

# Across State

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## HEATWAVE

### State Government Issues SOPs

#### Mumbai

In line with the State Heat Action Plan and the India Meteorological Department (IMD)'s color-coded heat alerts, the state government has issued three comprehensive Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to protect citizens—especially vulnerable groups—from heatwaves.

These measures are expected to help reduce heat-related illnesses and deaths, providing significant relief particularly to informal workers, mine workers, and low-income groups, expressed Disaster Management Minister Girish Mahajan.

The SOPs primarily focus on outdoor informal workers in 15 high heat-risk districts, coal mine workers in Chandrapur, and heat-resilient housing and settlements. The districts included are Latur, Amravati, Yavatmal, Washim, Akola, Buldhana, Nagpur, Wardha, Chandrapur, Gondia, Bhandara, Jalgaon, Nandurbar, Dhule, and Nanded.

The first SOP provides guidelines for outdoor workers such as street vendors, construction laborers, traffic police, sanitation workers, delivery personnel, and auto-rickshaw drivers. Measures include modifying work schedules based on IMD's yellow, orange, and red alerts, ensuring water breaks, setting up water booths, distributing ORS, providing shade, and strengthening health services.

The second SOP is designed for workers in coal mines in Chandrapur district, focusing on heat stress management. It includes provisions such as cooling rest areas, water supply, ventilation, work planning, job rotation, training to identify heat-related illnesses, and special facilities for women workers.

The third SOP focuses on heat-resilient housing, emphasizing immediate, medium-term, and long-term measures such as thermal improvement of homes, cool roofs, green spaces, and climate-sensitive planning.

The SOP also recommends mainstreaming heat-resilient housing and settlements in high heat-risk districts. The measures are divided into three levels:

**Immediate measures:** Heat risk mapping, targeting vulnerable groups, awareness campaigns, cooling centers, and low-cost thermal improvements in homes (reflective roofs, shading, ventilation).

**Medium-term measures (1–3 years):** Incorporating heat-resilient designs (cool



roofs, green spaces) into schemes like PMAY, housing policies, building by-laws, and master plans.

**Long-term measures:** Inclusion in state building codes, climate-sensitive zoning, and ensuring equitable thermal comfort for all.

All three SOPs emphasize inter-departmental coordination, regular review based on feedback from health centers and workers, and representation of informal workers. Important contact numbers such as District Control Room (1077), Ambulance (108), Police Helpline (112/100), and others have also been circulated.

These SOPs will be implemented through key departments such as District Disaster Management Authorities, Municipal Corporations, Public Works Department, Town Planning Department, MHADA, CIDCO, and local self-government bodies.

#### Ensure effective implementation of SOPs – Disaster Management Minister Girish Mahajan

Maharashtra is among the ten major heat-prone states in the country. Due to climate change, temperatures are steadily rising, with several regions recording temperatures between 47°C and 49°C. Instructions have been issued to all district collectors and disaster management departments to take necessary precautions. A special awareness campaign will also be conducted in view of rising temperatures, and Minister Girish Mahajan has

appealed for effective implementation of these SOPs.

#### Special efforts by the government to prepare SOPs – Principal Secretary Vinita Singal

Principal Secretary of the Relief, Rehabilitation and Disaster Management Department, Vinita Singal, stated that the state government made special efforts to prepare three detailed SOPs to ensure citizens' safety amid rising temperatures. The SOPs provide guidance on precautions to be taken by people venturing outdoors during peak heat hours (11 a.m. to 4 p.m.).

While formulating these measures, special provisions were made for mine workers, delivery personnel, and laborers working outdoors, particularly in the 15 high heat-risk districts. These measures are based on studies of extreme conditions, including regions like Jalgaon where temperatures can reach up to 50°C.

The SOPs are the result of six months of study and include provisions for unorganized sector workers, mine workers, and heat-resilient housing. Considering the likelihood of rising temperatures in May and June, these guidelines will be implemented through district collectors and district disaster management authorities.

The SOPs will be reviewed annually and necessary improvements will be made to enhance their effectiveness, she added.

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# Mumbai music event tragedy: Two students die after suspected drug overdose; six nabbed

## Mumbai

Mumbai police have launched a major investigation after a late-night music event at the NESCO Centre in Mumbai's Goregaon allegedly turned fatal, resulting in the death of two students and leaving another critically injured.

According to police sources, the deceased have been identified as a 24-year-old woman and a 28-year-old man, both reportedly students of a reputed MBA college in Mumbai. A 25-year-old woman is currently in critical condition and undergoing treatment in the ICU at a nearby hospital.

The incident is believed to have occurred during a concert attended by a large group of college students on April 11. Preliminary inputs suggest that some attendees may have consumed narcotic substances, possibly MDMA, although officials have clarified that the exact substance involved will only be confirmed after



forensic analysis.

Around midnight, several attendees reportedly began experiencing severe breathing difficulties. Emergency services were called, and the affected individuals were rushed to nearby hospitals. While both women were admitted to a trauma care facility, the male victim was taken to Lifeline Hospital, where

he was declared dead on arrival.

Police have recorded statements from multiple students who attended the event, with initial testimonies indicating possible drug-related activity at the venue. Investigators are also examining a video from the party that has since gone viral on social media.

## Six arrested after FIR

The Vanrai Police Station in Mumbai has registered a formal case, and arrests have been made in connection with the incident. At least six individuals have been taken into custody, including two college students and several event management personnel. Among those arrested are Vihaan alias Akash Samal (31), Sunny Vinod Jain, associated with NESCO event management, and Balakrishnan Balram, linked to internal security arrangements at the venue.

All accused have been remanded to three days of police custody.

Authorities have stated that it is still unclear who supplied the suspected narcotic substances and under what circumstances they were consumed. The investigation is ongoing, with police working to determine the exact chain of events that led to the fatalities.

# ED searches 11 premises in Kharat case; probe flags over 130 accounts, Solapur land buys

## Mumbai

The ED has raided 11 premises in Nashik, Pune, and Shirdi linked to self-styled godman Ashok Kharat, uncovering a network of 130 bank accounts and ₹60 crore in suspicious transactions.

The Enforcement Directorate on Monday searched 11 premises in Maharashtra — five in Nashik, three in Pune and three in Shirdi — as part of its money laundering probe into self-styled godman Ashok Kharat, accused in multiple cases of sexual exploitation and financial irregularities.

The searches come as investigators examine a wide financial network of over 130 bank accounts and transactions exceeding Rs 60 crore, along with land purchases and assets linked to Kharat and his associates.

The action follows registration of ECIR on April 6, based on an FIR filed on March 25 at Sarkarwada police station, Nashik, which includes allegations of extortion, religious manipulation and drug-facilitated assault. Kharat was arrested last month in the case.

According to the ED, preliminary findings suggest that Kharat opened multiple bank accounts in the names of third parties across cooperative credit societies in Nashik district, while remaining the nominee and using a common mobile number to control their operations.



Investigators have identified more than 130 such accounts.

These include over 100 accounts linked to Samata Cooperative Credit Society, with transactions of around Rs 60 crore. The agency also identified 30 accounts linked to Jagdamba Cooperative Credit Society, with transactions of about Rs 2.7 crore. Kharat was chairman on Jagadaba credit society till 2024.

Officials said funds did not remain

in a single account but appear to have moved across multiple accounts, a pattern being examined to trace how money was routed and redistributed.

Officials said the recurrence of the same nominee and contact details across accounts is being examined to determine whether they functioned independently or as part of a coordinated financial network. Deposits were often made by individuals who had visited Kharat, they said.

## Land purchases

The agency claimed that money collected from victims and through extortion was invested in land purchases through chartered accountant Prakash Pophale and his sons.

Records examined by The Indian Express show that members of the Pophale family — including Prakash Pophale and his son Lalit Pophale — appear across financial transactions, trust records and property purchases under examination.

Lalit Pophale, identified in records as a trustee of the Shivnika Sansthan trust linked to Kharat, appears in both institutional records and property transactions under examination.

In one such instance, land measuring about 4.48 hectares in Kalman village in North Solapur was

purchased on March 28, 2024 for Rs 2.40 crore in the name of Kharat (as power of attorney holder for his wife).

Adjoining parcels in the same area were purchased on June 20–21, 2024 in the name of Monika Lalit Pophale for a combined Rs 6.57 crore, placing linked individuals in the same location and time frame. The area falls along the proposed Shaktipeeth Expressway corridor.

Separate land and property records examined by The Indian Express show that at least 51 land parcels held across 11 family members are spread over 14 locations in Nashik, Ahmednagar, Pune and Raigad districts.

Of these, 27 entries are agricultural land totalling about 20.9 acres, while 24 are non-agricultural (NA) plots, development-ready parcels, with a concentration in Pathardi near Nashik, where multiple plots were acquired between 2020 and 2024.

The holdings extend beyond land to built assets, including a farmhouse complex near the Mirgaon temple, a bungalow and office premises in Nashik city, residential flats in Nashik and Pune, and a revenue-generating wedding lawn near Shirdi, indicating expansion from a temple-linked base into a distributed, multi-district asset network.

## Maharashtra CMRF to launch online system; applications to be cleared within 8 hours

## BMC May Hire Gen Z 'Intern Army' to Police Roads, Garbage & Transport

**Mumbai**

Applications under the Maharashtra Chief Minister Relief Fund (CMRF) for medical assistance will now be processed within eight hours through an online system to provide faster support to poor and economically weaker sections, officials said Monday.

According to CMRF cell in-charge Rameshwar Naik, the online facility will be launched soon by Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis. "The patient is expected to complete the paperwork in the hospital. Once that is done, the hospital administration will forward the application seeking funds through CMRF. As per the rules, if the documents are clear, the application will get cleared within eight hours," said Naik.

To reduce the burden on



patients, hospitals in Maharashtra will be directly linked to the CMRF cell, so they no longer need to visit multiple offices to complete the application process. The streamlined system is expected to ensure timely medical assistance.

CMRF was set up to help financially disadvantaged individuals access medical care across Maharashtra. It receives hundreds of applications every

day. The online application system is one of many steps aimed at providing faster and more efficient support to patients.

Between April 2025 and March 2026, as many as 40,776 patients in Maharashtra received financial assistance amounting to Rs 333.60 crore for medical treatment.

CMRF has also expanded its coverage to include treatment for serious conditions such as heart disease, kidney and liver disorders, neurological conditions, cancer, cochlear implants, organ transplants, and neonatal care.

