

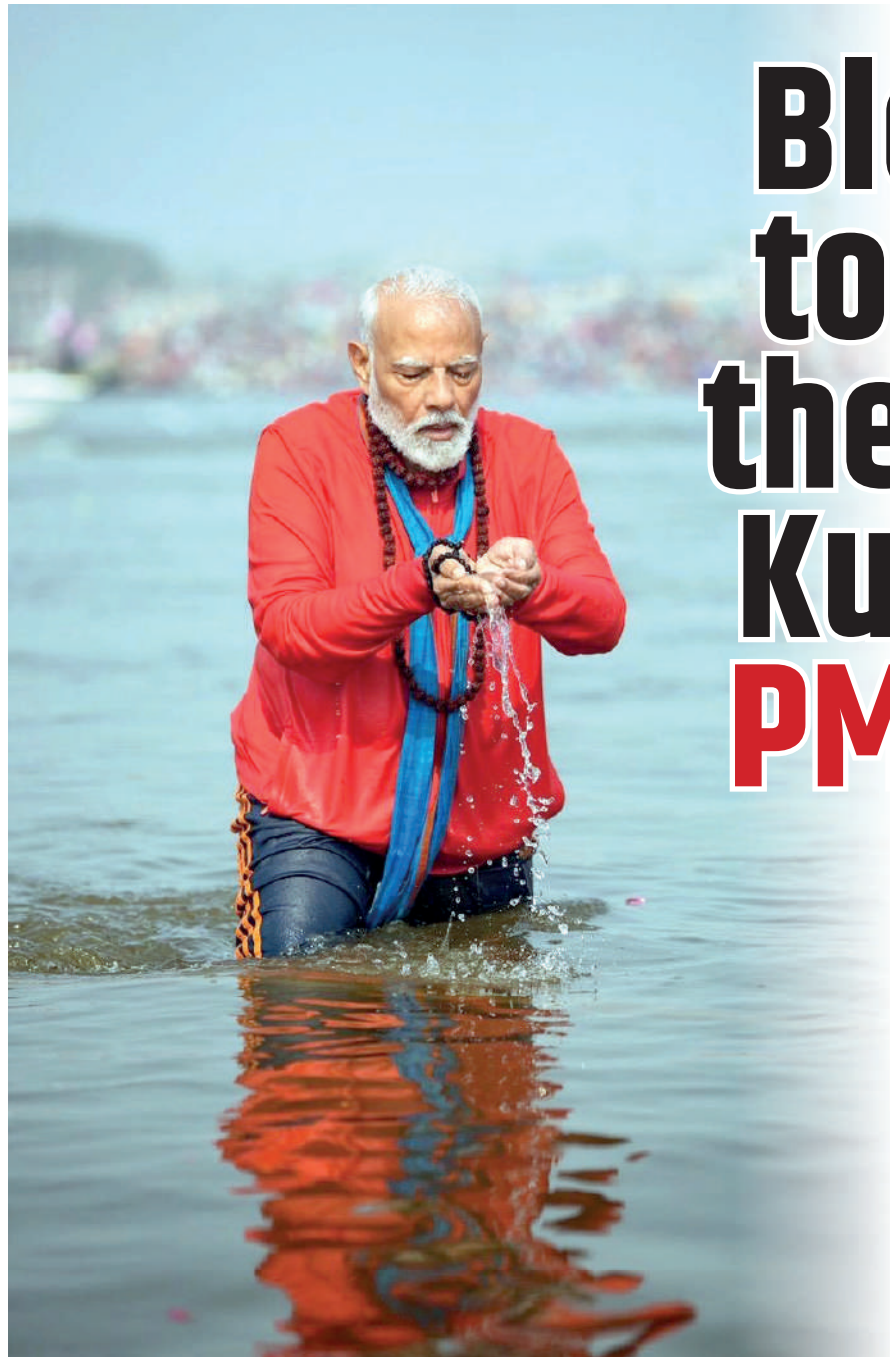
Across State

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Blessed to be at the Maha Kumbh : PM Modi

Arail VIP Ghat, acknowledging the enthusiastic supporters who gathered to witness the occasion. The boat ride, which began at 10:50 am, was part of the Prime Minister's brief but significant visit to the Maha Kumbh, a spiritual gathering of millions of devotees.

Later, the Prime Minister took a holy dip at the Sangam during the Ashtami Tithi of the Magh month, marking a special occasion in the sacred calendar. Following the bath, he offered prayers to the Ganga on the banks of Sangam. The Prime Minister's visit underscores the significance of the Kumbh Mela, an event that draws millions of pilgrims from across the nation.

PM Modi returned to Arail Ghat by boat at around 11:50 a.m. before departing for Prayagraj Airport at 12:30 p.m. This visit by the Prime Minister highlights the spiritual importance of the Maha Kumbh reaffirming the government's commitment to the cultural heritage of India. Earlier, during his visit to Prayagraj on December 13, the Prime Minister had inaugurated 167 development projects worth Rs 5,500 crore, improving connectivity, amenities and services for the general public.

Prayagraj

Prime Minister Narendra Modi took a holy dip on Wednesday at the Triveni Sangam at the Maha Kumbh. Holding 'rudraksha' beads and chanting mantras, the PM offered prayers while standing in the river.

PM Modi took a boat ride with Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath to reach Triveni Sangam --- the confluence of River Ganga, River Yamuna and the mythical Saraswati. Maha Kumbh 2025, which commenced on Paush Purnima (January 13), is the world's largest spiritual and cultural gathering, attracting devotees from across the globe. It

will continue until Mahashivratri on February 26.

In a post on X, the Prime Minister said he was filled with a spirit of devotion after taking a dip in the Sangam. "Blessed to be at the Maha Kumbh in Prayagraj. The Snan at the Sangam is a moment of divine connection, and like the crores of others who have taken part in it, I was also filled with a spirit of devotion," PM Modi said on X. "May Maa Ganga bless all with peace, wisdom, good health and harmony," he added.

Before boarding the boat, the Prime Minister and UP CM Yogi waved to the gathered crowd at

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Press Club of Working Journalists Held a Discussion on National Newspaper Day

The Emergence of Digital Media Can Not End the Existence of Print Media: Anand Sharma

Protection of Unbiased Journalism is Absolutely Necessary: Khalid Qais

Mumbai

Press Club of Working Journalists, an all-India registered organization committed to the safety and welfare of journalists, organized an online discussion on 29 January 2025, on the glorious occasion of National Newspaper Day. The program was coordinated and conducted by the National Organization General Secretary of the organization, Mumbai resident Shashi Dip through Google Meet platform and was chaired by the founder President of the organization, well-known advocate of the country, Mr. Syed Khalid Qais, Bhopal. The topic of this special discussion was

"How to Preserve the Existence and Dignity of Print Media in the era of Digital Media?"

in which well-known journalists, litterateurs and media personnel from across the country participated.

In the program, senior journalist from Bhopal, owner editor of Nirdaliya Newspaper Mr. Kailash Shrivastava "Aadmi" was present

as the chief guest and special guest was well-known senior journalist/ film producer from Nagpur, owner editor of Zeromile National newspaper Mr. Anand Sharma. In the program, Shrikant Saxena, Director, former Program Executive Doordarshan National from Sonapat Haryana, shared his thoughts and experiences profoundly and aptly. Most of the dignitaries welcomed his talks with huge applause. Chief guest Mr. Kailash Aadmi said in his address that if there is competition in any field, we should welcome it, while special guest Anand Sharma said that although the importance of digital media has increased, print media has its own importance, its existence can never end and according to him no newspaper is small or big. In his presidential address, Dr. Khalid Qais said that "Attacks on impartial

journalism in the present times are a matter of concern, sycophancy is destroying journalism. Closure



of thousands of newspapers in the last 10 years is proof of this, commercialization of journalism is at its peak. Protection of independent journalism is absolutely necessary."

In the discussion, Dr. Prity Prasad

from Bilaspur Chhattisgarh, Babulal Naga mfrom Jaipur, Riyaz Khan from Chittorgarh Rajasthan, Shaswati Das from Kolkata, Meer Mohammad Ali from Hyderabad Telangana, Mohammad Sheeraz from Karimnagar Telangana, Mueen Akhtar Khan from Harda Madhya Pradesh, Bharti Makhijani from Kutch Gujarat, Rajendra Yadav from Betul Madhya Pradesh also shared their valuable views. Shefali Sinha from Mumbai, Akram Khan from Betul, Raju Devda from Dhar, Pinky Bedi from Delhi, Mohammad Khalil from Telangana were present as listeners in the program. In the end, Shashi Dip expressed his heartfelt gratitude to all the dignitaries who attended the

program for making this special discussion a success. All the main guests and participants praised the Press Club of Working Journalists and Shashi Dip for organizing this prestigious event.

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'As simple as this': Devendra Fadnavis says he'll move to Varsha next month, after daughter's board exams

Mumbai

Devendra Fadnavis has said he will move to Varsha, the official residence in Mumbai's Malabar Hills that is designated for the Maharashtra chief minister, next month. Though sworn in as chief minister on December 5, 2024, he has not yet left his current residence, Sagar.

"My daughter (Divija) is in Class 10 and board exams are in this month. She suggested that we relocate to the new house after her exams. So we decided to move into Varsha after her exams." Fadnavis said on Tuesday. "It is



as simple as this. But I see wild speculations as to why I have not moved to Varsha, which is ridiculous and baseless." The Class 10 board exams will begin in mid-February and conclude in March.

Opposition parties have asked why the chief minister has not moved to Varsha. Shiv Sena (UBT) MP Sanjay Raut alleged that former chief minister Eknath

Shinde, who is now a deputy chief minister, was reluctant to leave the bungalow. "For the first time, our CM is not occupying Varsha. He is afraid to step in." Raut said. "Varsha will be demolished and a new building will come up."

A highly placed source in the chief minister's office said, "Officially, Shinde has already vacated the bungalow. There is some repair and civil work going on... It is a general practice to maintain official structures that come under the Public Works Department well."

BMC Tables Over Rs 74,000-Crore Budget For 2025-26

Mumbai

The Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC), considered the richest civic body in the country, tabled its budget of Rs 74,427 crore for 2025-26 at its headquarters in Mumbai on Tuesday.

The additional municipal commissioners presented the budget to BMC commissioner Bhushan Gagrani, the state-appointed administrator. BMC is currently run by an administrator since the term of the corporators ended on March 7, 2022. This is the third year of the budget being presented to the administrator, in deviation from the norm where the municipal commissioner presents the budget to the standing committee.

"The budget estimate for FY2025-26 is proposed at Rs 74,427.41 crore, which exceeds the budget estimates of 2024-25 i.e. Rs 65,180.79 crore, by 14.19 per cent," the budget document states.

In the budget, the education department has been allocated Rs 3,955 crore, BEST Rs 1,000 crore while a provision of Rs 5,100 crore has been made for the roads and transport department.

Special provisions have also been made for various projects underway in Mumbai including Rs 4,300 crore for the third phase of the Coastal Road (the elevated road from Dahisar to Bhayandar), Rs 1,957 has been allocated to the Goregaon-Mulund Link Road Project, the foundation stone of which was laid by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

BEST Bus Services

The Brihanmumbai Electric Supply and Transport (BEST)



undertaking, the second-largest public transport system in the metropolis after suburban trains, operates a fleet of around 3,000 buses, serving more than 30 lakh commuters daily. In the budget document, the BMC stated that despite its financial commitments, it has made the provision considering BEST's financial position.

"Although BMC itself has a huge requirement of funds towards its ongoing projects and other important objectives, a total provision of Rs 1,000 crore is proposed in 2025-26 as a grant to BEST undertaking considering its financial position," the document stated.

The funds will be used for infrastructure development, capital equipment purchases, loan repayments, wet lease buses, pay revisions, daily operations, the Intelligent Transport Management System (ITMS) project, Diwali bonuses of employees, pensioner dues and electricity bills. The document also says that as per the state directives, BMC will contribute

Rs 128.65 crore or its 5 per cent share towards the procurement and deployment of 2,000 electric buses for Mumbai. But it is not clear if the amount is part of the Rs 1,000 crore assistance or a separate provision.

The civic body also pointed out that since 2012-13, it has provided Rs 11,304.59 crore in financial assistance to BEST, which is financially bleeding and its accumulated loss amount calculates to Rs 9,500 crore. The document also noted that Rs 992 crore has been sanctioned by the 15th Finance Commission for BEST's electric bus purchases.

Of this, Rs 493.38 crore has already been received and disbursed, with the remaining Rs 498.62 crore will be provided once received.

Tax on Solid Waste

So far, there were only talks that BMC would levy a tax on solid waste and the budget has proposed the same. Gagrani said that it is necessary to impose a tax on waste collection due to the increasing cost of solid waste management. The final decision will

be announced only after taking legal advice on this matter.

A provision of Rs 113.18 crore has been made for special climate change for Mumbai and the health department has been allocated Rs 7,380.43 crore. Mumbai Eye will be developed under the public-private partnership (PPP) model on the land of London Eye.

Meanwhile, a provision of Rs 25 crore has been made for the development of Koliwadis to turn it into a tourist destination and the fire department has been given Rs 261.71 crore while for the disaster management department, the figure stands at Rs 309 crore.

A fund of Rs 220.12 has been allocated to the parks department and Rs 51.98 crore has been set aside for the director of planning. The market department has been granted Rs 181.53 crore.

Tax on Slums

The budget has brought the commercial slum owners under the tax net as BMC eyes Rs 350 crore in revenue from it. There are about 2.5 lakh slums under BMC of which 20 per cent are used for commercial purposes such as industries, shops, warehouses and hotels. Property tax will be collected by assessing the tax on these business owners.

Boosting Tourist Footfalls

BMC has made provisions to increase the number of tourists and animals like penguins, tigers, lions, zebras, giraffes and jaguars will be translocated to Rani Bagh to make it a new tourist attraction. A tiger sculpture will be installed at the underground tunnel of Sanjay Gandhi National Park.

Devendra Fadnavis announces plan to hold Magnetic Maharashtra global investor summit

Mumbai

The Maharashtra government has decided to organise a Magnetic Maharashtra summit again to attract mega projects from both foreign and domestic investors and keep the wheels of economic growth in motion, Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis said.

"During my first tenure as CM, we convened Make In India and Magnetic Maharashtra. We will hold Magnetic Maharashtra again," Fadnavis said. "Such events provide robust and assured platforms of convergence for global and domestic investors. It helps the government explore its own potential in

the larger interest of the state economy."

Responding to criticism over the state's participation at the World Economic Forum, Fadnavis said, "Our participation at the World Economic Forum in Davos yielded huge success as we signed 54 MoU (memorandums of understanding) worth Rs 15.70 lakh crore in investments for Maharashtra."

Fadnavis said 98 per cent of these are foreign direct investments. "Each and every MoU we entered into with companies is going to materialise hundred per cent," he said. "Maharashtra's MoU realisation rate used to be 65 per cent, as against 35-40 per cent of the rest of the

states. Under our tenure, it is going to be higher at 80-90 per cent."

During his first tenure as chief minister, the government organised a three-day Magnetic Maharashtra Convergence Summit at the MMRDA grounds in Bandra Kurla Complex, Mumbai, in 2018. Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the summit, at the end of which the government claimed it had attracted Rs 12 lakh crore in investments across multiple sectors, including projects worth Rs 35,000 crore in renewable energy. Fadnavis was then heading a government in which the undivided

Shiv Sena, under Uddhav Thackeray's leadership, was an alliance partner of the BJP. The alliance ran from 2014 to 2019. In 2019 Thackeray became chief minister, leading a Maha Vikas Aghadi government of the Congress, NCP and Shiv Sena, after the party founded by Bal Thackeray broke its ties with the BJP. During Uddhav Thackeray's tenure from 2019 to 2022, the MVA held Magnetic Maharashtra 2.0. This period also witnessed the Covid pandemic, which led to a nationwide economic slowdown. This summit could attract investments worth only Rs 1.29 lakh crore.

