

# Across State

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## "Congress Ignored BR Ambedkar's Contributions" PM Steps Up Attack



New Delhi

Stepping up the attack on the Congress, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday accused the party of ignoring BR Ambedkar's contribution to the country and always giving the credit to one family. The PM's comments, made during an event to lay the foundation stone of the Ken-Betwa river linking project in Madhya Pradesh, came amid a row over Union Home Minister Amit Shah's remarks on BR Ambedkar, which have attracted criticism from the Congress and other opposition parties.

Speaking at the event in Khajuraho, PM Modi also said only nations with well-managed water resources can make progress and that Ambedkar's vision played a significant role in strengthening the country's water resources.

"Baba Saheb Ambedkar's vision and farsightedness have contributed significantly to strengthening India's water resources, water management, and dam construction. Ambedkar ji played a crucial role in the development of major river valley projects in India. His efforts are also behind the formation of the current Central Water Commission," the PM said

But the Congress party, he said, never paid heed to the country's growing need for water conservation and did not recognise the efforts of the architect of the Constitution as a water conservationist.

Congress and governance do not go together, the PM emphasised, adding that past Congress governments delayed projects for 35-40 years after laying their foundation stones.

"The major challenge of the 21st century is water security. In the 21st century, only those countries that have adequate water resources with proper management will move forward," he said.

The PM's attack follows similar scathing remarks against the Congress over the Ambedkar issue by Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh and Assam Chief Ministers Devendra Fadnavis, Yogi Adityanath and Himanta Biswa Sarma.

The Congress has hit back, accusing the BJP of being hostile to democracy and the Constitution.

"The BJP and the Sangh have always opposed the makers of the Constitution, the protectors of the Constitution, the givers of freedom, and the protectors of democracy. All these facts clearly indicate that the Sangh, BJP, and their affiliated organisations cannot tolerate democracy and the Constitution in any form," Congress leader Surendra Rajput said.

The controversy was ignited last week, when Mr Shah said in Parliament that taking Ambedkar's name had become a fashion.

"Abhi ek fashion ho gaya hai -

Ambedkar, Ambedkar, Ambedkar. Itna naam agar bhagwan ka lete to saat janmon tak swarg mil jata (It has become a fashion to say Ambedkar, Ambedkar, Ambedkar'. If they took God's name so many times, they would have got a place in heaven)," he said.

### Solar Project Inaugurated Too

The PM also inaugurated the Omkareshwar Floating Solar Project in Madhya Pradesh's Khandwa district virtually, and laid the foundation stone of the Daudhan Irrigation Project, which is part of the Ken-Betwa river linking project.

Union Water Resources Minister CR Patil and Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Mohan Yadav handed over two 'kalash' (urns) containing water from the Betwa and Ken rivers, to the Prime Minister, who poured it over a model of the project.

The PM said the river linking project will open new doors of prosperity and happiness in the Bundelkhand region.

Officials said nearly 44 lakh people in ten districts of Madhya Pradesh and 21 lakh people in Uttar Pradesh will get drinking water under the project, which is estimated to cost Rs 44,605 crore. They added that nearly 7.18 lakh agricultural families in 2,000 villages will benefit from the project, which will also generate 103 MW of hydropower and 27 MW of solar energy.

PM Modi also released a commemorative stamp and a coin in memory of former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, whose birth centenary was on Wednesday. The Vajpayee government had proposed river linking as a solution for the country's irrigation needs.

PM Modi also performed the groundbreaking ceremony for the construction of 1,153 'Atal Gram Sewa Sadans', estimated to cost Rs 437 crore, at the Khajuraho event.

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## Congress Should Apologise For Wasting Parliament's Time: Fadnavis

Nagpur

Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis on Tuesday termed Congress' protest against Union Home Minister Amit Shah over his comments about Dr B R Ambedkar as drama, and said it should apologise for wasting Parliament's time. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has shown how the Gandhi family always opposed Ambedkar, he told reporters here.

Asked about the Congress's nationwide protest against Shah, he said it was mere drama. "Congress should apologise for tweeting an incomplete video of Amit Shah (where he mentioned Ambedkar) and wasting the time of Parliament and now wasting the people's time," the chief minister said. Congress never accorded respect to Ambedkar but now it wants to use his name for politics, he claimed.

## ED takes possession of flat of Dawood's brother

New Delhi

Dreaded terrorist Dawood Ibrahim's brother Iqbal Kaskar's flat in Maharashtra's Thane was recently taken into possession by the Enforcement Directorate, officials said on Tuesday. Kaskar, who was already in jail, was placed under fresh arrest by the ED on February 18 on money laundering charges. He is currently in jail under judicial custody. According to the official, the residential dwelling in Neopolis Building located in Thane West was attached as part of a provisional order issued under the PMLA in 2022 against its owner Mumtaz Ezaz Shaikh.

The ED had earlier alleged that this flat was extorted by Kaskar and others from a Thane-based real estate developer Suresh Devichand Mehta.

# Filmmaker Shyam Benegal cremated with full state honours

Mumbai

Veteran filmmaker Shyam Benegal, the pioneer of the parallel cinema movement in Indian cinema in the 1970s and 1980s, was cremated on Tuesday with full state honours and a three-gun salute here.

Benegal, known for films such as "Ankur", "Mandi", "Nishant", and "Junoon", died on Monday at a hospital here due to chronic kidney disease.

The last rites of the filmmaker, who celebrated his 90th birthday on December 14, were held around 3 pm at Dadar's Shivaji Park crematorium.

Benegal's cinema contemporaries, colleagues and younger generations of actors and artists accompanied wife Nira and daughter Pia in paying their last respects to the icon, whose movies captured the many realities of India.

Naseeruddin Shah, Rajit Kapoor, Kulbhushan Kharbanda, and Ila Arun, who starred in many of Benegal's films, were present to bid adieu to the director.

Also present were actor Ratna Pathak Shah, her son Vivaan Shah, writer-poet Gulzar, director Hansal



Mehta, lyricist Javed Akhtar, actors Divya Dutta, Boman Irani, Kunal Kapoor and Anang Desai.

Shivendra Singh Dungarpur, whose Film Heritage Foundation recently restored Benegal's 1976 "Manthan" for a screening at the Cannes Film Festival, was also present.

Gulzar said what Benegal brought to cinema was a revolution that will never come again.

"He hasn't departed, we have departed from him and seen him off. He brought a revolution, he has gone with that revolution of change

in cinema. Nobody else will be able to bring that wave, revolution once again. We will remember him for a long time and we will talk about him for a long to come," Gulzar told PTI.

Actor Shreyas Talpade, who played the lead role in Benegal's satire "Welcome to Sajjanpur", said the film was one of his most memorable shooting experiences because of Benegal.

"I was a changed person after I returned from the shoot of the film. I think we will miss his talks the most. He mesmerised us whenever he used to talk. It's a huge loss," Talpade said

## Case registered against 12 social media users for sharing manipulative video of CM Fadnavis

Mumbai

The Maharashtra state cyber department has registered a case against 12 social media users for allegedly sharing a manipulated and incomplete video of Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis. The officials said the content of the video was designed with an intention to incite societal unrest, hurt the sentiments of specific groups and potentially lead to a law and order situation in Maharashtra.

According to the state cyber officials, a formal complaint was filed with them after the video surfaced on social media platforms such as X, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube.

A representative from the BJP alleged that the video



was posted from accounts belonging to 12 social media users identified by their usernames as Bharat Bhavla Shinde (@Bs131B),

Suddhodhan Sahajrao (@Suddhodhan74629), Nagpur Congress Sevalal (@SevalalNGP), Saurabh Shingh Chauhan (@Sbchauhan0103), Mukesh Lavhale (@MukeshLavhale), suresh.kale, Prasad Salvi, Varad Kanki, Amol Kamble, Syed Saleem, THE SMART 230K, and Vishnu Bhotkar.

The complainant has been accused of sharing a manipulated and incomplete video.

It is alleged that the video had shown that the Chief Minister of Maharashtra does not believe in the Constitution of India, democracy and any constitutional body. It further suggested that he aims to create a parallel state.

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# Maharashtra govt allocates bungalows to ministers

## Mumbai

The Maharashtra government allocated bungalows and offices in Mumbai to its newly sworn-in ministers on Monday, two days after Cabinet portfolios were handed out.

There are 42 ministers, including Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis and two Deputy CMs Ajit Pawar and Eknath Shinde, in the present Maharashtra government of which six are ministers of state.

While most of the ministers have been allocated bungalows in Mumbai's Malabar Hill and Nariman Point areas, some of them have got flats in state government-owned buildings owing to a shortage of bungalows to accommodate all the 42 ministers. According to sources, this has led to displeasure among some ministers who did not get bungalows, and some have complained about the allotment of offices in Mantralaya's annexe building.

According to officials, Chief Minister Fadnavis will reside at the Varsha bungalow once his predecessor Eknath



Shinde vacates it. Shinde is likely to retain the Nandanvan and Agradoot bungalows that were already occupied by him in his previous tenure, and Ajit Pawar will continue to live in the Devgiri Bungalow.

Maharashtra Assembly Speaker Rahul Narvekar has been allotted the Shivgiri bungalow. The sea-facing Dnyaneshwari Bungalow and the sprawling Ramtek Bungalow, the most preferred residential

buildings, were allotted to Maharashtra Legislative Council Chairperson Ram Shankar Shinde and Revenue Minister Chandrashekhar Bawankule respectively. Former Shiv Sena minister Deepak Kesarkar lived in the Ramtek Bungalow.

While some Maharashtra ministers are unhappy with the bungalows they got, some have complained about the allotment of offices.

Rahul Narvekar – Sivagiri
Ram Shankar Shinde – Dnyaneshwari
Chandrashekhar Bawankule – Ramtek
Radhakrishna Vikhe Patil – Royalstone
Pankaja Munde – Parnakuti
Shambhuraj Desai – Meghdoot
Ganesh Naik – Pawangad
Dhananjay Munde – Satpuda
Chandrakant Patil – Sinhgad
Girish Mahajan – Seva Sadan
Mangal Prabhat Lodha – Vijaydurg
Ashok Uike – Lohagad
Ashish Shelar – Ratnashishu
Dattatray Bharane – Siddhagad
Aditi Tatkare – Pratapgad
Shivendraraje Bhosale – Panhalgad
Manikrao Kokate – Ambar
Jaykumar Gore – Prachitigad
Narahari Jirwal – Suruchi
Sanjay Savkare – Amber 32
Sanjay Shirsath – Amber 38
Pratap Sarnaik – Arvato 5
Bharat Gogavale – Suruchi 2
Makarand Patil – Suruchi 3
Gulabrao Patil – Jetvan
Hasan Mushrif – Vishalgad

## Rs 4.65 crore lost in SIM swap fraud recovered through cyber helpline number

### Mumbai

THE CYBER helpline number 1930 managed to recover Rs 4.65 crore of the Rs 7.60 crore fraudulently transferred from the account of a Malad-based businessman in a SIM swap case.

In a SIM swap fraud, cyber fraudsters manage to get personal details of a person and use it to apply for a new SIM card.

Once the new SIM card is activated, the old one gets disconnected. The accused then uses the person's details to make a transaction and approve the OTP that comes on the new SIM number.

In this case, on Sunday evening, when the Malad-based man realised that his and his son's phone numbers were not working, the service provider told them that new SIM cards had been issued, officials said.

The complainant found that Rs 7.60 crore had been transferred following which he contacted the helpline number which managed to save Rs 4.65 crore. An offence has been registered and the police are trying to track down the accused person.

## Dharavi Redevelopment Project: No building maintenance charges for a decade

### Mumbai

Residents of Dharavi, one of Asia's largest slums, will receive relief from building maintenance charges for a decade under the Dharavi Redevelopment Project, a joint venture between the Maharashtra government and Adani Group.

For the first 10 years, maintenance charges for new societies will be fully covered by the developer, as confirmed by officials of the Dharavi Redevelopment Project-Slum Rehabilitation Authority (DRP-SRA). This initiative includes free maintenance and aims to provide housing while enhancing residents' long-term financial well-being, said an official.

The Maharashtra government has designated 10 per cent of the built-up area in the rehabilitation component for commercial use. This revenue-generating model is designed to support community maintenance beyond the initial ten years. As a result, residents will not face the service charges commonly imposed in cooperative housing societies, including those managed by the Maharashtra Housing and Area Development Authority (MHADA).

To support this framework, a statutory corpus fund will be established for each tenement, providing residents with an additional layer of financial security, said



an official.

"This innovative approach ensures that Dharavi residents not only enjoy better homes but also a worry-free lifestyle in planned, sustainable communities," said a senior official.

According to officials, the redevelopment project offers modern amenities such as reliable water and electricity supply, private toilets, and kitchens—significantly improving the current living conditions of residents. Eligible residents (those who settled before 2000) will be provided with homes measuring 350 square feet, which are 17 per cent larger than the

units offered in other slum rehabilitation schemes.

The 2022 tender for the Dharavi Redevelopment Project addresses the shortcomings of previous efforts by emphasising both financial and infrastructural sustainability. A key feature of this plan is the inclusion of upper-floor residents who are often overlooked in slum rehabilitation schemes. With these measures, the Dharavi Redevelopment Project aims to transform housing and establish a model for inclusive and financially sustainable urban renewal, said an official.



# Jobs, Farm Productivity, Funds For Infra Boost Figure At PM-Economists Meet

**New Delhi**

Job creation, improving farm productivity, and mobilising public funds for infrastructure development were some of the issues that figured during the interaction between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and economists ahead of the 2025-26 Union Budget. The Prime Minister on Tuesday met eminent economists and sectoral experts at NITI Aayog to hear their views and suggestions for the upcoming Budget.

Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman is scheduled to present the Budget for 2025-26 in the Lok Sabha on February 1, 2025. According to an official statement, the Prime Minister emphasised that Viksit Bharat can be achieved through a fundamental change in mindset, which is focused towards making India developed by 2047.

The participants shared their views on several issues, including navigating challenges posed by global economic uncertainties and geopolitical tensions, strategies to enhance employment particularly among the youth, and create sustainable job opportunities across



sectors.

Suggestions were also made on aligning education and training programmes with the evolving needs of the job market, enhancing agricultural productivity and creating sustainable rural employment opportunities, attracting private investment and mobilising public funds for infrastructure projects to boost economic growth. Suggestions were also made for promoting financial inclusion

and boosting exports and attracting foreign investment, as per the statement.

Renowned economists and analysts present at the interaction included Surjit S Bhalla, Ashok Gulati, Sudipto Mundle, Dharmakirti Joshi, Janmejaya Sinha, Madan Sabnavis, Amita Batra, Ridham Desai, Chetan Ghate, Bharat Ramaswami, Soumya Kanti Ghosh, Siddhartha Sanyal, Laveesh Bhandari, Rajani Sinha, Keshab Das, Pritam Banerjee, Rahul Bajoria,

Nikhil Gupta, and Shashwat Alok, the statement added.

The meeting comes in the backdrop of worries around deceleration of economic growth. The Indian economy grew 6.7 per cent in the June quarter and 5.4 per cent in the July-September period. Recently, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) lowered India's economic growth forecast to 6.5 per cent for the current financial year from its earlier estimate of 7 per cent due to lower-than-expected growth in private investment and housing demand.

The multilateral development bank has also lowered India's growth forecast for the 2025-26 financial year. Earlier this month, the Reserve Bank of India also significantly lowered the growth projection for the current fiscal year to 6.6 per cent from 7.2 per cent earlier.

Next year's Budget will also be watched for any pre-emptive measures the government might take in response to a possible hike in US tariffs after US President-elect Donald Trump last week said India charges a lot of tariff and threatened to impose reciprocal tax.

# SC allows banks to charge over 30% interest on credit card dues

**New Delhi**

Banks can charge an interest rate of more than 30 per cent on credit card dues from customers as the Supreme Court has set aside a 2008 verdict of the National Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission (NCDRC) that had held such excessive interest rate amounted to unfair trade practice.

Adjudicating on 16-year-old appeals by Citibank, American Express, HSBC and Standard Chartered Bank, a Bench comprising Justices Bela M Trivedi and Satish Chandra Sharma termed the NCDRC's order as "unwarranted", saying it had no jurisdiction to rewrite the terms of the contract entered between the banks and the credit cardholders, which the parties had mutually agreed to be bound by.

The Bench sought to emphasise that "the credit card holders are duly educated and made aware of their privileges and obligations, including timely payment and levying of penalty on delay".

Writing the judgment for the Bench, Justice Sharma said, "We are of the considered opinion that once the terms of the credit card operations were known to the complainants and disclosed by the banking institutions before the issuance of the

credit cards, the National Commission could not have scrutinised the terms or conditions, including the rate of interest. More so, the respondent has not approached the statutory authority, the Reserve Bank of India, for any objection against the rate of interest, or the high Benchmark Prime Lending Rate."

"In addition, we are also of the considered view that an endeavour to cap the rate of interest charged by banks and dictating the need for a Benchmark Prime Lending Rate, drawing parallels with other economies across the world, whilst failing to trust the prudence of the Reserve Bank of India which has been entrusted with the fundamental responsibility of regulation of the monetary system and banking business is unwarranted," it said, setting aside the July 7, 2008, verdict of the NCDRC.