Eligible patients can receive financial assistance of up to Rs 5 lakh for major medical treatments under the Maharashtra Chief Minister Relief Fund.

**Mumbai**

Mumbai may soon deploy a 50-strong team of Gen Z 'civic fellows' to track potholes, garbage and transport gaps on the ground—armed with mobile apps and paid stipends as the BMC considers a pilot to tighten oversight and speed up fixes across city wards.

This is a proposal for a pilot 'Mayor Next Gen Civic Fellows Programme' mooted by Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) corporator Tejinder Singh Tiwana, which has been out up and will be deliberated by the general body panel later this month. In a notice of motion, dated February 23, Tiwana has called for innovation in monitoring of urban problems ranging from road conditions, garbage collection and segregation, public transportation and overall sanitation in the city. In a move that seeks to usher in cutting-edge technology and innovative thinking, Tiwana has proposed to rope in 50 trained and educated youth – between the ages of 18 to 25 – as interns under the 'Mayor Next Gen Civic Fellows' programme.

## Sword of uncertainty over corporator Sahar Sheikh's post

accused of submitting fake documents for caste certificate

**Thane**

Sahar Yunus Sheikh, an All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM) corporator from Mumbra—who came into the national spotlight after the Thane Municipal Corporation elections due to her "Kaisa haraya" remark—is now embroiled in controversy. The administration has objected to her caste certificate and recommended that a criminal case be registered against her. This has cast serious doubt over her position as a corporator. Meanwhile, Sahar Sheikh has stated that she will soon hold a press conference to clarify her stand on the issue.

In the recently concluded general elections of the Thane Municipal Corporation, AIMIM secured victory on five seats. Sahar Yunus Sheikh won from Mumbra Ward No. 30-B panel, defeating a candidate from the Nationalist Congress Party (Sharadchandra Pawar faction). Following her victory, she created a stir in political circles by celebrating in the constituency of NCP MLA Jitendra Awhad. Her "Kaisa haraya" remark also made her widely discussed on social media. However,



the same Sahar Sheikh is now facing allegations.

During the election, a complaint was raised regarding the caste certificate she submitted by complainant Siddiqui Farah Shabab Ahmed. It has been alleged that the certificate was obtained using forged documents. According to the complainant, government machinery was misled in the process, and false information was allegedly provided to four different government offices, making it a serious matter.

## BMC allocates Rs 58.5 crore to 15 corporators

**Mumbai**

The Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation's (BMC) standing committee on Thursday allocated Rs 58.5 crore to 15 corporators, with BJP members receiving the largest share of funds.

Of the total allocation, four BJP corporators received Rs 34.75 crore, while two Shiv Sena members were allotted Rs 20 crore. Notably, 11 of the 15 beneficiaries are members of the 26-member standing committee, which oversees the civic body's finances.

"The fund is being allocated on the basis of demands made by the corporators. These funds will be utilised by corporator members and group leaders largely for development wards across the city," said Prabhakar Shinde, BJP corporator and standing committee chairperson.

The funds were disbursed from a Rs 800 crore corpus set aside by the standing committee from the BMC's Rs 80,000 crore budget for ward-level development works. In addition, Rs 150 crore has been earmarked for the Mayor's development fund.

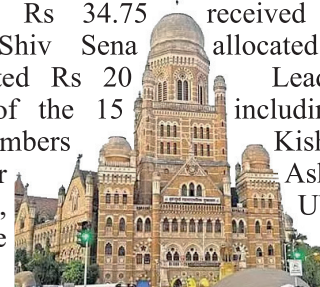
Among key allocations, BJP leader of the House Ganesh Khankar received Rs 20 crore, followed by Rs 10 crore each to BJP corporator Rajashree Shirwadkar and Shiv Sena group leader Amey Ghole. Deputy Mayor Sanjay Ghadi was allotted Rs 10 crore, while Mayor Ritu Tawde received Rs 2.25 crore. Shinde allocated Rs 2.5 crore to himself.

Leaders from other parties, including opposition leader Kishori Pednekar, Congress's Ashraf Azmi, AIMIM's Vijay Ubale and MNS's Yeshwant Killedar, received Rs 2 crore each. NCP's Ajit Raorane was allotted Rs

2.25 crore, while Samajwadi Party's Amrin Abahani received Rs 2 crore. Former Mayor Vishakha Raut was allocated Rs 25 lakh.

Civic officials said allocations are made based on corporators' demands and project merit, with remaining funds to be released through the year as required.

Each of Mumbai's 227 corporators already receive Rs 1.6 crore annually for civic works. The funds allocated on Thursday are in addition to this, with no fixed criteria governing their distribution.



## Social media 'love trap' case in Amravati: 180 minor girls targeted, 350 obscene videos made; man arrested

### Amravati

Police in Amravati have arrested a man accused of sexually exploiting multiple minor girls and recording explicit videos, officials said on Wednesday.

The accused, identified as Mohammad Ayaz alias Tanveer from Paratwada, was taken into custody following a complaint raised by Rajya Sabha MP Anil Bonde.

He allegedly exploited at least 180 minor girls and recording over 350 obscene videos.

### Allegations and modus operandi

According to police sources, the accused allegedly used social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Snapchat to contact minor girls and

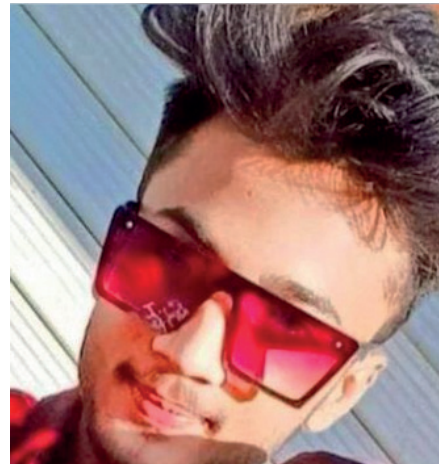
lure them into relationships. He is suspected of taking victims to cities including Mumbai and Pune, where he allegedly recorded explicit videos.

He used these videos later to blackmail victims. Authorities are also examining claims that some content may have been circulated online.

### Police action and investigation

Acting swiftly, local police arrested the accused and presented him before a court, which remanded him to seven days of police custody. Officials confirmed that a mobile phone has been seized and is being examined for digital evidence.

The Cyber Cell has joined the investigation to trace any online



distribution of the alleged videos and identify potential links to wider networks.

### Official response

Superintendent of Police (Rural) Vishal Anand is overseeing the investigation. Authorities are also considering demands for forming a Special Investigation Team (SIT) to probe the case in detail.

### Community reaction

Local residents, including members of the Muslim community, have reportedly urged strict legal action against the accused, emphasising the importance of justice and accountability.

### Ongoing probe

Police said the investigation is ongoing to determine the full extent of the case, including the number of victims and whether others were involved.

## Marathi mandatory for rickshaw and taxi drivers in Maharashtra from May 1



### Mumbai

Knowing Marathi will be mandatory for all licensed rickshaw and taxi drivers in Maharashtra from May 1, Cabinet Minister Pratap Sarnaik said on Tuesday. In a statement, he said that a statewide campaign will be carried out through the Motor Transport Department to implement the directive.

The Minister also warned that the licenses of drivers who do not possess basic knowledge of Marathi will be cancelled.

"From May 1, coinciding with Maharashtra Day, it will be mandatory for all licensed rickshaw and taxi drivers to know Marathi. A state-wide

inspection campaign will be conducted through 59 regional and sub-regional offices of the Motor Transport Department to verify if drivers can read and write the language," the minister stated.

Sarnaik noted that the rule mandating knowledge of the local language for issuing licences is already in place, but is being widely flouted.

He said the Transport Department has received numerous complaints, particularly from the Mumbai Metropolitan Region, Chhatrapati Sambhaji Nagar, and Nagpur, about drivers being unable or unwilling to

communicate with passengers in Marathi.

"It is everyone's duty to learn the language of the region where they conduct business. While it is important to be proud of one's mother tongue, it is equally vital to respect the state's language while working there," the Shiv Sena leader added.

He said the crackdown would not be limited to drivers alone. "Strict action will also be taken against transport officials found guilty of incorrectly issuing licenses by ignoring these established rules," the minister stated.

## Nation's Willpower As Important As Military Strength For Ensuring Security, Says NSA Doval

### Gandhinagar

National Security Advisor (NSA) Ajit Doval on Tuesday described national security as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, and stressed that the biggest mistake in assessing a nation's strength is ignoring the willpower of its people. While factors such as military strength are critical, the inherent strength of people often proves decisive in security matters, he insisted.

Addressing students at the fifth convocation ceremony of the Rashtriya Raksha University (RRU) in Gandhinagar in the presence of President Droupadi Murmu, Doval emphasised that national security is a collective responsibility shared by the entire nation.

"National security is a vast, complex, and multifaceted phenomenon. It comprises numerous components: a nation's military might, technological prowess, natural resources, diplomatic strength, and human capital," he said in his address to students passing out of the government-run university, which has been designated as an institution of national importance.

However, what often happens and where errors most frequently occur when assessing this comprehensive national power is in the evaluation of the nation's willpower and the inherent strength of its people, said the NSA.

Explaining this, Doval cited global examples and said, "If Russia (then USSR) withdrew from Afghanistan (in 1988-89), or if the United States was compelled to withdraw from Vietnam (in the 1970s) or if the US failed to achieve its objectives in Afghanistan, it was not for a lack of technology or military strength.

"Rather, the decisive factor was the spirit and commitment of the local people, what we refer to as the nation's willpower." He stressed that the sole objective of warfare is to break the morale of one's adversary, thereby compelling them to accept a treaty on one's terms.

# Samrat Choudhary Takes Oath As Bihar's First BJP Chief Minister; JD(U) Gets 2 Deputy CMs

Patna

Senior Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader Samrat Choudhary was sworn in as the 24th chief minister of Bihar on Wednesday. Governor, Lieutenant General (retired) Syed Ata Hasnain, administered the oath of office and secrecy to him at a ceremony conducted at the Lok Bhavan (formerly Raj Bhavan in the state capital).

With this, the BJP got its first chief minister in the eastern state, despite being in power as a part of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) since 2005, albeit with a couple of interregnums between 2013–2017 and 2022–2024.

Senior Janata Dal (United) or JD(U) leaders – Vijay Kumar Choudhary and Bijendra Prasad Yadav – also took oath as ministers on the occasion. They are tipped to become the deputy chief ministers.