'No Income Tax On Income Up To Rs 12 lakh in New Tax Regime': FM Sitharaman's Major Relief To Indian Middle Class In Union Budget 2025-26

New Delhi

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman presented the Union Budget 2025-26 in Lok Sabha on Saturday, her eighth consecutive budget. As was anticipated, she offered a major relief to the middle class, announcing that those earning up to Rs 12.75 lakh in a year would not have to pay any taxes. Sitharaman also altered tax slabs for people earning above this threshold to help save up to Rs 1.1 lakh in taxes for those with income up to Rs 25 lakh in a year. The tax cuts, which will cost the exchequer about Rs 1 lakh crore, will benefit 6.3 crore people, or more than 80 per cent of taxpayers, who earn up to Rs 12 lakh a year.

"The new structure will substantially reduce taxes on the middle class and leave more money in their hands, boosting household consumption, savings and investment," Sitharaman said presenting what was dubbed as 'reformist' budget for the next fiscal in Lok Sabha.

The Budget for April 2025 to March 2026 (FY26) proposed to raise the foreign investment limit in the insurance sector to 100 per cent from the current 74 per cent and continue spending spree on infrastructure while raising allocations for social sectors as well as providing for measures for poor, youth, farmers and women. All this she did while managing to stick to the fiscal consolidation roadmap, projecting a fiscal deficit of 4.4 per cent of the GDP in FY26 as against an estimated 4.8 per cent in the current year ending March 31.

The Budget session commenced on January 31, with President Droupadi Murmu's address, followed by Sitharaman's tabling of the Economic Survey 2025 in Parliament. The session will be held in two phases- the first running from January 31 to February 13, and the second from March 10 to April 4.

Assisting the Finance Minister in shaping the Budget proposals are

Revenue Secretary Tuhin Pandey, Economic Affairs Secretary Ajay Seth, Expenditure Secretary Manoj Govil, DIPAM Secretary Arunish Chawla, Financial Services Secretary M Nagaraju, and Chief Economic Advisor V Anantha Nageswaran.

FDI: Current BIT Model To Be Revamped; FDI Limit For Insurance Sector Hiked To 100 Percent



Budget 2025-26 aims to initiate transformative reforms across six domains which will augment our growth potential and global competitiveness during the next five years, the Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said while presenting the Union Budget 2025-26 in the Parliament on Saturday.

One of these domains is Financial Sector which encompasses sectors like Insurance, Pensions, Bilateral Investment Treaties (BIT) and so forth. The FM said that to encourage sustained foreign investment and "in the spirit of first develop India", the current BIT model will be revamped and made more investor-friendly.

Sitharaman also informed that the FDI limit for the insurance sector will be raised from 74 to 100 per cent. This enhanced limit will be available for those companies which invest the entire premium in India. The current guardrails and conditionalities

associated with foreign investment will be reviewed and simplified. To enhance the FDI limit, the government will have to bring amendments to the Insurance Act 1938, the Life Insurance Corporation Act 1956, and the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority Act 1999.

The Union Finance Minister also said that requirements and procedures for speedy approval of company mergers will be rationalized. The scope for fast-track mergers will also be widened and the process will be made simpler.

TDS Interest Income Limit For Senior Citizens Doubled To Rs 1 Lakh

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman proposed to double the limit for Tax Deduction at Source (TDS) on interest income for senior citizens to Rs 1 lakh, while increasing the threshold to Rs 6 lakh on rent from the current Rs 2.4 lakh.

She proposed rationalisation of TDS by reducing the number of rates and thresholds above which TDS is deducted. She added that threshold amounts for tax deduction will be increased for better clarity and uniformity.

"The limit for tax deduction on interest for senior citizens is being doubled from the present Rs 50,000 to Rs 1 lakh," she said, adding that for others, the limit for TDS has been increased to Rs 50,000 from the current Rs 40,000.

The annual limit of Rs 2.40 lakh for TDS on rent is being increased to Rs 6 lakh, she said. The move will reduce the number of transactions liable to TDS, thus benefiting small taxpayers receiving small payments, she told the Parliament.

No Income Tax Till Rs 12 Lakh: FM Sitharaman's Grand Gift To Indian Middle Class

Democracy, demography and demand are the key support builders in the journey to Viksit Bharat. Middle class provides strength in India's growth. In recognition to their contribution, we have periodically reduced their tax burden right after 2014...I am now happy to announce that there will be no income tax up to an income of Rs 12 lakhs.

- Net market borrowings are estimated at Rs 11.54 lakh crore for next fiscal.
- Govt to set up high-level committee for regulatory reforms on all non-financial sectors.
- Investment friendliness Index of states to be launched this year.
- Our regulations must keep up with technological innovation; we will update norms made under old laws.
- Jan Vishwas Bill 2.0 to be brought to decriminalise more than 100 offences.
- Model Bilateral investment treaty to be revamped to make it investor-friendly.
- Requirements and procedures for speedy approval for company mergers will be widened and process to be made simple.
- Revamped central KYC registry will be rolled out in 2025.
- Govt to deepen and expand services of India Post payments bank in rural areas.
- Govt to facilitate upgradation of air cargo warehousing for high-value perishable horticulture items.
- Bharat Trade Net, a digital public infrastructure, will be set up for international trade.
- Govt to set up national framework for promoting global capability centres in emerging Tier-II cities.
- Rs 20,000 crore to be given for promoting innovation in partnership with private sector.

New Income Tax Bill To Be Introduced

The central government will introduce a new Income Tax Bill next week, FM Nirmala Sitharaman announced in her Budget 2025-26 Speech in Lok Sabha today. "I reaffirm the commitment of the tax department to trust first, scrutinise later. I also propose to introduce the new income tax bill next week. I will detail the indirect tax reforms and changes in direct taxes in Part B.

PM Modi Slams Rahul, Kejriwal In His Reply To Motion Of Thanks To Prez Address In Lok Sabha

New Delhi

Prime Minister Narendra Modi slammed Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi, saying those who entertain themselves by getting photo sessions done in huts of the poor will find the talk about the poor in Parliament boring.

He did not take the name of Rahul, though. Modi was replying to the Motion of Thanks to the President's Address in Lok Sabha.

He also took a swipe at Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) national convenor and former Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal. "Some leaders focus on jacuzzi and stylish showers while my government focuses on providing water to every household," he said. He referred to the official residence of the former Delhi Chief Minister as 'Sheesh Mahal', a campaign rhetoric the BJP party has latched on to the ruling AAP in Delhi in the runup to the February 5 elections.

PM Modi asserted that the address strengthened the resolve of Viksit



Bharat and inspired people. The Prime Minister attacked Rahul for the latter's purported reaction to the President's address.

PM Modi said, "Those who entertain themselves by getting photo sessions done in huts of the poor will find the talk about the poor in Parliament boring."

On January 31, Gandhi family comprising Sonia Gandhi, Leader of the Opposition in Lok Sabha Rahul

Gandhi and Congress MP Priyanka Gandhi Vadra were seen discussing the speech of President Droupadi Murmu in the Parliament complex soon after she delivered her address to a joint sitting of Parliament. During the discussion, Rahul Gandhi is said to have asked Sonia Gandhi if the President's speech was "boring". A purported video of the interaction also trickled out.

The PM thanked the people for

giving him an opportunity to respond to the President's Address in Lok Sabha 14 times. "We did not give false slogans, but real development to people. Till five decades, slogans of 'Garibi Hatao' were heard and now 25 crore poor have come out of poverty," PM Modi said.

He said till now poor people have got four crore houses. "The one who has lived that kind of life knows what it means to have a house with a proper roof," he asserted. "Pain of poor, troubles of common man, cannot be understood just like that; it requires passion and some just don't have it," he said in one of his swipes aimed at the opposition.

The Prime Minister also listed out the achievements of his government in his 100-minute-long speech, which was applauded by the Treasury Benches. He spoke on the work done by his government to increase medical colleges in the country, which in turn has raised the medical seats reserved for SC, STs and OBCs.

In Tributes To Kumbh Stampede Victims, LOP Kharge Says 'Thousands' Died; Treasury Protests

New Delhi

Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge on Monday paid tributes to "thousands" who died in the January 29 Maha Kumbh stampede, triggering an uproar from the treasury benches even as Chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar asked him to retract the statement. Kharge, the Leader of the Opposition in Rajya Sabha, was quick to add that "this is my estimate (and) if this is not right you (the government) should tell what is the truth". He said he was ready to be corrected.

"I did not say 'thousands' to blame anyone. But how many people died, give that information at least. I will apologise if I am wrong. They should give figures how many died, how many are missing," he said. There was a stampede during the Amrit Snan on the occasion of Mauni Amavasya on January 29. According to the figures provided by the

Uttar Pradesh government, 30 people were killed and 60 others were injured.

However, while participating in a debate on the Motion of Thanks to the President's address in Rajya Sabha, Kharge used the phrase "the thousands who died in Kumbh" to pay tributes to the deceased. "I pay my tributes to the people who died in Maha Kumbh... the thousands who died in Kumbh," he said, leading to the protest by the ruling members.

Kharge, however, added this was his estimate and the government should provide the "correct" figures. "This is my estimate, if this is not right you should tell what is the truth... I am asking you to declare what the actual numbers are. If I am wrong I am ready to correct," he said. Chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar urged him to retract his statement.

"The LoP has indicated a scenario using figures to

the extent of thousands. I appeal to him, in this House, whatever is spoken, carries great weight. You have spoken something which has numbed everyone," Dhankhar said.

"A message that goes from here, even if it is contradicted, goes to the whole world. Can you go to that extent? I would appeal to you as one of senior most leaders of this country, if you put a figure in thousands I can only appeal to your conscious," he said. Kharge said he did not mention the figure to blame anyone.

Even as Chairman Dhankhar called Kharge making the claim a "very sad moment" and asked him to withdraw his statement, the Leader of Opposition insisted the government give the correct figures and continued with his speech. He also paid tributes to former prime minister Manmohan Singh, calling him the architect of the modern Indian economy.

1.55 cr MGNREGS workers' names deleted: Govt

New Delhi

The names of more than 1.55 crore active workers have been deleted from the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) between 2022 and 2024, the government informed Parliament on Tuesday.

In a written reply to a question in the Lok Sabha, Minister of State for Rural Development Kamlesh Paswan said the names of 86,17,887 and 68,86,532 active workers have been deleted or cancelled during financial year 2022-23 and financial year 2023-24, respectively. The total number of the workers whose names have been deleted over the two financial years is 1,55,04,419.

The workers' names have been deleted for reasons, such as fake or duplicate or incorrect job cards, families shifted out of gram panchayats permanently or if their villages have been classified as urban.

The minister said the responsibility of the scheme's implementation is vested with the governments of the states and UTs concerned, adding that updating or deleting job cards is a regular exercise conducted by the states.

2661 Varieties Of Climate Resilient Crops Developed During 2014-24: Union Minister Bhagirath Choudhary

New Delhi

The National Agricultural Research System (NARS) including ICAR Institutes and State/Central Agricultural Universities (CAU/SAU) has developed 2900 varieties of different crops during 2014-2024, out of which 2661 varieties are climate resilient.

Minister of State for Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, Bhagirath Choudhary informed on Tuesday in Lok Sabha, "During this period, 63 field crop varieties have been developed for Kerala state, comprising of 23 of cereals, 2 of oilseeds; 10 of pulses; 15 of forage crops and 13 of sugarcane of which 58 are climate resilient."

The Centrally Sponsored Scheme of Per Drop More Crop (PDMC) of the Central government has been implemented since 2015-16 which focuses on enhancing water use efficiency at the farm level through micro irrigation systems like drip and sprinkler irrigation systems. The PDMC was implemented as a component of the Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchayee Yojana (PMKSY) during 2015-16 to 2021-22 and under the Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana (RKVY) from 2022-23 onwards, the minister said.

The various components of this scheme help in water saving as well as reduced fertilizer usage through

fertilization, labour expenses, other input costs and overall income enhancement of the farmers. The government provides financial assistance 55 per cent to the small



and marginal farmers and 45 per cent to other farmers for installation of drip and sprinkler systems under the PDMC, Choudhary said.

"To help the farmers for taking decisions on day-to-day agricultural operations for reduction of crop damage and loss due to extreme weather as well as taking advantages of benevolent weather conditions, India Meteorological Department runs a scheme - Gramin Krishi Mausam Sewa (GKMS) to render weather forecast based operational Agrometeorological Advisory

Services in collaboration with Indian Council of Agricultural Research, State Agriculture Universities and other institutions for the benefit of farming community," he said.

district-level AAS bulletins for all agriculturally important districts of Kerala. These units are also involved in the dissemination of AAS to the farmers through multichannel dissemination systems like print and electronic media, Door Darshan, radio, internet etc. including SMS using mobile phones through the Kisan Portal and also through private companies under Public Private Partnership (PPP) mode. SMS-based alerts and warnings along with suitable remedial measures are being sent during extreme weather events like cyclones, deep depression etc. through the Kisan Portal," he said.

"Farmers access weather information including alerts and related agromet advisories specific to their districts through the mobile app, 'Meghdoot' and 'Mausam' launched by the Central government. To extend real-time weather updates to farmers for taking appropriate decisions on farm operations, AMFUs also use social media platforms. In Kerala, these services have been integrated in the Agriculture Information Management System (AIMS), Department of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare, Kerala government. About 40 lakh farmers are accessing the information in English and regional language from this platform," Choudhary added.

"Under this scheme, presently 130 Agromet Field Units, located at SAUs, institutes of ICAR and Indian Institute of Technology are operational across the country. Along with the biweekly bulletins, daily weather forecast and now cast information are also disseminated to the farmers by Regional Meteorological Centers and Meteorological Centers of IMD," the minister added.

"Out of the 130 AMFUs, 5 AMFUs viz. Ambalavayal, Pillicode, Thrissur, Vellayani and Kumarakom are preparing the

INDIA Alliance Functioning Well And Will Continue To Do So: Farooq Abdullah

Jammu

Jammu and Kashmir's former Chief Minister and National Conference President, Farooq Abdullah, on Tuesday said that the I.N.D.I.A. alliance is functioning well and will continue to do so in the future.

He addressed a media conference during the sidelines of an event in GMC Jammu on International Cancer Day. Answering a question on the Delhi election, he said, "I will have to become an astrologer so that I can tell you what will happen in the Delhi elections. How would I know who will come and who will go?"

Dr Farooq Abdullah further said that the attack carried out by unidentified militants in Behibagh village in south Kashmir's Kulgam district was in contrast with the centre's normalcy claims in Jammu and Kashmir. "Question to those who are beating drums in and outside Parliament that militancy has been wiped out and normalcy has returned to Jammu and Kashmir," he said.

'Let It Be Examined By HC First': Supreme Court Turns Down Pleas Challenging UAPA Amendments

New Delhi

The Supreme Court on Tuesday emphasised that the pleas against the amendments in UAPA provisions, empowering the state to designate individuals as terrorists and seize properties, should be first adjudicated by the high court instead of the apex court.

Stating that it had already issued notice in 2019, the top court noted that complex legal issues often arose in such matters, and it would be appropriate for high courts to examine it first, and Supreme Court should not

be the court of first instance.

The matter heard by a bench led by Chief Justice of India Sanjiv Khanna and comprising justices Sanjay Kumar and KV Viswanathan, said, "We cannot be the court of first instance... A lot of problems arise, sometimes issues are left by your side (petitioner), sometimes by their side (Union), then we have to refer to a larger bench. Let it be first decided by the high court."

The apex court was hearing pleas filed by Sajal Awasthi, Association for Protection of Civil

Rights (APCR) and Amitabha Pande. Senior advocate CU Singh, appearing for one of the petitioners, requested the bench to hear the matter and pointed out that notice was issued on the pleas five years ago.