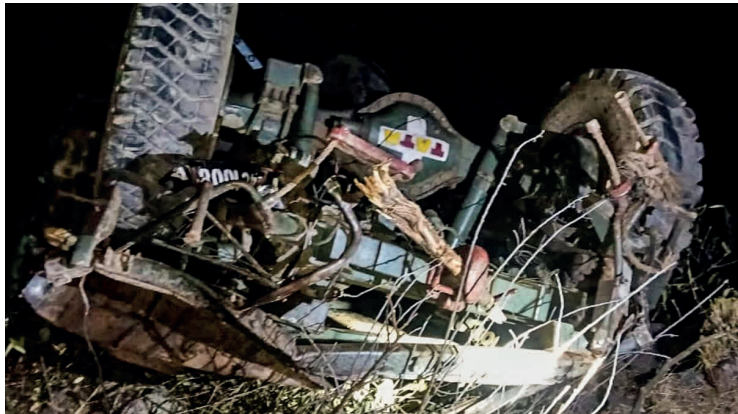
"It is correct to say that the National Commission has been duly empowered under the statute to set aside unfair contracts, which may symbolise a single will or are unilaterally dominant or incorporate terms which are unfair and unconscionable. However, the rate of interest, charged by the banks, determined by the financial

wisdom and directives issued by the RBI, and is duly communicated to the credit card holders from time to time, cannot be in any manner unconscionable or unilateral," it noted.

The top court agreed with the central bank's submissions "that the question of directing the RBI to act against any bank does not arise, in the facts and circumstances of the present case and that there is no question of the RBI being directed to impose any cap on the rate of interest, either on the banking sector as a whole, or in respect of any one particular bank, contrary to the provisions contained in the Banking Regulation Act, and the circulars/directions issued thereunder". Noting that the pre-conditions of 'deceptive practice' and 'unfair method' were manifestly absent, it said, "The banks have in no manner made any misrepresentation to deceive the credit card holders. Upon availing the facility of the credit cards, the customers are made aware of 'the most important terms and conditions', including the rate of interest, that shall be charged by the banks. Even on merits, the RBI has made it clear that there exists no material on record to establish that any bank has acted contrary to the policy directives issued by the RBI.



## 5 Soldiers Killed As Vehicle Plunged Into 300-Foot Gorge In Poonch, Terror Angle Ruled Out



### Jammu

Five soldiers were killed, and five others were injured in a tragic road accident near the Line of Control (LoC) in the Balnoi area of Mendhar in the Poonch district of Jammu and Kashmir on Tuesday evening. The accident occurred when a convoy of six vehicles en route from Nilam Headquarters to Balnoi Ghora Post skidded off the road and rolled down a 300-foot-deep gorge, officials said, ruling out any terror angle.

A defence spokesperson stated that the cause of the accident is being investigated but suggested the driver "possibly lost control at the turn of the road."

Officials quoted that the Indian Army's rescue team reached the site and recovered the bodies of five soldiers from the gorge, which is 300-350 feet deep. The injured were evacuated to a nearby camp for initial treatment.

Later, the injured soldiers were shifted to a field hospital in Poonch, with one of them reported to be in critical condition. "One 2.5-ton vehicle, part of a convoy of six vehicles, while moving on the operational track near Poonch, went off the road into a nallah. The operational track is on the home side of the LoC fence," the Defence spokesperson said in a statement.

Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Omar Abdullah expressed deep sorrow over the incident near the forward post along the Line of Control (LoC). He extended his condolences to the bereaved families of the soldiers and prayed for the speedy recovery of the injured, a

spokesperson said.

Congress leaders also expressed grief over the soldiers' deaths, with party chief Mallikarjun Kharge praising their selfless service to the nation. "Deeply anguished by the terrible news of the martyrdom of five of our brave Indian Army soldiers in a vehicle tragedy in Poonch district of Jammu and Kashmir," Kharge posted on X.

Our heartfelt condolences to the families of our bravehearts. We salute their sacrifice and selfless service to the nation. Our thoughts are with the injured, and we wish them a speedy and complete recovery", he added.

Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi also paid tribute, saying, "I pay my heartfelt tribute to the martyrs and hope for the speedy recovery of the injured soldiers. My deepest condolences to the bereaved families," in a post on X.

### New Delhi

The Enforcement Directorate is investigating the alleged involvement of some Canadian colleges and a few Indian entities in a money-laundering case linked to the trafficking of Indians into the US from the Canada border.

The investigation is linked to the death of a four-member Indian family, hailing from Dingucha village in Gujarat. The four died of extreme cold while trying to cross the Canada-US border illegally on January 19, 2022.

The ED said it took cognisance of an Ahmedabad Police FIR against Bhavesh

## People struggling with inflation, govt sleeping like 'Kumbhakarna': Rahul

### New Delhi

Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi on Tuesday said people were struggling with rising prices and are forced to compromise on small things of daily needs while the government is sleeping like 'Kumbhakarna'.

Rahul shared a video on his social media handles on his recent visit to a vegetable market in Giri Nagar here and interaction with housewives who narrated their ordeal due to rising prices of food items.

"A few days ago, I went to a local vegetable market and while shopping with customers, I talked to the vendors to know how the budget of the common people is deteriorating and how inflation has troubled everyone," he said in his post.

"People are struggling with



rising prices and are forced to compromise on small things of daily needs," the former Congress chief said in his post in Hindi.

"We discussed the prices of garlic, peas, mushrooms and other vegetables, and heard the

real experiences of the people. How garlic at Rs 400 per kg and peas at Rs 120 per kg have shaken everyone's budget," he said.

"What will people eat and what will they save," he wondered.

## Create data-rich platform to benefit investigation officers: Shah to NCRB

### New Delhi

Emphasising on the use of technology, Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Tuesday directed National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) and National Informatics Centre (NIC), the technical arm of the Centre, to ensure that alerts are generated for all the criminal cases at predefined stages and timelines right from registration to disposal of the case to benefit victims and complainants. Alerts to investigation officers as well as senior officers as per pre-defined timelines would help in expediting the process of investigation, the minister said

during a meeting held in the national capital to review the implementation of the three criminal laws in the country. The Union Home Minister said that NCRB should create a data-rich platform to benefit the investigation officers and other stakeholders in the criminal justice system. Shah highlighted that a team of officers of the Ministry of Home Affairs and NCRB should visit all the states to increase the adoption of technical projects and assist them in all possible ways. The Home Minister asked NCRB to facilitate complete implementation of the new criminal laws in the Inter-Operable Criminal Justice System (ICJS 2.0).

## ED probing role of Canadian colleges, Indian entities in human trafficking

### New Delhi

The Enforcement Directorate is investigating the alleged involvement of some Canadian colleges and a few Indian entities in a money-laundering case linked to the trafficking of Indians into the US from the Canada border.

The investigation is linked to the death of a four-member Indian family, hailing from Dingucha village in Gujarat. The four died of extreme cold while trying to cross the Canada-US border illegally on January 19, 2022.

The ED said it took cognisance of an Ahmedabad Police FIR against Bhavesh

Ashokbhai Patel, who emerged as the main accused in the matter, and a few others, to file a complaint under the criminal sections of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA). Patel and others are alleged to have "hatched a well-planned conspiracy to send people (Indians) to the US through Canada via illegal channels thereby committing the offence of human trafficking," it said.

The agency had earlier found that as part of the racket, the accused "arranged" admission for people, desirous to go to the US illegally, in colleges and universities based in Canada. A Canadian student visa was applied

for such people and once they reached that country, instead of joining the college, they "illegally" crossed the US-Canada border, the agency said in a statement on Tuesday.

"In view of this, the fee received by colleges based in Canada was remitted back to the individuals' account," the ED alleged.

Indians were "lured" into the racket and charged between Rs 55 lakh and Rs 60 lakh per person, according to the ED.

The agency said it undertook fresh searches in this case on December 10 and December 19 at eight locations in Mumbai, Nagpur, Gandhinagar and Vadodara.



# Increase in voter turnout in Maharashtra poll normal: EC to Cong



## New Delhi

The Election Commission of India (ECI) on Tuesday claimed that the jump in voting percentage in the recently concluded Maharashtra Assembly elections, as alleged by the Congress, was normal.

In response to Congress' allegations, the poll panel said the charge of a spike in polling percentage by the Congress in the Maharashtra Assembly elections was a "misconception".

It added that the increase in voter turnout from 5 pm to 11.45 pm was normal.

Last month, the Congress had raised doubts about the jump in voting percentage in Maharashtra on the polling day and demanded an answer from the ECI.

In a letter to the ECI, the Congress said there was an "inexplicable increase" in voter turnout between 5 pm and the final voter percentage announced by the EC at 11.30 pm on the day of polling.

Replying to the concerns, the EC explained why it was wrong to compare 5 pm voter turnout data with the final polling data, how an increase in voter turnout from 5

pm to 11.45 pm is normal, being part of the process of aggregation of voter turnout and how there can be bona fide but inconsequential differences in votes polled and votes counted data.

It said it was impossible to change the actual voter turnout as statutory Form 17C giving details of voter turnout is available with authorised agents of candidates at the time of close of poll at polling station itself.

It further explained that a rule-based process was followed with transparency in Maharashtra electoral roll preparation and there was no irregular pattern in voter deletions in the state.

It told the Congress that due process was followed, including participation of Congress representatives in preparation of electoral rolls.

On November 29, the Congress had written to the ECI saying, "With this exercise of unchecked and arbitrary deletion and consequent insertion of voters, Maharashtra witnessed an unprecedented increase of an estimated 47 lakh voters being added to the electoral roll between July 2024 and November 2024."

# Congress moves SC against tweak in election rule



## New Delhi

The Congress on Tuesday filed a writ petition in the Supreme Court challenging the recent amendments to the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961, and expressed hope that the apex court will help restore the "fast-eroding" integrity of the electoral process. The government has tweaked an election rule restricting public inspection of certain electronic documents such as CCTV camera and webcast footage as well as video recordings of candidates. The government says the move is aimed at preventing misuse of such documents. Earlier, documents such as reports

and other communication by returning officers, polling officers and observers among others could be accessed, but with the changes in rules, it will now be difficult. AICC general secretary Jairam Ramesh, who filed the petition, said: "The integrity of the electoral process is fast eroding. Hopefully the Supreme Court will help restore it." "A writ has just been filed in the Supreme Court challenging the recent amendments to the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961," he said in a post on X. Ramesh said the EC, a constitutional body charged with the conduct of free and fair elections, could not be allowed to unilaterally, and without public consultation, amend such a vital law in such a brazen manner. "This is especially true when that amendment does away with public access to essential information that makes the electoral process more transparent and accountable," he contended. Based on the recommendation of the Election Commission of India, the Union Law Ministry on Friday amended Rule 93(2)(a) of the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961, restricting the type of "papers" or documents open to public inspection. Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge called the amendment "another assault in (the Modi government's) systematic conspiracy to destroy the institutional integrity of the Election Commission of India". Other Opposition parties, including the CPM, CPI, and SP, also criticised the amendment. Senior leader and CPI general secretary D Raja said without having a proper discussion with political parties and without evolving a consensus, such unilateral decisions by the Centre would destroy the electoral system and free and fair elections.

# Delhi Police uncover illegal Bangladeshi immigration racket, 11 arrested

## New Delhi

A murder investigation led the Delhi Police to bust an organised syndicate facilitating the infiltration of Bangladeshi nationals into India. The probe resulted in the arrest of 11 individuals, including four Bangladeshi illegal immigrants who entered India through jungle routes and travelled to Delhi by train, using AC classes to avoid detection.

The syndicate provided fake Aadhaar cards, temporary SIM cards, and cash for travel expenses to the Bangladeshi nationals. The investigation began when a woman reported her husband, Sentu Sheikh alias Raja, lying unconscious at their residence.



He was later declared dead at a local hospital. During the probe, four Bangladeshi nationals were arrested, revealing that they had planned the murder due to threats from the deceased. Further questioning exposed their illegal entry into India and residence in

Delhi's Sangam Vihar area using fake Indian IDs.

The police found 21 Aadhaar cards, 4 Voter ID cards, and 8 PAN cards meant for Bangladeshi nationals at the deceased's residence. This led to another case being registered, focusing

on the creation of fake Indian documents and routes for illegal immigration.

The accused revealed that they obtained fake Aadhaar cards through 'Poonam Online Computer Centre' in Rohini, Delhi, owned by Sahil Sehgal. Sehgal's interrogation exposed his role in generating fraudulent birth certificates using the fake website 'Jantaprints.site'.

Further arrests included Ranjit, Afroz, Mohd. Chand, Saddam Hussain, Deepak Mishra, and Sonu Kumar, all involved in the syndicate. This case highlights the ongoing issue of illegal immigration and the need for continued efforts to combat such organised crime.



# Opposition used 'rusty knife': Dhankhar breaks silence on attempt to remove him

New Delhi

Breaking his silence on the opposition's attempt to remove him, Vice-President and Rajya Sabha Chairperson Jagdeep Dhankhar on Tuesday termed it a hasty move akin to using a rusty vegetable-cutting knife for bypass surgery.

"Just look at the notice against the Vice-President. Just look at the six links they have given. You'll be shocked. Chandra Shekhar ji once said, 'Never use a vegetable-cutting knife for bypass surgery.' The notice wasn't even a vegetable-cutting knife; it was rusty. There was haste. When I read it, I was astonished. But what surprised me more was that none of you read it. If you had, you wouldn't have been able to sleep for days," Dhankhar said.

Addressing a function of the Women Journalist Welfare Trust at Vice-President's Enclave, Dhankhar said, "Any constitutional position has to be vindicated by commitment to sublimity, sterling qualities and constitutionalism. We are not in a position to settle scores. Because for the success of democracy, two things are inalienable: expression and dialogue."

He said, "If expression is qualified, compromised, or made subject to coercion, democratic values are flawed. It is antithetical to democratic evolution... Before you use your vocal cords, allow your ears to entertain the other point of view. Without these two elements, democracy can neither be nurtured nor blossom."

Cautioning against orchestrated efforts to harm national interests, the Vice-President said, "Quite often I have seen for myself, these are fuelled in an orchestrated manner by forces that are determined to be inimical to



the interest of this country. Their objective is to destroy, brick by brick, our constitutional institutions, slur the presidency, and mind you, who is the President? The first tribal woman to become President of this country."

He lamented that in the last 10-30 years there haven't been many great debates in Parliament. "We are in the news for the wrong reasons. The pressure has to come from your category. Accountability must be enforced by the media, the only conveyance to the people at large. Media can strike a chord with the people and generate pressure on public representatives," he said.

Highlighting the responsibility of journalists in shaping narratives and defending constitutional values, Dhankhar said, "Journalism is a tough game. To maintain journalistic ethics, to be investigative, to look at areas the government doesn't want you to see, a welfare trust and a

strong legal body are essential to safeguard your interests."

He lauded the contributions of women journalists and anchors -- both in India and globally. "Women journalists bring unparalleled perspectives, and their numbers are growing daily. It is only a matter of time before this field is dominated by women. Your challenges only mean opportunities for you," he noted.

On the rapid economic growth of India and the critical role of the media in this transformative journey, the Vice President said, "We are now the fifth largest global economy, and Japan and Germany will be overtaken in the next year or two, making us the third largest. To be a developed nation, our income has to go eightfold. A daunting task, but achievable."

He said, "I have no doubt that in Bharat, which is unusually seeing an ecosystem of hope and possibility, your role is significant. Your challenges only mean opportunities for you. In your profession, you will have to contend with disruptive technologies. You'll have to contend with it. And learn fast at it. Because narratives are given wings only to generate sensation."

Describing the Women's Reservation Bill as an epochal development, Dhankhar said, "In 2023, after three decades of setbacks where there was intention but no effort, a game-changing constitutional amendment was enacted. One-third reservation for women in state legislatures and the Lok Sabha is a reality. This vertical and horizontal reservation will ensure one-third representation for women in all segments, including SC and ST categories. It is truly an Amrit Kaal for women in Indian democracy."

# Congress Needs to Give Up Leadership of INDIA Alliance: Mani Shankar Aiyar

Mumbai

Senior Congress leader and former Union Minister Mani Shankar Aiyar has once again given a piece of tough advice to his party, Congress, on the issue of INDIA bloc leadership. Aiyar expressed the opinion that Congress should not think about leading the India Bloc but should give a chance to whoever wants to lead this alliance.

He commented that West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee has the ability to lead this India Alliance and some leaders of other parties in this alliance also have this ability.

The India Alliance unsuccessfully fought the 2024 Lok Sabha elections across the country against the BJP-led NDA. Recently, a controversy has erupted over who should lead this alliance. A few days ago, Mamata Banerjee expressed her desire to lead the

INDIA bloc forward. Some constituent parties in the India Alliance have supported Mamata Banerjee's desire.

The Mahavikas Aghadi, which is part of the INDIA alliance, had to face a crushing defeat in the Maharashtra Assembly. After that, questions are being raised again about the leadership of the INDIA bloc. Against this backdrop, Mani Shankar Aiyar's comments triggered a fresh debate.