Previously, former chief minister Nitish Kumar's son Nishant Kumar was to take oath as one of the two



deputy chief ministers. JD(U) sources said that he refused, citing his inexperience in governance and sought more time to learn the ropes.

The swearing-in started with the national song Vande Mataram, followed by the national anthem. Bihar chief secretary Pratyaya Amrit conducted the ceremony.

Nitish and several senior leaders

of his JD(U) were present at the oath ceremony. Senior BJP leaders, including party president Nitin Nabin, Union health, chemical and fertiliser minister JP Nadda, Union agriculture minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan, party national general secretary (organisation) BL Santhosh, national general secretary and Bihar in-charge Vinod Tawde, Bihar unit president

Sanjay Saraogi and others were also present on the occasion.

Article 164(1A) of the Constitution of India limits the size of the council of ministers in a state to 15 percent of the total members of the legislative assembly. Accordingly, Bihar, which has a 243-member Assembly, can have a maximum of 36 ministers.

With the swearing-in of Samrat, Vijay and Bijendra, 33 positions in the cabinet will remain vacant. Further expansion is expected after the West Bengal and Tamil Nadu Assembly elections. Sources said that the other ministers would be inducted sometime in May.

The BJP, JD(U), Lok Janshakti Party (Ram Vilas), Hindustani Awam Morcha (Secular), and Rashtriya Lok Morcha are allies and members of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in Bihar. Their leaders will discuss the power-sharing formula in the state, including the number of cabinet berths and the departments.

## Marshal Arjan Singh's legacy continues to inspire generations: IAF, Defence Ministry pay tribute on 107th anniversary

New Delhi

The Indian Air Force on Wednesday recalled the legacy of war hero Marshal Arjan Singh on his 107th birth anniversary, describing him as a symbol of exceptional leadership, courage and foresight, whose service to the nation continues to inspire generations of air warriors.

An iconic figure in the country's military history, Arjan Singh was the first and only officer of the Indian Air Force (IAF) to be awarded the rank of Marshal in 2002.

Born on April 15, 1919, at Lyallpur in undivided Punjab, his father, grandfather and great-grandfather had served in the cavalry.

Singh led a fledgling IAF in the 1965 India-Pakistan war when he was in his 40s. He died in September 2017 at the age of 98.

On Wednesday, the IAF and the Ministry of Defence paid homage to the officer and recalled his legacy and contribution to the nation.

"On the 107th birth anniversary of Marshal of the Air Force Arjan Singh, DFC, #IAF pays tribute to one of



the nation's most revered air warriors. A symbol of exceptional leadership, courage and foresight, his service to the nation continues to inspire generations of air warriors.

"The only officer in the history of the Indian Air Force to be conferred the distinguished five-star rank, his legacy remains etched in the annals of military history," the IAF said in a post on X.

It also shared a poster carrying Arjan Singh's photos taken during the course of his career, with the caption: "Remembering Marshal of the Air Force Arjan Singh—An

enduring legacy of courage, leadership and service." The defence ministry also paid tribute to Arjan Singh and shared some high points of his career on X.

"Ministry of Defence pays tribute to the legendary air warrior, Marshal of the Air Force, Arjan Singh DFC, on his 107th birth anniversary.

"On this day, we recall the contribution made by the Marshal to the nation and the Indian Air Force. His dynamic personality, professional competence, leadership and strategic vision set him apart as an icon of the IAF," the ministry said. According to his brief profile shared by the ministry, Arjan Singh was the first officer to be appointed Air Chief Marshal of the IAF.

Singh was a highly decorated officer and received the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) in 1944 for his leadership during the Burma campaign in World War II.

On his 106th birth anniversary last year, the IAF remembered him as a leader who "led from the cockpit" and "not just the command room

## The judge of the future can't remain confined to the identity of a legal specialist: CJI Surya Kant

New Delhi

When the Chief Justice of India, Justice Surya Kant, chose to look 50 years ahead and speak of a judge who must think beyond statutes, precedents and even the traditional identity of a jurist, he was not indulging in futurism. The CJI was, in effect, sounding a quiet but firm reminder: the law is already being outpaced by the world it seeks to regulate.

Speaking at the 4th Ashok Desai Memorial Lecture on "Reimagining Justice: The Indian Judiciary 50 Years Hence", the CJI framed a question that the legal system can no longer postpone—what happens when disputes are no longer rooted in the familiar, but in the engineered, the virtual and the irreversible?

For long, the judicial role has been anchored in a comforting certainty: statutes to interpret, precedents to follow, facts to weigh. The architecture was linear, the disputes largely human, the consequences visible. But the next half-century promises to dismantle that neat arrangement.

The disputes of tomorrow will not always arise from what has happened, but from what can be engineered, simulated, or permanently altered. It is in this shifting landscape that the Chief Justice of India's observations acquire their force. "The judge of the future can't remain confined to the identity of a legal specialist or jurist alone, the disputes that will come before the court will require an understanding that extends far beyond statutes and precedents," he said, pointing to questions arising from synthetic biology and deep-sea mining—domains where law will follow, not lead.

# South vs North India: Is Women's Reservation a cover for a delimitation conspiracy?

New Delhi

Ahead of the special sitting of Lok Sabha on Thursday to pass constitutional amendments that would enable a roll out of 33 per cent women's reservation in Lok Sabha and state assemblies from the 2029 election cycle, the Opposition and the government are ranged against one another on a set of issues.

The Congress-led INDIA bloc is saying that women's reservation is a cloak for a larger delimitation conspiracy whereby the proportional share of southern, northwestern and some eastern states in the Lok Sabha would decrease and that of Hindi heartland states, including UP and Bihar would increase.

Here is all about the debate

What is the government proposing?

The government would bring three bills in the special session -- The Constitution (131st) Amendment Bill 2026; The Delimitation Bill 2026 and THE UTs Amendment Bill 2026 to amend the Government of Union Territories Act, 1963, the Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi Act, 1991 and the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act, 2019. The first Bill is the most important of all as it proposes to raise the number of seats of Lok Sabha from 543 to up to 850.

What this main bill will do?

It would readjust the existing allocation of seats of Parliamentary and Assembly Constituencies currently based on the population figures published as per 1971 census. The division of territorial constituencies is based on the population figures published as per 2001 census.

At present articles 82 and 170 of the Constitution provide that the allocation of seats in the Lok Sabha and States Legislative Assemblies, and the division of each State into territorial constituencies shall be readjusted in such manner and on the basis of such census, by such authority (the Delimitation

Commission), as Parliament may by law determine. The government is proposing that since the next census (which started



recently) and the consequential delimitation exercise thereafter would take considerable time and delay the effective and dedicated participation of women in democratic polity, the new Bill will allow delimitation on the basis of already published Census data which is 2011 figures.

Why is Opposition wary?

The Opposition is saying the government has proposed to raise Lok Sabha strength up to 850 without promising proportional representation to states. What this means in simple terms is -- south states currently have 24 per cent representation in the Lok Sabha as per the seats allocated to them. This as per the 850-MP Lok Sabha norm would reduce to 20 per cent (166 seats - increase of just 36 seats in 850). Whereas, five northern states which have

37 per cent representation in Lok Sabha now would have 43 per cent representation in the new Lok Sabha (367 seats - increase of 167 seats compared to 200 now). As an example -- UP has 80 seats (14.7 per cent share) in the current 543 member ok Sabha. This would increase to 143 seats in an 850 member Lok Sabha -- a rise of 63 seats (share going up to 16.8 per cent). But Tamil Nadu which has 39 seats and 7.2 per cent share in current Lok Sabha would add 10 seats and have 49 seats in the new LS but its proportional share in the new house will fall to 5.8 per cent. Opposition is saying this should not happen and that the percentage of seats of every state in the new Lok Sabha should remain the same.

How the new seats are being calculated?

The formula is this -- divide the

population of India -- 1.2 billion with the number of proposed seats in Lok Sabha -- 850. This comes to 14 lakh. Now to calculate the share of seats of every state in the new Lok Sabha divide the 2011 Census population of that state with 14 lakh. For example, UP's 2011 population of 20 crore divided by 14 lakh yields 143 LS seats as against 80 today. Likewise, Punjab's 2011 population of 2.7 crore divided by 14 lakh yields 19 seats as against 13 today.

What is the government assuring?

Government has clarified that the seats in the new Lok Sabha would be proportional only. "We will see a 50 per cent increase in current seats for every state. No injustice would be done to any state. Misreading of the Bills must be avoided. The nuances would be clarified in the Parliament when Bills come up for debate tomorrow until April 18.

What next

On Thursday, Law Minister Arjun Ram Meghwal would pilot the Bills and address concerns of opposition parties around delimitation and the northern states benefitting over the southern. Lok Sabha galleries would be filled with special women guests from all over India.

Opposition strategy

Opposition would raise concerns around federal skew on account of the proposed readjustment of Lok Sabha seats although they have stated they are in favour of women's reservation.

# 13 killed, 22 injured after boiler explodes in Chhattisgarh

## Sakti

In a major industrial accident, at least 13 workers were killed and 21 others injured after a steam-carrying tube connected to a boiler exploded at a Vedanta Ltd power plant in Sakti district of Chhattisgarh on Tuesday afternoon, police said.

The powerful blast occurred at around 2:30 pm in a tube supplying high-pressure steam from the boiler to the turbine at the Vedanta Ltd power plant in Singhitarai village causing severe burns to workers, Sakti Superintendent of Police (SP) Prafull Thakur told PTI.

Soon after the accident, local administration personnel and police teams rushed to the spot and launched rescue operations, he said.

While four workers died on the spot, around 30 others were injured and rushed to different hospitals in neighbouring Raigarh and Bilaspur districts, the IPS officer stated.

"Nine more workers succumbed to injuries later. Twenty-one injured workers are being treated in different hospitals," an Industrial Safety Department official in Raigarh said.

The private company put the death toll at 10.

At least six of the injured are stated to be in critical condition, said power plant officials.

Chief Minister Vishnu Deo Sai expressed grief over the incident and announced a compensation of Rs 5 lakh to the kin of each deceased worker and Rs 50,000 to those injured.

Sai ordered the Commissioner of Bilaspur division to conduct an inquiry into the tragedy and said the strictest possible action would be taken against anyone found guilty in the probe.

The district administration has ordered a separate magisterial probe into the industrial accident, while Vedanta has initiated its own inquiry.