It was argued before the apex court that instead of disposing of the petitions, the matter could be transferred to the Delhi High Court. The counsel pointed at the logistical difficulties faced by the petitioners, citing that many of them were retired bureaucrats. The counsel said, "We filed before the Supreme Court, and we would find it inconvenient to get representation before multiple high courts".



Muslim Community Has Rejected Waqf Bill: Owaisi

New Delhi

AIMIM leader Asaduddin Owaisi on Monday said the Waqf Amendment Bill, in its current form, will lead to social instability as it has been rejected by the Muslim community.

Participating in the debate on the President's Address, Owaisi said that the Bill has been rejected by the entire Muslim community and its implementation would take this country back to the 1980s and early 1990s.

"I am cautioning and warning this government - if you bring and make a Waqf law in the present form, it will be violation of Article 25, 26 and 14, it will lead to social instability in this country. It has been rejected by the entire Muslim community. No Waqf property will be left, nothing will be left," Owaisi said.

"You want to make India 'Viksit Bharat', we want 'Viksit Bharat'. You want to take this country back to the '80s and early '90s, it will be your responsibility. Because, as a proud Indian Muslim, I will not lose an inch of my Masjid... I will not lose an inch of my Dargah. I will not allow that," he said. "We will no more come and give a diplomatic talk over here. This is the House where I have to stand and speak honestly, that my community - we are proud Indians. It is my property, not given by anyone. You cannot snatch it away from me. Waqf is a form of worship for me," Owaisi said.



Earlier in the day, opposition MPs Kalyan Banerjee (Lok Sabha) and Md. Nadimul Haque (Rajya Sabha) strongly protested the removal of key portions from their dissent notes submitted to the Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) on the Waqf (Amendment) Bill, 2024.

In a letter to Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla, the MPs alleged that their objections were arbitrarily deleted without prior notice or explanation.

The Joint Committee of Parliament scrutinising the Waqf (Amendment) Bill on Wednesday adopted its report and the amended version of the proposed law with a majority vote, the panel's chairperson Jagdambika Pal said. Opposition members voiced their strong criticism of the adopted Bill, which was approved with 15-11 votes, alleging that it was "unconstitutional" and would destroy the Waqf board by allowing for the government's interference in the religious matters of Muslims.

Akhilesh says govt hiding death toll, seeks action against cover-up

New Delhi

Samajwadi Party leader Akhilesh Yadav on Tuesday launched an attack on the Central and Uttar Pradesh Governments for failing to release the tally of those who were killed in the Kumbh stampede, and sought an all-party meeting on the management of the religious event.

The Kannauj MP, who was participating in the discussion on the Motion of Thanks on President's Address in the Lok Sabha, alleged that the government was hiding the number of deaths in the stampede at the Kumbh congregation in Prayagraj, and demanded strict action against those trying to cover up the "mismanagement" in organising the fair.

Sougata Roy of the TMC said President Droupadi Murmu failed to mention about the ethnic violence in Manipur in her address to both Houses of Parliament, adding that she too, like the Prime Minister, had failed to visit the troubled state and remains ensconced in Rashtrapati Bhavan.

On tension along the China border, Yadav said both the BJP and the Congress have opinions on the issue. He referred to the Congress regime and said there was a time when acres were lost to China and now the BJP, too, was following the same path. However, it does not even accept China has occupied, the SP chief added.

Yadav's remarks came a day



after Leader of the Opposition Rahul Gandhi claimed that the Army had confirmed Chinese presence inside Indian territory.

The SP chief reiterated his demand for a caste survey on Tuesday, noting that the Congress had not always backed the idea. "There should be a caste survey to strengthen reservation. Now, the Congress supports it too. But if they had done so earlier, we wouldn't have to ask for it now," Yadav said, assuring Congress of his party's support on the issue.

As treasury bench MPs attempted to highlight friction between the SP and Congress, Yadav dismissed the suggestion with a jibe at the ruling party. "There is no friction — unlike your double engine," he retorted.

Echoing Rahul's concern over China's growing influence in the manufacturing sector, Yadav referred to the 1991 economic reforms unleashed during former Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao, pointing out that while the market was opened, proper attention was not given to the manufacturing sector, as it warranted.

"If manufacturing sector had been paid heed to then probably we would have gone ahead of China by now," he said.

EC hits back at AAP: We are 3-member body, not run by one person

New Delhi

Amid allegations levelled by the Aam Aadmi Party that the Election Commission is being run by CEC Rajiv Kumar, the poll panel on Tuesday hit back saying it is a three-member body which has collectively noted "repeated deliberate pressure tactics" to malign the poll authority in Delhi polls.

It said an impression is being created that the EC is a single member body.

In a post on X, the EC said it has decided to have constitutional restraint, absorbing such outbursts

with sagacity, stoically and not to be swayed by such insinuations.

Top AAP leaders, including its convener Arvind Kejriwal, have claimed that the EC has been ignoring the BJP's alleged violations of poll code.

Kejriwal had alleged that Kumar is not taking action against the BJP to bag a post-retirement assignment.

Kumar demits office on February 18 on attaining the age of 65 years.

Gyanesh Kumar and Sukhbir Singh Sandhu are the

other election commissioners.

"The 3-member Commission collectively noted repeated deliberate pressure tactics to malign ECI in Delhi Elections, as if it is a single member body & decided to have constitutional restraint, absorbing such outbursts with sagacity, stoically & not to be swayed by such insinuations," the poll authority said in a rare reaction.

Delhi goes to polls on Wednesday where AAP seeks to retain power and BJP trying to form the next government.

Gujarat government forms committee to draft UCC

Gandhinagar

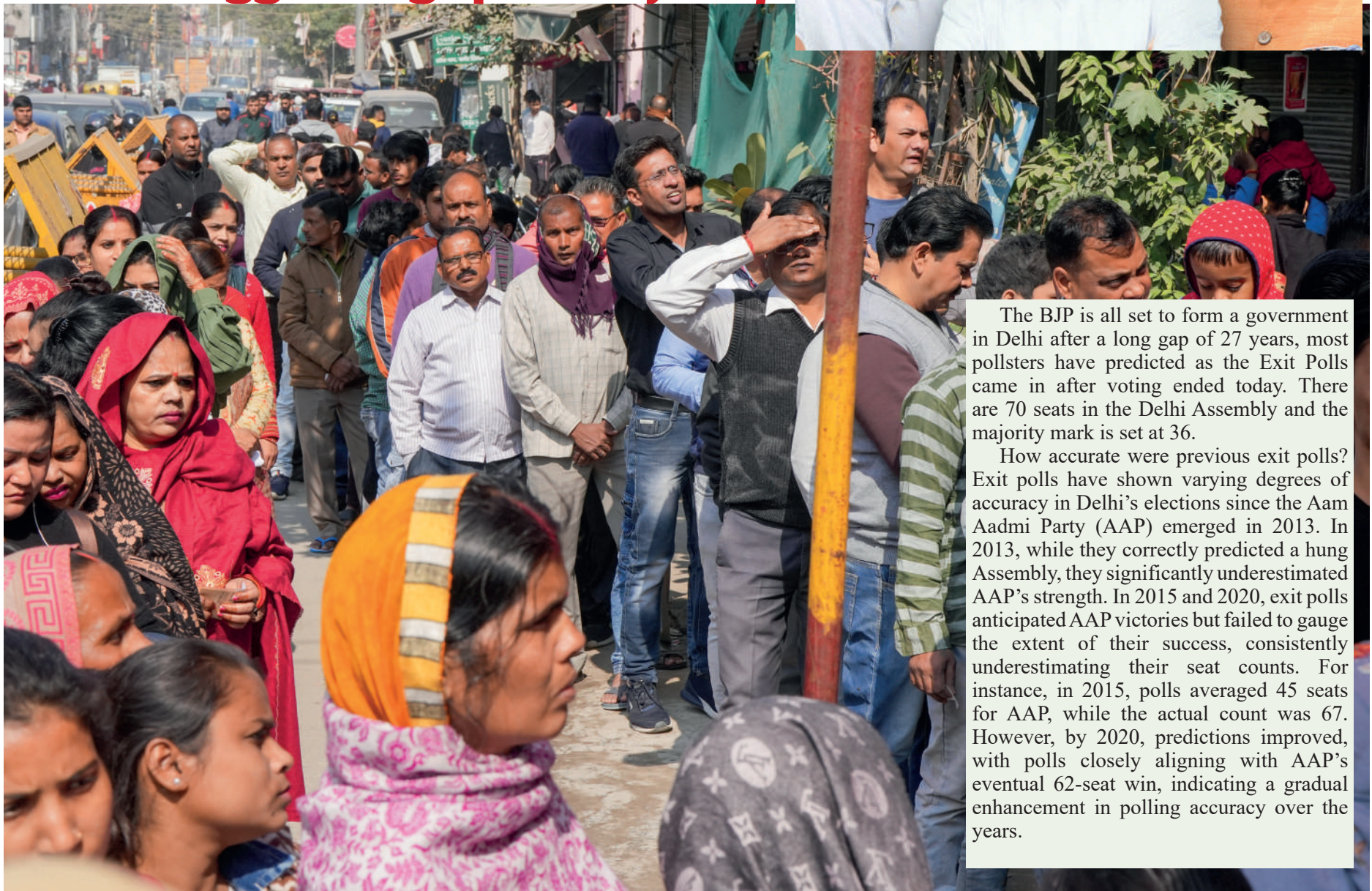
After Uttarakhand rolled out its version of the Uniform Civil Code, the BJP-ruled Gujarat on Tuesday announced the constitution of a committee to draft the UCC Bill. Gujarat Chief Minister Bhupendra Patel announced the move, stating that the committee will submit its report to the state government within 45 days.

"To prepare the draft for Uniform Civil Code (UCC) and make the law, a 5-member committee under the chairmanship of retired Supreme Court judge Ranjana Desai has been constituted. The committee will submit its report to the state government in 45 days, based on which the government will take a decision," Patel said.

Former Supreme Court judge Ranjana Prakash Desai had also headed the Uttarakhand UCC panel earlier. Meanwhile, plans to commence work on UCC in all the BJP-ruled states is underway with announcements expected gradually.

BJP could make a comeback in Delhi after 27 years

AAP struggles to go past majority



The BJP is all set to form a government in Delhi after a long gap of 27 years, most pollsters have predicted as the Exit Polls came in after voting ended today. There are 70 seats in the Delhi Assembly and the majority mark is set at 36.

How accurate were previous exit polls? Exit polls have shown varying degrees of accuracy in Delhi's elections since the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) emerged in 2013. In 2013, while they correctly predicted a hung Assembly, they significantly underestimated AAP's strength. In 2015 and 2020, exit polls anticipated AAP victories but failed to gauge the extent of their success, consistently underestimating their seat counts. For instance, in 2015, polls averaged 45 seats for AAP, while the actual count was 67. However, by 2020, predictions improved, with polls closely aligning with AAP's eventual 62-seat win, indicating a gradual enhancement in polling accuracy over the years.

New Delhi

Voting for the Delhi Assembly Elections 2025 concluded. Voting was held for all 70 constituencies in the national capital. The polling process commenced at 7 am and concluded at 6 pm. There were over 1.55 crore registered voters. The elections will determine the composition of the Delhi Legislative Assembly, with results set to be announced on February 8.

A voter turnout of 57.70 per cent was recorded till 5 PM. The contest is primarily a three-way battle between the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and Congress. AAP, led by Atishi after Arvind Kejriwal's resignation in September 2024 due to corruption allegations, is eyeing a third consecutive term, highlighting

its governance and welfare schemes.

The BJP, which has been out of power in Delhi for over 25 years, has aggressively campaigned, hoping to reclaim the capital. Meanwhile, Congress, once dominant in Delhi politics, seeks a revival after failing to win a single seat in the last two elections. High-profile candidates include Arvind Kejriwal (AAP), Parvesh Verma (BJP), and Sandeep Dikshit (Congress), who are contesting from the New Delhi seat. There are a total of 13,766 polling stations in the national capital.

Delhi Assembly Election 2025 LIVE: Voting Concludes For All 70 Seats

Voting has concluded for the Delhi Assembly Elections. All voters in the queue after the formal closing hours of polling at 6 PM are allowed

to cast their vote, as per the Election Commission of India.

It was a three-way contest between the Aam Aadmi Party, the Congress and the BJP. There was enthusiasm among the voters in Delhi. The who's who of the country from President Droupadi Murmu, Vice President Jagdeep Dhankar, Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi, his sister and MP Priyanka Gandhi, Army chief General Upendra Dwivedi, AAP national convener Arvind Kejriwal, Delhi Chief Minister Atishi exercised their franchise.

Among the other prominent personalities, who voted include AAP leader and former Delhi Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia, former Chief Justice of India DY Chandrachud and Chief of Defence

Staff General Anil Chauhan. The voting was smooth at most of the places in the national capital. There are 70 seats in the Delhi Assembly. Exit polls can be aired from 6.30 PM as per the directive of the Election Commission of India.

A voter turnout of 57.70 per cent was recorded till 5 PM as per the data of the Election Commission of India. A voter turnout of 51.81 per cent was recorded in the Kalkaji Assembly constituency from where the Delhi Chief Minister is contesting the polls, till 5 PM. In the New Delhi Assembly seat, from where Aam Aadmi Party national convener Arvind Kejriwal is contesting the polls, a voter turnout of 54.27 per cent was recorded till 5 PM. The voter turnout in Chandni Chowk was recorded at 52.76 per cent till 5 PM.

PM Modi Set To Hold Talks With US President Trump In Washington On Feb 13

New Delhi

Prime Minister Narendra Modi is set to pay a two-day visit to the US from February 12 to hold talks with US President Donald Trump on a range of issues including trade and defence, people familiar with the matter said on Monday. As per the plan, Modi will travel to Washington DC after concluding his two-day visit to Paris, they said.

The prime minister is expected to land in the American capital on the evening of February 12 and he and Trump are expected to hold the talks the next day, the people said. It would be the prime minister's first bilateral visit to the US after Trump assumed the presidency for a second term on January 20 following his stunning electoral victory in November.

Modi will be among a very handful of foreign leaders to travel to Washington DC on a bilateral visit within weeks after the Trump administration came to power. However, there is no official word yet on Modi's visit. Last week, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said New Delhi is working with Washington for an "early" visit of PM Modi to the US.

The prime minister is travelling to Paris to attend the Artificial Intelligence Action summit on February 10 and 11. Modi's visit to the US is taking place against the backdrop



of concerns in India over the US President's approach to immigration and tariffs.

President Trump on Sunday announced imposing a 25 per cent tariff on Canadian and Mexican imports as well as an additional 10 per cent tax on Chinese goods. Modi and Trump, during a phone conversation on January 27, vowed to work towards a "trusted" partnership with a focus on boosting India-US cooperation in areas of trade, energy and defence.

Following the phone talks, the White House said Trump emphasised the importance of India increasing its procurement of US-made security equipment and moving toward a fair bilateral trade relationship. "Both leaders emphasised their commitment to advance the US-India strategic partnership and the Indo-Pacific Quad partnership, with India hosting Quad Leaders for the first time later this year," it said.

India has already indicated

its keenness to expand its energy ties with the US, especially in the clean energy sector. New Delhi on Saturday announced plans to amend its nuclear liability law and set up a nuclear energy mission, a move that came ahead of Modi's trip to the US.

Certain clauses in India's Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Act, 2010 have emerged as hurdles in moving forward in the implementation of the historic civil nuclear deal that was firmed up between the two strategic partners around 16 years back.

It is learnt that India is looking at the possibility of civil nuclear cooperation with the US in small modular reactors (SMRs). US-based Holtec International is known to be one of the leading exporters of SMRs globally and the Department of Atomic Energy is learnt to be interested in having some collaboration with the American firm.

Time we get on with India-EU free trade pact: EAM



New Delhi

Touching upon the pending Free Trade Agreement between India and the European Union, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar today said, "It's time we get on with it."