Aiyar said that Congress should not think about leading INDIA alliance and whoever leads this alliance, the Congress party and its leadership will always have a more important place in the alliance.

The Congress leader said that the Congress will always have an important place among the opposition parties in the country even if it does not lead the alliance. He further said that Rahul



Gandhi will get more respect as a leader of the Congress than this alliance.

Congress national spokesperson Surendra Rajput said that INDIA bloc is an alliance of 36 parties and many leaders in this alliance have the ability to lead this bloc. If there is a discussion about the leadership in the forthcoming meetings of INDIA alliance, a decision will be taken by the majority of those present in the meeting.

Former Chief Minister of the state Sushil Kumar Shinde refused to speak on this issue. Former minister and Congress MLA Dr. Nitin Raut clarified that he cannot speak on this issue. Former Leader of Opposition in the Maharashtra Legislative Assembly Vijay Wadettiwar reacted by saying that he will get information about this and speak later, he has not read or heard anything about it yet.

# Railway Unions Demand Proper Implementation Of Rotational Transfers

## New Delhi

Several Railway Unions are advocating for the effective implementation of rotational transfers for officials in sensitive positions to improve rail operations and create a smoother working environment. Alok Chandra Prakash, General Secretary of the Indian Railways Signalling and Telecommunication Department Maintainers' Union, told ETV Bharat, "The railways have a clear policy regarding rotational transfers, but it has not been properly followed. As a result, many officials, supervisors, and in-charges have remained in the same positions despite completing their tenures."

"The railways should strictly implement this policy on every level for a healthy work environment. Currently, several officials have been holding the same posting for a long time as a result



they started their monopoly and put extra pressure on junior staff, which is not good at a workplace," Prakash said.

Endorsing this, Sanjay Kumar Pandhi, Working President of the Indian Railway Loco Runningmen Organisation, told ETV Bharat, "The rotational transfer policy is not being implemented properly, leading to several anomalies in the workplace. This policy was designed to foster harmonious relations between officials and staff for a better work environment, but its

implementation has been inadequate. It is a sound policy, and the railways should apply it effectively."

A woman railway employee, submitted a complaint letter earlier this year regarding harassment by several senior officials. "In a poor health condition, I was pressurised to work as a result my health condition deteriorated and I had to face miscarriage," she alleged in her letter.

The woman employee told ETV Bharat over the phone, "Several senior officials often put extra pressure on junior staff even during poor medical health conditions, which is not good for a healthy work environment. A proper transfer posting system should be followed to avoid such type of issues."

Similarly, an employee submitted a written complaint in September to the railway against harassment at the

workplace.

Ram Sharan, Central President, All India Loco Running Staff Association told ETV Bharat, "Rotational transfer is not being implemented as per set rule, which affects lower level staff. If officials and supervisors work in the same position for a long tenure, he/she starts monopoly and unnecessary control over employees, which creates a vicious work environment. This situation can be averted by following transfer policy as per rule."

Dilip Kumar, Executive Director (I&P) of the Railway Board, responded to ETV Bharat regarding the rotational transfer issue: "The railways have a clear policy for transfers on sensitive posts, which have already been identified. Transfers for these positions are conducted in accordance with established guidelines."

# Heavy Snowfall Shrouds Kedarnath, Halts Reconstruction Work

## Rudraprayag

The upper reaches of the Himalayan Region received incessant snowfall while it rained in the foothills since Monday morning. In the second session of snowfall, over one-and-a-half feet of snow has accumulated in Kedarnath, shrouding the famed pilgrimage site in a whitish attire.

The uninterrupted snowfall has impeded the reconstruction work, going on since the start of the winter closure. The workers are awaiting the snowfall to cease to resume their work.

Rudraprayag also received a fresh spell of snow.

The heavy snowfall coupled with harsh cold has brought the life of the locals to a halt though it attracted a good number of tourists making the travel companies happy.

Meanwhile, at least 177 roads, including three national highways, were closed in neighbouring Himachal



Pradesh following heavy snowfall in several districts, officials said on Tuesday.

Snowfall was recorded in the Kinnaur, Lahaul and Spiti and the higher reaches of Shimla, Kullu, Mandi, Chamba and

Sirmaur districts.

A second consecutive day of snowfall has led to an increase in tourist inflow amid hope of a white Christmas. Shimla Hotel and Tourism Stakeholders' Association president M K Seth said hotel occupancy in Shimla was at more than 70 per cent.

The snowfall led to a 30-percentage point increase in room bookings, he added. About 174 roads and three national highways are closed and tourists in about 500 vehicles stranded near the Atal Tunnel were safely rescued till late on Monday, additional chief secretary (revenue and disaster) Onkar Sharma said.

According to reports, four people died in accidents during the past 24 hours and several sustained injuries due to vehicles skidding in some places. The administration has yet to share details about the victims.

# Yogi Adityanath Targets Congress For 'Insulting' Ambedkar Since Nehru's Days

## Lucknow

Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on Tuesday launched a scathing attack on the Congress as he accused the party of repeatedly disrespecting 'the architect of India's Constitution' B R Ambedkar during his lifetime and undermining his legacy after his death. Adityanath also claimed that India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru was against Ambedkar's inclusion in the Drafting Committee of the Constitution.

He made the remarks in a press conference at his official residence 5 Kalidas Marg, amid ongoing controversy triggered since Union Home

Minister Amit Shah's remarks on Ambedkar in Rajya Sabha last week. Flanked by ministers Swatantra Dev Singh and Asim Arun, Adityanath highlighted the press conference's purpose as an effort to expose what he described as the unethical and unconstitutional conduct of Congress and other opposition parties against Ambedkar.

"Dr B R Ambedkar played a monumental role during India's freedom movement, the drafting of the Constitution and the early years of independent India. Despite facing numerous social hurdles, he earned the highest degrees in law, finance and economics. "His contributions to the nation remain unparalleled. Every Indian holds deep respect and

reverence for him," the chief minister said.

Adityanath contrasted the BJP's reverence for Ambedkar with the Congress' history of disrespect. He detailed the BJP's efforts to honour Ambedkar's memory, including creating memorials at significant locations tied to his life, such as in Mhow, Nagpur, Mumbai and in London where Ambedkar studied.

"Under the BJP leadership, whether it was Atal Bihari Vajpayee's government or Prime Minister Narendra Modi's, every effort has been made to respect Ambedkar's ideals. In contrast, the Congress has a long record of insulting him and marginalising his contributions," he asserted.



# Pakistani Airstrikes Target Taliban Hideouts In Afghanistan, Women And Children Feared Killed

## Peshawar

Pakistan in rare airstrikes targeted multiple suspected hideouts of the Pakistani Taliban inside neighbouring Afghanistan on Tuesday, dismantling a training facility and killing some insurgents, four security officials said.

The strikes were carried out in a mountainous area in Paktika province bordering Pakistan, said the officials. They spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak to the media on the record. It was unclear whether the jets went deep inside Afghanistan, and how the strikes were launched.

No spokesman for Pakistan's military was immediately available to share further details. But it was the second such attack on alleged hideouts of the Pakistani Taliban since March when Pakistan said intelligence-based strikes took place in the border regions inside Afghanistan.

In Kabul, the Afghan Defense Ministry condemned the airstrikes

by Pakistan, saying the bombing targeted civilians, including women and children. It said that most of the victims were refugees from the Waziristan region.

"The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan considers this a brutal act against all international principles and blatant aggression and strongly condemns it," the ministry said. Residents said at least eight people, including women and children, were killed in the airstrikes by Pakistan. They said the death toll from the strikes may rise.

In a post on the X platform, the Afghan defence ministry said the Pakistani side should know that such unilateral measures are not a solution to any problem. "The Islamic Emirate will not leave this cowardly act unanswered but rather considers the defence of its territory and territory to be its inalienable right."

The strikes came hours after Mohammad Sadiq, Pakistan's special representative for Afghanistan, travelled to Kabul to

discuss a range of issues, including how to enhance bilateral trade and improve ties. Sadiq during the visit met with Sirajuddin Haqqani, Afghanistan's acting interior minister, to offer his condolences over the Dec. 11 killing of his uncle Khalil Haqqani.

He was the minister for refugees and repatriation who died in a suicide bombing that was claimed by a regional affiliate of the Islamic State group. Sadiq in a post on X said he also met with Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi and he "held wide-ranging discussions.

Agreed to work together to further strengthen bilateral cooperation as well as for peace and progress in the region." A delegation of the pro-Taliban Jamiat-e-Ulema Islam also visited Kabul on Tuesday to convey condolences over the killing of Haqqani's uncle. Islamabad often claims that the Pakistani Taliban use Afghan soil to launch attacks in Pakistan, a charge Kabul has denied.

# Bethlehem Marks A Second Subdued Christmas Eve During War In Gaza



## Bethlehem

Bethlehem marked another sombre Christmas Eve on Tuesday in the traditional birthplace of Jesus under the shadow of war in Gaza.

The excitement and cheer that typically descends on the West Bank during Christmas week were nowhere to be found. The festive lights and giant trees that normally decorate Manger Square were missing, as were the throngs of foreign tourists that usually fill the square.

Palestinian scouts marched silently through the streets, a departure from their usual raucous brass marching band. Security forces arranged barriers near the Church of the Nativity, built atop the spot where Jesus is believed to have been born.

The cancellation of Christmas festivities is a severe blow to the town's economy. Tourism accounts for an estimated 70% of Bethlehem's income — almost all from the Christmas season.

Latin Patriarch Pierbattista Pizzaballa, the top Roman Catholic cleric in the Holy Land, noted the shuttered shops and empty streets and expressed hope that next year would be better.

"This has to be the last Christmas that is so sad," he told hundreds of people gathered in Manger Square, where normally tens of thousands would congregate.

Pizzaballa held a special pre-Christmas Mass in the Church of the Holy Family in Gaza City. Several Palestinian Christians told the Associated Press that they have been displaced in the church since the war began in October of last year with barely enough food and water.

"We hope by next year at the same day we'd be able to celebrate Christmas at our homes and go

to Bethlehem," said Najla Tarazi, a displaced woman who prayed for the war to end. "We don't feel happy."

Bethlehem is an important centre in the history of Christianity, but Christians make up only a small percentage of the roughly 14 million people spread across the Holy Land. There are about 182,000 in Israel, 50,000 in the West Bank and Jerusalem and 1,300 in Gaza, according to the U.S. State Department.

The number of visitors to the town plunged from a pre-COVID high of around 2 million per year in 2019 to fewer than 100,000 in 2024, said Jiries Qumsiyeh, the spokesperson for the Palestinian Tourism Ministry.

After nightfall, the golden walls of the Church of the Nativity were illuminated as a few dozen people quietly milled about. A young boy stood holding a pile of balloons for sale, but gave up because there were no customers to buy them.

A surge of violence in the West Bank, where more than 800 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli fire and dozens of Israelis have been killed in militant attacks, has stalled tourism. Palestinian officials do not provide a breakdown of how many of the deceased are civilians and how many are fighters.

Since the deadly Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas attack that sparked the war, access to and from Bethlehem and other towns in the West Bank has been difficult, with long lines of motorists waiting to pass through Israeli military checkpoints. The restrictions have prevented some 150,000 Palestinians from leaving the territory to work in Israel, causing the Israeli economy to contract by 25%.

# Bangladesh Requests India To Extradite Sheikh Hasina

## Dhaka

Bangladesh's interim government on Monday said it has sent a diplomatic note to New Delhi requesting for extradition of deposed prime minister Sheikh Hasina, who has been living in India since fleeing Bangladesh in August. Bangladesh's de facto foreign minister Touhid Hossain said Dhaka wants Hasina back to face the judicial process.

"We have sent a note verbale to the Indian government saying that Bangladesh wants her back here for the judicial process," Hossain told reporters in Dhaka. It is learnt that the diplomatic note or note verbale was handed over to India's external affairs ministry by the Bangladeshi high commission in New Delhi.

Indian government sources confirmed receiving the note



verbal. "We confirm that we have received a note verbale from the Bangladesh high commission today in connection with an extradition request. At this time, we have no comment to offer on this matter," said a source. There was no comment from the ministry.

Hasina, 77, has been living in India since August 5 when she fled the country following a massive student-led protest that toppled her 16-year regime. Bangladesh-based International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) has issued arrest warrants for Hasina and several former Cabinet ministers,

advisers, and military and civil officials for "crimes against humanity and genocide".

Earlier on Monday, Home Adviser Jahangir Alam said his office sent a letter to the foreign ministry to facilitate the ousted premier's extradition from India. "We have sent a letter to the foreign ministry regarding her extradition. The process is currently underway," he told reporters in response to a query.

Alam said an extradition treaty between Dhaka and New Delhi already exists and Hasina could be brought back to Bangladesh under it. Last month, in an address to the nation on the completion of 100 days of the interim government, Bangladesh's Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus said it will seek the extradition of Hasina.

# Simplify GST

THE core belief behind the introduction of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) was simplification of the tax structure and ensuring better compliance. It defies logic why complexities continue to be the standard practice. The popcorn tax exemplifies the surfeit of irrational and unwarranted slabs across sectors. Salted popcorn attracts 5 per cent GST, pre-packaged and labelled varieties 12 per cent and the caramel option is a luxury at 18 per cent. Ahead of the 55th GST Council meeting, the attention was focused on the much-anticipated rate cut on health and life insurance premiums. The deferment came as a disappointment. A bigger one was the effort put in to clarify how much a consumer ought to pay on this and that popcorn bucket. On show was not only the sanction for misplaced priorities,

but the lack of empathy for end-users and businesses.

When a former chief economic adviser



terms the popcorn episode a national tragedy and a violation of the spirit of the 'Good and Simple Tax' that GST was meant to be, he voices concerns that need to be addressed urgently. The harsh criticism, cutting across ideological lines,

indicates the frustration over the slow movement on rationalising GST slabs. It reflects both bureaucratic obduracy and political endorsement of a strategy that apparently hinges on over-taxation and intricacies. Nothing less than a systemic re-arrangement with regard to the imposition of GST would suffice. The citizen's wellbeing has to come first, not the wishlist of the government machinery to fill coffers any which way.

The data cited by the Opposition that reveals GST evasion of Rs 2.01 lakh crore in the 2023-24 financial year warrants scrutiny and course correction. Structural complexities only derail enforcement. Holding on to the status quo is a problem and not a solution.

// satyasya paramam nīdhānam //

We would like to hear from you. Please share your comments on [editor.acrossstate@gmail.com](mailto:editor.acrossstate@gmail.com)



*"If life were predictable it would cease to be life and be without flavor."*

-Eleanor Roosevelt

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A three-storey building came down like a house of cards in Mohali on Saturday, claiming two young lives. Far from being quake-resistant, the structure could not even withstand digging — apparently unauthorised, for that matter — in the adjacent plot belonging to one of the owners of the building. The tragedy has turned the spotlight on the pitfalls of unregulated construction and urbanisation in Mohali. Long regarded as Chandigarh's poor cousin, this satellite city is witnessing a realty boom, with all kinds of property developers looking to grab a share of the pie. Residential and commercial complexes are coming up overnight, even as strict enforcement of the bylaws remains elusive. The use of substandard

## Safety compromised



construction material and unskilled labour or contractors are among the other factors that are making buildings unsafe. There is a worrying tendency among builders to cut corners so as to expedite work and maximise profits.

This problem, however, is not confined to Mohali. It is also afflicting cities across Punjab and neighbouring Haryana. 'Millennium

City' Gurugram's Chintels Paradiso Group Housing Society is a prime example of unscrupulous developers putting lives of residents at risk. In February 2022, two women were killed after the ceiling of a flat in a high-rise tower caved in; such was the cascade effect that portions of flats on lower floors also crumbled. One tower after another of this

premises has been declared unsafe for habitation by technical experts, necessitating the evacuation of its occupants. At the receiving end are the hapless homebuyers who put their life savings into dubious projects, while the offenders simply wait for the dust to settle before resuming their operations.

Regular inspections and audits are a must to ensure that builders do not circumvent bylaws at any stage. Officials who allow violations right under their nose should also be taken to task. Brazen negligence and greed that reduce unsuspecting people to sitting ducks at home, in offices or in the marketplace should not go unpunished.



# Blow to transparency

## Tweaking of poll rule raises eyebrows

WHEN the Supreme Court declared the electoral bonds scheme unconstitutional in February this year, it emphasised the voter's inalienable right to information — including the right to know the details of individuals and companies making donations to political parties. The landmark verdict also served as a reminder to the Union Government,

unconvincing argument is that such material, if made accessible to one and all, can be misused to the detriment of voter safety.

Such fears and concerns just don't hold water in the age of social media. Footage of voters coming out of polling stations is widely available. In many cases, electors themselves share their

photos and videos on digital platforms. The CCTV cameras installed at polling stations merely keep an eye on the poll officials — they do not violate the secrecy of the ballot. There is no camera that records the



which had backed the controversial scheme to the hilt, that there should be no compromise on transparency as the integrity of the entire electoral process was at stake. The Centre seems to have conveniently forgotten the SC's ruling. Based on a recommendation of the Election Commission of India (ECI), the Law Ministry has amended Rule 93(2) (a) of the Conduct of Election Rules in order to prevent public scrutiny of electronic documents such as CCTV and webcasting footage as well as video recordings of candidates. The

voter pressing a certain button on the EVM. Still, the ECI is losing sleep over this non-issue.