The CM termed the incident "extremely tragic" and expressed



condolences to the bereaved families.

In a statement, Sai said during these difficult times, the state government stands firmly with the affected families.

The CM has directed officials to ensure proper and free medical treatment is arranged for all the injured individuals. While wishing for the speedy recovery of the injured, he emphasized that no negligence in their treatment would be tolerated, it said.

Sai affirmed that the state government has been maintaining constant vigilance over the situation, and relief and rehabilitation operations are being executed on a priority basis.

In a statement released in Mumbai, Vedanta, which is listed on exchanges, put the death toll at 10 and said the affected workers were personnel from a sub-contractor hired by the diversified global natural resources conglomerate.

"We regret to inform that an unfortunate incident occurred at Unit-1 boiler of company's Athena Power plant located at Singhitarai, Chhattisgarh on April 14, 2026, involving personnel of company's sub-contractor, NGSL. As of now 24 workmen of our sub-contractor have been affected by the incident and 10 have succumbed to their injuries,"

said the statement.

The private company said its immediate priority is to ensure the provision of best possible medical assistance and treatment to all those affected and doing everything possible to alleviate suffering of the near and dear ones of the deceased.

"The company is extending full support to the injured and is closely coordinating with the attending medical teams and local authorities. The company is in the process of ascertaining the details and has initiated a detailed investigation into the incident in coordination with its sub-contractor and the relevant authorities," according to the statement.

Meanwhile, Sakti Collector Amrit Vikas Topno ordered a magisterial inquiry into the tragedy.

"All departments concerned have been directed to carry out a detailed probe covering all aspects and submit a report at the earliest to prevent recurrence," he said.

The local plant management, in a statement, said, "an unfortunate incident occurred at one of the boiler units at our Singhitarai plant, involving personnel from our sub-contractor, NGSL (NTPC GE Power Services Ltd), which operates and maintains the unit." The management said its immediate priority is to ensure

the best possible medical assistance and treatment to those affected.

According to plant officials, the explosion was triggered by a leak in the tube carrying high-pressure steam generated in the boiler unit to the turbine, which rotates to produce electricity.

At least six of the injured are stated to be in critical condition, and efforts are underway to airlift some to Raipur for advanced care, they said.

The construction of 1,200 MW coal-based thermal power project (two units of 600 MW each) in Singhitarai, originally owned by Athena Chhattisgarh Power Ltd, was started in 2009, but remained stalled between 2016 and 2022.

Vedanta acquired the plant in 2022, after which one 600 MW unit was completed and commissioned in August last year, while the second unit is still under construction.

Eyewitnesses described scenes of devastation and panic after the powerful blast.

Ajit Das Kar, a worker from West Bengal who had been working as a painter at the plant for over a month, said the explosion felt "like a missile had landed." "We had just finished lunch at around 2.30 pm when there was a massive blast and thick smoke spread everywhere. We were working at a height of around 17 metres. The explosion took place at height of around 9 meters in Boiler no. 1 where we were working. I managed to save myself by hiding inside a cupboard. Those workers who were below were badly burnt," he said.

Many of the workers present were engaged in painting work at the facility, he said.

Grief-stricken family members of the victims were seen sitting outside the plant.

One of them, Chitrasen Patel, said his father, who worked at the plant, died in the blast.

A large number of police personnel have been deployed at the site.

# TMC woos Kolkata's Chinese community via Mandarin

## Kolkata

As the political tempo rises in West Bengal's high-stakes Assembly election, the ruling Trinamool Congress (TMC) has reached out to Kolkata's Chinese community by appealing for support in Mandarin.

TMC's Topsis candidate Jawad Khan has reached out to Chinatown voters in their own language. Khan has put up graffiti in Mandarin on the walls of Tangra, once a tannery hub

established in the 1920s and now a thriving restaurant district serving authentic Chinese cuisine, to bolster his re-election campaign.

The older Chinese settlement is in central Kolkata's Tiretta Bazar. The two together make up the estimated 4,000 Chinese population in Kolkata.

Though small in number, the Chinese community thrifty with money by nature, has been important to political parties as a source

of funding, especially at the time of elections.

In a tightly contested poll, the TMC is seeking to match the BJP's financial clout by tapping all available resources. "My constituency is a mini-India with people of different faiths, ethnicities and languages living together," Khan said. "I decided to appeal to my Chinese voters in Mandarin as a mark of respect."

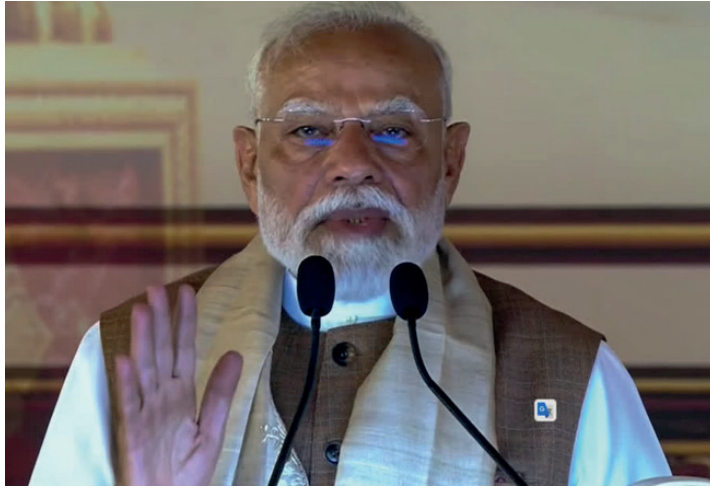
# PM Modi Proposes 9 Resolutions For Indians To Achieve Viksit Bharat Goal Faster

## Bengaluru

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday called upon people to take 'nine collective pledges' to make India a cleaner, greener, self-reliant, and healthy nation.

He was speaking after inaugurating the newly built Guru Bhairavaikhya Mandir, built in memory of the late Dr Balagangadharanath Swamiji, on the Adichunchanagiri Maha Samsthan Mutt premises in Mandya district, 90 km from Bengaluru. Dr Balagangadhar Swamiji was the 71st pontiff of the mutt revered by the Vokkaliga community.

Reflecting on the nine principles—including food, education, health, environment and spirituality—on which the Adichunchanagiri



mutt functions, PM Modi urged people to make nine resolutions and follow them with commitment to realise the goal of achieving Viksit Bharat faster.

The PM's first request was to conserve water. "The lives of the people of Mandya have evolved with the blessing of the river Cauvery. Who

understands the importance of saving and conserving water better than them? I want all Indians to resolve to save water and promote its judicious use," the PM urged.

He called upon every Indian to plant a sapling in the name of his or her mother. "Under the ongoing 'Ek Ped Maa Ke Naam' campaign,

crores of people have already planted saplings. Now it is time for others to join the campaign and resolve to protect our Mother Earth," he said.

He urged the people to resolve to keep their villages, towns, cities, religious and public places neat and clean. "Keeping our neighbourhood, public and religious places clean is our collective responsibility," he added.

PM Modi also called upon people to embrace indigenous products, support Indian manufacturers and protect jobs. "All Indians should live the 'Vocal for Local' mantra," he said.

Adopting chemical-free natural farming, promoting domestic tourism, consuming healthy food, reducing edible oil consumption by at

least 10%, and focusing on fitness and sports are among other resolutions PM Modi proposed.

He lauded the contributions of Adichunchanagiri mutt, particularly Balagangadhar Nath, in the fields of spirituality, education and health. "The mutt that runs educational institutes from kindergarten to medical and engineering colleges has helped thousands of students from economically weaker sections besides bringing positive changes in their lives," he said.

Nirmalanand Swamiji of the mutt, Former PM HD Deve Gowda, Union Ministers H D Kumaraswamy and Shobha Karandlaje, Mandya district minister Cheluvaryaswamy, and Opposition Leader in Assembly R Ashoka were present.

## SC Stays Telangana HC's Anticipatory Bail To Pawan Khera In Assam FIR

### New Delhi

The Supreme Court on Wednesday put on hold the transit anticipatory bail granted by the Telangana High Court to Congress leader Pawan Khera in connection with the Assam Police FIR regarding CM Himanta Biswa Sarma's wife's complaint.

The matter came up for hearing before a bench led by Justice J K Maheshwari. Solicitor General Tushar Mehta represented the Assam government before the bench.

The bench passed an interim order while issuing notice on the petition filed by the Assam government against the high court's order.

The bench said that if Khera applies for anticipatory bail before the court having jurisdiction in Assam, while deciding such an application, the order passed by this court in the matter of transit bail will not have any adverse impact.

The Assam government moved the Supreme Court against the Telangana High Court order granting one-week transit anticipatory bail to Congress leader Pawan Khera in a case registered against him for levelling allegations against the



state's Chief Minister, Himanta Biswa Sarma's wife.

During the hearing, Mehta contended that Khera's petition contained no averment regarding territorial jurisdiction in Telangana.

Mehta claimed his wife has a property there. "If this is the case, a person can buy properties across the country and seek anticipatory bail from the places they choose. This is forum-shopping, if not forum-choosing..." contended Mehta. After hearing submissions, the apex court said, "Considering all the aspects, issue notice." The bench added that in the meantime, the operation of the high court order will be stayed.

## Boost to PM Modi's women's quota plan as ex-President Pratibha Patil extends support



### New Delhi

In a major boost to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's plans to pilot bills in Parliament for early rollout of 33 per cent women's quotas in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies, former President and Congress veteran Pratibha Patil has come out in support of the move.

In a letter to Modi, India's first woman President said she has long believed that real women's empowerment will come only when women have an equal say in decision-making in the country.

Yesterday, first woman Lok Sabha Speaker Meira Kumar, another senior Congress leader, had come out to back the move. She had even attended a related seminar led by the Prime Minister.

"I extend my heartfelt appreciation for the initiative for historic implementation of the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam. This landmark constitutional amendment represents a transformative step in strengthening India's democratic framework by ensuring greater representation and participation of women in legislative bodies," Patil wrote.

She added, "As the first woman President of India, I have long championed the belief that genuine women's empowerment can only be achieved by providing them equal opportunities to shape decisions that affect the nation. This amendment is far more than a legal provision; it is a powerful affirmation of our collective resolve to advance gender equality, foster inclusive governance, and build a stronger, more progressive India."

# Iran War 'Close To Over,' Says President Trump

## Washington

US President Donald Trump has said that the war with Iran is "close to over," asserting that if he pulled up stakes right now, it would take Tehran 20 years to rebuild the country.

