir Files (2022), The Kerala Story (2023), Emergency (2025), The Bengal Files (2025), and The Sabarmati Report (2024) get not only released, but also get tax-free and a standing ovation in the Parliament. Law and order in those respective states is intact. Only the Punjab law and order would disrupt the unity of the nation? Perhaps if I had a Muslim as a villain or if I showed Muslims in negative light, then I would've also gotten standing ovation in the Parliament.

Javed Akhtar has maintained that the film industry can't be divided on political lines. Do you believe that political polarity has also trickled into Bollywood now?

Yes, for sure. I think it has changed a lot. There's a loss of involvement. In today's times, there are so many films where you can have Muslim A-list actors, but the protagonist has to be Hindu. I don't understand why that's the case. At one point of time, I was involved with a film that's just going to get released. It's based on a true-life Muslim character. But because it's a big budget film with an A-list star, the character has been made Hindu. So, somewhere there's a fear in society that probably the people in power don't want to see a real-life hero come from a minority, whether it's Sikh, Muslim or Christian. I'm not saying that's what they want, but that's what I feel when I look at the overall scenario.

Is it a conflict of interest if Panjab '95 actors Diljit Dosanjh and Arjun Rampal also act in films with different politics, like Border 2 and Dhurandhar?

No, whatever I'm making, my actors and characters need to be true to that. I have nothing to do with what they do in their personal lives. Diljit's support has always been there. Whenever I speak to him, he really tries to empathize with me. It's not something in our control. We all know the reasons. It's sad, but we can't do anything beyond a point. Diljit has been very vocal. He shows up whenever and wherever he can.

Would you do a film that you don't align with politically, probably in exchange of Panjab '95 getting cleared?

No. I won't do a single cut on this film, unless it's coming from the law. If I don't understand the politics or the right reasoning to tell a story, if I'm not honest with it, it'd be very difficult for me to do a film. I'm not here to support anybody's personal or political agendas. I'm not here to be anybody's mouthpiece.

Even Kangana Ranaut, a sitting BJP MP, had a tough time getting her film Emergency cleared without cuts linked to the Khalistan issue. If she has to compromise too, where's the hope?

That depends on how many cuts were asked. I haven't watched the film, so it's very difficult for me to say. But that was cleared by the court? Allow me to go to the court? Every political party will have their agenda, but you can't take away people's constitutional rights. It's not in good taste.

Given that making a film today is such an uphill battle, do you miss being just a casting director?

It's not that I was only a casting director back then. I was also Vishal Bhardwaj's associate director for 15-16 years. Luckily, he also began giving me a separate casting director credit from Makdee (2002). That was one of the first times that casting directors were professionally recognized. So, I thought I'd do casting for other films for survival, but guru toh ek hi ho sakta hai. The first film I was technically hired as a casting director was Delhi Belly (2011).

Imran Khan and Anushka Sharma in Matru Ki Bijlee Ka Mandola. Imran Khan and Anushka Sharma in Matru Ki Bijlee Ka Mandola.

Speaking of Delhi Belly, Imran Khan recently revealed that Vishal Bhardwaj cast him in Matru Ki Bijlee Ka Mandola (2013) for a "dishonest reason", purely on the box office he could bring to the film. Was that the case?

Yes. To make that film, you needed an X amount of money. That was only coming in with Imran because he had three consecutive hits at that time. So, it was Vishal sir's decision to go with Imran. See, filmmaking is definitely passion-driven, but is also a very big business. When Ajay Devgn couldn't manage dates, there was another star in consideration. But we weren't getting the amount we needed to make the film. So, the studio only suggested Imran. I also respect what Imran is saying because somewhere, he's also coming from a right place. But then you both decide to give it your 100% and see it through.

Sunil Pal recalls 'throwing up' looking at Sunil Grover dressed as a woman on Kapil Sharma's show: 'Shouldn't do that, makes me feel icky'



Comedian Sunil Pal is known for his controversial opinions and blunt statements. In a recent interview, Sunil opened up about his peers in the comedy circuit — Kapil Sharma and Sunil Grover. While praising the former for evolving with time, he dished Grover's character as a woman on Kapil's show. During a podcast with Siddharth Kannan, Pal was asked about Indian comedians who have faded away, and the ones who still stand strong in the

industry. "It has been 21 years. It is human tendency that we always want change. One has to accept change with time, otherwise you can get stuck in a specific circle and become limited. Both Naveen Prabhakar and Ahsaan Qureshi became a target of this. They didn't change themselves, that's what I feel," he shared.

The comedian added, "In the last 40 years, the great Johnny Lever is the only one who lived his era and inspired people to change. I am his devotee and fan. Besides him, I saw a strong force in Kapil Sharma. He also changed himself, and even Sunil Grover. In the last 20 years, there are hardly 5 people who I have seen changing. Otherwise, people are still doing market jokes, old artiste mimicry, and not trying anything new." Sunil Pal also recalled "throwing up" while watching Sunil Grover perform in a cross-dressed role. "Both of us have worked a lot together in the early days of our career. His acting as a woman made me uncomfortable. So much so that I once threw up while eating, just looking at him. Coming in a woman's get up, it makes me feel icky, once shouldn't do that, I feel so. Otherwise, I am a fan of his work. People who do vulgarity and abuse are earning crores, and I also had this option earlier," he concluded. For the unversed, Sunil Grover is famous for his comedy sketches as female characters, most notably Gutthi and Rinku Bhabhi, on Kapil Sharma's show.