The timing of the amendment is a dead giveaway. It comes in the wake of the Punjab and Haryana High Court's order that all documents related to the Haryana Assembly elections be shared with the petitioner in the 'Mehmood Pracha vs ECI' case, including CCTV camera footage as permissible under Rule 93(2). The ECI would be well advised to lift the veil of secrecy in the best interest of electoral democracy.

IN January, a 10-year global study of positive doping cases by minors named India as the second worst country, after Russia. Some months later, a report by the World Anti-Doping Agency concluded that India recorded the highest number of drug cheats in 2022. An expose by The Tribune highlights why the dubious distinction is no aberration. Used syringes and empty vials were found stuffed in a washroom during a state boxing championship held in Hisar. That the telltale signs of rampant doping came to light in Haryana, a state that is considered a shining example of nurturing excellence in sport, makes it even more disturbing. Such blatant malpractices point to an environment of complicity. It's a blot on Indian sport and reflects

unwillingness to confront the malaise.

The lack of awareness among sportspersons and coaches as well as the neglect in conducting anti-doping campaigns are major structural flaws.

# Vanishing Aravallis

## Mining mafia's assault continues unchecked

THE Aravalli Hills, one of the world's oldest mountain ranges and a vital ecological barrier, are under relentless assault from illegal mining. Aided by jurisdictional ambiguities, miners have ravaged the hills, particularly in villages along the Haryana-Rajasthan border, leaving flattened landscapes and staggering

local habitats, displaced communities and disrupted groundwater recharge zones critical for Delhi-NCR's ecology.

To counter this menace, Haryana has planned to use LiDAR (light detection and ranging) technology for boundary demarcation and intends to recover costs from Rajasthan. However, this

jurisdictional tussle only underscores deeper governance failures. Collaborative action by the two states is essential to resolve disputes and implement the Supreme Court directives banning mining in the Aravallis. A 2023 study shows that nearly 8 per cent of the Aravallis has



losses. The Haryana government has estimated a Rs 2,500-crore loss over the last two years due to illegal mining by contractors from Rajasthan, who, it alleges, exploit the lack of demarcation to expand their activities unchecked. In 2023 alone, over eight crore metric tonnes of minerals vanished from hills in Nuh villages, reducing their majestic peaks to rubble. Despite repeated FIRs and complaints by the affected villagers, no action to halt the destruction is visible. The loss isn't just economic — it has devastated

disappeared since 1975, with projections indicating a 22 per cent loss by 2059 if rapid urbanisation and mining continue.

However, the focus must shift to preventive measures — deploying advanced surveillance technologies, imposing strict penalties on the 'big shark' miners and bolstering enforcement. The Aravalli range is a lifeline for millions, serving as a natural shield against desertification and a crucial ecological zone. Urgent, coordinated efforts are needed to protect this treasure from the grip of greed and neglect.

# Confront doping



substances and fudging age are seen as quick-fix methods for winning a medal at any cost. The goal is not sporting glory per se, but the windows that open. For the vast majority, that means a government job. After the success of the Indian Premier League in the cricket-crazy country, India Inc has been pushing the boundaries in supporting various sporting disciplines. Encourage and incentivise the private sector to do more. Create ample opportunities for athletes, while sending out a clear message that doping has no place in sport.

For those entrusted with checking doping, the track record has been dismal. A culture founded on fraud defeats the very purpose of sport.

What must not be ignored is the widely held notion among athletes of losing out in terms of a career without a podium finish. The widespread use of banned performance-enhancing

# IAF training hiccups

THE highlight of the Indian Air Force's (IAF) 92nd Raising Day celebrations in October this year was a typically spectacular air show, whose theme was 'Bhartiya Vayu Sena — Saksham, Sashakt, Atmanirbhar (potent, powerful and self-reliant)'. Those three words were supposed to reflect the IAF's "unwavering dedication to safeguarding the nation's airspace". The ground reality, however, is not all that rosy. In a report tabled in Parliament on Wednesday, the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India has flagged deficiencies in the training of IAF pilots. Under intense scrutiny is the Pilatus PC-7 Mk-II aircraft, which is



being used to impart Stage-1 flying training since 2013. The performance audit has noted that 25 per cent of these aircraft reported 38 snags due to engine oil leaks between 2013 and 2021. No less worrying are the delays in the IAF's aircraft modernisation plans that have affected stages 2 and 3 of pilot training for

transport and helicopter streams.

Outdated equipment is another area of concern. The world's fourth-largest air force cannot afford to compromise on the upgrade of training simulators and aircraft. Trainee pilots need state-of-the-art technology to hone their skills. Issues

such as engine oil leaks can dampen the spirits of aspirants who want to soar high and protect India's skies. Lowering the bar can prove to be a recipe for disaster.

There are problems not only in terms of quality but also quantity. The shortage of pilots has risen from 486 to 596 in about six years, as the recruitment has fallen short of the targeted intake. The CAG has done its job. Now it is up to the IAF and the government to take corrective action on priority. This vital pillar of India's defence edifice must not be allowed to lose its much-touted potency and power.

## It's unparliamentary

BARELY 15 months after the new building of Parliament hosted its historic first session, parliamentary propriety finds itself battered and bruised. The just-concluded Winter Session will be remembered for the wrong reasons. A slugfest between NDA and Opposition MPs, triggered by Home Minister Amit Shah's caustic remarks about BR

Ambedkar, descended into a nasty free-for-all. A push here, a shove there — all hell broke loose as lawmakers locked horns in every sense of the phrase. Elected representatives disgraced not only themselves but also their voters with their words as well as actions. Shah didn't exactly cover himself with glory when he observed that it had become a fashion to chant Ambedkar's name. He dragged the 'Father of the Constitution' into an unsavoury debate, and the Opposition — in a shambles after its stunning defeat in the Maharashtra elections — pounced upon this opportunity to target the ruling party. Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself had to intervene to defend Shah and slam the Congress for its

'rotten ecosystem' and 'malicious lies'.

Ambedkar is a national icon whom no party can afford to ignore. It's obvious that parties on both sides of the political divide are playing a game of one-upmanship over his legacy. What makes this slanging match all the more deplorable is that it's happening amid nationwide celebrations to mark 75 years of the Constitution's adoption. This living document has stood the test of time, affirming India's commitment to democracy, justice and equality. It is the collective responsibility of all parliamentarians to uphold the Constitution's ideals. Their unwavering focus should be on working towards ensuring social justice and inclusive development, not on hitting each other below the belt. Maintaining the decorum and dignity of the august House is the least they can do. Otherwise, the new 'temple of democracy' will be reduced to a no-holds-barred theatre of the absurd, spoiling India's deftly built image of Vishwaguru and Vishwa Bandhu.

## India-China talks

THE recent Special Representatives' meeting in Beijing between India's National Security Adviser Ajit Doval and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi marks a pivotal moment in bilateral diplomacy. This first dialogue in nearly five years, following the 2020 Galwan valley clash, reflects a cautious yet significant shift toward normalising ties between the two Asian giants. Central to the discussions was the implementation of the October 2024 disengagement agreement in Ladakh. Both sides committed to maintaining peace and tranquillity along the Line of Actual Control, a critical step to prevent future conflicts. The meeting also underscored a six-point consensus aimed at deepening cooperation in areas such as border trade, data sharing on trans-border rivers and the resumption of the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra.

While the agreements signal progress, challenges persist. The border dispute remains a complex and sensitive issue, compounded by historical grievances and mutual mistrust.

The emphasis on confidence-building measures and 'step-by-step' resolutions demonstrates pragmatic diplomacy. However, translating these commitments into actionable change will require sustained political will and vigilance. The broader implications of this meeting cannot be overlooked. As both nations grapple with shifting global power dynamics, their engagement holds the potential to influence the multipolar world order. Collaborative initiatives in trade, technology and multilateral platforms like BRICS could pave the way for a more stable and prosperous region.

Yet, peace is only the starting point. Both nations must seize this opportunity to redefine their relationship through people-to-people exchanges, eased trade barriers and cultural cooperation. These steps are essential to build trust and overcome the lingering shadows of conflict. The path to reconciliation is long, but this dialogue offers hope for a more harmonious future. For India and China, peace is not just an ideal but a necessity.



## Government signs \$500 mn loan deal with ADB to boost green infra projects



### New Delhi

The Centre and Asian Development Bank (ADB) has signed a \$500 million (about Rs 4,250 crore) loan to support green and sustainable infrastructure projects aligned with the country's climate commitments.

The ADB loan, with a sovereign guarantee, will be extended to the India

Infrastructure Finance Company Ltd (IIFCL), the finance ministry said in a statement on Monday. The signatories to the Financing Environmentally Sustainable Growth in Infrastructure Project were Juhi Mukherjee, Joint Secretary, Department of Economic Affairs, Ministry of Finance, and Country Director Mio Oka for ADB.

"The ADB financing will help the IIFCL provide long-term capital for infrastructure projects focusing on connectivity and energy transition as well as under-resourced sectors like urban projects, education, and health care," said Oka.

To meet its net-zero commitments, the country needs immense private capital investment that will require innovative financing platforms and risk-mitigation instruments to address inherent sector risks and market asymmetries, it said. The ADB has worked closely with the IIFCL over the years to develop its operational and risk management capacities. As the IIFCL has developed and evolved, its operations are increasingly geared toward leveraging private sector resources that necessitate the expansion of its product offerings for potential institutional investors, it said.

## Retail inflation for farmers, rural workers eases



### New Delhi

Retail inflation for farm workers and rural labourers dipped to 5.35% and 5.47% in November compared to 5.96% and 6%, respectively, in October this year.

The All-India Consumer Price Index for Agricultural Labourers (CPI-AL) and Rural Labourers (CPI-RL) registered an increase of 5 points each in November, reaching levels of 1,320 and 1,331, respectively, a Labour Ministry statement said. "The year-on-year inflation rates based on CPI-AL and CPI-RL for the month of November were recorded at 5.35% and 5.47%, respectively, compared to 7.37% and 7.13% in November 2023," it stated.

## Nissan, Honda announce plans to merge, creating world's number 3 automaker

### New Delhi

Japanese automakers Honda and Nissan have announced plans to join forces, forming world's third-largest automaker by sales as the industry undergoes dramatic changes in its transition away from fossil fuels.

The two companies said they had signed a Memorandum of Understanding on Monday and that smaller Nissan alliance member Mitsubishi Motors also had agreed to join the talks on integrating their businesses.

"We anticipate that if this integration comes to fruition, we will be able to deliver even greater value to a wider customer base," Nissan's CEO Makoto Uchida said in a statement.

Automakers in Japan have lagged behind their big rivals in electric vehicles and are trying to cut costs and make up for lost time.

News of a possible merger surfaced earlier this month, with unconfirmed reports saying that the talks on closer collaboration partly were driven by aspirations of Taiwan iPhone maker Foxconn to tie up with Nissan, which has an alliance with Renault SA of France and Mitsubishi.

A merger could result in a behemoth worth more than \$50 billion based on the market capitalisation of all three automakers. Together, Honda and the Nissan alliance with Renault SA of France and smaller automaker Mitsubishi Motors Corp would gain scale to compete with Toyota Motor Corp and with Germany's Volkswagen AG. Toyota has technology partnerships

with Japan's Mazda Motor Corp. and Subaru Corp.

Even after a merger Toyota, which rolled out 11.5 million vehicles in 2023, would remain the leading Japanese automaker. If they join, the three smaller companies would make about 8 million vehicles. In 2023, Honda made 4 million and Nissan produced 3.4 million. Mitsubishi Motors made just over 1 million.

Nissan, Honda and Mitsubishi announced in August that they would share components for electric vehicles like batteries and jointly research software for autonomous driving to adapt better to dramatic changes centred around electrification, following a preliminary agreement between Nissan and Honda set in March.

Honda, Japan's second-largest automaker, is widely viewed as the only likely Japanese partner able to effect a rescue of Nissan, which has struggled following a scandal that began with the arrest of its former chairman Carlos Ghosn in late 2018 on charges of fraud and misuse of company assets, allegations that he denies. He eventually was released on bail and fled to Lebanon.

Speaking on Monday to reporters in Tokyo via a video link, Ghosn derided the planned merger as a "desperate move".

From Nissan, Honda could get truck-based body-on-frame large SUVs such as the Armada and Infiniti QX80 that Honda doesn't have, with large towing

capacities and good off-road performance, Sam Fiorani, vice president of AutoForecast Solutions, told The Associated Press.

Nissan also has years of experience building batteries and electric vehicles, and gas-electric hybrid powertrains that could help Honda in developing its own EVs and next generation of hybrids, he said.

But the company said in November that it was slashing 9,000 jobs, or about 6% of its global work force, and reducing its global production capacity by 20% after reporting a quarterly loss of 9.3 billion yen (\$61 million).

It recently reshuffled its management and Makoto Uchida, its chief executive, took a 50% pay cut to take responsibility for the financial woes, saying Nissan needed to become more efficient and respond better to market tastes, rising costs and other global changes.

Fitch Ratings recently downgraded Nissan's credit outlook to "negative", citing worsening profitability, partly due to price cuts in the North American market. But it noted that it has a strong financial structure and solid cash reserves that amounted to 1.44 trillion yen (\$9.4 billion).

Nissan's share price also has fallen to the point where it is considered something of a bargain.

On Monday, its Tokyo-traded shares gained 1.6%. They jumped more than 20% after news of the possible merger broke last week.



## Finance Commission grants UP Rs 1599 cr while Andhra gets Rs 446 cr for rural development



### New Delhi

The central government on Tuesday released funds under the Fifteenth Finance Commission (XV FC) grants for rural local bodies in Uttar Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh for the financial year 2024-25.

The grants include Rs 1,598.80 crore for Uttar Pradesh and Rs 446.49 crore for Andhra Pradesh, marking a significant step in strengthening grassroots governance and rural development.

The Ministry of Panchayati Raj stated that Uttar Pradesh received the second installment of untied grants totaling Rs 1,598.80 crore.

It said "These funds are for all eligible 75 District Panchayats, all eligible 826 Block Panchayats and all eligible 57691 Gram Panchayats of the state".

Similarly, Andhra Pradesh was allocated the second installment of untied grants amounting to Rs 420.99 crore, along with a withheld amount of Rs 25.49 crore from the first installment for the financial year.

The ministry stated that in Andhra Pradesh "These funds are for eligible 13097 duly elected Gram Panchayats, 650 duly elected Block Panchayats and all 13 eligible District Panchayats of the State".

The grants, recommended by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj and the Ministry of Jal

Shakti, are released in two installments annually. They are aimed at addressing location-specific needs under the 29 subjects outlined in the Eleventh Schedule of the Constitution.

While untied grants cater to various developmental requirements except for salaries and establishment costs, tied grants are specifically allocated for sanitation, maintenance of Open Defecation Free (ODF) status, and water supply management, including rainwater harvesting and water recycling.

This direct financial empowerment of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) is transforming rural local governance.

The ministry also noted that initiative aligns with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision of "Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas, Sabka Prayas," fostering inclusive growth and self-reliance at the village level.

The funds are expected to enhance accountability, improve basic services, and promote participatory democracy, driving India closer to the goal of becoming a "Viksit Bharat" where every village actively contributes to the nation's prosperity. (ANI)

(The story has come from a syndicated feed and has not been edited by the Tribune Staff.)

## GD Goenka Group Celebrates 30 Glorious Years of Excellence with GD Goenka Confluence 2024

### New Delhi

The GD Goenka Group, a pioneer in the education sector, proudly celebrated its 30th anniversary with GD Goenka Confluence 2024, a landmark event held at GD Goenka University, Sohna Road.

This three-day gathering brought together principals and educators from across the GD Goenka network to honour the Group's remarkable legacy and envision the future of education. Marking three decades of innovation, growth, and impact, the event served as a platform to reflect on the Group's journey from its inception in 1994 to becoming one of India's most respected education brands.

Speaking on the occasion, Nipun Goenka, Managing Director of GD Goenka Group, said, "Today, we come together not just to honor the legacy of three transformative decades but to celebrate the shared dreams that continue to shape our future. At GD Goenka, education is not just about academics; it's about touching lives, sparking curiosity, and nurturing leaders of tomorrow. Confluence 2024 stands as a beautiful reflection of our journey--one driven by a passion for excellence, innovation, and wholistic growth. The conversations we have had today with our esteemed guests inspire us further to create a learning experience that empowers every student to thrive in a world full of possibilities. Together, we reaffirm our belief in the boundless potential of education to change lives."

The event featured an array of engaging sessions and activities. Day 1 set a celebratory tone with powerful speeches by eminent personalities including the Former Union Minister for Women and Child Development, Smt. Smriti Irani.