He was speaking at the second edition of the annual India International Centre-Bruegel seminar today. Bruegel is a think tank from Europe.

Jaishankar reiterated his push for multilateralism on a global scale, saying different standards had been applied to countries in the East and the West. The minister called out the selective and uneven application of "matters of principle" to different countries and asserted that any global agenda could no longer be set by a handful of powers.

The minister said, "In a world that promises to be so volatile and uncertain, a stronger India-EU relationship can be an important stabilising factor".

He said India was cognisant of the "strategic awakening" of Europe in the past few years and that could serve as a driver of deeper engagement.

"In recent years, there has been a more intensive engagement with the European Commission. We expect that to increase in the coming days," Jaishankar said.

The minister spoke about the India-Middle East Economic Corridor, saying that it might have slowed because of the current tensions in West Asia, but had the potential to link the Far East to western Europe and beyond.

Much hype over deportations under new Trump regime

Washington

The much-publicised deportation of the 200-odd Indians from the US today has come just 10 days ahead of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's scheduled visit to the US.

Deportations from the US have happened regularly over the past four decades, but such a publicised deportation appears to be the new normal for the Indian diplomacy under the Donald Trump regime. Such deportations have multiple implications for India, primarily due to the large diaspora abroad that sends remittances back home

in billions of dollars annually.

Deportations can disrupt the flow of money. The World Bank website says India received \$125 billion remittance in 2023.

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio and External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar had met on January 21 in Washington DC, where the former set the agenda clearly by saying the US would "work with India to advance economic ties and address concerns related to the irregular migration matter". Jaishankar had clarified India's stance, saying that New Delhi

is open to the "return" of Indian nationals living illegally. He had said India's position was "consistent and principled". In November, the US had given a list of 18,000 Indians who faced deportation. Keen to push for legal migration, India in the past few years has signed mobility and migration and labour agreements with several countries. In the past four decades, such agreements have been signed with Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and the UAE.

India has signed with France, UK and Germany the Migration and

Mobility Partnership Agreement (MMPA), which is comprehensive in nature and covers short stay visas, and mobility of students, researchers and professionals for economic reasons. It prevents irregular migration and trafficking in human beings. Also, there have been agreements with Japan on "specified skilled workers" and with Portugal on the recruitment of Indian workers. India is also discussing the MMPA with Denmark, Finland, Italy, Portugal, Cyprus, Greece, Germany Austria and Australia.

Trump's tariff spree

President Donald Trump's renewed tariff spree has rattled global markets, reigniting fears of a full-scale trade war. By slapping 25 per cent tariffs on imports from Mexico and Canada, and a 10 per cent hike on Chinese goods, he has thrust America's top trade partners into economic retaliation mode. Canada and Mexico were swift to respond with countermeasures, while China, seasoned from previous tariff battles, remains poised for strategic retaliation. However, amidst the global fallout, India has artfully navigated Trump's protectionist storm. Proactively slashing its peak tariffs from 150 per cent to 70 per cent, India aims to shed the "tariff abuser" label that Trump has often wielded against it. Import duties on the top 30 US goods — ranging from crude petroleum to Harley-Davidson motorcycles — now stand at a modest 7.5 per cent or less. This strategic move not only averts immediate

US trade retaliation but also signals India's commitment to integrating into global supply chains, as highlighted by the Union Budget 2025-26.



While India contributes a mere 3.2 per cent to the US trade deficit, its burgeoning pharmaceutical and precious metals exports remain vulnerable. Yet, with Trump's initial tariff salvo sparing India, a window

for bilateral trade negotiations has opened, coinciding with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's upcoming US visit. Moreover, with US tariffs making Chinese goods pricier, Indian exporters may find new opportunities to capture the American market share, particularly in sectors like textiles, electronics and auto components. Still, India must tread cautiously. A prolonged trade war could inflate US consumer prices, dampening demand in one of India's largest export markets. Additionally, any broad-based US trade restrictions might eventually spill over to affect India's key industries. In this unfolding global economic drama, India's pragmatic tariff cuts have bought time. But, the larger trade war tremors are far from over.

// sātyāsyā pārāmām nidhānām //

**YOU'LL NEVER
CHANGE YOUR
LIFE UNTIL YOU CHANGE
SOMETHING YOU DO DAILY.**
— JOHN C. MAXWELL

Battleground Delhi

Delhi votes tomorrow after a no-holds-barred election campaign that saw the main contenders giving absolutely no quarter to their rivals. It is expected to be a fight to the finish, unlike the 2015 and 2020 Assembly elections that were reduced to a one-horse race. The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) knows very well that it won't be a walk in the park this time. The BJP has pulled out all the stops in a bid to remove the thorn in its side — Arvind Kejriwal. However, the former CM, out on bail in a money laundering case linked to the now-scrapped Delhi excise policy, continues to be the face of AAP and a potent threat to the saffron party.

The wily Kejriwal has managed to deflect attention from the 'Sheesh Mahal' row and the corruption charges against him by accusing the BJP government in Haryana of 'poisoning' Yamuna water supplied to Delhi. A notice, promptly issued by the Election Commission on the BJP's complaint, has forced him to clarify that he was referring to "unprecedented high



levels of ammonia in raw water". Nevertheless, BJP leaders have expended a lot of time and energy on refuting one conspiracy theory after another. This has helped AAP regroup and refocus ahead of voting day.

In this high-stakes battle, the BJP has not shied away from taking the revdi route to woo the electorate. Curiously, voters of the national capital have been resisting the temptation of electing a double-engine government; the Modi magic has been confined to the Lok Sabha

elections. In the last roll of the dice, the BJP-led Centre has provided huge relief to the much-taxed middle class, an important vote bank in Delhi. Another factor that gives the BJP hope is the conflict between AAP and the Congress, which are part of the Opposition's INDIA bloc. Both have learnt no lesson from the 2024 fiasco in Haryana, where they played into the BJP's hands by going solo. Their avoidable one-upmanship will have a bearing on the Delhi verdict.

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Bihar largesse

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman's Budget-day sari — adorned with a Madhubani art motif — left no room for doubt about Bihar's central place in the Union

Koshi canal project; and a National Institute of Food Technology, Entrepreneurship & Management. No wonder Nitish Kumar, the longest-serving CM of Bihar,

of its government. The saffron party tactically chose Bihar over Andhra in the 2025-26 Budget — next year, it might be the other way round.

Opposition-ruled states have every reason to be disappointed by the Budget proposals. AAP-helmed Punjab, the hub of the farmers' agitation — first against the three Central laws and now in support of the demand for legalising MSP — has been left to fend for itself. Ironically, instead of announcing a loan waiver, the Centre has raised the Kisan Credit Card loan limit. This will only worsen farmers' indebtedness. Congress-ruled Himachal Pradesh has been ignored as well, while the budgetary allocation for Jammu & Kashmir has been bafflingly reduced.



Government's scheme of things. Indeed, the FM announced a slew of proposals for the state that goes to the polls later this year — a Makhana board to boost the production, processing, value addition and marketing of foxnuts; financial support for the western

lavished praise on PM Narendra Modi and Sitharaman for giving special treatment to his state. All-powerful in the Lok Sabha for a decade, the BJP is now dependent on Nitish's Janata Dal (United) and Andhra Pradesh CM Chandrababu Naidu's TDP for the survival

Finally, I-T cuts

Middle class wins on taxes, loses on savings

For years, India's middle class has been caught in a financial squeeze — rising prices, stagnant wages and a tax burden that rarely felt fair. With Union Budget 2025, the Modi government has finally offered substantial tax relief by raising the exemption limit and lowering tax rates. Now, individuals earning up to Rs 12 lakh pay no tax. The revised structure increases disposable income, potentially boosting consumer spending while easing inflation. The expected rise in consumption could counterbalance the reduced tax revenue. For salaried individuals, the simplified regime is a welcome departure from the complexity of deductions and compliance. Senior citizens stand to gain with limit for tax deductions on interest income doubled to Rs 1 lakh annually. This will provide meaningful relief to the retirees relying on fixed-income sources. And, those dependent on rental income will gain from the increased TDS threshold, now raised to Rs 6 lakh annually, offering greater financial flexibility.

However, the fine print presents concerns as the changes come with trade-offs. While lower rates seem beneficial, the removal of



key deductions — on EPF, PPF, insurance and home loans — may erode the common man's actual savings. A deeper concern is the potential decline in long-term savings. The new regime discourages investments in PFs and social security schemes. While taxpayers enjoy greater flexibility, the absence of forced savings could weaken their financial security in the long run. Additionally, the upcoming Eighth Pay Commission could push government salaries higher, placing employees in higher tax brackets and offsetting relief.

For now, middle-class taxpayers can breathe easier. But real economic relief requires more than tax cuts — it demands sustained income growth, inflation control and an expanded tax base. Plus, a social security net for the retirees — at present, it is almost nil for the private sector. Without these, financial pressures will persist despite the temporary relief.

AI mission

Grab the opportunity for low-cost models



The artificial intelligence (AI) storm unleashed by DeepSeek is a tough reality check. As expected, the new benchmarks being set by China as a developer of AI foundational models have shaken up governments worldwide and the western-dominated Big Tech. The challenge for India is to not just play catch-up, but also to grab the opportunity that the production of advanced AI models at low costs presents. Instead of a panic-driven counter-balancing strategy, it's vital to view it as a pivotal moment for AI democratisation. Access to — and now, the proven possibility of — cheaper technology and adoption tools is bound to provide a better foothold to innovators. IT Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw's announcement of plans to build a domestic version of the Large Language Model (LLM) is thus a positive response. The road ahead requires staying on course.

There's a consensus in the technology ecosystem that India has the talent, capability and competence

to make significant progress in AI. The government, on its part, has been pushing the Rs 10,370-crore India AI Mission. Ten startups have been selected for building the LLM focusing on localised AI applications and enhancing accessibility for Indian users. Getting the fundamentals right may well decide the outcome of the efforts. That calls for a concerted public-private interface on what's essential and what's lacking. Obfuscation on addressing critical deficiencies, like the need for substantial investment in core infrastructure and research initiatives in universities, will only pull the project down.

Can India do a Mangalyaan in AI, with cost-effective ways and without massive computational resources? There's no reason why it can't, provided the situational issues are taken care of. Embracing the momentum triggered by the open-sourcing of DeepSeek would require an attitudinal change. National projects demand collaboration at all levels, bereft of politics or theatrics.

Merit vs domicile



India faces an acute shortfall of doctors both in terms of quantity as well as quality; the situation is even worse when it comes to specialists. A major stumbling block has been domicile-based reservation under the state quota in postgraduate (PG) medical courses; it has brazenly undermined the primacy of merit. Righting a grave wrong, the Supreme Court has ruled that such reservation is unconstitutional. Allowing it would infringe upon the fundamental rights of many students, the court has rightly said. Indeed, giving aspirants a raw deal because they belong to a different state runs counter to Article 14 (equality before the law) of the Constitution. This equality is guaranteed to every Indian citizen across the length and breadth of the country. Now, the playing field has been

levelled for medical graduates who opt for specialisation to boost their career prospects.

The bottom line is that merit cannot be compromised at the PG level, even as residence-based reservation can be permissible to an

extent in undergraduate or MBBS courses. India's ailing healthcare system cannot afford to be crippled by the presence of below-par specialists. According to the Health Dynamics of India 2022-23 report, which was released by the Union Health Ministry in September last year,

the problem is severe in rural areas, where there is nearly 80 per cent shortage of specialist doctors at community health centres. No wonder countless patients rush to multi-speciality hospitals in nearby or even distant cities, thereby putting these overstretched institutions under greater strain. The widespread reluctance of some medical professionals to serve in the hinterland is another issue that needs to be urgently addressed.

Competent specialists can make all the difference when it comes to giving timely and effective medical treatment. They are needed in every part of the country, not just in their hometown. The apex court has shown the way by doing away with the parochial and flawed consideration of residence for PG admissions.

Gains and gaps

Targeted interventions in literacy needed

THE Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2024 paints a mixed picture of rural education in the region. While there are encouraging gains in arithmetic and digital literacy, reading proficiency remains a stubborn challenge across Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and Jammu & Kashmir. Punjab's schools, particularly government institutions, have outperformed national averages in most categories. While only 34 per cent of class III students can read basic text, an improvement in arithmetic skills offers hope. The state's focus on early childhood education is evident, with a remarkable 85 per cent of pre-primary children enrolled. However, the reading gap is concerning, hinting at systemic shortcomings in foundational literacy.

Haryana, on the other hand, has seen a sharp rise in government school learning gains, outpacing private institutions in arithmetic skills. But the state still lags behind Punjab and Himachal in reading proficiency. The drop in government school enrolment suggests a reversal

of the pandemic-driven trend, raising questions about quality perception and infrastructure in rural schools. Himachal Pradesh stands out for its consistent excellence. With 84.2 per cent of class VIII students demonstrating strong reading abilities and a remarkable jump in arithmetic ability, it is among India's top performers. The state's high teacher engagement and infrastructure improvements, despite geographical challenges, offer a model for others. J&K presents a more nuanced picture. While enrolment rates remain high, learning outcomes trail the national average. The growing digital divide is another concern, with boys outperforming girls in smartphone usage and digital literacy.

The ASER findings reinforce the need for targeted interventions in foundational literacy. The priority must remain on improving reading skills, particularly in Punjab and Haryana. A greater push for teacher training, improved pedagogical methods and sustained policy focus would aid in bridging the learning divide.

A strategic leap

Critical minerals mission takes off

The Union Cabinet's approval of the National Critical Minerals Mission (NCMM), with an outlay of Rs 34,300 crore over seven years, is a decisive step toward securing India's access to essential raw materials. These critical minerals — lithium, nickel, cobalt, and rare earth elements — are indispensable for clean energy, electronics and defence industries. Currently, India is highly dependent on imports, particularly from China, which dominates global processing and refining capabilities. The NCMM has the ambitious aim of decreasing this dependence through intensified domestic exploration, acquisition of overseas mineral assets and value-chain development. The government plans to fund 1,200 mineral exploration projects and auction over 100 mineral blocks by 2030-31.

The key to the mission's success lies in its effective execution. Merely securing raw materials is not enough; India must invest in refining capabilities, streamline regulatory approvals and promote responsible mining. Additionally, mining expansion should not come at the cost of ecological degradation. As

much as 5.9 million tonnes of lithium reserves have been discovered in Reasi, Jammu and Kashmir. While this find holds the potential to transform India's battery industry, concerns persist over deforestation, groundwater depletion and displacement of local communities. Notably, insufficient exploration data has deterred industry players from bidding for the Reasi reserves. The more modest lithium block in Chhattisgarh is the only one to have been successfully auctioned.

Additionally, strengthening local manufacturing of batteries, electric vehicles and renewable energy infrastructure will be critical to reducing reliance on global supply chains. India must also expand its strategic partnerships with mineral-rich nations to ensure supply stability. It has partnered with Argentina for lithium exploration. Discussions with Australia, Chile and Bolivia are also on. Expanding such collaborations and securing long-term agreements will be crucial for building a resilient and self-sufficient critical minerals ecosystem.

Budget 2025 prioritises non-inflationary growth: Finance secretary

New Delhi
Budget 2025 prioritises non-inflationary growth through careful fiscal management, with the government's entire borrowing of Rs 15.68 lakh crores channelled exclusively into capital expenditure, Finance Secretary and Secretary, Department of Revenue, Tuhin Kanta Pandey told industry leaders Monday.

Speaking at a FICCI conference on the Union Budget 2025-26, Pandey emphasised that the budget's design ensures growth without stoking inflation pressures.

"When we show the numbers, there is nothing hidden elsewhere. Our entire borrowings are going into CAPEX - nothing could be better than this. It's a non-inflationary budget," he said.