Shilpa Shinde's return to Bhabiji Ghar Par Hai was a promise producer Benaifer Kohli made to the show's late writer: 'I will look after her'

Actress Shilpa Shinde has returned to the small screen, reprising her celebrated character from Bhabiji Ghar Par Hai. While the show's season 2 has been running successfully on Zee5, Shilpa has returned to the show after a decade. The actress who played Angoori Bhabhi initially in 2015 had quit the show after a year, following some differences with the producers. Now, as she returns, Bhabiji Ghar Par Hai producers Benaifer and Sanjay Kohli reveal in an exclusive interview with SCREEN, how they managed to bring the actress back. Sanjay also talks about making Bhabiji Ghar Par Hai 2 on a smaller scale budget compared to its predecessors.

Why had Shilpa Shinde quit Bhabiji Ghar Par Hai earlier?

Interestingly, Shilpa Shinde was never the first choice for Angoori Bhabhi. In fact, as revealed by the producers in the show's very first episode, Shilpa played the role of Anita, which was later helmed by Saumya Tandon. While Shilpa's character as Angoori Bhabhi became an instant hit, in 2016, the actress had a fallout with the producers when she was asked to sign an exclusive contract for the show. This only escalated into a legal battle after Shilpa made some other accusations against the producers. Following this, the makers had decided never to work with Shilpa Shinde again.

How did Shilpa Shinde return to Bhabiji Ghar Par Hai?

Shubhangi Atre replaced Shilpa Shinde and played Angoori Bhabhi for 10 years. In season 2, Shubhangi's exit came as a shocker. Talking about what went behind Shilpa returning and Shubhangi leaving the show, producer Benaifer Kohli said, "Thanks to Shubhangi, she ran the show for many years. At one point, the show was plateauing, and we needed to change the story. The channel said let's change the actress also."

Shilpa's return was a promise Benaifer made to the show's former writer, Manoj Santoshi, who recently passed away. "When my writer Manoj Santoshi was in Hyderabad for a kidney transplant, Shilpa looked after him. She was there 24/7, and to do that for a friend was amazing. She rented an apartment, would eat hospital food, and she has a level of kindness that is unmatched. After what I saw Shilpa do for Manoj, I have decided that I will look after her lifelong," Benaifer said. Sanjay Kohli added, "In Hyderabad, Manoj also gave her one wish that he wanted his Angoori to be back. He called Shilpa Angoori, so it was a promise that Benaifer gave him to bring her back."

Bhabiji Ghar Par Hai 2 is made on a 20 percent budget cut while the makers have been happy about the success Bhabiji Ghar Par Hai 2 is getting, Sanjay Kohli says he produced the show on a 20 percent lesser budget than



season one. Talking about the decision to release Bhabiji Ghar Par Hai on Zee 5, he said, "On YouTube, Bhabiji Ghar Par Hai is doing tremendous business for the channel. Today, when you produce a show on OTT, it can cost anywhere between Rs 1.5-2 crores. This show's production cost is very cheap; on TV, the budget is very poor. Whether it comes on OTT or not, you are a producer for &TV, so the budget you get is according to that." He further added, "The budgets on TV are in lakhs, what we used to get in 2019 for Bhabiji, I am getting 20 percent less of that. After COVID, we were all asked to cut the budget. Benaifer was the first person to support that." Benaifer said, "It was such a period that there was no advertising, so we went ahead with that. One or two people didn't agree." Sanjay Kohli went on to discuss how artists never understand budget constraints and shared, "Artists never agree, they don't understand. They don't understand the outside world; the budgets we used to get in 2012, producers are getting those kinds of budgets today. Established producers are working at those budgets because the money from advertising has come down, the subscription base has gone down, we have to understand that." Benaifer also added, "It is also getting divided with OTT." He further reflected on the cost of food, hiring a set, and all have gone up. Benaifer also said no matter what happens, they have always made sure that the crew's payments never get held up. Interestingly, after Bhabiji Ghar Par Hai 2, they are also releasing a film, Bhabiji Ghar Par Hai: Fun On The Run. The film marks the maiden production of Sanjay and Benaifer's son, Vihaan Kohli.

Farah Khan announces her comeback, says will do a film with Shah Rukh Khan: 'End of this year I'll start'



The iconic duo of Shah Rukh Khan and Farah Khan has delivered several blockbusters, including Main Hoon Na, Om Shanti Om, and Happy New Year. Beyond commercial success, these films have cemented their place in the socio-cultural fabric of the country. With such a devoted fan base, audiences have long awaited the duo's reunion, and it seems that wish is finally coming true. Farah recently revealed her plans to return to direction, emphasizing that she will do so only with Shah Rukh. While interacting with Nakuul Mehta on her YouTube channel, Farah discussed

the popular social media hashtag 'Farah Wapas Aao,' where film-goers have been urging her to make a comeback. She said, "I think it's time. I think end of this year I'll start." In the same breath, she added, "If I do it, I will do with Shah Rukh. Otherwise, I will keep doing YouTube."

When asked if she plans to step away from YouTube to make time for her film, she humorously remarked, "I don't want to leave YouTube, as I have to pay my children's fees. It's very expensive to have kids, as you all know." For those unaware, Farah's children, Divya and Czar, are heading to the United States to pursue higher education in fields ranging from economics to data science and artificial intelligence. Meanwhile, Shah Rukh Khan is currently busy shooting for his upcoming film King, an actioner directed by Siddharth Anand. The title and first look of the film were unveiled on SRK's 60th birthday, and the release date is expected to be announced in the coming days. The star-studded cast includes Suhana Khan, Deepika Padukone, Abhishek Bachchan, Raghuvar Jayal, Jackie Shroff, Jaideep Ahlawat, Arshad Warsi, Abhay Varma, and Rani Mukerji.