Complimenting the Group's transformative role in education, Smt. Irani said, "My relationship with the Goenka family goes back a decade, and I am here today because they gave me the opportunity to speak to leaders of 120 schools. The biggest challenge in education isn't just how many students pass, but how many remember what they



were taught. Cognition is about perceiving, remembering, and presenting information. We must teach students to reflect on evidence, respect different viewpoints, and revisit stories to find new aspects. Our future depends on students who can articulate and reflect, turning our demographic dividend into a strength." The Group also launched the Goenkan Gazette, a comprehensive magazine that showcases the achievements and events of the GD Goenka Schools across 20 states and Union Territories. With nearly 200,000 students, this publication captures the vibrant activities and collaborations within the GD Goenka Group of Schools.

Furthermore, Boman Irani, a celebrated actor captivated the audience with his insights on creativity and perseverance.

"Sometimes it's good to say no, even to yourself, when lured by the perks of success. Whether in movies, teaching, or any field, becoming a celebrity can change how you walk, but don't let it change your soul. When you achieve something, remember there's always more to learn and new goals to set. Don't compare yourself to others who seem more advantaged. Keep striving and stay true to your core," said Irani.

In addition, Dr. Kiran Bedi, India's first woman IPS officer shared her inspiring vision of leadership and ethics.

"I would like to thank the entire Goenka family for their warm invitation. Every child has the potential to excel, and it is essential to understand and support their individual needs. To ensure the holistic development of children, parents and schools must come together. Parents play a crucial role in organising activities and managing time after school, while teachers should stay informed about

their students' activities outside school hours. By fostering open, one-on-one dialogue with parents, schools can build more meaningful relationship and enhance learning outcomes, ultimately benefiting the child's overall growth," said Dr. Bedi. Day 1 of the event also featured distinguished personalities, including Anil Rai Gupta, Chairman and Managing Director of Havells India Limited, who shared his insights, and Gaurav Kapoor, a renowned stand-up comedian, who captivated and entertained the audience with his performance.

Day 2 focused on holistic education, featuring an enlightening session by BK Sister Shivani, a renowned spiritual leader, on values and inner peace in education.

"We often seek perfection in the world around us, believing it will bring us inner peace, but true happiness comes from within. The COVID-19 pandemic from 2019 to 2024 has brought significant changes, especially in the minds of our children, highlighting the importance of prioritising meditation in schools to foster calmness and resilience in an ever-evolving world. Today, stress and being busy have become symbols of success, but we must remember that true fulfilment lies inside," said Sister Shivani.

Additionally, there were insights into future educational trends by Dr. Joseph Emmanuel, Chief Executive & Secretary, CISCE, and an engaging interaction with Ms. Tulsi Kumar, Playback Singer, Actress and alumna of the institution.

This was followed by Bhaichung Bhutia, former Indian football team captain, delving into the significance of sports and teamwork, and Subhash Gangaram Talekar, President, Mumbai Dabbawala Association, who shared his inspiring journey.



## Expected decline in food prices in January could increase odds of rate cut in Feb: ICICI Bank



### New Delhi

The Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) could consider a rate cut in February if food inflation declines in January, according to a report by ICICI Bank.

The report emphasized that a deceleration in food prices may strengthen the case for easing policy rates to support economic growth.

It said, "Expected deceleration of food prices in January could increase the odds of a rate cut in February".

The minutes of the latest MPC meeting revealed a dovish stance,

with two members advocating for a rate cut. Their argument was based on the moderation in growth and the limited transmission of food inflation to core inflation at present.

However, other members who voted to maintain rates expressed that the timing for a rate cut was not appropriate. They indicated that lower food inflation in the coming months could provide a suitable opportunity for such a move.

As per the data by the official data, the retail inflation in November was at 5.48 per cent as compared to 6.21 per cent logged in October, falling in line

with the Reserve Bank of India's 2-6 per cent comfort band.

The report noted that if the decline in inflation continues further then the chances of the rate cut in the upcoming MPC in February are high.

The report also mentioned that in parallel, the Indian rupee (INR) has been under depreciation pressure due to a stronger US dollar index (DXY) driven by the hawkish stance of the Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC).

This depreciation pressure led to net foreign portfolio investment (FPI) outflows worth USD 0.2 billion. It noted that the worsening external economic outlook is likely to keep the Indian Rupee under depreciation pressure in the near term. However, a lighter economic calendar for the week ahead might provide some respite.

It said, "Given the worsening external outlook, we expect the depreciation pressure on the INR to persist going forward"

The report highlights the interplay between domestic inflation trends and external factors, which will likely shape the RBI's monetary policy decisions in the coming months.

## Insurance settlement claims dip to 82.52% in FY24

### New Delhi

Net incurred claims to net earned premium (claims ratio) of non-life insurance industry stood at 82.52% during 2023-24 as against 82.95 % in the preceding fiscal year, as per the IRDAI's annual report.

According to the Annual Report 2023-24 of the Insurance Regulatory and Development

2022-23 to Rs 90,252 crore in 2023-24.

Private sector insurers, including standalone health insurers, have underwritten Rs 1.88 lakh crore as against Rs 1.58 lakh crore in 2022-23.

The aggregate profit of the non-life insurance sector was Rs 10,119 crore as against a net loss of Rs 2,566 crore in 2022-23.

During 2023-24, the aggregate net incurred claims saw a 15.39% increase to Rs 1.72 lakh crore from Rs 1.49 lakh crore.

"The incurred claims ratio (net incurred claims



Authority of India (IRDAI), during 2023-24, the non-life insurance industry underwrote a total direct premium of Rs 2.90 lakh crore in India registering a growth of 12.76% from previous year.

The contribution of public sector general insurers increased 8.88% from Rs 82,891 crore in

to net earned premium) of the non-life insurance industry was 82.52% during 2023-24 as against 82.95% of the previous year," the report said.

The incurred claims ratio for public sector insurers was 97.23% for 2023-24 as against the previous year's incurred claims ratio of 99.02%.

## Jaya Hind Industries Pvt Ltd Installs India's Largest 4400-Ton High-Pressure Die Casting Machine

### New Delhi

Jaya Hind Industries Private Limited, a part of the Dr. Abhay Firodia Group of companies, has achieved a significant milestone with the installation of India's largest 4400-tonne high-pressure die-casting machine from Buhler-Switzerland at its Urse plant near Pune. This massive development highlights Jaya Hind's emphasis on technological innovation and its mission to set new industry benchmarks.

The 4400-ton die-casting machine is a game-changer in manufacturing, setting new benchmarks for producing complex aluminum structural components. This cutting-edge marvel makes it possible to create parts that were once out of reach in the region. From structural components like cradles, shock towers, and housings to advanced aluminum parts for electric vehicles and heavy-duty transmission and flywheel housings for commercial vehicles, this machine pushes the boundaries of what's achievable in modern manufacturing.

Prasan Firodia, Managing Director of Jaya Hind Industries, stated, "This marks a proud moment for Jaya Hind and the Indian die-casting industry. The 4400-ton machine reflects our relentless dedication to innovation and excellence. It empowers us to meet the rising demand for large, complex structural parts for futuristic applications, particularly in the rapidly evolving EV sector. We are looking forward to enhanced production capacity and improved workflows through the same."

With this groundbreaking installation, Jaya hind Industries is poised to cater to both domestic and international Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEMs). The enhanced capabilities align with the growing global demand for lightweight, high-strength aluminium components critical to next-generation vehicles.

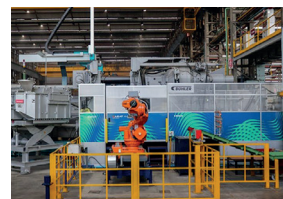
This milestone not only elevates Jaya hind Industries but also positions India as a global leader in advanced die-

casting technology, redefining the future of manufacturing in the aluminium sector.

Founded in 1947, Jaya hind Industries Private Limited, part of the Dr. Abhay Firodia Group, is a leading end-to-end aluminium casting solutions provider for global and domestic OEMs. A pioneer in aluminium die-casting since 1964, the company offers cutting-edge tool manufacturing, machining, and advanced HPDC capabilities, with over 45 die-casting machines ranging from 160t to 4400t. With manufacturing facilities in Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Madhya Pradesh, and Germany, Jaya hind serves a prestigious

client base including BMW, Volkswagen, Cummins, Ford, and Tata Motors. It also holds a licensing agreement with KS-Huayu, Germany, for cylinder blocks and structural parts.

Jaya Hind is a seven-time recipient of the "Best Foundry in India--Large Sector" Award.





# 5 ways in which India-Russia relationship will shape the world in 2025



Foreign policy trends in 2025 will be shaped by shifts in great power relationships. A new administration in the US could upend its relations with old allies in Europe and intensify rivalry with China. In an uncertain world, India plays a leading role in maintaining balance. The global community is watching New Delhi's efforts to restore stability to its troubled relationship with China, and wonders whether the Indo-US dynamic will recapture the energy that characterised it in Donald Trump's first term.

The strength of ties between New Delhi and Moscow matters to both countries. It touches core mutual areas: Trade in energy, technological co-development, and strategic interests. Russia remains India's most accommodating partner when it comes to high-tech supplies. While the West — France and the US in particular — are relaxing rules for trade with India in dual-use tech, there is still a long way to go before New Delhi's undersea and long-range requirements are satisfied by the West. This is where Moscow steps in.

The global community is watching New Delhi's efforts to restore stability to its troubled relationship with China,

and wonders whether the Indo-US dynamic will recapture the energy that characterised it in Donald Trump's first term.

What some overheated commentary on the India-Russia relationship misses is that it is of deep importance for the West as well. The BrahMos missile, co-developed by India and Russia, has been given to the Philippines to fend off the Chinese. In other words, it is only through India that Russian technology can be used to preserve the rules-based order. And it is only because it is India that no Chinese veto is permitted by Moscow on such sales.

This is but one example of the unique nature of the relationship between India and Russia. Their closeness will have deeper implications in 2025, a year in which it will be recognised as a global public good. Here are five ways in which this relationship is vital for the preservation of global order.

First, it serves as a bridge between the rest of the world and a Russian polity that has been alienated by, and has set out to further alienate, the Western ecosystem. India's commitment to multilateralism and the global order anchors Russia, its close partner, to a system that it otherwise seeks to disrupt. India can do this because it is not seen as agitating for any one

political or geopolitical position. It is a boundary nation that transcends systems, and provides an ability to connect — even integrate — separate universes.

Second, the India-Russia relationship prevents the Russian bear from totally entering the dragon's den. A Russia locked into servitude to Beijing's interests would be profoundly inimical for the world order, the West in particular. India's outstretched hand grants Russia the ability to manoeuvre and allows it to avoid capitulating completely to China's demands. It has become increasingly clear — at BRICS and elsewhere — that avoiding becoming a junior partner to its giant neighbour is a priority for Moscow. Russia expects a partnership of equals. India provides one, China does not. Europe must realise that when peace eventually returns to the continent, it will be with Russia as an equal of the European Union, and not subordinate to it.

India's outstretched hand grants Russia the ability to manoeuvre and allows it to avoid capitulating completely to China's demands.

Third, trade between India and Russia in fossil fuels is designed to be compliant with sanctions meant to limit Russian profits. This too

provides broader benefits to the world. It brings valuable price stability and predictability to energy markets, which is vital for the West and for Europe in particular. It is no exaggeration to say that the energy trade component of the Indo-Russian relationship prevents Europe from slipping further into political disorder.

Fourth, the relationship allows for new possibilities in the crucial Arctic region. Without India's increasing strategic presence in the Arctic, in partnership not just with Russia but also with European and Nordic friends, a new Russia-China axis would have shaped the region's future. This would have spelt disaster for the ecology and security of global supply chains. India's growing role instead opens better options. A Chennai-Vladivostok corridor, co-owned by Russia and India, might be a first step towards a more effective and inclusive connectivity and governance architecture for the region.

Finally, India's presence in groupings with growing power and influence like BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation ensures that these are not weaponised against the West. As External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar has put it, India is non-Western, it is not anti-Western. This moderate and reasonable attitude shapes the actions and positions of such groupings. The entry of New Delhi's candidates — and Western friends — such as the UAE, Egypt and Vietnam into BRICS as either members or partners has further moderated that grouping. The presence of these countries, and India's leadership, ensures BRICS serves more as a complement to legacy, Western-led multilateral groupings than as a challenge.

India's presence in groupings with growing power and influence like BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation ensures that these are not weaponised against the West.

The ability to partner with nations that are deeply divided by geopolitics has been a feature of Indian diplomacy since Independence. It is only now, however, that this ability will be revealed as essential to prevent the fracturing of a stressed global order. The India-Russia relationship serves not just the two countries in question, but the world. The policy community in both India and the West is keenly aware of this relationship's pivotal importance. Scepticism in the West's Russophobic media and think tank ecosystem does not change that reality.



# The Role of Digitalisation in Heritage Conservation

Heritage tours and storytelling are central to travel itineraries, contributing significant amounts to tourism revenues. India, with an estimated 30,000 heritage sites in its urban areas alone, holds immense potential to harness the soft power of its ancient civilisation. Indeed, countries across the world are leveraging indigenous cultures as tools for soft power. Growing populism and the nostalgic harking back to a distilled past contribute to digital permanency by generating e-footprints in the conservation process. The evocation of nostalgia, culture, and heritage and the subsequent digital practices around their conservation call for mainstream policy attention. Digital archiving enhances global engagement and accessibility, presenting heritage as an effective tool for soft diplomacy.

Cultural tourism also contributes to a country's gross domestic product (GDP). According to consulting firm KPMG's 2024 report on heritage tourism, the global heritage tourism market reached US\$587.1 billion in 2023 and is estimated to touch US\$813 billion by 2032, with a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 3.69 percent from 2024 to 2032. In India, the post-COVID-19 recovery in the tourism industry has shown steady progress. Table 1 shows how revenue generated from ticket sales at heritage sites maintained by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) are steadily climbing to their pre-pandemic levels.

To grow a US\$1-trillion tourism economy by 2047, the Indian government aims to attract 100 million international tourists annually by 2047, the 100<sup>th</sup> year of independence. Achieving this goal requires innovative urban heritage planning and infrastructural development in Indian cities. However, current heritage conservation schemes prioritise economic gain over preserving evolutionary markers of emotional, cultural, and national identity.

This paper discusses the transformation of heritage as a public good, expounds the concept of the "heritage-industrial complex", and identifies the challenges to digital heritage preservation. Studying the experiences of certain other countries, it underscores the role of digital technologies in preserving and systematising India's heritage conservation efforts. It argues that India must expand its focus from the mere economic exploitation of the country's rich heritage to tourism-driven infrastructural fixes. Initiatives must address fundamental challenges such as poor documentation, financial constraints, database creation and management, and public participation, to preserve and promote the significant and intrinsic socio-economical, cultural, emotional, historical, and national characteristics of India's heritage.

## *Emergence of the 'Heritage Boom'*

The word 'heritage' is equivocal, complicated, and controversial. It is often used to describe both tangible and intangible pasts that evoke intergenerational memory. Following the French Revolution, heritage evolved from a monarchical property to a public good, and thus became integral to the nationalisation process. While the Venice Charter of 1964 initially limited heritage to monuments and archaeological sites, the scope broadened in the late 20th century through the Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage Convention (1972), the Declaration of Amsterdam (1975), and later the FARO Convention (2011). Today, over 40 such international and regional accords exist, and heritage now includes buildings, gardens, urban and rural precincts, natural sites (reefs, mountains, ecosystems), and intangible cultural practices.

The "heritage boom" that followed the Second World War was driven by increased middle-class insecurity, with nostalgia fuelling the development of mass tourism and the commercialisation of the past. Today, 'heritage' is defined as a negotiated narrative of the past, "tailored to present-day purposes," distinct from the study of history. National heritage is part of the social fabric and is essential



in shaping any imagined community. Heritage conservation thus serves as a tool for power, nation-building, and the creation of a national narrative that supports contemporary political goals. For example, the former Shah of Iran celebrated Persepolis as the birthplace of the Iranian state, and Nazi Germany promoted cultural links to ancient India.

*The Heritage-Industrial Complex and Digitalisation*  
The heritage-industrial complex is reimagined from the 'iron triangle' of the military-industrial complex, a concept popularised by former US President Dwight D. Eisenhower. In heritage, a similar "iron triangle" forms between government, legislators, and companies, each with different normative dynamics. While international insecurity drives the military-industrial complex, heritage selection and presentation are shaped by internal insecurities and national image concerns. The heritage-industrial complex thus represents a specialised interaction between tourism and culture. This specialised discourse on conservation and heritage often loses its original context, enabling public participation through consumption. The stakeholder matrix has expanded, with increased collaboration between tourism and culture. Local communities play a key role in defining and facilitating this interaction, and tourists increasingly contribute to shaping heritage through their experiences.

The cyberspace dimension has expanded the public beyond geographical territory. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) considers world heritage as "an imagined community". The global public often feels nostalgic for a past they may never have shared, making these narratives more selective ideological claims than purely historical facts. While heritage conservation once focused on protecting tangible cultural elements from "the market," it is now viewed, quite ironically, as a key driver of economic development. The digitalisation of heritage can further globalise the creation and co-option of narratives, serving as soft power in two ways: a) by providing a shared historical context that is "positive" and b) by implying a similar value system that the heritage represents. In this regard, heritage has evolved from being a transformative public good to a signifier. Rather than reshaping identity, countries now use heritage as a tool for protection, preserving it to reinforce the credibility of national narratives both in physical and virtual spaces. Therefore, the increasing reliance on digital preservation must be considered within the discourse around heritage conservation.