The capital expenditure programme of Rs 15.48 lakh crores for fiscal year 2025-26 includes Rs 11.21 lakh crores in direct central government spending and Rs 4.27 lakh crores in grants to states for capital projects.

This approach marks a significant shift from traditional patterns where government borrowing often funded revenue expenditure, he said.

The government has exceeded its fiscal consolidation targets, achieving a deficit of 4.8 per cent against the projected 4.9 per cent for the current year, with plans to reduce it further to 4.4 per cent in the next fiscal year.

The Union Budget 2025-26 tries to balance the impending challenges focusing on demand and supply side imperatives. The stimulus offered in the budget will push growth while fostering macro-economic stability, Pandey noted.

The budget returns Rs 1 lakh crore to the middle class, designed to work through market mechanisms rather than direct government spending.

"Whether citizens save or consume these funds, both outcomes benefit the economy - savings strengthen bank liquidity, while consumption benefits spread across industries," Pandey explained.

Overall, the theme of the budget has been growth with fairness, trust first, give stimulus to economy and to inculcate and encourage entrepreneurship, he concluded.

During the conference, Central Board of Direct Taxes Chairman, Ravi Agrawal,



alluded to the fundamental shift in tax administration approach, emphasising a new 'PRUDENT' framework: Proactive and professional, Rule-based, User-friendly, Data-driven, creating an Enabling environment, Non-intrusive administration, and leveraging Technology with transparency.

"It is no longer an adversarial tax department. It is a participative approach aimed at growth of economy and improved governance," Agrawal said.

Key initiatives include extending the updated returns window from two to four years, with about 9 million updated returns filed in the past two years generating additional tax revenue of Rs

8,500 crore.

The government also announced rationalisation of TDS and TCS provisions, optimising thresholds and rates while decriminalising certain provisions. A new simplified direct tax code is expected to be presented next week, marking the first comprehensive overhaul in decades.

In addition, Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs Chairman, Sanjay Kumar Agarwal, underlined that the government has undertaken a comprehensive rationalisation of customs duties across 8,500 tariff lines.

The reform has reduced India's average customs duty rate from 11.65 per cent to

10.66 per cent, moving closer to ASEAN standards.

"This exercise was conducted to make structures simple while ensuring competitiveness of Indian industries remains intact," Agarwal said.

The reforms include elimination of seven duty rate slabs and removal of surcharges on 82 tariff lines to simplify the tax structure. Key measures include duty reductions on critical minerals for semiconductors and clean energy, extending export periods for handicrafts from six months to one year, and customs duty cuts on frozen fish paste from 30 per cent to 5 per cent to boost marine exports. The mobile manufacturing sector, already an export success, will benefit from new duty exemptions on component parts.

On the occasion, Industry leaders welcomed the budget's balanced approach. FICCI President Harsha Vardhan Agarwal called it "a blueprint for resilience, innovation and long-term economic transformation," noting that tax relief for individuals earning up to Rs 12.75 lakh per annum would enhance disposable income and spur consumption.

Manufacturing growth hits 6-month high in Jan

New Delhi

Fuelled by the steepest upturn in exports in nearly 14 years, India's manufacturing sector growth has started 2025 on a strong footing and touched a six-month high in January, a monthly survey said on Monday.

The seasonally adjusted HSBC India Manufacturing Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI) rose from December's one-year low of 56.4 to 57.7 in January, supported by the fastest upturn in new export orders since February 2011. In PMI parlance, a print above 50 means expansion, while a score below 50

denotes contraction.

"India's final manufacturing PMI marked a six-month high in January. Domestic and export demand were both strong, supporting new orders growth," said Pranjul Bhandari, Chief India Economist at HSBC. Goods producers attributed the substantial increase in new orders to better domestic demand and a pick-up in international sales. Subsequently, manufacturers in India continued to scale up production volumes. The latest increase was substantial and the fastest since October 2024. Going forward, companies turned more

optimistic about output prospects, with nearly 32 per cent of firms forecasting growth and just 1 per cent expecting a reduction. According to panel members, buoyant underlying demand, better customer relations, favourable economic conditions and marketing efforts all bode well for growth prospects. Robust sales gains and upbeat forecasts prompted companies to recruit additional workers at the start of Q4 of this fiscal. On the price front, cost pressures retreated to their weakest in 11 months, but selling prices rose solidly amid buoyant demand.



RBI may use CRR as a regulatory intervention tool rather than liquidity management tool: SBI Report

New Delhi

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) may start using the Cash Reserve Ratio (CRR) more as a regulatory intervention tool rather than just a liquidity management tool in the future, according to a report by the State Bank of India (SBI).

The report highlighted the urgent need for the central bank to revisit its existing liquidity management framework.

It said "The RBI could look into using CRR more as a regulatory intervention tool / countercyclical liquidity buffer rather than as a liquidity tool in future. There is an urgent need to revisit the existing liquidity management framework by RBI"

Currently, the RBI uses various measures to manage liquidity in the banking system, such as Open Market Operations (OMO), CRR, and the repo rate.

However, the report suggests that the CRR should be seen as a countercyclical liquidity buffer rather than a liquidity adjustment tool. This means the central bank could use CRR to control liquidity in the economy depending on the financial situation, rather than adjusting it frequently to manage day-to-day liquidity needs. The report also suggested that the RBI should replace the Weighted Average Call Rate (WACR) as the main policy rate. WACR is the interest rate at which banks borrow and lend money in the overnight market.

However, SBI believes that WACR does not fully serve its purpose as a policy tool and should be reviewed.

According to the report, the ownership of government securities (G-Secs) is expected to remain unchanged in FY26. However, there could



still be an OMO gap of around Rs 1.7 trillion.

This indicates that the RBI might need to introduce more liquidity measures on a sustained basis to ensure smooth functioning of the banking system.

The report also predicts that the RBI may cut the repo rate by 25 basis points in its February 2025 policy meeting. Over the entire rate cut cycle, the reduction could be at least 75 basis points.

It stated that in the first phase the RBI is expected to cut the repo rate twice in succession in February and April 2025. Then there could be a break in June 2025 and the second round of rate cuts may begin in October 2025.

The SBI report suggests that the RBI could revamp its liquidity management approach, shift CRR's role to a regulatory tool, and make changes to its policy rate framework. Additionally, it expects the central bank to cut rates gradually in 2025 to support economic growth.

Income tax cuts in union budget to boost 2-wheeler and passenger vehicle sales: Jefferies

New Delhi

Union Budget raising the income tax exemption limit to Rs 12 lakh is expected to give a big boost to the demand of 2-wheelers (2Ws) and passenger vehicles (PVs) according to a report by the global brokerage firm Jefferies.

The report highlighted that the proposed tax relief will provide the Indian middle class with a total tax benefit of approximately Rs 1 lakh crore, which could lead to increased discretionary spending, including on automobiles.

It said, "The proposed income tax cuts should help the Indian middle class with a total tax benefit of approx. Rs1.0Trn, which is likely to boost discretionary consumption including demand for two-wheelers (2W) and passenger vehicles (PV), especially in urban areas".

Jefferies estimated that the tax benefits will be distributed among around 3.5 crore taxpayers, translating to an average annual benefit of nearly Rs 30,000 per person.

It stated that given the estimated market size of 4.3 million PVs and 21 million 2Ws in FY25, the additional spending power from tax cuts could significantly boost sales.

It also noted that upcoming salary hikes for public sector employees in FY27 could provide an additional push to the auto sector.

The Union Government has recently announced the formation of the eighth pay commission to recommend hiking the salaries of central government employees.

The report predicts that two-wheelers and passenger vehicles will be among the biggest beneficiaries of the increased consumer spending.

The report maintains its projection of a 13 per cent compound annual growth rate (CAGR) for the two-wheeler industry from FY25 to FY27, which translates to a modest 3 per cent CAGR from FY19 to FY27.

While the two-wheeler and passenger vehicle segments are expected to grow strongly, the outlook for the truck industry is less optimistic. It believes that slower capital expenditure (capex) growth could hurt truck demand.

It said, "On the flip side, moderating capex growth is likely to be a drag for truck demand; we cut our FY26/FY27 truck industry growth estimates".

As a result, the firm has lowered its growth estimates for the truck industry from 5 per cent per year in FY26 and FY27 to 0 per cent and 5 per cent respectively. Over the FY25-27 period, truck demand is expected to grow at a sluggish 2 per cent CAGR.

"we expect 2Ws and tractors to grow at a strong 13-15 per cent CAGR, PVs to grow at healthy 9 per cent, but trucks to lag at just 2 per cent" says the report.

CPI inflation likely to ease to 4.5 pc in Q4 FY25, 4.8 pc for full FY25: SBI Report

New Delhi

The country's retail inflation is expected to decline to 4.5 per cent in the last quarter (January-March) of the financial year 2024-25 (FY25), while the overall average inflation for the year is likely to be at 4.8 per cent, according to a recent report by the State Bank of India (SBI).

The report also projected that inflation will further ease in FY26, with an expected average range of 4.2 per cent to 4.5 per cent.

It said "The domestic CPI inflation is expected to come down to 4.5 per cent in Q4 FY25

and average to 4.8 per cent in FY25. January inflation numbers trending closer to approx. 4.5 per cent".

In the October-December quarter of 2026, the report added that the inflation could even fall below 4 per cent. Meanwhile, core inflation-- which excludes volatile food and fuel prices, might surpass headline inflation by September 2025.

The report highlighted that the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) faces a challenging task in managing inflation risks, especially considering the fiscal stimulus and the uncertain

impact of ongoing trade tensions worldwide.

In the short term, RBI has some room to cut interest rates as the effects of fiscal stimulus take time to play out. Additionally, the US Federal Reserve's decision to keep interest rates unchanged gives RBI more time to ensure that inflation expectations remain stable.

The Economic Survey, which was recently presented in Parliament also estimates headline inflation for FY26 at 4.2 per cent, while for the current fiscal (FY25), it is expected to be around 4.8 per cent.

OMCs face near-term pressure amid absence of budgetary support for under-recovery on LPG

New Delhi

Oil Marketing Companies (OMCs) are likely to face near-term challenges due to multiple factors, including no budgetary support for LPG under-recovery, weak Singapore Benchmark Gross Refining Margins (GRM), and declining integrated margins on auto fuel, according to a report by Dolat Capital.

"In the near term, OMCs will remain under pressure mainly due to (1) the absence of budget support for LPG under-recovery; (2) weak Singapore Benchmark GRM at USD 2.4/bbl Q4TD vs. spot of USD 9.6/bbl; and (3) integrated margins on auto fuel at Rs8/lt vs. long term avg. of Rs11.5/lt." says the report

But the report also adds



that while the absence of budgetary support for LPG under-recovery remains a concern, the government's decision to not hike excise duty in FY26, alongside lower crude prices, could act as a financial cushion for the

OMCs.

Analysts estimate that an additional Rs 2.5 per litre Gross Marketing Margins (GMM) on auto fuels would be sufficient to offset the projected LPG under-recovery for FY25.

The government's decision to keep excise duty unchanged, coupled with falling crude oil prices, suggests that OMCs may continue to earn higher-than-average Gross Marketing Margins (GMM) on auto fuel.

The recently announced FY26 budget projects a modest 3.5 per cent increase in total excise duty collection compared to restated FY25 figures.

Currently, OMCs are earning GMM of Rs 7.5 per litre on a spot basis. Even after accounting for LPG under-recovery impact (Rs 2.5 per litre), the adjusted GMM on auto fuels stands at Rs 5 per litre, still exceeding long-term averages.

Notably, in the first nine months of FY25, OMCs

earned Rs 8 per litre GMM on auto fuels, significantly higher than the long-term average of approximately Rs 3.5 per litre.

Despite these potential buffers, OMCs continue to face headwinds. Singapore Benchmark GRM has weakened to USD 2.4 per barrel in Q4 to date, compared to a spot rate of USD 9.6 per barrel.

Furthermore, integrated margins on auto fuel have declined to Rs 8 per litre, below the long-term average of Rs 11.5 per litre.

The FY26 budget allocates Rs 127 billion in total assistance for various projects and schemes but does not directly address LPG under-recovery for OMCs.

JGU Launches Two-Year M.Sc. Degree in Counselling Psychology

Sonipat

A new two-year programme in Counselling Psychology, offered by the Jindal School of Psychology & Counselling (JSPC) at O.P. Jindal Global University (JGU), will commence in August 2025. Designed to address the significant mental health challenges in India, the programme is grounded in the globally recognized scientist-practitioner model, integrating theoretical knowledge, ethical standards, research, and practical training to equip students with the knowledge and skills to excel in the field of counselling psychology.

Prof. (Dr.) Surabhika Maheshwari from Indraprastha College for Women, University of Delhi, inaugurated the M.Sc. degree at a ceremony held at the JGU campus. She said, "Psychology is fun, but it's also something arduous and requires a hard work and commitment. The discipline is structured around the super-dynamic ever-changing human being, set in an ever-changing world, set in an ever-chaotic universe, set amidst the constant tribulations of striving to be better today than yesterday. So, what are the challenges of counselling in India? First and foremost, it must be de-colonized. The symptoms of various disorders may be described differently in a textbook compared to the context in which people live with the disorder. De-colonizing is feeling the pulse of

the various disorders and symptoms as they actually occur in culture-specific settings. The multiplicity of psychology must be kept alive."

"The Master's degree in Counselling Psychology revolves around three components. First is the core curriculum, designed to provide the theoretical and foundational base of the counselling and treatment fields. Second are practicum courses that provide real-world expertise through on-campus training, school-based fieldwork, and community-based engagement. Third is research, whereby students complete a Dissertation that critically explores some aspects of counselling psychology", said Prof. (Dr.) Manjushree Palit, Associate Dean of the Jindal School of Psychology and Counselling.

"I have tremendous hope for the new degree in Counselling Psychology. It offers a curriculum that is evidence-based and culturally relevant. I agree with many who have spoken of the hesitation of college students, including our own students at JGU, to seek help from campus counsellors. The taboo that surrounds mental health and seeking help must be addressed and broken down. This degree is a remarkable initiative in that direction, and my team is very excited to take it out into the world. I am confident JSPC will fulfill the vision put forth for the new counselling psychology programme", said Prof. (Dr.) Upasana Mahanta, Dean of Admissions and Outreach, O.P. Jindal Global University.

IE University and IIT Bombay sign landmark MOU to drive Global Education and Innovation

New Delhi

In a significant step toward fostering global academic collaboration, IE University and the Indian Institute of Technology Bombay (IIT Bombay) have officially signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) aimed at advancing education, research, and innovation. The historic signing ceremony took place at IIT Bombay and was attended by Prof. Shireesh Kedare, Director of IIT Bombay, Dr. Santiago Iniguez de Onzono, President of IE University, and Dr. Karan Gupta, Managing Director of IE University, India & South Asia. This partnership marks a new era of cross-border cooperation between one of Europe's top universities and India's leading technological institute. Under this agreement, IE University and IIT Bombay will jointly work on student & faculty Exchange Programs, Joint Research Initiatives, Executive Education & Leadership Programs among other initiatives. Dr. Karan Gupta, Managing Director of IE University, India & South Asia, emphasized the transformative impact of this alliance. "This partnership is a game-changer for both institutions. By combining IIT Bombay's deep-rooted technical expertise with IE University's leadership in global business education, we are paving the way for future leaders who will shape industries worldwide." Dr. Santiago Iniguez de Onzono, President of IE University, added, "IE University has always championed diversity, entrepreneurship, and innovation. Partnering with a world-class institution like IIT Bombay enhances our mission to create globally competent leaders who can drive change at an international level."

National Budget 2025-26 and urban reforms

The National Budget 2025-26 presented on 01 February 2025 by India's Finance Minister (FM) was preceded by the budget revealed on 23 July 2024. The FM referred to the July 24 budget several times in her 25 Feb budget speech, probably because the earlier one had laid out the government's principal financial and policy decisions as well as outlays. This budget, therefore, was a continuum.