The president's comments come hours after the US Central Command said it has successfully blocked all traffic to and from Iranian ports and coastal areas in the first 24 hours of Trump's blockade, saying the US was supporting freedom of navigation for vessels transiting the Strait of Hormuz.

"I think it's close to over, yeah. I view it as very close to being over," Trump told

Fox News in an interview that will be telecast later Wednesday. The interview for the programme "Mornings with Maria" was recorded on Tuesday.

"I think it's — I had to divert because if I didn't do that, right now you'd have Iran with a nuclear weapon. And if they had a nuclear weapon, you'd be calling everyone over there 'sir,' and you don't want to do that," Trump said.

The US and Iran failed to reach an agreement following historic marathon talks in Islamabad over the weekend to find a peaceful resolution to the conflict that started on February 28. A US media report said on Tuesday



that Trump said that a second round of talks with Iran could be held in Islamabad "over the next two days."

"You should stay there, really, because something could be happening over

the next two days, and we're more inclined to go there," Trump told The New York Post. Trump attributed the possibility of a second round of talks to the "great job" done by Pakistan Army chief

Field Marshal Asim Munir.

"It's more likely, you know why? Because the field marshal is doing a great job," the US President said. He did not say whether Vice President J D Vance would continue to lead the negotiating team, which included White House Special Envoy Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner.

"I've been saying they can't have nuclear weapons. So I don't like the 20 years," Trump said when asked about suggestions that a moratorium might encourage Iran to make an agreement. "I don't want them (Iran) to feel like they have a win," the US President said.

## Saudi Arabia Pledges Additional USD 3 Billion Support To Pakistan

### Islamabad

Saudi Arabia has pledged an additional financial support of USD 3 billion to Pakistan and also extended an existing USD 5 billion facility for three years, local media reported. The support comes at a crucial juncture as Islamabad prepares to repay USD 3.5 billion to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) this month and faces pressure on its foreign exchange reserves.

"Saudi Arabia has pledged an additional USD 3 billion in deposits for Pakistan and has extended its existing USD 5 billion facility for a further three years," Dawn quoted Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb as saying in Washington.

"The existing USD 5 billion Saudi deposit would no longer be subject to the previous annual rollover arrangement and would instead be extended for a longer term," he added. The announcement came as Prime Minister

Shehbaz Sharif is expected to undertake official visits to Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Türkiye from April 15–18.

"The fresh Saudi support comes at a critical time for Pakistan's external financing needs and will help bolster foreign exchange reserves and strengthen the external account', Geo News quoted Aurangzeb while speaking to journalists in Washington on the sidelines of the World Bank-IMF Spring Meetings 2026.

The IMF has stipulated that Pakistan's three key bilateral creditors -- Saudi Arabia, China and the UAE -- must maintain their cash deposits with the country until the completion of the ongoing three-year programme. Aurangzeb said that the government is committed to maintaining reserves in line with its market obligations and targets under the IMF-supported programme, the report said.

## Any attempt to impose force on Iran is doomed to failure: President Pezeshkian

### Tehran

Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian on Wednesday strongly hit back at what he described as external pressure and military aggression against Iran, asserting that any attempt to impose force on the Islamic Republic would ultimately fail amid a fragile ceasefire and diplomatic engagements to secure a complete halt to hostilities in West Asia.

According to Iranian state media ISNA, Pezeshkian emphasised that Iran remains committed to constructive dialogue but will not yield to coercion, as reports suggest a possible second round of talks between Washington and Tehran after the first round of talks ended in a stalemate in Islamabad.

"We emphasise constructive dialogue, but will not be forced to surrender. Any attempt to impose will or force Iran to surrender is doomed to failure, and the people will never accept such an approach. Iran is not seeking war," he said, as quoted by ISNA.

His remarks come amid heightened tensions following a US-imposed blockade targeting Iranian ports, further escalating



the already strained relations between Tehran and Washington.

Pezeshkian also questioned the legality and morality of recent actions against Iran by the US and Israeli forces, raising concerns over the attacks impacting civilian infrastructure.

"With what authorisation and for what crime was the attack on our country carried out?" he asked, adding, "What justification does targeting civilians, elites, children, and destroying vital centres--including schools and hospitals--have within the framework of international law and humanitarian principles?" as quoted by ISNA.

The Iranian President reiterated that while the country seeks peace and diplomatic engagement, it will firmly resist any form of external aggression or pressure that undermines its sovereignty.

Earlier in the day, the United States Central Command (CENTCOM) announced that a full blockade of Iran's ports has been successfully implemented, with US forces asserting maritime dominance across key regional waterways, particularly the Strait of Hormuz.

In a statement, CENTCOM Commander Admiral Brad Cooper stated that within just 36 hours of initiating the blockade, US forces had effectively stopped all maritime trade flowing in and out of Iran.

"A blockade of Iranian ports has been fully implemented as U.S. forces maintain maritime superiority in the Middle East. An estimated 90 per cent of Iran's economy is fueled by international trade by sea. In less than 36 hours since the blockade was implemented, U.S. forces have completely halted economic trade going into and out of Iran by sea," the statement read.

CENTCOM revealed that more than 10,000 US personnel, including Sailors, Marines, and airmen, alongside over a dozen warships and dozens of aircraft, are involved in the blockade operation.

# Violence in Noida

VIOLENT protests by factory workers in Noida (Uttar Pradesh) on Monday, coming on the heels of clashes between the police and workers in Manesar (Haryana), are a troubling reminder that India's industrial ecosystem is far from picture-perfect. The unruly scenes have exposed not only a breakdown of law and order but also a deeper failure of dialogue between the labour force, the industry and the state government. What began as a march in support of a legitimate demand for wage revision quickly escalated into arson, vandalism and traffic disruptions in Noida, paralysing key routes and stranding thousands of commuters.

The unrest stems from a widening gap between rising living costs and stagnant wages. Workers across industrial hubs are struggling to make ends meet amid inflationary pressures worsened by the war in West Asia. Haryana's decision to raise

minimum wages reflects an acknowledgment of this grim reality. However, reactive measures alone cannot substitute for negotiations and



grievance redressal.

While the authorities are probing the role of vested interests in fomenting trouble, the recurrence of such incidents indicates systemic

mistrust. Workers often feel ignored, while employers fear disruptions and losses. This mutual suspicion creates a volatile environment where even minor triggers can spark chaos. India's manufacturing ambitions — central to its vision of long-term economic transformation — cannot be realised without a stable and motivated workforce. Industrial performance cannot be confined to output and investments. If labour unrest continues to simmer, it risks undermining investor confidence and disrupting supply chains. The lessons are clear: economic progress must be inclusive and governance should be worker-friendly. Only through continuous dialogue, fair policies and trust-building can India ensure that its factories remain engines of growth rather than flashpoints of conflict.

// sātyāsyā pārāmām nidhānām //

**“ARISE, AWAKE,  
AND STOP NOT  
TILL THE GOAL  
IS REACHED.”  
-SWAMI  
VIVEKANANDA**

## Voting right at stake

THE clock is ticking for lakhs of people whose appeals against the deletion of their names from West Bengal's electoral rolls are pending in appellate tribunals.

The Supreme Court has refused to issue directions allowing aggrieved residents to vote, saying that their petition is “premature” and they must exhaust their remedies before the appellate authorities. The tribunals have their work cut out as two-phase polling will be held in the state on April 23 and 29.

From the outset, the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls in the state has been marked by a bitter confrontation between the ruling Trinamool Congress (TMC) and the Election Commission of India (ECI). The entire exercise has been under judicial scrutiny over the

past few months amid allegations of “politically motivated” deletions of voters' names. The onus is on the tribunals to expedite the adjudication process. Even though



many claims have already been dealt with, the scale of omissions and the anxiety among affected voters cannot be dismissed lightly. The right to vote, as the apex court noted, is not merely constitutional but deeply “sentimental” — a marker of belonging and

citizenship. When individuals fear disenfranchisement or, worse, detention, the issue transcends procedural technicalities. Transparency in deletions and swift disposal of appeals are essential to ensure that no eligible voter is left out.

Making matters worse, the Centre-State conflict has not remained confined to the SIR row. The arrest of Vinesh Chandel, co-founder of the Indian Political Action Committee (I-PAC) — a consultancy firm working for the TMC — by the Enforcement Directorate in a money-laundering case has emerged as a new flashpoint. With political tensions mounting by the day, free and fair polls in Bengal hinge on the credibility of Central institutions and the cooperation of the state authorities.

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# Census as a Solution to Many Problems

In a welfare state, the role of a census is considered very important. Centuries ago, in his work *\*Arthashastra\**, Kautilya also emphasized that if a state wishes to provide good governance, it must have a thorough understanding of its people. According to him, a state that does not count its population governs in darkness. Due to COVID-19 and certain other reasons, the disruption that had emerged in India's long-standing census process has finally cleared, and the census has formally begun again from the start of this month. Since India is the most populous country in the world, this exercise is naturally vast in scale.

More than three million enumerators, supervisors, and officials will spend months asking 33 questions to 1.4 billion Indians. Covering over 7,000 cities and more than 600,000 villages, this will be the largest administrative exercise in the world. One notable feature of this census is that it will be conducted entirely in digital form. All Indian citizens can also self-enumerate through a portal available in 16 languages. Its mascots have been named *\*Pragati\** (Progress) and *\*Vikas\** (Development), clearly reflecting the aspirations associated with the exercise.

The tradition of census-taking in India dates back to the pre-independence period. The first modern attempt was made during British rule between 1865 and 1872, though it was



not conducted simultaneously across all regions and lacked coordination among provinces. It was only in 1881 that the first synchronized census was carried out across undivided India. After independence, the first census was conducted in 1951, and since then, barring a few exceptions, the process has continued regularly.

Over time, the nature of census questions has also evolved. In 1872, there were only 17 questions, mostly limited to identifying "who lives where." By 1901, questions included proficiency in English, reflecting colonial priorities. By 2011, the census had expanded to include detailed data on migration history, fertility trends, work patterns, and disability. It is

therefore fair to say that the census reflects the emerging concerns and priorities of the state.

India could not conduct the 2021 census, largely due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which shifted priorities and made such a massive administrative exercise difficult. However, questions remain: by 2022, conditions had largely normalized, and there was scope to complete the process between 2023 and 2024, yet the required efforts were not made. The formal notification for the current census came in June 2025, and the process has begun 15 months later. While it may be said that "better late than never," justifying the delay is not easy.