The World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) introduced the concept of digital preservation in 1996 as a set of tools and management activities to ensure continuous access to digital materials. In 2003, UNESCO's Charter on the Preservation of Digital Heritage defined "digital preservation" as the use of digital technologies to record, preserve and access the cultural and historical values of monumental buildings and sites. The digital cultural heritage procedures include three stages: internal storage, network sharing, and content interaction, further divided into digital documentation, research

management, and presentation. Advanced techniques such as morphological modelling, early warning systems, archiving with tools like Heritage Building Information Modelling (HBIM), Augmented Reality (AR), Virtual Reality (VR), Light Detection and Ranging (LiDAR) and digital twins are increasingly helping countries conserve urban built heritage with improved public participation. Italy, China, and Spain are leaders in research on the digital preservation of built heritage.

The scope for digital intervention in the heritage heavily relies on the level of end-user engagement envisioned for the site. Technology interventions in specialised areas, including the act and process of conservation planning, public engagement via tools like AR and VR, and end-to-end ticketing, bring inclusivity and accessibility under the microscope, especially given the significant digital divide in India. Whether digital tools enhance or hinder community engagement requires further research, as their effectiveness hinges on political will and bureaucratic clarity on conservation mandates, which, in the Indian context, remain limited and ambiguous.

## *India's Heritage Conservation Landscape*

India's built heritage is managed by multiple agencies, each with specific mandates and jurisdictions. The ASI oversees 3,691 monuments, sites, and historical and archaeological relics across the country, including the 22 UNESCO World Heritage sites. India's states have archaeological departments and museums governing approximately 5,000 sites. However, conservation initiatives by state agencies have been sporadic and often remain uncaptured in the central databases. Some metropolitan cities, such as New Delhi and Mumbai, have their own conservation committees due to the density of sites under municipal jurisdictions. Approximately 450,000 heritage temples fall under the ambit of Temple Trusts and Committees. The Central Public Works Department (CPWD) of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA), the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage's (INTACH) Charter of Unprotected Heritage in India, state Public Works Departments (PWDs), Urban Local Bodies (ULBs), and Indian Railways, also manage several heritage buildings, many of which remain unprotected and unlisted.

Due to inadequate infrastructure and funding, many heritage structures lack formal protection systems. Efforts by NGOs like INTACH, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC), the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) and government organisations like the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) and the National Mission on Monuments and Antiquities (NMMA), have worked to compile listings that provide approximations of these sites. The ASI and the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) work on a National GIS Database for monuments and sites. Bhuvan, an ISRO web-based utility that compiles geospatial data, offers detailed satellite imagery but remains unvalidated and unreliable.

Cities like Mumbai have had Heritage Conservation Committees for decades, with most

urban heritage sites listed and protected from redevelopment. However, these committees often fail to engage with these structures after creating such lists. The Mumbai Heritage Conservation Committee (MHCC), comprising experts across all relevant domains, including conservation architects, academics, and municipal officers, is primarily responsible for approving individual renovation or conservation applications, focusing primarily on preserving the facades of buildings. While the committee often rejects applications that do not meet its specifications, private sector participation lacks incentive due to the competitive real estate market and the absence of compensation for conservation efforts. As a result, the committee is often perceived as a hurdle rather than an opportunity. India's heritage conservation system treats the public as passive, with little proactive engagement, hindering innovation and dialogue with the communities.

Additionally, heritage sites are governed by different departments; for instance, eight properties in Mumbai are under the CPWD's jurisdiction.

Implemented from 2015 to 2019, the Heritage City Development and Augmentation Yojana (HRIDAY) focused on 12 cities: Ajmer, Amravati, Amritsar, Badami, Dwarka, Gaya, Kanchipuram, Mathura, Puri, Varanasi, Velankanni, and Warangal. Funds under HRIDAY were disbursed to cities in lump sums rather than gradually. The scheme aimed to achieve the "development of core heritage-linked civic infrastructure projects which include revitalisation of urban infrastructure for areas around heritage, religious, cultural and tourism assets of the cities," dissonance between central and local government prerogatives and approvals caused significant delays. However, its effectiveness was hindered by challenges, including poor interdepartmental collaboration, conflicting central and local government priorities, lack of institutional arrangement and due diligence, irrational timelines, and high cost and time overruns.

In Dwarka and Mathura, these constraints led to quick fixes without considering the crucial local and traditional crafts for restoration works, giving "incidental and largely unplanned" benefits. Frequent conflicts between the CPWD and state departments over budget allocations, coupled with tight timelines, restricted the employment of local or technical expertise.

HRIDAY has been subsumed under the Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual Heritage Augmentation Drive (PRASHAD) and Swadesh Bharat schemes, which focus on religious tourist hotspots. HRIDAY and PRASHAD fall under the Adarsh Smarak scheme, launched by the Ministry of Culture in 2014, which chose 153 sites from ASI's portfolio for the provision of tourist facilities like Wi-Fi, security, interpretation centres, and signage. However, this tourism-centric approach has ignored the fundamental challenges in conservation, including documentation, verification, workforce improvement and site management. Rather than holistic cultural preservation and promotion as the ultimate goal, heritage conservation has become a subset of the tourism industry.

## *Digitised Heritage Conservation and Inventory Management: Global and Indian Examples*

Successful large-scale conservation efforts globally are characterised by two key features. The first is community involvement in project planning, which addresses practical concerns such as transport bottlenecks and access to amenities like potable water and toilets. Engaging community networks also facilitates access to local resources, preserves surrounding intangible aspects, and ensures greater socio-economic benefits to the local communities. The second feature includes mapping and archiving existing structures for digital preservation as well as integrity assessment contributing to easier documentation and a larger digital footprint of public histories. Both features directly impact the long-term sustainability of the development plans. Table 2 lists the digital tools most commonly used in built heritage conservation.



# Digital Personal Data Protection Act: Shaping India's AI-driven fintech sector

The fintech (financial technology) sector in India has witnessed rapid expansion, driven by an integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI), ushering in a period of transformative innovation in financial services. AI has significantly enhanced capabilities in personalisation, fraud detection, and operational efficiency, fundamentally altering the financial landscape. However, this progress has been accompanied by pressing concerns over data privacy. The industry's growing dependence on extensive personal data raises critical issues around data security, consumer autonomy, and the risks of misuse. In response, Indian regulators have adopted a proactive stance, aiming to craft a regulatory framework that judiciously balances the imperatives of technological innovation with safeguarding consumer rights and privacy.

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As organisations increasingly integrate AI into their operations and service delivery, the need to establish clear standards for its deployment becomes a critical economic imperative. Setting such standards is essential to ensuring that AI-driven innovation fosters efficiency and productivity while mitigating risks related to bias, ethical concerns, and market distortions. By defining guidelines for responsible AI usage, policymakers can promote consumer trust, ensure fair competition, and support long-term economic stability in an increasingly technology-driven landscape.

## **The role of the Digital Personal Data Protection Act**

Indian fintech firms have begun leveraging AI across a variety of applications, signalling a broader shift toward data-driven innovation in the financial sector. Paytm, a leading digital payment platform, leverages AI to analyse user behaviour and transaction history, allowing it to provide personalised financial product recommendations. For example, its algorithms suggest customised credit options

based on user's spending patterns and financial goals, boosting engagement and satisfaction. Similarly, the State Bank of India introduced SIA, an AI-powered chatbot, capable of handling up to 10,000 customer inquiries per second. Continuously learning from interactions, SIA has significantly improved the efficiency of customer service.

A cornerstone of India's strategy to address data privacy concerns in the fintech sector is the enactment of the Digital Personal Data Protection Act (DPDPA) in 2023. This legislation seeks to strike a balance between safeguarding personal data and fostering technological innovation. Central to its framework is the requirement for fintech firms to secure explicit consent from users before processing personal data, ensuring greater transparency and reinforcing individual control over personal information. By aligning with global benchmarks such as the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the DPDPA positions itself as a comprehensive standard for data privacy governance.

The Act introduces key provisions that empower individuals with the right to access, correct, and erase their data, offering them greater agency over their personal information. For fintech firms, it imposes obligations to implement stringent security protocols, ensuring data integrity and protection. Additionally, the establishment of grievance redress mechanisms provides a structured avenue for addressing disputes related to data misuse, which fosters consumer confidence and creates an ecosystem where innovation and compliance coexist.

The DPDPA's deterrent power lies in its significant penalties for non-compliance, with fines of up to INR 2.5 billion (approximately US\$30 million). These penalties, among the most severe globally, reflect the regulatory emphasis on prioritising data protection over short-term profit motives. From an economic perspective, the DPDPA not only reduces the externalities associated with data breaches, but also signals a credible commitment to maintaining consumer trust—an essential component

of a resilient and innovation-driven fintech ecosystem. By embedding privacy within its regulatory architecture, the DPDPA underscores the critical interplay between market efficiency and consumer protection.

## **Privacy by design**

Beyond legislative interventions, Indian regulators are advocating for a proactive framework in data privacy governance by encouraging fintech firms to integrate the principles of "privacy by design". This paradigm emphasises embedding privacy

ancillary concern. In a jurisdiction like India, where public apprehension around data breaches and misuse is heightened, 'privacy by design' can serve as a strategic differentiator, offering firms a competitive edge in the marketplace.

By embedding privacy considerations into the foundational stages of product development, firms can preemptively align with regulatory requirements, thereby mitigating the risk of costly compliance failures downstream.



considerations at every stage of the product life cycle, from conceptualisation and development to deployment. By minimising data collection and institutionalising robust privacy safeguards within technological architecture, this approach ensures that privacy is not treated as a regulatory afterthought, but as a foundational design principle.

The adoption of the 'privacy by design' framework yields several notable advantages. By embedding privacy considerations into the foundational stages of product development, firms can preemptively align with regulatory requirements, thereby mitigating the risk of costly compliance failures downstream. This proactive stance fosters consumer trust, particularly as individuals become increasingly cognisant of the value of their personal data. Furthermore, the framework institutionalises a culture of accountability and data stewardship within organisations, reinforcing privacy as a core business objective rather than an

emphasises the importance of promoting ethical AI development practices. Regulators are advocating for transparency in AI decision-making to mitigate concerns around user privacy and the potential for bias or unfair treatment. As AI tools increasingly power personalised financial services, such as credit scoring, fraud detection, and investment advice, there is growing unease regarding the opacity of many AI models, which could contribute to discrimination and deepen inequalities in the financial sector.

As India's fintech sector evolves, the role of regulators in addressing privacy concerns related to AI is becoming increasingly significant. Initiatives such as the DPDPA, the promotion of 'privacy by design' principles, the establishment of regulatory sandboxes, and the emphasis on ethical AI development are vital steps toward managing privacy risks effectively. However, as technology progresses, regulators must remain adaptable, refining their strategies to address emerging challenges and innovations in the fintech space.

India's regulatory framework is not solely focused on compliance but aims to foster an ecosystem where technological advancement and privacy protection coexist. By balancing innovation with consumer rights, the framework sets an example for responsible fintech development. The insights from India's approach to privacy and data protection can provide valuable lessons for other emerging markets addressing similar challenges.

To strengthen its approach, India could consider enhancing cross-sector collaboration between regulators, fintech companies and technology experts. Establishing a dedicated AI and fintech task force, for instance, could enable the real-time identification of emerging risks and the co-creation of adaptive regulatory solutions. Additionally, investing in public awareness campaigns about data privacy rights and promoting an open dialogue between stakeholders would ensure that the regulatory framework remains transparent, inclusive, and responsive to evolving needs.

Nevertheless, the implementation of 'privacy by design' is not without its challenges. A key critique is its potential to constrain innovation, as early-stage privacy safeguards may limit data collection, thereby curtailing the development of highly personalised services. For fintech startups and smaller enterprises, the associated resource demands—ranging from building secure systems to ensuring transparency in data handling—can impose significant financial and operational burdens. These compliance costs, particularly during the nascent phases of business growth, may hinder the scalability of smaller players within India's competitive fintech landscape. Consequently, while the framework offers substantial long-term benefits, it introduces complexities that disproportionately impact resource-constrained firms, necessitating a balanced approach to implementation.

## **The way forward**

India's regulatory approach to AI and privacy in fintech



# Vacant urban homes in India

Cities in the developed world, as well as Indian cities, have been facing a rise in unoccupied properties. In Western cities, this is primarily on account of de-industrialisation, economic downturn, and demographic decline. However, in India, unlike the West, urban populations are growing, the economy is doing well and industrial activities are on the rise. The reasons for vacant homes in Indian cities lie elsewhere—in archaic rent control laws that remain un-reformed for decades, sub-optimal land use plans, and speculation by city developers and homeowners. Some of these are beyond the control of cities and fall in the domain of the states. However, the adverse consequences are far-reaching. Unutilised housing stock hurts the national, state, and city economies and cannot be allowed to fester. Just as the West is experimenting with a fresh set of solutions, states and cities in India need to reform their laws, repair their local plans and bring in fresh legislation to prevent the growing phenomenon of vacant homes.

Just as the West is experimenting with a fresh set of solutions, states and cities in India need to reform their laws, repair their local plans and bring in fresh legislation to prevent the growing phenomenon of vacant homes.

## Vacant homes

'Vacant homes' refer to properties that have been freshly constructed but not found occupants, or older properties that were previously occupied but have now fallen into disuse. Cities in the developed world face this issue due to two major factors. One of them is de-industrialisation. Since de-industrialisation leads to the closure or relocation of industrial activity lands that were once occupied are no longer productively utilised. Part of the workforce that worked in these industries moved elsewhere because of their inability to afford their homes. These cities have also been experiencing a population loss, giving rise to 'shrinking cities.' The loss of population could happen due to outmigration, a fall in birth rate below replacement levels, preference-based residential shifts, suburban expansion negatively impacting city growth, economic downturn forcing people to seek employment elsewhere, environmental changes that have made parts of a city inhospitable, or war and strife that make the place too dangerous.

According to the United States (US) Census Bureau, as of 2022, there were approximately 15.1 million vacant homes nationwide. These vacant homes, which include rental housing, comprise 10.5 percent of the total US housing inventory. While

vacant lands represent all types of land, including vacant homes, they help us understand the vacancy trend for homes in the country. In cities of more than 100,000 people in the US, vacant lands range from 19 to 25 percent of the total land area. In other cities with populations above 250,000, the vacant land percentage is between 12.5 and 15 percent. This means that smaller cities are experiencing a greater economic and demographic



decline. Europe, too, has been facing a similar problem; in 2016, one in six properties or around 38 million homes were estimated to be vacant. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) estimated that one in every four properties in Greece, Portugal, and Bulgaria were empty in 2016. Hungary and Cyprus had a 12-percent vacancy, Slovenia and Finland 11 percent, Ireland 9 percent, and France 8 percent.

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In such a situation, cities struggle to maintain "quality of life and enhanced aggregate social value," making them adopt a pro-growth strategy to shore up the economy. However, they must replace the earlier traditional emphasis on residential and commercial growth since the factors of deindustrialisation and population loss provide no succor to those strategies. It could be possible to put these vacant properties to another use, such as providing a social amenity that was either missing or insufficient. Regarding some properties, citizens themselves could take the initiative to re-engineer them into community

spaces. This would require more flexible local regulations, allowing a larger variety of uses.

Such initiatives are plentiful in Europe. In Budapest, the Hungarian Contemporary Architecture Centre has teamed up with non-governmental organisations, social enterprises, professional organisations and municipal decision-makers to rework the statutory frameworks, so that they allow different uses of vacant

study has concluded that 30,000 cities in the US will become ghost towns by 2100, primarily because of declining population. Indian cities, on the other hand, generally do not face problems of economic downturn or the loss of population. The urban population in the country has been increasing every decade, and large cities are adding huge populations that are difficult to handle. The economies of Indian cities have also been generally thriving.

## Vacant homes in urban India

Shockingly, although a large population in Indian cities cannot find housing, huge numbers of residential properties are lying vacant in the mega and metropolitan cities of India. In 2011, urban India had 11.1 million units of vacant houses, which is 12.4 percent of its urban housing stock. This was up from 1.83 million in 1971. Whereas the increase in vacant units was a mere 0.46 million between 1971 and 1981, in subsequent decades, the numbers have sharply risen: 2.15 million from 1981-1991, 2.01 million from 1991-2001 and 4.64 million from 2001-2011. This trend indicates the rising proclivity of 'premiumisation' in the real estate sector (an increased focus on producing high-end residential units), leading to a situation where the high-demand affordable housing segment remains in perennial short supply.

The vacancy phenomenon in India can be attributed to archaic rent control laws. However, it is also a result of faulty and insufficiently customised land use plans and the almost complete abandonment of the housing sector to private enterprise which seeks only to maximise profitability by constructing high-end residences. In any event, these residential units cannot be allowed to remain unoccupied indefinitely. That adversely impacts the city economy and smacks of the pernicious practice of speculation.