This article focuses on the Budget proposals having relevance to urban settlements and critically analyses those proposals and their impact on cities.

Paragraph 8 of Budget 25-26 spells out the goals regarding transformative reforms that India needs to essay. These goals, divided over six domains, aim at augmenting India's growth potential and global competitiveness. The third among them is 'Urban Development'. The budget recognises the salubrity of cities as an essential precondition in India's growth story. Incidentally, Urban Development was a priority area in the July Budget as well, which specified seven different urban subjects. They comprised cities as growth hubs, creative redevelopment of cities, transit-oriented development, urban and rental housing, water supply, sewerage and sanitation, street markets and stamp duty. Most of these once again find a mention in the February budget.

It is good to see street vending progressively being recognised as a legitimate activity in the cities. It is a viable source of employment for the urban poor.

Since the urban poor are an increasing constituent of cities, Paras 49 and 50 exclusively focus on them. The budget states that the government will implement a scheme for the socio-economic upliftment of urban workers to help them enhance their incomes, providing them with sustainable livelihoods and achieving a qualitative improvement in their lives. Para 50 takes stock of the PM SVanidhi scheme put into operation in earlier years. The scheme has, till date, provided benefits to more than 6.8 million street vendors, giving them relief from loans that are made available at unaffordable interest rates in the informal loan market. Buoyed by this success, the Budget proposes to re-engineer the scheme by raising the loan limit from the banks, coupled with UPI-linked credit cards with an INR 30,000 limit and



assistance in capacity building and skill improvement.

It is good to see street vending progressively being recognised as a legitimate activity in the cities. It is a viable source of employment for the urban poor. However, as a growing number of street vendors contest for urban space, its spatial requirements yet are not fully recognised in city plans. The facilitation of street vending needs multiple enabling measures and the most important of them is to align state planning laws with vending needs. Till such time, fitting street vending into overcrowded urban spaces would continue to be a painful exercise.

Para 57 of the budget, in terms of intent in the urban arena, is the most significant. It refers to proposals in the July 2024 budget and resolves to take them forward. Clarifying further, the Budget proposes that "urban sector reforms related to governance, municipal services, urban land and planning will be incentivised." The last paragraph of this article returns to analyse this issue in greater detail.

Paras 58 and 59 talk about the Urban Challenge Fund. The Government will set up such a fund of Rs. 1 trillion to implement the proposals for 'Cities as Growth Hubs', 'Creative Redevelopment of Cities' and 'Water and Sanitation'. These had been announced earlier in the July 24 Budget. Elaborating on this, Para 59 states that the fund will finance up to 25 percent of the cost of bankable projects. The cities and states will have to participate financially and fund at least 50 percent of the cost through bonds, bank loans and public-private partnerships. Of the

long-term total amount of INR 1 trillion, an allocation of INR 100 billion will be made for 2025-26.

As things stand, it is quite evident that much of the growth hubs and challenge funds would get directed towards larger cities. Most other cities of the country do not have the wherewithal to raise municipal bonds or bank loans given their very feeble financial health. Besides, they cannot negotiate a public-private partnership. In this scenario, more of the pile of economic activities would get allocated to larger cities and the all-round development of a very large number of other cities would get stymied. Cities today are carrying a large unfunded mandate and the budget could have been the right place for its acknowledgment. This is a subject that would have to be given deeper thought at the national level.

The resolve to incentivise urban reforms in the areas of governance, municipal services, urban land and planning is welcome. As India urbanises and her cities become progressively bigger drivers of the national economy, it is natural that the national budget should turn more attention towards the cities.

One of the several provisions of the budget that are not direct outlays for cities but will have a healthy impact on them is the expansion of air connectivity. These are detailed in Paras 67 and 68. Since the airports are essentially located in cities, this would be a great fillip to city mobility and business. Para 67 states that the regional connectivity scheme UDAN has satisfied the aspirations of 15 million middle-class citizens to travel by air. The scheme has inter-connected

88 airports and operationalised 619 routes, encouraging the government to launch enhanced regional connectivity to 120 new destinations and transport 40 million passengers in the next ten years. The scheme is also designed to support helipads and smaller airports in hilly areas, particularly in India's North-East. Besides, greenfield airports will be facilitated in Bihar to meet the future needs of the State. These will be in addition to the expansion of the capacity of Patna airport and a brownfield airport at Bihta.

Tax reliefs to middle-class citizens and the resultant impact that would occur on their greater consumption ability would surely assist the economy of cities. So would the ambitious target of 70 percent women in economic activities. National centres of excellence for skilling, expansion in the capacity of IITs, centres of excellence in artificial intelligence for education as well as expansion of medical education and daycare centres in all district hospitals bode well for urban settlements.

Finally, a word on urban reforms that the Budget mentions. The resolve to incentivise urban reforms in the areas of governance, municipal services, urban land and planning is welcome. As India urbanises and her cities become progressively bigger drivers of the national economy, it is natural that the national budget should turn more attention towards the cities. Besides, the urban subjects cited in the budget are areas where urban reforms have been waiting for decades and are desperately needed. If cities are recognised as one of the pillars of India's growth story, attention should be riveted towards our cities to get their institutional architecture right. However, this is a subject fraught with serious difficulties, as cooperation would be required from all three levels of governance—the government of India, state governments and urban local governments. Unfortunately, the mention of reforms in the budget is terse. One can understand that in a budget document that must deal with a huge number of issues, a single subject can only find a brief mention. It is, however, hoped that a detailed analysis of what is required and the areas of urban deficit in governance, planning, land and civic services are clearly spelt out in a separate paper and nationally debated.

Budget 2025: Powering India's green energy future

Building on the priorities of the previous year, the Budget announced on 1 February 2025, continues to place energy security and energy transition at its core. With significant investments in renewable energy, electric vehicle infrastructure, and pivotal policy reforms aimed at nuclear energy and green hydrogen, the budget unveils a multi-faceted approach to transforming India's energy landscape. But as the government pushes forward with these transformative initiatives, the real question lies in how these plans will unfold in practice and whether they can address the challenges that remain.

Energy security

India is taking significant strides in diversifying its energy mix, with nuclear power playing a crucial role in its energy transition agenda. Last year, approximately INR 22.28 billion was allocated for nuclear power projects. This year, the finance minister introduced the Nuclear Mission for Viksit Bharat, aiming for 100 GW of nuclear capacity by 2047.

To encourage greater private sector involvement, the government plans to amend the Atomic Energy Act, and Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Act to ease supplier liability provisions, making the sector more attractive to investors. However, this policy shift has not been matched by increased funding, as the Department of Atomic Energy's budget has been reduced from INR 249 billion to INR 240 billion.

To encourage greater private sector involvement, the government plans to amend the Atomic Energy Act, and Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Act to ease supplier liability provisions, making the sector more attractive to investors.

Additionally, INR 200 billion has been earmarked for research and development of small modular reactors, with a target of deploying five indigenous reactors by 2033. However, India's track record with nuclear expansion raises concerns about feasibility as 10 reactors announced in 2017 still remain non-operational. Achieving these ambitious targets will require strong policy backing and close collaboration with the private sector.

New and Renewable Energy

The Budget for FY26 significantly increased allocations for the renewable energy sector, with budget estimates reaching INR 256.49 billion for MNRE. This marks a 39 percent increase against the initial budget estimates of INR 191 billion from last year. The solar sector shined bright, securing the largest share of this allocation at INR 241 billion. This allocation includes INR 1.5 billion earmarked for solar power (grid) and INR 2.6 billion for the PM KUSUM, a scheme supporting farmers by subsidizing standalone solar pumps and solarizing existing grid-connected pumps to reduce diesel dependence.

The lion's share of this funding



was directed towards PM Surya Ghar Muft Bijli Yojana, which witnessed a remarkable 81 percent increase in the allocation, increasing from INR 110 billion in FY25 to 200 billion in FY26. Launched last year, this ambitious scheme aims to provide up to 300 units of free electricity monthly, while simultaneously promoting the adoption of RTS amongst one crore households. The scheme targets lower- to middle-income families and offers substantial financial assistance, covering 60 percent of the cost for 2 kW systems and 40 percent for those with capacities ranging from 2-3 kW.

This scheme has proven instrumental in advancing the uptake of RTS in the residential sector. As of December 2024, an impressive 6,30,000 installations have been completed, marking a substantial increase in the monthly installation rate, which now stands at 70,000. However, its impact has been uneven across states. Gujarat leads with 281,769 installations (46 percent of the total), while states like Telangana face lower subsidy uptake due to persistent technical glitches in the rooftop solar portal and challenges faced by DISCOMs.

Green hydrogen holds immense potential to transform India's energy landscape, but its success will depend on the creation of a comprehensive ecosystem, including the establishment of electrolyzer manufacturing capabilities and the strategic development of hydrogen hubs.

Moreover, the National Portal reveals that many applications are for systems with capacities averaging around 4 kW, exceeding the original design specifications. This indicates that residents of larger homes are more likely to benefit, while poorer households, often lacking property ownership or terrace space, both eligibility prerequisites, face significant barriers. These and other issues must be addressed to ensure the continued success and equitable implementation of this initiative.

The expansion of and modernization of grid infrastructure was also deemed

pivotal for renewable energy integration. Revamped distribution sector scheme, aimed at enhancing the efficiency and financial stability of DISCOMs through prepaid smart metering and infrastructure upgrades was allocated INR 160 billion. To support the integration of renewable energy into the grid, INR 60 billion has been allocated for Green Energy Corridors (GECs), ensuring the smooth transmission of solar and wind power. The budget also supported power sector reforms by allowing states to borrow an additional 0.5 percent of their GSDP to strengthen the financial health of electricity distribution companies.

In tandem with these initiatives, the National Green Hydrogen Mission has witnessed a significant boost in funding, receiving INR 6 billion in the latest budget which is double the revised estimate of 3 billion for FY25, underscoring the government's commitment to accelerating the green hydrogen economy. Green hydrogen holds immense potential to transform India's energy landscape, but its success will depend on the creation of a comprehensive ecosystem, including the establishment of electrolyzer manufacturing capabilities and the strategic development of hydrogen hubs.

Strengthening the domestic manufacturing system and supply chains This budget places significant emphasis on the supply side of electric vehicles, introducing transformative indirect tax reforms to augment domestic manufacturing and fortify the EV value chain. The removal of Basic Customs Duty on vital materials such as cobalt, lithium-ion battery scrap, lead, zinc, and 12 other essential minerals is expected to lower the costs for EVs, clean energy, and electronics manufacturing. Complementing this, the National Critical Minerals Mission, led by the Ministry of Mines, has been allocated 41 billion for FY26. Additionally, the budget also proposes a plan for extracting critical minerals from mine tailings, presenting an opportunity to create job opportunities in regions with limited industrial growth. Success will depend on MSME support and workforce skilling initiatives to

strengthen resource recovery and circular economy practices.

These supply-side reforms, along with initiatives like the Prime Minister's Electric Drive Revolution in Innovative Vehicle Enhancement (PME-DRIVE), are expected to foster long-term self-reliance and make EVs more affordable.

Furthermore, the budget allocation for the Production-Linked Incentive (PLI) Scheme under the National Program on Advanced Chemistry Cell Battery Storage has been substantially increased from INR 1.54 billion to INR 15.58 billion. The government has also significantly raised the budget for the PLI scheme for Automobiles and Auto Components, from INR 34.69 billion in FY25 to INR 281.88 billion in FY26. These supply-side reforms, along with initiatives like the Prime Minister's Electric Drive Revolution in Innovative Vehicle Enhancement (PME-DRIVE), are expected to foster long-term self-reliance and make EVs more affordable.

The Finance Minister also launched the National Manufacturing Mission to provide policy guidance, execution roadmaps, and governance frameworks to MSMEs. Aimed at advancing climate-friendly development, the mission will prioritize clean technology manufacturing, fostering domestic value creation in sectors such as solar PV cells, EV batteries, wind turbines, and grid-scale batteries. This is a welcome initiative as limited access to finance remains a key bottleneck for MSMEs for clean energy adoption.

What is missing?

India's energy transition journey is deeply tied to its commitment to energy efficiency, which has evolved beyond mere conservation to become a cornerstone of energy security, infrastructure modernization, and economic competitiveness. Despite its critical role in reducing import dependence and advancing climate goals, budgetary allocations for energy efficiency programs remain disproportionately low at INR 160 billion as compared to renewable energy.

While ambitious in scope, the budget presents a mix of opportunities and hurdles on India's path to a greener future.

Overall, this year's budget reinforces India's push toward a greener future, with a strong emphasis on renewables, electric mobility, and domestic manufacturing. The substantial funding, tax reforms, and policy measures lay the groundwork for long-term transformation. However, challenges persist, particularly in ensuring equitable implementation and infrastructure readiness. While ambitious in scope, the budget presents a mix of opportunities and hurdles on India's path to a greener future.

Budget 2025-26 and women's empowerment: Is India meeting its gender goals?

As India steps into the fiscal year 2025-2026, it also celebrates two decades of gender budgeting. In her Budget address, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman laid out a vision that places women at the heart of India's growth story. With a clear focus on empowering youth, farmers, and women, this year's Budget aligns with the broader goal of a Viksit Bharat by 2047, with 'women-led development' as a cornerstone of this transformation. One of the most ambitious targets set in this Budget is the integration of 70 percent of women into the workforce. But how well does the 2025-26 gender budget live up to these lofty goals? This piece dives deep into the budget's allocations, exploring how they align with and advance the vision of women-led development, with a sharp focus on key areas like employment, education, health and well-being, and safety and security.

Employment

Agricultural schemes like the Krishonnati Yojana (with an allocation of INR 2,550 crore for 2025-26) remain under Part B of the gender budget without dedicated provisions for women farmers.

This year's gender budget introduces a significant initiative aimed at empowering first-time entrepreneurs, including women, with term loans up to INR 2 crore over the next five years. Women's workforce participation continues to be a pressing issue and a key priority in every budget. The Female Labor Force Participation Rate (FLFPR) showed a slight increase to 41.7 percent in 2023-24. While initiatives like the PM Employment Generation Programme (PMEGP) are designed to support entrepreneurship, the funding for PMEGP has decreased from INR 1,012.50 crore in 2024-25 to INR 862.50 crore in 2025-26. In terms of rural employment, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), which provides 57.8 percent of person-days worked by women, received INR 40,000 crore, an increase from INR 37,654 crore in 2024-25. However, only 33.6 percent of this allocation

is reflected in the gender budget, which raises concerns about the full recognition of women's contributions in gender-responsive budgeting. Furthermore, 80 percent of women are involved in agriculture, but only 13.9 percent of landowners are women. Despite this, agricultural schemes like the Krishonnati Yojana (with an



allocation of INR 2,550 crore for 2025-26) remain under Part B of the gender budget without dedicated provisions for women farmers.

Education

The increase of PM Pradhan Mantri Poshan Shakti Nirman (PM POSHAN) from the two previous years is also a win.

Education is key to unlocking women's economic empowerment. While India has made progress in closing gender gaps in primary and secondary education, the dropout rates are wider in higher education. For instance, women make up over 40 percent of STEM graduates, but only 14 percent are employed in STEM roles, reflecting a 'leaky pipeline'. The 2025-26 Budget addresses the gender digital divide through the National Mission on Education through ICT (NMEICT) under Part A, which allocates 100 percent of funding for women. However, funding for this scheme has decreased from INR 551.25 crore in 2024-25 to INR 229.25 crore, raising concerns about resources for bridging the digital gender gap. On the other hand, Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan received an increase to INR 12,375 crore, and the PM SHRI Schools

scheme saw a significant boost to INR 2,250 crore, signalling improvements in the quality of education and school infrastructure. The increase of PM Pradhan Mantri Poshan Shakti Nirman (PM POSHAN) from the two previous years is also a win.