For the past one and a

half decades, governance in India has continued to rely on data from the 2011 census, even though the country has undergone significant changes during this period. Fifteen years is a long time—millions of Indians have migrated, changed occupations, and moved from villages to cities. Yet, policy planning still relies on outdated classifications of rural and urban areas based on 2011 data. This outdated framework is not suitable for welfare schemes and public expenditure.

The consequences are not merely theoretical. Researchers and policymakers depend on census data to assess consumption expenditure, labor force participation, and social conditions. If the base

data itself is 15 years old, the resulting picture cannot reflect reality. Over time, such small discrepancies accumulate and can lead to serious distortions.

The 2027 census has much more at stake than just demographic data. One important aspect is the delimitation of parliamentary and assembly constituencies, for which the new census data will be crucial. India's political map is still based on an outdated scenario and does not adequately represent the aspirations of a changing nation. The new census offers an opportunity to correct this.

Another significant feature is the inclusion of caste enumeration for the first time since 1931. This issue is highly controversial. Supporters argue that without caste data, it is difficult to design effective welfare policies. Opponents, however, believe that it could deepen social divisions that the Constitution seeks to reduce. Both arguments have merit. The delay in the census may also partly be attributed to this dilemma over whether to proceed with caste enumeration.

In this context, it is important to remember that a society that does not measure its problems cannot solve them. While the delay in the census has created a vacuum in the foundation of policymaking that cannot be filled overnight, the exercise will at least provide the country with a mirror—one that is essential for charting the path forward.

## Delhi-Dehradun highway's green vision



THE inauguration of the Delhi-Dehradun Expressway marks a significant milestone in India's infrastructure journey, promising to compress travel time between the national capital and Uttarakhand's gateway city to under three hours. More than a feat of engineering, the project signals a shift in how highways are imagined. They are not merely roads, but also economic corridors linking regions, markets and opportunities. At one level, the benefits are immediate and tangible. Faster connectivity is expected to boost tourism to Dehradun and Mussoorie, ease congestion on existing routes and stimulate economic activity across western Uttar Pradesh. Districts like Saharanpur and Shamli, often bypassed in earlier development cycles, could see gains in logistics, warehousing and real estate. In that sense, the expressway fits squarely within the Centre's broader push for integrated, high-speed corridors under programmes like Bharatmala.

What sets this project apart is its attempt to reconcile development with ecological sensitivity. The elevated wildlife corridor through the Rajaji landscape,

complete with animal underpasses, reflects a growing recognition that infrastructure must adapt to nature, not the other way around. Karnataka's elephant corridors, linking Bandipur, Nagarhole and adjoining forests, similarly show how connectivity safeguards migration routes while reducing human-wildlife conflict. If effective over time, the new expressway could become a model for future projects in ecologically fragile zones.

However, concerns remain. Reports of last-minute construction fixes and earlier delays raise familiar questions about the quality of execution and the pressure of deadlines. Infrastructure must be judged not by inauguration timelines but by durability, safety and long-term environmental impact. Ultimately, the expressway embodies both promise and caution. It showcases India's ambition to build faster and smarter, but also underscores the need for rigorous standards and accountability. The true success of this project will lie in whether it sustains efficiency without compromising ecological and structural integrity.

## Ambedkar's Life Is His Message

The actions of great individuals themselves become their message. That is why people across the world show deep interest in the lives of great leaders. There is also a growing curiosity globally about the life and struggles of Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar. Reflecting on his relevance today, a popular saying comes to mind: "People love work, not skin." There is no doubt that Ambedkar was one of the most hardworking sons of India. From a very young age, he devoted himself entirely to intellectual pursuit. His grand vision, ambitious dreams, and relentless determination to build the capacity to achieve them have few parallels.

His father, Subedar Ramji, a follower of the Kabir tradition, taught him his first lesson—that if he wanted to free the so-called "untouchable" communities from social slavery, he would have to empower himself through knowledge. Only knowledge can counter knowledge. Understanding his father's intent, Ambedkar made education the goal of his life. However, untouchability and caste-based discrimination created obstacles at every step of his educational journey. In such an environment, passing the tenth grade itself was a remarkable achievement, and he was honored for it. He was the first student from the "untouchable" community to pass the tenth standard.

His remarkable academic achievements were the result of his continuous dedication to learning. Otherwise, his early academic record reflected that of an average student. He himself dispelled any notion of being a "born genius" in his interviews. In an interview published in \*Saptahik Navayug\* on April 13, 1947, he mentioned that he missed a second division in his B.A. by a few marks. In his intermediate exams, he had scored only 223 out of 600 marks. He remarked that if anyone had predicted, based on his academic results up to graduation, that he would go on to achieve such heights, they would have been considered mad. Yet, what mattered most was his choice of study,

the quality of his research, and its relevance to society. It was on the basis of his research findings that the Reserve Bank of India was established. Nobel laureate economist Amartya Sen has also credited Dr. Ambedkar's work for shaping the understanding of poverty.

Dr. Ambedkar was deeply concerned about national unity. He not only expressed his concerns but also advised against the partition of India on religious grounds. Through his book \*Thoughts on Pakistan\*, he tried to persuade both sides. He



urged Muhammad Ali Jinnah to find a solution through unity, warning that partition would lead to regret. Jinnah reportedly dismissed his views, saying, "I have read your book, Dr. Ambedkar; this is your opinion, not our decision." Ambedkar was farsighted—he had predicted that partition would not bring lasting peace or progress. Dividing populations would not resolve the problem, but his warnings went unheeded.

His concerns about India-Pakistan relations later proved to be accurate. Even today, there is a lack of trust, cooperation, and harmony between

the two countries. India continues to spend vast resources combating terrorism allegedly supported by Pakistan, while Pakistan too frequently engages in military posturing. Had the subcontinent remained united, the enormous expenditure on military resources could have been directed toward economic, intellectual, and social development.

To make the "untouchables" self-reliant and socially empowered, Dr. Ambedkar secured the right to separate electorates at the Round Table Conferences. Mahatma Gandhi opposed this, saying that the untouchables were dear to him and he would not allow their separation. The media of that time portrayed separate electorates as if Ambedkar was seeking a separate nation like Pakistan. Gandhi undertook a fast unto death in Yerwada Jail in Pune. Ambedkar came under immense pressure to save Gandhi's life. He faced a moral dilemma—whether to safeguard Gandhi's life or protect the rights of the oppressed communities. Eventually, the Poona Pact was reached, ensuring reserved representation in political, administrative, and public services. Unfortunately, the agreement was not implemented in the spirit it was intended. The promise that adequate representation would be achieved within ten years remains unfulfilled even today. Representation in higher education, the judiciary, medical and engineering fields, and top administrative positions remains minimal.

Just as India has faced the problem of caste discrimination, the United States struggled with racial discrimination. Through inclusive policies, African Americans were integrated into industries, media, arts, cinema, politics, sports, and music. In contrast, Dalits in India are still not adequately represented in the modern service sector. As a result, India has not fully realized its potential to become like the United States. While the country is developing, true progress requires balanced and inclusive growth. Providing equal opportunities to all citizens will accelerate nation-building.

## 'Nari shakti' law - Promise must meet practice

PRIME Minister Narendra Modi on Monday described the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam as a historic step that fulfils BR Ambedkar's vision and ends "decades of waiting" for women's political representation. The law, passed in 2023, provides for 33% reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and state Assemblies, with implementation expected around 2029 after delimitation. A special parliamentary session is planned from April 16 to 18 to pass the enabling amendments, including changes to the delimitation Act. It links women's reservation to a delimitation exercise that would redraw constituencies and expand the Lok Sabha from 543 to 816 seats, with 273 seats reserved for women. However, the proposal has triggered a sharp political divide over its design. Opposition parties support reservation but argue the government is using it as a pretext to push a broader delimitation agenda that could alter the country's political map based on the 2011 Census.

At the core of the reservation policy is the poor record on women's representation. Women currently make up only about 13-14% of Lok Sabha members, rising from nearly 5% in the early decades after Independence. In state Assemblies, the average is around 9%, with very few states crossing the 15-20% mark. This persistent gap highlights the distance between constitutional equality and political reality. In this view, the law is undeniably a long-overdue correction. Greater participation of women will reshape policymaking and deepen democracy.

However, concerns remain over delay and design. Linking its implementation to delimitation could postpone meaningful change and dilute its impact. There is also the concern that constitutional ideals are being used for political messaging rather than urgent reform. Ultimately, the measure will be judged by whether it delivers timely and genuine representation to women in our legislatures.



# Price hikes, outlook cuts - What airlines are doing as fuel costs surge

A surge in jet fuel prices driven by the U.S.-Israeli war on Iran has upended the global aviation industry, forcing airlines to raise fares and revise financial outlooks.

Jet fuel prices have soared from \$85 to \$90 per barrel to \$150 to \$200 per barrel in recent weeks, a financial hit for an industry where fuel accounts for up to a quarter of operating expenses.

Below is a list of how airlines are responding, in alphabetical order:

**Agean Airlines**

The Greek airline expects suspended Middle East flights and a spike in fuel prices to have a "notable impact" on its first-quarter results.

**Airasia X**

The Malaysian airline's executives said the company had cut 10% of flights across the group, with a surcharge of about 20% on fuel in general.

**Air France-KLM**

The airline group said it planned to increase long-haul ticket prices to address surging fuel costs, with cabin fares set to rise by 50 euros (\$58) per round trip.

**Air India**

The Indian flag carrier said it would revise its fuel surcharge from a flat domestic surcharge to a distance-based grid. It said surcharges on international routes did not compensate for the exponential rise in jet fuel prices.

**Air New Zealand**

The airline said on April 7 it would slash flights through May and June and hike fares, having been one of the first to announce broad increases to ticket prices when the conflict broke out. It also suspended its full-year earnings forecast due to fuel market volatility.

**Akasa Air**

India's Akasa Air said it was introducing a fuel surcharge ranging between 199 and 1,300 Indian rupees (\$2 to \$14) on domestic and international flights.

**Alaska Air**

The U.S. airline said it would increase fees for the first checked bag by \$5 and by \$10 for the second on its North American flights, as well as for its Hawaiian Airlines unit. It hiked prices for a third checked bag from \$50 to \$200.

**American Airlines**

The U.S. carrier said it would hike checked baggage fees by \$10 each for the first and second checked bags and by \$150 for the third checked bag on domestic and short-haul international flights. The airline also trimmed certain benefits for economy passengers.