State governments and cities must bring in laws and regulations to force their occupation. The Vacant Homes Tax, like Ireland, is a good idea. The tax base must be escalated based on the vacancy period, with the forfeiture of properties being kept vacant beyond a specific period. Besides, there is a clear and present need for housing policy reform to enable a greater production of affordable housing in our cities. Housing is a key social good that mandates a sharper regulatory presence of the government, mainly because its withdrawal hits the urban poor the hardest.

properties for a defined period. This approach identifies local organisations in need of space and matches them to empty properties that meet their requirements. This could include shops, school buildings and more. Space, a United Kingdom-based organisation, works with local communities to tweak regulations so that they allow the temporary use of vacant homes for community benefit and social enterprise. Several cities have adopted such measures to reanimate vacant spaces and put them to profitable use. However, in other cases, where cities are struggling with non-cooperation in the maintenance of properties by their owners, countries are considering more regulatory measures to bring back empty homes to use. One of these is the imposition of a tax on such houses. Ireland has called this the Vacant Homes Tax (VHT). Owners of properties that get marked out as 'deliberately kept vacant,' have to pay the VHT as long as their property is vacant.

It is significant to compare the situation in the Western world with India. Commercial buildings in Western cities are falling vacant due to an economic downturn, and residential units are turning into 'ghost homes' because there are no people to occupy them, or because landlords are not spending on their maintenance. For example, a recent University of Illinois



# Shyam Benegal: A Unique Voice of Indian Cinema

It was in the early 70s, a time when the Hindi film industry was a tightly-knit, closed circle, with its doors and windows firmly shut. No one from outside could enter. This was also the era of multi-starrers, where the industry had become bloated and self-absorbed. There seemed to be no space for any young technician or filmmaker to break through. But amidst this, there emerged a filmmaker from Hyderabad, swimming against the tide. The name was Shyam Benegal.

He has made 21 feature films, two feature-scale documentaries, and also had a successful career in advertising. Before celebrating the legacy of Shyam Benegal as a filmmaker, it is very important to understand the time when he entered the world of cinema and made his mark. The first feature was made in 1974. He chose stories that he liked, tapped new talents, used Hindi cinema's strongest element dance and music in a neo-realistic way, and was certainly a ray of hope for aspiring actors who were dreaming of entering films while studying in Film and Television Institute of India (FTII).

All filmmakers are dreamers, and so was Benegal. However, to fuel those dreams, money was needed. Finding a sponsor for art-house cinema was a monumental task back then. Yet, Shyam found ways to make the films he believed in. His filmography is a masterclass in understanding society, the system, women, and the culture of the times he lived in. Going by his work, it rings true when he said, "If there's any real fear I have, it is that of repeating myself." Hence, repetition and formula are things one would not find in his films.

Born on December 14, 1934, in Hyderabad, Shyam Benegal's passion for cinema began in his childhood. A small cinema near his home sparked his love for film. Watching two films a week, one Hollywood and one Indian, he was quickly hooked on the world of make-believe. His fascination grew as he befriended the projectionist so that he could watch more movies. His father, Sridhar B. Benegal, a professional still photographer, further nurtured his interest with a 16mm Bolex camera, making home movies about their large family (Shyam had nine siblings). This early exposure to films, coupled with family discussions about them, made filmmaking feel like a natural ambition, even though, at the time, pursuing it seemed unrealistic in Hyderabad.

He took a long time to begin making films. When he was 18, he vowed that if he didn't make his first film by the time he was 20, he would die. Then it continued: if he didn't make his first film by 22, 25, 30... The years passed, but he persisted. Finally, at the age of 39, he made his first film, *Ankur* (1974). The script, which he had initially written in college, had been drafted and redrafted countless times. He took it to every producer in Mumbai (then Bombay), but for 20 years, no one was willing to invest in it. It was a long journey before a producer finally agreed to put a little money into the film.

Shyam was successful in advertising and was already making documentaries, but cinema was where his heart was. So, he decided to leave his job to pursue filmmaking. It was a gentleman named Lalit Bijlani, who used to distribute advertising films, and agreed to sponsor *Ankur*. His debut film turned out to be a successful venture. One of the first people Shyam showed the film to was Satyajit Ray, who asked him what he expected from it. Shyam said he would be happy if the film played at the Eros Cinema in Bombay over a weekend. Ray, however, predicted that it would run for several weekends. In reality, *Ankur* ran for 25 weeks.

The success of *Ankur* highlighted Shyam's ability to cast his films correctly. One of the strengths of *Ankur* was its casting. It featured two entirely new faces, Shabana Azmi and Anant Nag. In fact, everyone in the film was a newcomer. The only person who had shot a feature film before was Govind Nihalani, the cinematographer who later turned director and screenwriter.

Shyam's second film, *Nishant* (1975), followed a similar pattern, made for the same producer, though with some new faces. It was mostly shot in Pochampalli village in Telangana (then Andhra Pradesh), famously known as the

"weavers' village" for its handwoven sarees. Along with Girish Karnad, the film introduced fresh talents like Naseeruddin Shah and Smita Patil.

While his first two films were backed by the same producer, Shyam's third film, *Manthan* (1976), was made in a very different and remarkable way. *Manthan* stands as a glowing example of the adage "where there's a will, there's a way." The film was India's first crowdfunded venture, with contributions from 5 lakh farmers, each donating Rs 2 to support its production. This unique initiative was spearheaded by the Gujarat Cooperative Milk Marketing Federation (GCMMF), which played a pivotal role in making the film.

The success of *Manthan* inspired Shyam to adopt the same crowdfunding model for several of his later films. Both *Susman* (1987) and *Antamaad* (1981) were made in a similar manner. However, before these two, there came a masterpiece. A film called *Bhumika* (1977), shot during the Emergency. It was based on the life of the trailblazing Marathi actress Hansa Wadkar. What was truly remarkable about the film, however, was its soundtrack -- or rather, the lack of one. The film had no background music whatsoever, yet it is often considered the one 'musical' film Shyam has made, as there are songs in it, even though there is no background score. Upon its release, the film tanked but eventually found an audience during its third release.

Shyam, who once referred to his film *Kondura* (also known as *Anugraham*, 1978) as one of the least known of his works, took

The filmmaker, never one to be confined by norms, even those of his own making, sought to break free from his usual style of storytelling with *Mandi* (1983), one of the most iconic films of his career. With *Mandi*, he challenged the conventional grammar of filmmaking, rejecting the typical structure of beginning, middle, and end. The film was born out of his desire to move away from focusing on a single protagonist. Instead, *Mandi* relied on a stellar ensemble cast, with Shabana Azmi, Smita Patil, Nina Gupta, Ila Arun, Naseeruddin Shah, Kulbhushan Kharbanda, and Amrish Puri all infusing life into the story, which was based on the classic Urdu short story *Aanandi* by Ghulam Abbas. Following *Mandi*, Shyam continued to explore ensemble-driven narratives, steering clear of the traditional focus on a lone protagonist.

After *Mandi*, Shyam's career took a slightly different turn with *Trikaal* (1985), a film that some consider his most perfect work. Once again, it was an ensemble-driven film, with he weaving together a diverse group of actors. Three standout features of the film were Shyam's inclusion of actors from Bombay's amateur English theatre scene, who blended seamlessly with the rest of the cast. Another remarkable aspect was the fact that all the night scenes were shot entirely in candlelight, long before high-speed film technology became available. And, of course, there was Shyam's unique portrayal of Goa's fascinating culture, which was integral to the narrative and texture of the film.

There came a time when Benegal paused his filmmaking career, coinciding with the rapid rise of television as a powerful competitor to the big

four different tales, where he is the protagonist in each, yet his perception of himself changes from one story to another.

Those who knew Shyam well often remarked that he was incapable of malice. This was evident when he approached Khalid Mohammed, a critic who had relentlessly attacked all his films. Despite this, Shyam worked with him, and Khalid went on to write three of his films: *Mammo* (1994), *Sardari Begum* (1996), and *Zubeidaa* (2001). Before we delve into *Zubeidaa*, which remains Shyam's most commercial work, with bigger stars and music by AR Rahman, it's important to note other significant films like *Samar* (1999) and *Hari Bhari* (2000), which can't be overlooked.

When Shyam decided to make *Samar*, one of the first challenges he faced was the realisation that he could never make a film like *Ankur* again. So, he approached it with a unique narrative. *Samar* became a film-within-a-film, revolving around a film crew that travels to a village where an atrocity against an untouchable had taken place, inspired by a real incident. Shyam once shared how the crew was uncertain about how the story would come together, as the entire process felt confusing for everyone, including himself. Yet, despite the confusion, it all came together in the end. Following this, *Hari Bhari* explored gender issues and women's reproductive rights.

The early years after Independence, brimming with hope and change, left a lasting impact on Shyam's worldview, his life, and, of course, his cinema. These formative years helped shape him into a socially conscious filmmaker, with his films often reflecting the societal changes and issues of the time. Perhaps that's why Shyam once remarked that the story of *Zubeidaa* reminded him of his own days when he could feel the winds of change around him. The film delves into the romance between *Zubeida Begum*, an aspiring actress, and the Maharaja of Jodhpur, Hanwant Singh. Reflecting on this inter-faith love story, Shyam once shared in an interview, "The feudal system was being dismantled, and there was a great churning in Indian society. It fascinated me. Some adapted slowly, while others simply couldn't. We were transitioning from a feudal structure to a democratic one. And this story is set at that pivotal moment in history."

Shyam's *Welcome to Sajjanpur* (2008) brought back social issues like unemployment, but with a touch of humor that made the film both thought-provoking and entertaining. With *Well Done Abba* (2010), he returned to familiar territory, shifting the story from Mumbai to Hyderabad. This political satire highlighted how the burden of political systems is rarely shared by politicians and bureaucrats; instead, it is the common man who bears the brunt in every aspect of life.

A seasoned director in the genre of political biographies, Shyam Benegal's final directorial venture, *Mujib: The Making of a Nation*, was a significant project. With this film, Shyam brought together two nations, India and Bangladesh, as he told the story of the late Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the father of Bangladesh, shaping his life and legacy on screen.

In his prolific, almost seven-decade career, Benegal received numerous National Awards. He was honoured with the Padma Shri in 1976 and the Padma Bhushan in 1991. In 2005, he was awarded the Dadasaheb Phalke Award, India's highest honour in the field of cinema. Benegal also served as a Rajya Sabha MP from 2006 to 2012.

Shyam Benegal, who shaped the Indian parallel cinema movement, passed at 90 away after battling chronic kidney disease. He is survived by his daughter and wife, Nira Benegal.

In reflecting on his remarkable contributions, there is no better way to sum up his philosophy than through his own words. As he once said, "Single film doesn't change society. But cinema as a whole does." His keen insights into the industry were also captured in another of his memorable quotes: "Some people say that everything's becoming democratized, but that's just another way of saying everything's getting dumbed down, you know."



on a fascinating challenge to adapt a brilliant Marathi novel by the writer Khanolkar into Telugu nativity. The story delves into the Brahmin psyche and examines deeply traditional societies where Southern India is still more rooted in tradition compared to the North. The Telugu version received a wonderful release but also sparked tremendous controversy. In fact, one Telugu literary magazine devoted an entire year-long debate to the film. However, the Hindi version of the film never saw the light of day in theatres and was only eventually shown on television. Despite being one of Shyam's lesser-known works, the film was featured in the Indian Panorama at the 1979 Berlin International Film Festival.

The only time in Shyam's career when his star was also his producer was with Shashi Kapoor, with whom he made *Junoon* (1979) and *Kalyug* (1981). *Kalyug*, in particular, stands out as an intriguing film, as it draws heavily from the themes of the Mahabharata. During a retrospective celebrating his cinema in 2002, Shyam shared that the Mahabharata encapsulates the entire spectrum of human archetypes, and these can be applied across time, place, or context. He felt this timeless quality made it a perfect foundation for *Kalyug*, which tells the story of an industrial family in collapse. Shyam found parallels between the characters of the Mahabharata and those in the film, infusing the ancient epic's essence into a contemporary narrative.

screen. It wasn't that he wanted to stop making films, but the television boom of the mid-80s made it nearly impossible. With a flood of channels, it became difficult to raise funds and even harder to get a film on the screen. Cinemas were only interested in blockbusters, leaving little room for anything else. So, Shyam shifted his focus to television, taking on several projects, one of which was *Bharat Ek Khoj* (1988), based on Jawaharlal Nehru's *Discovery of India*. This 53-hour series was shot on 35mm film, just like a feature film, and even today, not many would know that it was made with 144 sets.

During his time away from the silver screen, Shyam directed two documentaries, one on Satyajit Ray and another on Jawaharlal Nehru. But that wasn't all. He also created a television series called *Yatra* (1986), which explored the two longest train journeys in Bombay. Rather than a traditional documentary, *Yatra* was crafted as a series of short stories, as pure documentaries generally don't work well in India.

In a few years, Shyam returned to films with *Suraj Ka Satwan Ghoda* (1993), based on Dharmvir Bharati's stories. The film marked a distinct shift in his filmmaking style. His narrative technique took a bold turn here, as he aimed to tell multiple stories happening simultaneously. The novel, written by Bharati in the mid-50s, was considered a groundbreaking work in Hindi literature, making it a perfect material for Shyam's creative vision. The story revolves around a central character who narrates



## Nikki Tamboli to make debut in Punjabi films with item song



Former “Bigg Boss 14” contestant Nikki Tamboli is all set to make her debut in the Punjabi film industry with an item song for the upcoming film “Badnaam,” which is set to release in February.

“I’m absolutely thrilled to be a part of ‘Badnaam’! It’s a song that’s going to make you want to get up and dance, and I’m so grateful to have had the opportunity to work with such an amazing team,” Nikki said.

Nikki believes “in taking risks and trying new things”.

“‘Badnaam’ is just another example of that. I hope my fans enjoy the song as much as I enjoyed working on it,” Nikki Tamboli said, speaking about her experience working on the song,” she said.

The song is sung by

Sunidhi Chauhan. “Badnaam” is scheduled to be released in February 2025. It is a romantic drama starring Jayy Randhawa, Jasmine Bhasin, and Mukesh Rishi.

Talking about Nikki, she started her career as a model. In 2019, she made her acting debut with the Telugu horror comedy film Chikati Gadilo Chithakotudu.

She later made her Tamil debut in the action horror film Kanchana 3 as Divya. Her third film was Thipparaa Meesam in Telugu. In 2020, she made her television debut through participating in the Hindi reality show Bigg Boss 14 where she finished at 3rd place.

In 2021, she participated in the stunt-based reality show Fear Factor: Khatron Ke Khiladi 11, filmed in Cape Town where she finished at 10th place. Apart from reality shows, she was also seen in several music video collaborations.

In 2022, she was seen in the game show The Khatra Khatra Show which was hosted by Bharti Singh and Haarsh Limbachiyaa. Nikki made a special appearance in the song “Cocktail” in Hindi film Jogira Sara Ra Ra opposite Nawazuddin Siddiqui. In 2024, She appeared in the reality show Bigg Boss Marathi Season 5, where she met Arbaz Patel, who was also seen in “Splitsvilla 15”.

Their love story began while they were contestants on Bigg Boss Marathi 5. The two developed a close bond.

## Prime Video announces premiere date of ‘Paatal Lok’ season 2

The much awaited second season of “Paatal Lok” is set to premiere on Prime Video on January 17, the streamer announced on Monday.

Written and created by Sudip Sharma, the first season of the crime drama featured Jaideep Ahlawat as a washed-out Delhi police officer named Hathi Ram Chaudhary, who lands the case of a lifetime when four suspects are captured in the assassination attempt of a prime time journalist.

The new season will see Ahlawat reprise his role alongside Ishwak Singh and Gul Panag. Tillotama Shome, Nagesh Kukunoor, and Jahnu Barua are the new additions to the cast, a press release stated.

Directed by Avinash Arun Dhaware, “Paatal Lok” season two is a Clean Slate Filmz Production in association with Eunoia Films LLP.

“As the stakes rise, this upcoming season promises to propel the drama barometer to new heights drawing viewers into an even darker, immersive and more treacherous world. The new season plunges the iconic character of Hathi Ram Chaudhary and his team into an uncharted territory - a perilous ‘fresh hell’ that will test them like never before,” read the official synopsis of the series.

Nikhil Madhok, Head of Originals, Prime Video India, said the first chapter of “Paatal Lok” made a huge impact with its gripping narrative, layered characters and raw portrayal



of societal realities, earning critical acclaim and a massive fanbase.

“At Prime Video, we always prioritise two essential aspects across our shows — the unique and compelling nature of the stories we tell, and identifying the right time to bring those narratives to our audience.

“The phenomenal response to the first season of the neo-noir crime drama inspired us to delve even deeper into its immersive world with the second installment. While collaborating once again with Sudip, Avinash and the talented cast behind this groundbreaking series, we are excited to unveil a new chapter that pushes creative boundaries,” Madhok said in a statement.

Sharma, who also serves as the showrunner of the series, said he is “thrilled” to continue his long-standing association with the streamer through the second season of “Paatal Lok”.

“The overwhelming response to the first season filled me with immense gratitude and inspired me to craft stories that are raw, relatable, and intensely gripping.

“The streaming service also acted as a perfect medium to bring out unique storytelling to life, offering our team a platform to expose and expand our horizons in terms of visual representation. Collaborating with an exceptional team has been a privilege, and together we’ve elevated this drama to new heights, amplifying the themes of crime, mystery, and suspense,” he added.