Housing continues to receive the lion's share in this

year's gender budget. The PMAY-Urban saw its allocation rise from INR 15,170 crore in 2024-25 to INR 23,294 crore, while PMAY-Urban 2.0 increased from INR 1,500 crore to INR 3,500 crore. In addition, the PMAY-G (Rural Housing) allocation rose from INR 32,500 crore to INR 54,832 crore. Despite this substantial increase, only 73% of PMAY-G houses are registered in women's names, raising concerns about the extent to which these funds are genuinely empowering women. Moreover, the shift of PMAY-Urban from Part B to Part A in previous years artificially inflated gender budget figures without a corresponding increase in women-specific spending. While the funding boost is a positive development, the lack of clarity and misalignment between funding and outcomes suggests a need for a more focused, women-centred approach to ensure these resources drive real change.

Health

Anganwadi workers are grossly underpaid. This underfunding highlights the ongoing neglect of women's health needs and the urgent need for targeted investment.

Health is a critical indicator of women-led development, and this year's budget reflects incremental progress in key areas. The Saksham Anganwadi and Poshan 2.0 schemes have slid back to their 2023-24 allocation of INR 450.98 crore, which, however, is an improvement of the previous years INR 220 crore. Notably, Ayushman Bharat - Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PMJAY) saw an increase from INR 3,624.80 crore to INR 4,482.90 crore. However, this allocation is included in Part B of the gender budget, which mandates at least 30 percent of provisions for women, raising questions about its actual impact on women's health. Similarly, the Menstrual Hygiene Scheme (MHS) under the National Health Mission, a concern unique to women, is also placed in Part B, suggesting that only 30 percent of its funding is directed toward women—a critical misalignment. The Matru Vandana Yojana, offering INR 6,000 per mother, has remained unchanged since 2013, failing to adjust for inflation. Lastly, Anganwadi workers are grossly underpaid. This underfunding highlights the ongoing neglect of women's health needs and the urgent need for targeted investment.

Safety and security

Women's safety and security are vital to true empowerment, but budget allocations still reveal significant gaps. The Nirbhaya Fund, which supports fast-track courts, crisis centers, and surveillance, received a small increase—from INR 180 crore to INR 200 crore in 2025-26. However, nearly 74 percent of the INR 7,212 crore allocated since its inception remains unspent, raising questions about its effective use. Mission Shakti, launched in April 2024, addresses women's safety and empowerment through two verticals: Sambal for safety (One Stop Centres, Women Helpline, etc.) and Samarthyaa for empowerment (Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana, SANKALP, etc.). While Samarthyaa saw a significant funding increase from INR 953.74 crore to INR 2,396 crore, 'Sambal', saw an increase, but was the same allocation as in

2023-24, remaining at INR 629 crore. A major oversight remains the lack of investment in gender-sensitive public transportation, which 91 percent of urban women find unsafe and unreliable, limiting their access to employment.

Paving the way for gender-responsive budgeting

To increase women's workforce participation, we must focus on developing human capital. This can be achieved by boosting investments in health, education, and skill development while reducing unnecessary spending on inflated housing subsidies.

Despite the government's annual promises and large budget allocations, real progress often falls short. To make these numbers meaningful, significant actions must accompany them.

A critical step toward ensuring real impact would be the implementation of the Gender Budgeting Act, as recommended by NITI Aayog. This Act would institutionalise gender-based budgeting across all Ministries and States/UTs, while also mandating the collection and publication of gender-disaggregated data - a crucial gap in tracking progress.

To increase women's workforce participation, we must focus on developing human capital. This can be achieved by boosting investments in health, education, and skill development while reducing unnecessary spending on inflated housing subsidies. Moreover, addressing the unpaid care burden, which accounts for 15 percent-17 percent of India's GDP, should be prioritised through paid leave policies, care service subsidies, and skill-building for caregivers.

Lastly, with the intensifying impacts of climate change, women, particularly in agriculture and natural resource management, are on the frontlines. Studies show that women are disproportionately affected by heatwaves and other climate-related crises. Therefore, gender budgeting must be updated to ensure it is truly inclusive, addressing both the immediate and long-term needs of women in all sectors.

A budget for the “middle-class”: Rebalancing growth, inclusivity, and fiscal prudence

Domestic consumption has long fuelled India's economic growth, contributing nearly 57 to 60 percent of GDP. Historically, rising incomes, urbanisation, and demographic shifts have driven domestic demand, cementing consumption as a key pillar of India's growth strategy. However, recent signs of stress have emerged, leading to a divergence between growth in private final consumption expenditure and the real GDP growth rate, primarily due to rising income inequality and a disproportionate tax burden on the middle class, both slowing consumption growth. As the Union Budget 2025-26 attempts to relieve some of these pressures through significant cuts in personal income taxes, concerns over balancing the objectives of growth, inclusivity, and fiscal prudence are likely to emerge.

The middle-class tax burden: A growth bottleneck

India's middle class, expected to reach 800 million people by 2030, plays a critical role in fuelling discretionary spending. Yet, this segment has faced a consistent tax burden, with direct and indirect levies such as GST, fuel duties, and other consumption-based taxes eroding disposable incomes. While successive budgets have attempted to provide relief, stagnating real wages and inflationary pressures continue to limit purchasing power.

The rich and ultra-rich, by contrast, have a low MPC, with a significant portion of additional income directed toward savings, investments, and offshore assets rather than domestic consumption.

In contrast, the ultra-rich in India enjoy significantly lower direct taxation compared to global benchmarks. Unlike many developed economies that implement progressive wealth taxes, capital gains surcharges, or inheritance taxes, India's tax system places a heavier reliance on indirect taxes, disproportionately impacting lower- and middle-income households. The absence of targeted taxation on the wealthy means that fiscal consolidation efforts largely continue to rely on the middle class with higher Marginal Propensities to Consume (MPC), thereby constraining overall demand growth.

The MPC concept offers a crucial economic linkage between taxation, income distribution, and consumption growth. Low-income households have the highest MPC, meaning that most of their additional income is spent on essentials, creating strong demand-side effects. However, a large share

of the Indian population belonging to this segment remains vulnerable to poverty and reliant on social protection to meet their subsistence consumption. The middle class, on the other hand, though having a slightly lower MPC than the poor, still channels much of its income toward consumption, particularly in discretionary sectors such as real estate, automobiles, and white goods. The rich and ultra-rich, by contrast, have a low MPC, with a significant portion of additional income directed toward savings, investments, and



offshore assets rather than domestic consumption. While investment incentives for the wealthy can stimulate capital formation, they do little to drive short-term demand. Moreover, with the overall degree of capacity utilisation stagnating at around the 75 percent mark, there is little or no incentive for these households to invest further.

This imbalance creates a paradox. While tax relief for the middle class can boost demand, it also raises the risk of widening the fiscal deficit if not offset by alternative revenue sources. Without progressive taxation mechanisms for high-income groups, India's consumption-driven growth path remains vulnerable to these structural demand weaknesses.

Union Budget 2025-26: The tax cuts and fiscal trade-offs

The Union Budget 2025-26 has delivered substantial tax relief to the middle class, a move designed to uplift disposable incomes and stimulate consumption. The most notable change is the increase in the nil tax slab from INR 7 lakhs to INR 12 lakhs under the new tax regime, with salaried taxpayers effectively

benefiting up to INR 12.75 lakhs due to the INR 75,000 standard deduction. Additionally, revised slabs ensure that taxpayers earning up to INR 12 lakhs owe no tax, while those earning INR 18 lakhs and INR 25 lakhs see respective reductions of INR 70,000 and INR 1.1 lakhs, annually.

With a shrinking tax base, revenue shortfalls could lead to higher borrowing or expenditure cuts, jeopardising critical long-term investments in the social sector.

While these tax cuts align to boost aggregate household consumption

cuts, jeopardising critical long-term investments in the social sector.

Will social welfare be the hidden cost?

While the budget promises increased spending on social protection and development, the lack of revenue offsets raises concerns about long-term funding sustainability. Several key welfare and infrastructure programs could face constraints. The government has expanded funding for livelihood programmes targeted at the informal sector, including a revamped PM SVANidhi scheme to provide increased credit limits for street vendors. Additionally, a social security scheme for gig workers will offer e-Shram registration and healthcare benefits to nearly 1 crore platform-based workers. However, sustaining these programmes amidst declining tax revenues may prove challenging, forcing potential reductions in scope.

A major budget commitment includes setting up 200 Day Care Cancer Centres in district hospitals and adding 10,000 medical college seats as part of a broader plan to create 75,000 seats over five years. While these initiatives are crucial for human capital development, their execution depends on stable fiscal resources. If revenue constraints emerge, healthcare and education spending could face delays or cuts.

The budget earmarks INR 1.5 lakh crore for interest-free loans to states for capital expenditure and an INR 1 lakh crore Urban Challenge Fund to drive city renewal projects, including improved water and sanitation. These programs are vital for long-term economic competitiveness but require predictable revenue streams to avoid disruptions. With the government foregoing over INR 1.026 lakh crore in tax revenues, financing these initiatives might become increasingly difficult in the absence of a widening tax base and a conservative estimate of tax buoyancy at 1.1. In the absence of new revenue sources, India may face a policy trade-off between fiscal consolidation and social investment.

Progressive taxation to fuel growth without fiscal myopia

While tax reliefs for the middle class are well-intended, the sustainability of this strategy remains questionable without targeted taxation for the ultra-rich. A few policy options could be explored to balance fiscal needs while maintaining economic equity.

expenditure, a critical issue remains: there has been no compensatory tax increase for high-income earners. Individuals earning above INR 24 lakh continue to be taxed at 30 percent, the same as in previous years, with no additional wealth tax, inheritance tax, or capital gains adjustments. Consequently, the government stands to lose INR 1 lakh crore in direct tax revenue and another INR 2,600 crore from indirect tax reforms, intensifying fiscal pressures.

The budget bets that increased disposable incomes among the middle class will translate into higher spending, supporting industries such as housing, consumer goods, and automobiles. However, this assumes that a significant share of the additional income will be spent rather than saved, a premise that remains uncertain given current economic conditions. Moreover, the fiscal deficit is targeted at 4.4 percent of GDP for FY 2025-26 (40 basis points lower than the revised estimates for FY 2024-25), necessitating stringent fiscal discipline. With a shrinking tax base, revenue shortfalls could lead to higher borrowing or expenditure

Grammys 2025: Kendrick Lamar, Beyonce and Charli XCX win big

Rapper Kendrick Lamar won five honours for 'Not Like Us', while Beyoncé and Charli XCX followed with three awards each at the 67th Grammy Award, which was hosted by Trevor Noah. The awards took place in the early hours of Monday in Los Angeles.

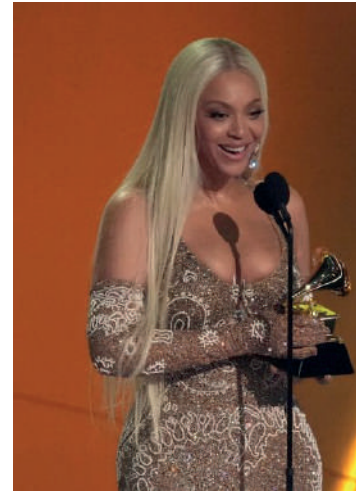
Lamar's 'Not Like Us' bagged five Grammy awards for record of the year, song of the year, rap performance, best rap song and best music video categories, making the Compton-bred rapper a 22-time Grammy winner.

The producer behind the hit, DJ Mustard, accepted the first awards on Lamar's behalf, as the audience in the Peacock Theater in Los Angeles erupted into a thunderous applause.

Beyoncé took the lead with 11 Grammy nominations, a career-high, for her country album "Cowboy Carter." After years of missing out on album of the year, she finally took home the trophy, in addition to best country album and best country duo/group performance for "I'm Good (feat. Beyoncé)" featuring Miley Cyrus. In winning



album of the year with "Cowboy Carter," Beyoncé has become the first Black woman to win the top prize in the 21st century. The last was Lauryn Hill with "The



Miseducation of Lauryn Hill" 26 years ago.

Lamar, Billie Eilish, Post Malone and Charli XCX each had seven nods apiece, followed by Taylor Swift, Chappell Roan and Sabrina Carpenter with six each. Charli XCX took home dance pop recording for "Von Dutch", dance electronic album for "Brat" and best recording package.

Carpenter won for best pop solo performance for "Espresso" and pop vocal album, while Roan was named best new artist. For the Best Pop Duo/Group Performance was won by Lady Gaga and Bruno Mars

for "Die With a Smile".

Carpenter also took home the Best Pop Vocal Album for "Short n' Sweet". She was contending alongside Billie Eilish for "Hit Me Hard and Soft", Ariana Grande's "Eternal Sunshine", "The Rise and Fall of a Midwest Princess" by Chappell Roan and Taylor Swift's "The Tortured Poets Department."

Shakira dedicates award to her 'immigrant brothers, sisters'

During her Grammy acceptance speech, singer-songwriter Shakira took the opportunity to talk about the political turmoil surrounding President Donald Trump's immigration policies. Jennifer Lopez presented the award to Shakira in the Best Latin Pop Album for "Las Mujeres Ya No Lloran". The "Waka Waka" hit-maker thanked her children and dedicated the award 'to all my immigrant brothers and sisters in this country' she said. "You are loved. You are worth it and I will always fight with you," added the Colombian singer.

Here's how Janhvi Kapoor 'burnt' herself

It seems Bollywood actress Janhvi Kapoor spent too much time in the sun as she got "sunburnt".

Janhvi took to her Instagram, where she uploaded a mirror selfie. In the image, the actress is seen wearing orange shorts and a grey hued activewear crop top. Janhvi is flaunting her tanned back in the image.

For the caption, the actress wrote: "BURNT".

The actress did not reveal where she was. However, Janhvi visited the old city of Kochi and even visited some of the iconic spots such as Jew Street. The 27-year-old star along with Sidharth Malhotra is shooting for the romantic comedy "Param Sundari".



Sidharth had previously shared pictures and videos from Kochi on February 2. The video, captured from

inside of a houseboat, shows the Chinese nets for catching fish in the Kumbalangi area of Kochi.

"Param Sundari" is a cross-cultural romance film. It has been locked for theatrical release on July 25.

The film is by production house Maddock Films, directed by Tushar Jalota of "Dasvi" fame. It centers on a love story between a North Indian played by Sidharth and a South Indian girl, filmed in Kerala.

The film "promises a heartfelt tale of love, where two worlds collide, and sparks are bound to fly. Set against the breathtaking backwaters of Kerala, this love story

is a rollercoaster of laughter, chaos, and unexpected twists you won't see coming," per a description provided by Maddock, reports variety.com.

"Its like those films that Mani-sir (Mani Ratnam) used to do like 'Saathiya' (the Hindi-language remake of Tamil drama-romance film "Alai Payuthey")," Maddock chief Dinesh Vijan told Variety.

"The kind of music it has and Janhvi playing a South Indian is interesting, Sid's playing a Northern Delhi boy and the conflict is very cool. It's like maybe taking 'Teri Baaton Mein Aisa Uljha Jiya' forward – there's a high tech idea in there. But we are going into the 'Kantara' world of sorts – we are going a little more than than that."

Nimrit Kaur Ahluwalia on starting from TV: There's no reason to feel ashamed of it

Nimrit Kaur Ahluwalia has talked about the stigma some actors associate with their television background. The actress embraces her small screen roots and said that there's no reason to feel ashamed of it.

The actress, who gained the spotlight with her work in 'Choti Sarrdaarni, said: "Many TV actors abandon their background like it's a thing to be hidden. There's no shame in the background that literally gave you the launchpad."

"I owe everything to television," she shares.

The actress said that she will never abandon the identity that helped her gain the spotlight.

"It was my first avenue to become an actor and the platform that nurtured my passion for acting. It gave me the opportunity to reach where I am today. There's no reason to feel ashamed of it, and I will never abandon the identity that got me started."