It had earlier said it expected a \$400 million increase in first-quarter expenses due to the fuel prices.

**Cathay Pacific**

The Hong Kong airline said it would cut some flight from mid-May until the end of June, cancelling about 2% of its scheduled passenger flights, while its budget airline HK Express is cutting around 6 per cent of flights. The carrier previously said it would hike its fuel surcharge by 34 per cent across routes from April 1 and review them every two weeks.

**Cebu Air**

The Philippines-based airline said the sharp rise in fuel prices was a key concern and it would continue to review its pricing and network strategies to mitigate the impact.

**China Eastern Airlines**

The airline said it would raise fuel surcharges for domestic flights from April 5, with flights of 800km and below hit with a 60 yuan (\$9) surcharge and a 120 yuan surcharge for flights over 800km.

**Delta Air Lines**

Delta said it would cut capacity by around 3.5 percentage points from its original plan and raise fees for checked bags in an attempt to offset soaring jet fuel costs, with an increase of \$10 on the price of first and second checked bags and a \$50 increase on the third checked bag.

The U.S. airline pulled all planned capacity growth for the current quarter and forecast profit below Wall Street expectations. Delta CEO said it would hold off on updating the full-year outlook given uncertainty over how long the fuel price spike would last.

**Easyjet**

EasyJet CEO Kenton Jarvis said European consumers should expect higher ticket prices towards the end of summer, when existing fuel hedges come to an end.

**Frontier Airlines**

The U.S. airline is reviewing its full-year forecast as fuel prices have increased significantly since it issued the outlook.

**Greater Bay Airlines**

The Hong Kong-based company said it would raise fuel surcharges on most routes from April 1, while keeping them unchanged on mainland China and Japan routes.

Its surcharge for flights between Hong Kong and the Philippines will more than double, the carrier said.

**Hong Kong Airlines**

The airline said it would raise fuel surcharges by up to 35 per cent from March 12, with the sharpest increase

its estimated fuel bill for the second half of 2026 to A\$3.1 billion-A\$3.3 billion, from a previous A\$2.5 billion forecast.

**SAS**

The Scandinavian airline said it would cancel 1,000 flights in April because of high oil and jet fuel prices, after cancelling a "couple hundred" flights in March.

SAS, which had already increased flight prices, said that even if it tried to absorb the rising fuel costs, the price surge would still be a blow to the aviation industry.

**Spring Airlines**

The budget Chinese airline said it would raise fuel surcharges on domestic flights from April 5, with details to be announced later.

**Southwest Airlines**

The American carrier said it would hike checked baggage fees by \$10 for the first and second bags, raising costs to \$45 for the first bag and \$55 for the second.

**Tap**

The Portuguese airline said its price hikes would partially mitigate the impact of fuel price changes on its revenue.

**Thai Airways**

The Thailand-based carrier said it would raise fares by 10 per cent to 15 per cent to address rising fuel costs.

**Turkish Airlines, Lufthansa**

SunExpress, a joint venture between Turkish Airlines and Lufthansa, said it would impose a temporary fuel surcharge of 10 euros per passenger from May 1 on routes between Turkey and Europe. The surcharge will apply to bookings made on or after April 1 for departures on or after May 1.

Turkish Airlines said on April 10 it had decided not to distribute any dividend from its 2025 net profit, opting to retain earnings to preserve cash.

**T'way Air**

The South Korean low-cost carrier said on April 13 it plans to furlough some of its cabin crew without pay in May and June as part of its measures to address the impact of the war in the Middle East.

**United Airlines**

The U.S. airline is cutting unprofitable flights over the next two quarters as it prepares for oil prices to remain above \$100 until the end of 2027, CEO Scott Kirby said.

United has been able to raise fares without materially hurting bookings in response to the rapid increase in oil and jet fuel prices, Chief Commercial Officer Andrew Nocella said.

The carrier is also increasing first and second checked bag fees by \$10 for customers travelling in the U.S., Mexico and Canada and Latin America, it said in an e-mailed statement to Reuters.

**Vietjet**

The Vietnamese budget airline said it had adjusted flight frequency on selected routes due to potential fuel shortages.

**Vietnam Airlines**

The carrier plans to cancel 23 flights per week across domestic routes from April, Vietnam's aviation authority said, after the airline requested government assistance to remove an environmental tax on jet fuel.

**Virgin Atlantic**

The airline is adding fuel surcharges to fares but will still struggle to return to profitability this year, its CEO Corneel Koster told the Financial Times.

**Virgin Australia**

Virgin Australia said it was adjusting fares to reflect rising cost pressures across the aviation sector, which it said were being significantly exacerbated by the situation in the Middle East.

**Westjet**

The Canadian airline will add a C\$60 (\$43) fuel surcharge to some bookings and combine flights as costs soar, the Canadian Press reported.



on flights between Hong Kong and the Maldives, Bangladesh and Nepal, where charges would rise to HK\$384 (\$49) from HK\$284.

**IAG**

British Airways-owner IAG said on March 10 it did not plan to increase ticket prices immediately, as it has hedged much of its fuel for the short- to medium-term.

**Indigo**

India's biggest airline said it would introduce fuel charges on domestic and international flights from March 14, including a charge of 900 rupees for flights to the Middle East and a charge of 2,300 rupees for flights to Europe.

The company is also lobbying the Indian government to cut fuel taxes, sources told Reuters.

**Jetblue Airways**

The U.S.-based low-cost carrier said it was increasing fees for optional services such as checked baggage as it experiences "rising operating costs". Baggage prices will rise by either \$4 or \$9, it said.

**Korean Air**

The South Korean flag carrier will enter emergency management mode from April, as rising oil prices weigh on costs, a source with knowledge of the matter told Reuters. The airline plans to implement phased response measures based on oil price levels, and step up company-wide cost efficiency to offset surging fuel costs.

**Pakistan International Airlines**

The carrier said it would raise domestic flight fares by \$20 and international fares by up to \$100, citing higher fuel surcharges.

**Qantas Airways**

Australia's Qantas said it had delayed a planned A\$150 million (\$106 million) buyback and was raising

## Industries to bear Rs 3,000 crore loss amid Noida workers protest

### Noida

Noida protests that erupted on Monday have impacted about 80 per cent of the industries in the area, according to Sudhir Srivastava of the Noida Entrepreneurs Association.

Speaking with The Tribune, Srivastava said industries are facing about Rs 2,000 - Rs 3,000 loss per day due to the workers' protest in Noida. There are number of companies operating across Noida and each company is facing various kinds of losses.

"At the moment, manufacturing companies are bearing heavy losses, exporters are already facing delay of consignment due to Iran war and this protest adds more woes to the companies," he said.

Srivastava also said the Centre should keep the salary structure similar across India, as this will create a uniformity and won't force workers to move from one state to another.

He also emphasises that the Centre should make some effective policies under 'Make in India' campaign in order to



address the labour challenges and pay disparities. He noted that so far there has not been any response or support from the government.

The violent protest has disrupted the electronics manufacturing activities in Noida, with firms such as Dixon Technologies, Optimus Electronics, Lava International, OPPO, Vivo and Samsung, which manufacture smartphones and other consumer electronics in the area, facing challenges to operate.

The protest also hit the garment hub in Noida. As of March 2026, exports from the Noida apparel cluster were

expected to be around Rs 55,000 crore, making it one of India's biggest centers for clothing manufacture. With this protest, it is likely that garment industry is going to hit negatively with regard to revenue.

A fresh protest erupted in Noida's Sector 80 on Tuesday, as workers agitating over low wages clashed with police, with some resorting to stone-pelting. Police intervened to disperse the crowd, chasing away protesters and eventually clearing the area.

Before the situation turned violent, police officials had been trying to explain the proposed wage hike to workers, who were demanding a minimum monthly salary of Rs 20,000. Authorities later said that certain miscreants attempted to exploit the situation and incite unrest.

In the wake of the unrest, the Uttar Pradesh government has increased minimum wages across worker categories, with revised rates coming into effect retrospectively from April 1, officials said on Tuesday.

## Fuel price freeze: Rs 18/litre loss on petrol, Rs 35 on diesel

### New Delhi

Losses on petrol have widened to Rs 18 per litre and to Rs 35 on diesel as state-owned fuel retailers continue to keep pump prices frozen despite a sharp rise in input costs, sources said.

Despite prices being deregulated more than a decade back, state-owned Indian Oil Corporation (IOC), Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd (BPCL) and Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Ltd (HPCL) have not changed the retail petrol and diesel price since April 2022. Global crude oil prices have seen sharp fluctuations over this period - from above USD 100 per barrel following the Russia-Ukraine war, to easing to around USD 70 a barrel earlier this year, before surging again to about USD 120 last month after the US-Israel attacks on Iran triggered fresh supply concerns.

The three firms were incurring losses of about Rs 2,400 crore per day at the peak last month, which have since narrowed to around Rs 1,600 crore daily after the government cut excise duty on petrol and diesel by Rs 10 per litre each - a reduction that was not passed on to consumers but used to partly offset losses, industry sources said.

The losses in March have wiped away all gains they made in January/February, they said, adding the three firms are most likely to post losses in the January-March quarter.

Macquarie Group, in a report on 'India Fuel Retail', said, "At spot petrol-diesel pricing of USD 135-165 per barrel, we estimate India's oil marketing companies lose Rs 18 and Rs 35 per litre on petrol and diesel sales (respectively)."

Every USD 10 per barrel increase in crude adds roughly Rs 6 per litre to marketing losses, the report said.

The brokerage flagged a high likelihood of retail fuel price hikes after elections in key states like West Bengal and Tamil Nadu at the end of this month. "We see risk of higher pump prices post state elections in April." India, which imported about 88 per cent of its crude oil requirement in 2025, remains highly exposed to global price swings. Around 45 per cent of imports came from the Middle East, 35 per cent from Russia and 6 per cent from the United States. Despite this, the country continued to be a net exporter of key petroleum products, including diesel, petrol and aviation turbine fuel.

While the government cut excise duty on fuels by Rs 10 per litre in March, central levies have been on a declining trend and now stand at Rs 11.9 per litre on petrol and Rs 7.8 per litre on diesel.

Even a complete removal of excise duties would not fully offset OMC losses at current prices, the report noted.