The first season of “Paatal Lok”, directed by Dhaware and Prosit Roy, arrived on the streamer in 2020 during the peak of the pandemic. Its success brought nationwide fame to Ahlawat, known for “Gangs of Wasseypur” and “Raazi”, and saw Singh emerge as the breakout performer.

## Amitabh Bachchan reveals he bunked classes during school

Veteran Bollywood megastar Amitabh Bachchan is known for discipline on the sets, and his penchant for rehearsing the scenes. However, there was a time when Big B let go of the discipline in him for momentary fun.

The veteran actor revealed on the quiz based reality show ‘Kaun Banega Crorepati’ that he used to bunk his school.

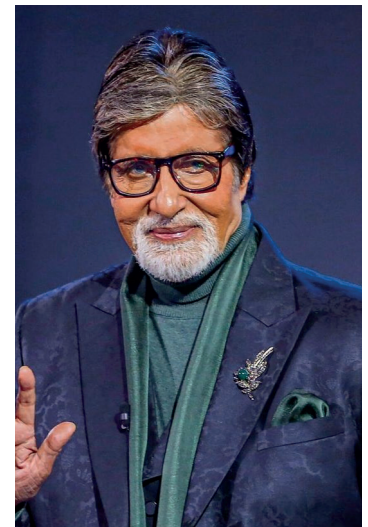
The reality show brings an exciting twist to the format with ‘India Challenger Week’. This week, out of 10 play-along contestants, the top two from the Fastest Finger First (FFF) round competed in the ‘Jaldi 5 Buzzer Round’

to secure their place on the hotseat.

The winner of this buzzer challenge then continued with the game, starting with the money tree at the 6th question. Jaspal Singh from Punjab, a Science Lab Assistant with a sharp mind and quick reflexes left the audiences impressed with his knowledge.

During the show, a curious Jaspal asked Amitabh Bachchan, “You had a role as the principal in the movie ‘Mohabbatein’, where you portrayed a character who was all about ‘Parampara, Prathishta, Anushashan’ (Tradition, Prestige, Discipline). I’m curious,

if you were truly a principal, would you have been that strict? And, did you ever skip classes?” Responding to the same, Amitabh Bachchan said, “Where did you get the idea that I could have been a principal? Padhaai-likhaai mein zero the hum... so I could never have become a principal. But yes, the principal at my school was very strict. I used to bunk school, not just classes! I was in a boarding school in Nainital, and we couldn’t leave the campus. But at night, when everyone else was asleep, I would sneak out. If I got caught, I would be punished”.





## PV Sindhu Weds Venkata Datta Sai In Grand Udaipur Ceremony



Indian badminton star and two-time Olympic medalist PV Sindhu got married on Sunday. She tied the wedding knot with Venkata Datta Sai, a Hyderabad-based businessman and Executive Director at Posidex Technologie. A grand ceremony was held at the luxurious Raffles Udaipur Resort in Rajasthan. The intimate wedding ceremony was attended by close family and friends along with some distinguished guests including Jodhpur's Culture and

Tourism Minister Gajendra Singh Shekhawat.

Shekhawat shared a photograph of the duo's wedding on his 'X' handle.

"Pleased to have attended the wedding ceremony of our Badminton Champion Olympian PV Sindhu with Venkata Datta Sai in Udaipur last evening and conveyed my wishes & blessings to the couple for their new life ahead," Shekhawat tweeted.

The celebrations kicked off

with a sangeet ceremony on December 20 which included the dancing performance from both the families. On the next day, traditional rituals like Haldi, Pellikuthuru, Mehendi, and other customs were held.

Sindhu's husband Venkata Datta Sai holds a Diploma and BBA in Accounting and Finance from FLAME University and a Master's in Data Science and Machine Learning from IIIT Bangalore. He has managed Delhi Capitals during his tenure at JSW. He now works in the role of Executive Director at Posidex Technologies and Managing Director of Sour Apple Asset Management.

Sindhu has clinched an Olympic gold and two medals in the BWF World Championships. The Indian shuttler is widely regarded as one of the best to play for the country and is still one of the top shuttlers in the country at the moment.

## Lapse on my part, says Manu; list yet to be finalised: Govt

### New Delhi

A controversy erupted over double Olympic medallist Manu Bhaker not being shortlisted for the Dhyan Chand Khel Ratna award. While the shooter on Tuesday admitted that "there has been a lapse, maybe on my part" while filing the nomination for this year's National Sports Awards, the Sports Ministry insisted the list was yet to be finalised.

Sources said there was a chance that her name might be included once the official list was announced. Sports Minister Mansukh Mandaviya has the discretionary powers to add or delete names from the list of recommended athletes and it is understood that he would take a decision soon.

"Discussions are on, but the final decision rests with the minister. We have to wait for it," said a source. The names, recommended by this year's award committee headed by retired Supreme Court judge, Justice V Ramasubramanian, have been sent to Mandaviya for a final decision. The committee has recommended hockey captain Harmanpreet and Paralympics gold medallist Praveen Kumar who won gold in men's T64 high jump for the country's highest sporting honour, Major Dhyan Chand Khel Ratna.



Manu tried to end the controversy by saying she remained motivated. "As an athlete, my role is to play and perform for my country. Awards and recognition keep me motivated but are not my goal. I believe there

has been a lapse, maybe on my part, while filing the nomination. It is being corrected," she wrote in a post on X. Earlier, her father Ramkishan Bhaker and personal coach Jaspal Rana stated that the snub had affected her morale and drive to perform for the country. Rana questioned the committee for showing lack of respect for the athlete and her fans. "It is just not done. This is an example that shows they have no respect for the sport, athlete or the fans," he told The Tribune. "They could have taken a suo moto

cognisance and included her name if it was not there. We all know of instances where names have been included by the committee and there is a precedent," he added. Mohammad Shami and golfer Anirban Lahiri have been some prominent names who have been awarded Arjuna Awards despite their names missing from the list presented to the committee.

However, the list is yet to be finalised. The Sports Ministry said she was likely to be there when the names were finally revealed.

## Mumbai Cricketer Replaces R Ashwin In India's Test Squad



Mumbai's spin-bowling all-rounder Tanush Kotian has been added to the Indian team ahead of the fourth Test of the series against Australia. The Mumbai cricketer is added to the team in place of Ravichandran Ashwin who recently took retirement from international cricket. The 26-year-old secured his place in the national side by showing consistency in domestic cricket.

Kotian is known to deliver under his pressure and he has often proved his mettle in the red-ball competitions. The 26-year-old made his first-class debut in 2018 and has featured in 33 matches. He has scored 1525 first-class runs scoring 1525 runs with an average of 41.21 laced with two hundreds and 13 fifties. In bowling, he has scalped 101 wickets with a bowling average of 25.70 including five-wicket hauls. He is currently

part of Mumbai's Vijay Hazare Trophy squad and might travel to Australia to join the Indian spin attack. He was a member of the Ranji Trophy winning team last season and also played for India A for the two unofficial Tests against Australia A. He featured in the second match taking one wicket and racking up 44 runs.

R Ashwin took retirement from Test cricket after the conclusion of the third Test between India and Australia. The off-spinner bid farewell to the international cricket with a tally of 537 Test wickets, 156 ODIs and 72 T20Is. India are up against Australia in the five-match Test series currently with the scoreline levelled at 1-1 with two more matches to go. The result of the series might also affect the chances of the teams qualifying for the World Test Championship (WTC) final.

## India-Pak clash in Dubai on Feb 23

The Champions Trophy will be held in Pakistan and Dubai, after hosts Pakistan selected the UAE as a neutral venue for their rivals India, the International Cricket Council (ICC) said on Tuesday.

Holders Pakistan will host an ICC event for the first time in 28 years. The eight-team competition kicks off on February 19 in Karachi and wraps up with the final on March 9, featuring a total of 15 matches across Pakistan and Dubai. Tournament matches will be held in Rawalpindi, Lahore and Karachi. Each venue in the country is set to host three group-stage games, with Lahore also staging the second semifinal. "Lahore will also host the final on March 9, unless India qualify, in which case it will be played in Dubai. Both the semifinals and the final will have reserve days," the ICC said in a statement. "The three group matches involving India, as well as the first semifinal, will be played in Dubai."



## Vinod Kambli hospitalised in Thane, condition 'stabilising'



### Thane

Former Indian cricketer Vinod Kambli was hospitalised in Thane on Monday with multiple health issues, including low blood pressure and a urinary tract infection (UTI), doctors said, adding his condition "is stabilising".

Doctors attending to him said that imbalances in sodium and potassium were identified that were causing cramps and mobility issues. They added old brain clots from a prior stroke were found, contributing to neurodegenerative changes, affecting his memory and coordination.

The former cricketer has been kept under observation as further diagnostic tests were being conducted, doctors said.

According to hospital authorities, Kambli's initial evaluation indicated low blood pressure (hypotension), measured at 90/60 mm Hg. In addition, he was diagnosed with a urinary tract infection (UTI), a bacterial infection affecting any part of the urinary system.

A senior doctor noted that Kambli had imbalances in essential electrolytes, including sodium and potassium. These minerals are critical for muscle function and nerve signaling. Low levels, known as hyponatremia (low sodium) and hypokalemia (low potassium), lead to symptoms such as muscle cramps, weakness, and, in severe cases, impaired mobility.

"He was found to have old clots in his brain, likely residual effects from a prior stroke," said a doctor who was involved in his treatment. Over

time, such clots can contribute to neurodegenerative changes, which refer to progressive damage or loss of neurons, affecting functions such as memory, movement, and coordination like seen in his case, he added.

Doctors are conducting an MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging) scan to investigate further. His wife sought urgent medical attention when he began experiencing severe leg cramps and was unable to walk. The cramps were attributed to the electrolyte imbalance, exacerbating his discomfort and mobility issues.

## AUS vs IND : Jasprit Bumrah, Steve Smith On Verge Of Major Milestones In MCG Test



### Melbourne

Star India pacer Jasprit Bumrah and ace Australian batter Steve Smith are gearing up for massive milestones for the Boxing Day Test match. India and Australia will meet in the fourth match of the ongoing Border Gavaskar Trophy. The star duo will be aiming to achieve a crucial milestone in the upcoming red fixture.

Jasprit Bumrah has been the standout bowler in the series and he has an opportunity to achieve a historic feat in the match. With six more wickets in his tally,

Bumrah will reach the milestone of 200 Test wickets. Only five bowlers - Kapil Dev, Ishant Sharma, Javagal Srinath and Mohammed Shami have reached the feat earlier. Overall, a total of 11 bowlers have attained the milestone. Australia batter Steve Smith is another cricketer who will have a chance to register his name in the record books. He is 191 runs away from completing 10,000 runs in Test cricket. By doing so, he can become the 4th Australian player to achieve the feat. Allan Border, Steve Waugh and Ricky Ponting are the



other Australian batters to amass 10,000 Test runs. Notably, Smith has racked up 191 runs or more in a Test six times in his career.

The series between India and Australia is levelled at 1-1 with the third fixture of the series to be played in Melbourne. India started the series with a victory in the first Test but Australia bounced back with a triumph in the next fixture. Now, with two more matches to go, the series result might impact the chances of both teams to qualify for the final of the World Test Championship (WTC).

## Pakistan Become First Team To Whitewash South Africa On Their Home Soil, Seal ODI Series 3-0

### Johannesburg

The rampaging Pakistan side thrashed hosts South Africa in the third ODI by 36 runs via the DLS method at The Wanderers Stadium on Sunday, December 22, 2024, and sealed the series 3-0. With this emphatic victory, Pakistan became the first team to whitewash South Africa at their home in ODI cricket. Notably, this was the bilateral series win for Pakistan in South Africa.

The Pakistan side dominated the entire series, especially with the bat, continuing their stellar performances under the new white-ball captain Mohammad Rizwan from the last three series, starting from the Australia tour, Zimbabwe tour and now here against Proteas. This series win



means Pakistan have now won five bilateral series in a row after beating New Zealand, Afghanistan, Australia and Zimbabwe.

The Champions Trophy is around the corner and Pakistan, who are the official hosts of the marquee event, would be delighted with these results and

looks favourites to defend the title, having won it in the last edition against India in 2017.

South Africa have a lot to ponder over. Their top order remained silent throughout the series. Heinrich Klaasen came, Klaasen mesmerized and Klaasen went but it was never enough, it wasn't the

story for one match, but for the entire series. When you are playing with a relatively inexperienced bowling lineup, getting runs on the board becomes more important, which didn't happen for South Africa throughout this series. They needed someone else to take the baton ahead. Marco Jansen tried, and Corbin Bosch tried it in the third and final ODI but they still fell way too short.

The loss means South Africa have won only one out of three ODI series this year, after also losing to Afghanistan in Sharjah, and two out of six ODI series under white-ball coach Rob Walter, who took over in February 2023.



# Shimla Turns Into Winter Wonderland: Snowfall And Carnival Attract Tourists For Christmas, New Year

## Shimla

As 2024 draws to a close, the picturesque hill stations of Himachal Pradesh, including Shimla, have transformed into a magical winter wonderland. The recent heavy snowfall has blanketed the region in a layer of white, attracting tourists from across the country to celebrate Christmas and New Year amidst nature's marvels.

The streets of Shimla, Kullu, Manali, and Lahaul are bustling with excited visitors. Roads are adorned with a soft carpet of snow, and the hills glisten as if wrapped in a silver sheet, creating a scene straight out of a fairy tale. Tourists are overjoyed, capturing moments of joy and awe as their dreams of experiencing snowfall come true.

### Tourists Thrilled By Shimla's Snowy Charm

One such tourist, a young woman from Maharashtra, could not contain her excitement. "This is my first visit to Shimla," she said with a bright smile. "It is so wonderful to see snowfall for the first time. It feels like a dream come true. We are enjoying every bit of this experience," she added.

Similarly, Meena Juneja, a tourist from Delhi, shared her spontaneous change in plans. "We were originally planning to visit Punjab, but when we heard about the snowfall in Shimla, we immediately changed our destination. Watching the snowfall with my family has been an unforgettable experience," Meena said.

Anna, a tourist from Bihar, expressed her delight after witnessing Shimla's snowy charm. "I live in Delhi, and this trip to Shimla has been a pleasant surprise," she said. "Seeing snowfall for the first time feels magical as if my dream has finally come true. It is such a joyful moment to celebrate Christmas in this snowy paradise."



The Winter Carnival has added a unique charm to Shimla's festive season. Tourists enjoy traditional music, cultural performances, and local delicacies as part of the event. "It is not just the snow, the Carnival has made our trip even more special. It offers colourful programs and a glimpse into Himachal Pradesh's unique culture," said a visitor from Delhi.

### Tourism Industry Booms Amid Snowy Celebrations

The influx of tourists has brought smiles to the faces of local tourism and hospitality businesses. Hotel operators have made special arrangements for the visitors to ensure their stay is comfortable and memorable. "The snowfall has been a blessing for us," said a local hotelier.

"Tourists are flocking to Shimla, and the atmosphere is vibrant and lively. We

are thrilled to see happy faces all around," he added.

### Efforts To Ensure A Hassle-Free Celebration

The Himachal Pradesh government has stepped up to ensure that tourists can celebrate without any hindrance. Chief Minister Sukhwinder Singh Sukhu shared his vision for the festive season, emphasising the state's readiness to welcome visitors.

"We have issued a notification allowing hotels, restaurants, and dhabas to remain open 24 hours during Christmas and New Year," said CM Sukhu. "Our aim is to ensure that no tourist faces any inconvenience, especially when it comes to food and hospitality," he added.

He also directed the Himachal Pradesh Police to maintain a friendly and

welcoming approach towards tourists. "If someone dances a little too much in celebration," he remarked with a laugh, "let them enjoy. The police should handle such situations with love and care, not by locking them up."

### A Perfect Christmas and New Year Destination

With the snowfall painting Shimla into a postcard-perfect destination, and the festive spirit alive in every corner, visiting Himachal Pradesh during Christmas and New Year has become a cherished experience for many. The combination of snowy landscapes, vibrant cultural programs, and warm hospitality makes it an ideal choice for families and friends looking to make unforgettable holiday memories.

## Cities across India celebrate Christmas with lights, prayers, and festivities

### Mumbai

Cities across India were beautifully adorned with lights on Tuesday night, creating a festive ambience for the Christmas celebration. Churches and markets were illuminated with vibrant lights, sparkling stars, and beautifully arranged Christmas cribs a day before the main holiday.

The spirit of celebration was visible everywhere, with communities coming together to mark the joyous occasion. Churches were adorned with



stunning decorations, creating a magical atmosphere that drew large crowds for prayer and reflection. Markets were bustling with activity as people shopped for Christmas trees, gifts, and festive

treats, adding to the holiday excitement.

Visuals of the celebrations are emerging from the different parts of the county. In Kerala's Ernakulam St. Francis of Assisi Roman Catholic Metropolitan Cathedral was beautifully decorated with lights, stars and Christmas cribs. Devotees sang hymns and carols in celebrations. Special prayers were offered at St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Metropolitan Cathedral in Thiruvananthapuram.