The actress is all set to make her debut in movies with the Punjabi film "Shaunki Sardar". The film, which also stars Guru Randhawa and Babbu Maan, is all set to release on May 16.

Expressing her excitement, Nimrit had said, "This is an incredibly special moment for me as I announce the release date of my debut film, Shaunki Sardar. The film is releasing on 16th May 2025, and I couldn't be happier to share this news with all of you."

"Shaunki Sardar" is directed by Dheeraj Kedarnath Rattan and the film promises a powerful narrative celebrating Punjab's culture, values, and spirit.

Talking about the actress, Nimrit started her career with modelling, and in 2018, she was crowned Femina Miss Manipur. She then featured in a music video titled 'Masstaani' by B Praak, which helped her step into the world of showbiz.

In 2019, she began her work in the popular daily soap 'Choti Sarrdaarni, which helped her gain the spotlight.

The actress was later seen in the 16th edition of the controversial reality show 'Bigg Boss', hosted by Salman Khan, where she was placed in the sixth position.

She was then seen in the stunt-based reality show "Khatron Ke Khiladi" season 14. The show was won by actor Karanveer Mehra, who is currently seen in the show "Bigg Boss 18" hosted by Salman Khan.



Saif Ali Khan makes first public appearance at Netflix event, says feels nice to be standing her

In his first public appearance since the knife attack at his home last month, Bollywood star Saif Ali Khan on Monday attended the slate announcement event of streaming service Netflix and said it feels "nice to be standing" in front of an audience.

The 54-year-old actor was stabbed repeatedly by an intruder during a robbery attempt at his 12th floor residence in Satguru Sharan in Mumbai's Bandra area in the early hours of January 16. He underwent surgery and was discharged four days later.

Saif's latest movie "Jewel Thief - The Red Sun Chapter"



was announced at the event. The film is a heist drama by filmmaker Robbie Grewal and also stars Jaideep Ahlawat.

"Pathaan" fame filmmaker Siddharth Anand is producing

the upcoming feature with his wife, Mamta Anand, under their banner Marflix Pictures.

"It feels very nice to be standing here in front of you. And it feels very nice to be here. I'm very excited about this movie.

"Siddharth and I have been talking about this film for a long time, and I've always wanted to do a heist film and a film like this, I couldn't have asked for a better co-star. And basically a lovely movie and I'm very excited," Saif said.

The actor has already completed shooting for the movie, which will be released directly on Netflix

Ibrahim Ali Khan to make digital debut with 'Nadaaniyan'

Bollywood star Saif Ali Khan's son Ibrahim Ali Khan will be making his debut digitally just like his contemporaries, such as Junaid Khan and Agastya Nanda, among many others, with the romantic drama christened 'Nadaaniyan', where he will be seen paired alongside actress Khushi Kapoor. Directed by debutant Shauna Gautam, the film also stars Mahima Chaudhary, Suniel Shetty, Dia Mirza and Jugal Hansraj. The young adult romantic drama is about Piya, a bold and spirited girl



from South Delhi, and Arjun, a determined middle-class boy from Noida. As their two completely different worlds collide, they embark on a journey filled with mischief, heart, and the sweet messiness of first love.

Talking about the film, producers of Dharmatic Entertainment shared, "Love has always been at the heart of our storytelling, and with Nadaaniyan, we're celebrating it in its purest, most youthful form." The film will be

released on the streaming giant Netflix. However, the release date is still under wraps. Making her directorial debut will be Shauna Gautam, who was also the assistant director for Rocky Aur Rani Kii Prem Kahaani.

Actress Delnaaz Irani revives Akbar Birbal on stage

If you loved watching the show Akbar Birbal on TV, actress Delnaaz Irani has quite the treat for you. She cannot stop beaming and the reason for this happiness is her new play titled #Akbar@Birbal. The actress is seen in the play with Paritosh painter. She says, "The show had a successful run on TV for almost three-and-a-half years, and now we are back with it in theatre. What's a clear icing on the cake is that we have the same cast. There is Ali Azgar, who is a very renowned artist and Nyrna Banerjee. The rest



of the cast remains the same as well. Vishal Kotian plays Birbal, I am playing Rani and the guy who was playing Saleem, Pavan, is still the same. As for Paritosh, he is a very dear friend of mine and has been a renowned theatre personality, writer for theatre,

movies and serials. The show was his idea and one call from him had me so fascinated that I immediately said, 'Okay, done. We'll do it', she says. She added, "For me, performing on stage is a very pure form of expression of my craft. Theatre is my first love, so there is nothing specific that I look for in a play. When a play is offered to me, I am only looking forward to performing on stage. I have been associated with the medium for almost 33-34 years non-stop and have done Hindi, English, and Gujarati plays. It's been quite a journey."

BCCI Announces INR 5 Crore To Women's Under-19 T20 World Cup India Team & Support Staff

Mumbai

The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) extended its heartfelt congratulations to the India Under-19 women's team for successfully defending their ICC Under-19 Women's T20 World Cup 2025 title, announcing a cash prize of Rs 5 crore, on Sunday, February 2, 2025.

India thrashed South African women in the all-important final by 9 wickets as they successfully defended their title by remaining unbeaten throughout the tournament, winning seven matches in a row. Indian team remained the unbeaten



side in the tournament and became the first team to win consecutive ICC titles after clinching the inaugural title in 2023 under the leadership of Shefali Varma.

With this final defeat,

Proteas lost their third ICC final in the last 8 months which included a 2024 Men's T20 World Cup, 2024 Women's T20 World Cup final and now Under-19 Women's T20 World Cup

2025.

"Led by a spirited captain, Niki Prasad, the Indian team remained unbeaten throughout the tournament as they showcased exceptional skill, composure, and dominance. India played with fearless intent throughout the tournament, culminating in a commanding nine-wicket victory over South Africa in the final," BCCI said in the statement.

"To honour this remarkable achievement, the BCCI has announced a cash reward of INR 5 Crore for the victorious squad and support staff, led by Head Coach Nooshin Al Khadeer,"

it added.

Coming to the match front, opting to bat, South managed to score only 82 runs in the innings as the Indian spin attack comprising Parunika Sisodia (2/6), Aayushi Shukla (2/9), Vaishnavi Sharma (2/23) and Gongadi Trisha (3/15) ran through their batting order.

In reply, Indian batter Gongadi Trisha topped the score for India with an unbeaten 44 off 33 balls while Sanika Chalke remained not out on 26 off 22 balls. India achieved the target in just 11.2 overs.

Tendulkar Recalls When Brother Ajit Admonished Him For Showing Disrespect

Pune

Cricket icon Sachin Tendulkar, one of the greatest to have played the game, stressed the importance of values while recalling an incident where his brother Ajit admonished him for showing disrespect.

Speaking with noted scribe Sunandan Lele, Tendulkar, a veteran of 200 Tests at an event to mark the 75 years of Chitale Bandhu Mithaiwale, recalled that the incident took place after a game at the M Chinnaswamy Stadium in Bengaluru.

"I and VVS Laxman were batting. I was batting on 35, and VVS Laxman hit the ball towards third man, Micheal Bevan fielded it and I did not see the call by Laxman, as the stadium was packed and there was a lot of noise. I was run out," recalled Tendulkar, the

first batter to score an ODI 200.

"While going to the dressing room, I showed disrespect. After the game, when I returned home (to Mumbai), Ajit asked me what was the need to show disrespect. It disturbed VVS Laxman, and he was to bat further," Sachin said.

He also quipped that he later told VVS Laxman that because of him he was admonished by his brother.

Tendulkar also recalled his famous 241 not out against Australia in Sydney in January 2004 when he did not play a single cover drive.

"I had discussed with my brother Ajit about the shot, and he told me that the problem was not the shot but the shot selection. In Sydney, it wasn't pre-decided that I wouldn't hit a cover drive. Ajit



had thrown a challenge at me if I could play without getting out, and I accepted the challenge," he further added.

"While I was leaving all the balls going out, I thought of not hitting the cover drive as it would get me in trouble," recalled Tendulkar who faced

the Australian attack in that game.

This innings not only showcased Tendulkar's technical prowess but also his mental fortitude and adaptability. By restraining himself from playing the cover drive, he demonstrated the importance of discipline and the ability to modify one's natural game for

the greater good of the team.

The winner of the 2011 World Cup in Mumbai and former India skipper also recalled that in the 1990s he was without a bat contract for two years as his family had decided that he would not promote tobacco or alcohol companies.

During the free-wheeling chat, Tendulkar, a recipient of Bharat Ratna, the country's highest civilian honour, also spoke about how he started to show the bat towards his father Ramesh Tendulkar after his death during the 1999 World Cup and how it changed his life.



IND vs ENG 5th T20I: All Records Made By Abhishek Sharma During 135-Run Knock At Wankhede Stadium

Mumbai

Although it was a dead rubber when India met England in the fifth T20I of the bilateral series, Abhishek Sharma added thrill and entertainment for the spectators with his blitzkrieg of 135 runs from just 54 balls. He registered the highest individual T20I score by an Indian and put all the English bowlers to the sword.

Abhishek surpassed the previous record of Shubman Gill who had played a knock of 126 runs against New Zealand in Ahmedabad. Abhishek's knock was laced with 13 fours and seven sixes and it drew applause from the crowd.

Most sixes for India

During his six-hitting frenzy at Wankhede, Abhishek smacked the ball beyond the boundary rope on 13 occasions. With his aerial shots, the left-handed batter became the Indian batter with the most sixes in a T20I innings. Previously, Rohit Sharma, Tilak Verma and Sanju Samson were the joint leaders with 10 sixes in a T20I innings.

Second-fastest century

Abhishek completed his century in just 37 balls and clocked the second-fastest century in T20Is between full-member teams. David Miller and Rohit Sharma both scored a century in just 35 balls against Bangladesh and Sri Lanka respectively.

Ranji Trophy 2024-25: Quarter Final Between J&K And Kerala Relocated To Pune

Pune

The Maharashtra Cricket Association (MCA) on Sunday, February 2, announced that the Ranji Trophy 2024-25 quarterfinal tie between Jammu & Kashmir and Kerala will be held at the MCA International Stadium, Gahunje here. The Ranji Trophy clash between Jammu Kashmir and Kerala is scheduled to start from Wednesday, February 8, at 9:30 am IST.

The match has been relocated from its original venue due to potential weather concerns, as confirmed by the BCCI officials, the MCA stated in a media statement issued here.

The MCA International Stadium, known for its world-class facilities and weather-friendly conditions, was a natural choice. MCA President Rohit Pawar expressed his enthusiasm about hosting such a prestigious fixture.

"We have a good infrastructure to host the game of cricket, and I'm sure it will be a great playing experience for both teams



under these conditions. We hope to witness a competitive contest and wish both Jammu & Kashmir and Kerala the very best," Pawar, who is an NCP (Sharadchandra Pawar) MLA said.

MCA Secretary Adv. Kamlesh Pisal added, "We have a great record of hosting games while strictly abiding by and fulfilling the BCCI's guidelines. Our venue poses no weather concerns, which made it an ideal choice for this crucial match. We are thankful to the BCCI for giving such an opportunity by reposing confidence in MCA and we assure you that we will keep

the confidence reposed in MCA."

Jammu and Kashmir led by Paras Dogra scripted history by qualifying for the Ranji Trophy knockouts and will face an equally strong Kerala.

Recently, the MCA stadium hosted a T20I match between India and England which was won by the hosts by 15 runs on Friday, February 2. The match got special attention from cricket experts across the world for specialist pacer Harshit Rana, who made his debut and replaced batting all-rounder Shivam Dube as a concussion substitute.

R Praggnanandhaa Beats World Champion D Gukesh In Tiebreaker To Clinch Tata Steel Masters Title



Netherlands

Grandmaster R Praggnanandhaa made a remarkable comeback to beat the reigning world champion Dommaraju Gukesh 2-1 in the tie-breaker to clinch the Tata Steel Masters chess tournament here on Sunday, February 2. Praggnanandhaa became the first Indian since Viswanathan Anand in 2006 to win the top prize at the Tata Steel Masters.

Praggnanandhaa became the first Indian since Viswanathan Anand in 2006 to win the top prize at the Tata Steel Masters. In a dramatic final round that saw a plethora of twists and turns with two youngsters aiming to win every tiebreak game after the 13th and final round of the prestigious competition tied for the top spot with 8.5 each. After displaying an aggressive and innovative brand of play to lead the group, both Indians suffered shocking defeats in the final round. Youngest World Champion Gukesh lost to compatriot Arjun Erigaisi, who successfully took revenge after the former surpassed him in the FIDE rankings to become the highest-ranked Indian. On the other hand, Praggnanandhaa was done by Germany's Vincent Keymer. However, despite the losses, they still managed 5.5 points each to remain joint leaders.

Social activist Damania accuses Munde of graft during his stint as agriculture minister

Mumbai

Social activist Anjali Damania has accused NCP leader Dhananjay Munde of being involved in a scam worth Rs 161.68 crore during his tenure as agriculture minister in the previous Mahayuti government and called for his resignation.

Currently serving as the Maharashtra Food and Civil Supplies minister, Munde denied the allegations and threatened to file a defamation lawsuit against Damania. His name has already been under scrutiny following the arrest of his close aide, Walmik Karad, in connection with the murder of sarpanch of Massajog village in Beed district Santosh Deshmukh.

Damania said the allegations stem from violations of a government resolution (GR) dated September 12, 2018, which mandated that all scheme-related funds under the Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) system be transferred directly to farmers' bank accounts, excluding specific entities such as Mahabeej, KVK, and MAIDC. She alleges this rule was disregarded.

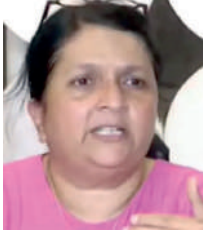
According to Damania, the government resolution included 62 components under DBT, with any changes to the existing components

requiring approval from a committee comprising the Chief Secretary, Finance Secretary, and Planning Secretary.

Damania also pointed to a new GR issued on March 12, 2024, just before the Model Code of Conduct for the Lok Sabha elections came into effect. This resolution appointed the agriculture commissioner as the controlling officer for agricultural input purchases, a move that former Agriculture Commissioner Pravin Gedam had raised concerns about. Damania claims that Munde overruled these concerns and sought permission from then Deputy Chief Minister and Finance Minister Ajit Pawar.

The activist further accused the agriculture department under Munde of financial irregularities in the procurement of five items—nano urea, nano DAP, battery sprayers, metaldehyde pesticide, and cotton bags—at inflated prices, resulting in a total loss of Rs 161.68 crore to the exchequer.

Munde, however, dismissed the allegations as baseless. "None of the allegations leveled by her in various cases over the years have been substantiated. Perhaps she is considering a return to politics, which is why she is making such allegations," he said.



BMC allocates Rs 1,000 crore for cash-strapped BEST

Mumbai

The Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) on Tuesday allocated Rs 1,000 crore for the cash-strapped Brihanmumbai Electric Supply and Transport (BEST) in its budget for the 2025-2026 fiscal, pointing out that it has provided Rs 11,304.59 crore to the undertaking since 2012-13.

The BEST runs nearly 3,000 buses in Mumbai, catering to lakhs of commuters daily. According to the BMC, these financial provisions are part of ongoing efforts to modernise Mumbai's transport infrastructure and improve the city's public transportation

system.

"...a total provision of ₹1,000 crore is proposed in 2025-26 as a grant to BEST undertaking considering its financial position," the budget document stated. This grant will be utilised for infrastructure development, the purchase of new capital equipment, repayment of loans, and the procurement of buses on a wet lease basis. It will also cover pay revisions, day-to-day expenses, the Intelligent Traffic Management System project, Diwali bonuses for employees, and dues for pensioners and gratuity.

Across State अक्रॉस मुंबई



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साऊथ इंडियन फाऊंडेशन



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कोटी कोटी शुभेच्छा!