## India's GDP to grow at 6.5% in FY27: IMF



### New Delhi

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) on Tuesday updated India's growth forecast for the fiscal year 2026-2027 to 6.5 per cent, an increase from the earlier estimate of 6.4 per cent made in January.

The IMF states that despite global uncertainty, India's growth forecast is still favorable. Growth for 2025 has been revised upward by 1.0 percentage points from October forecasts to 7.6 per cent, which reflects sustained momentum in the fourth quarter and better-than-expected performance in the second and third quarters of the fiscal year.

However, it cautioned that growing geopolitical tensions, especially the ongoing conflict in the Middle East, could impede the pace of the global economy and raise prices.

It noted that under the assumption of a limited conflict, global growth is projected at 3.1 per cent in 2026 and 3.2 per cent in

2027, below recent outcomes and well under pre-pandemic averages.

IMF highlighted that the global inflation is expected to tick up in 2026 and resume its decline in 2027. Pressures are concentrated in emerging market and developing economies, especially commodity importers with preexisting vulnerabilities.

Risks are decisively on the downside. A prolonged conflict, deeper geopolitical fragmentation, disappointment over AI-driven productivity, or renewed trade tensions could weaken growth and unsettle markets.

The IMF also outlined the impact of the conflict on global energy markets. Between August 2025 and March 2026, oil prices increased by 57.6 per cent, reaching USD 105.8 per barrel.

Disruptions in oil shipments across the Strait of Hormuz, a vital worldwide supply route, were the primary cause of the rise.

# Centre announces auction of government securities worth Rs 32,000 crore

## New Delhi

The Centre has notified the sale (re-issue) of government securities worth Rs 32,000 crore through an auction to be conducted by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI). This move is a part of the Centre's ongoing borrowing programme to meet fiscal requirements.

According to the notification issued by the Ministry of Finance, two government securities will be auctioned. These include a 6.36 per cent government security maturing in 2031 with a notified amount of Rs 21,000 crore, and a 6.90 per cent government security maturing in 2065 with a notified amount of Rs 11,000 crore.

The government also retains the option to accept additional subscriptions of up to Rs 2,000 crore for each security, depending on market response.

The auction will be conducted on April 17, 2026, at the RBI's Mumbai office through its electronic platform, E-Kuber.

Non-competitive bids will be accepted between 10.30 am and 11.00 am, while competitive bids can



be submitted until 11.30 am.

The results of the auction will be announced on the same day, and successful bidders will be required to make payments on April 20, 2026.

Up to 5 per cent of the notified amount will be

reserved for non-competitive bidders, including retail investors and eligible institutions, under a special scheme aimed at promoting wider participation in government securities.

Retail investors can participate either through authorised intermediaries or via the RBI's Retail Direct Gilt Account platform, subject to specified conditions.

The securities will carry half-yearly interest payments and will be redeemed at par on maturity. For the 2031 security, coupon payments will be made on August 16 and February 16 each year, while for the 2065 security, payments will be scheduled on April 15 and October 15.

Officials said the auction forms part of the government's broader market borrowing strategy and provides an opportunity for investors to participate in long-term sovereign instruments.

The issuance is expected to attract strong interest from institutional as well as retail investors, given the stable returns and sovereign backing of government securities.

## Passenger vehicle dispatches up 16% to 4.4 lakh units in March



## New Delhi

The domestic passenger vehicle deliveries from manufacturers to dealers increased 16 per cent year over year to 4,42,460 units in March 2026, according to the Industry association the Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers (SIAM) on Tuesday.

In March 2025, there were 3,81,358 passenger car dispatches while two-wheeler sales rose 19.3 per cent to 19,76,128 units last month as against 16,56,939 units in March last year, SIAM said in a statement.

Three-wheeler dispatches to

dealers were up 21.4 per cent last month at 76,273 units as against 62,813 units in the year-ago period, it added. Last year, as per SIAM data, the passenger vehicle sales in India reached an all-time high of 4.3 million units in the financial year 2024-25.

That marked a 2 per cent increase compared to the previous year, utility vehicles (UVs) had remained the key growth driver in the passenger vehicle segment. Their share in overall sales rose to 65 per cent in FY 2024-25, up from around 60 per cent in the previous year.

## Weak monsoon may hit pulses, soybean and cotton hardest; rice better cushioned by irrigation

## New Delhi

A below-normal monsoon forecast for 2026 could disproportionately hurt India's pulses, soybean and cotton output, as production of these crops is concentrated in states with relatively weaker irrigation coverage, according to a Moneycontrol analysis of crop concentration and irrigated area data.

The India Meteorological Department (IMD) on April 13 projected monsoon rainfall at 92 per cent of the long-period average (LPA), its weakest preliminary forecast in nearly 26 years. A deficient monsoon raises risks to sowing, yields and rural demand, while also adding pressure on food inflation.

While irrigated states may also face risks, with recharge lower and reservoirs not filling up for the rabi season, a larger challenge lies for states that rely more on the monsoon.

Reservoir levels were comfortable until April 2, with storage 27 per cent above normal, and only the eastern region was facing a shortage.

Among major crops, soybean appears most vulnerable. Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh together account for 83.6 per cent of India's soybean output. Maharashtra

alone contributes 48.3 per cent, but has irrigation coverage of only 43.3 per cent, below the national average of 59.9 per cent. Madhya Pradesh, which contributes 35.3 per cent, has higher irrigation at 60.2 per cent.

Cotton also faces elevated risk, with Maharashtra, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh accounting for 66.1 per cent of national output. Maharashtra, the single largest producer at 24.8 per cent, has relatively low irrigation at 43.3 per cent, while Gujarat has stronger irrigation coverage at 70.6 per cent.

Tur is the most exposed among pulses. Maharashtra and Karnataka together contribute 66.8 per cent of India's production, and both states have irrigation coverage of 43.3 per cent. Jharkhand, which contributes 7 per cent, has the weakest irrigation coverage among major producing states at 17.2 per cent.

At the aggregate level, pulses production remains highly vulnerable. Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh together account for 81.8 per cent of total pulses output. Of these, only Madhya Pradesh has irrigation above the national average.

# Biggest currency clampdown in decade risks backfiring for India

As the currency hit new lows amid the Iran war, the Reserve Bank of India forced local banks to unwind bearish bets across onshore and offshore markets. The lack of an immediate explanation rattled the lenders and investors, leaving them unsure of the RBI's intent and questioning its handling of risks, according to bankers, who asked not to be identified discussing client matters.

Since the curbs, the rupee has gained more than 2% to 92.66 per dollar as of Thursday — but that's come at a cost. Banks are staring at potential losses running into the hundreds of millions of dollars, according to Jefferies Financial Group Inc. Hedging costs have jumped, making it harder for investors to buy protection. Foreign investors, meanwhile, have slashed their bond holdings.

The tighter controls and abrupt announcement may fuel perceptions that India is backtracking on efforts to integrate with global markets. Those reforms — introduced after the 2013 taper tantrum, when the Federal Reserve's plan to scale back bond purchases triggered outflows from emerging markets — helped boost India's appeal and paved the way for its inclusion in JPMorgan Chase & Co.'s bond index in 2024.

The rupee market also expanded, with the currency gaining popularity in financial hubs such as London and Singapore. Now, it's more widely traded overseas than in India.

The degree of intervention and lack of clear signaling raise concerns about policy predictability and transparency, said Sanjay Guglani, chief investment officer at Singapore-based Silverdale Capital Pte Ltd., which manages about \$1.5 billion. He described the RBI's steps as discretionary, adding that “this raises the bar for rupee assets among offshore investors.”

**RBI Curbs Break Linkage Between Offshore, Onshore Markets | One-month forward points**

The measures started in late March, when the RBI capped banks' daily currency positions in local markets at \$100 million by April 10, sparking a scramble to unwind at least \$30 billion in arbitrage trades.

When that failed to halt the rupee's slide, the central bank extended the curbs to offshore derivatives days later, barring lenders from offering non-deliverable forwards, which allow investors to bet on the currency without holding it. Together, they amount to a coordinated push to flush out bearish rupee positions and speculative trades across the market.

Officials were targeting investors using NDFs to build short rupee positions, as well as banks running arbitrage trades — buying dollars onshore and selling offshore — to profit from price gaps. Together, they had amplified pressure on the rupee.

BofA Securities Inc. economists warned that the recent measures risk rolling back a decade of liberalization authorities have pursued to avoid a repeat of 2013. They “essentially break the link RBI had cultivated in the last decade,” the analysts led by Rahul Bajoria wrote in a note.

The experiences elsewhere offer a cautionary tale. China's 2015-17 squeeze on offshore yuan liquidity stabilized the currency but triggered funding spikes and unnerved global investors. Malaysia's 2016 clampdown on offshore ringgit trading curbed speculation while draining liquidity. In both cases, the moves carried reputational costs, underscoring the fine line India must navigate.

## Regulatory Risk

Some market participants say the sudden policy shifts are prompting them to reassess the risks of operating in the market.

Two senior foreign bankers said clients had questioned the RBI's seemingly arbitrary move. They also asked: if

toxic mix for an oil-importing economy with a persistent current-account deficit. Rising crude has inflated the import bill, while a global flight to safety has boosted the dollar. A two-week US-Iran ceasefire may offer some relief.

RBI Governor Sanjay Malhotra said Wednesday the central bank remains committed to deepening currency markets and internationalizing the rupee, and that the latest measures don't signal a shift in stance. In his first public remarks since the measures were introduced, he added that they're only temporary and will not remain in place forever.

The Finance Ministry has reached out to external experts for ideas to stabilize the rupee, according to a person with

through domestic banks, as long as it's in the deliverable market and not for speculation. They also don't prevent others from offshore trading of NDFs.

“Such measures are likely to create a wedge between offshore and onshore markets,” said Soumya Kanti Ghosh, chief economic adviser at State Bank of India and a member of the prime minister's economic advisory council. “This might create a vicious loop” where offshore premiums see gains, he added.

In recent years, regulators have repeatedly stepped in to cool market activity at a time when India is seeking a bigger place in global portfolios. A crackdown on equity derivatives tightened rules on short-term speculation by cutting the number of weekly index options expiries. Authorities stifled a once-buoyant onshore currency futures market in 2024.

Still, the trade-off between currency stability and an open market may be unavoidable in times of stress. RBI's Malhotra said FX volatility surged in the final weeks of March, with positions building up and arbitrage widening between non-deliverable and deliverable markets. Those linkages help price discovery in normal times, but not during periods of excessive volatility.

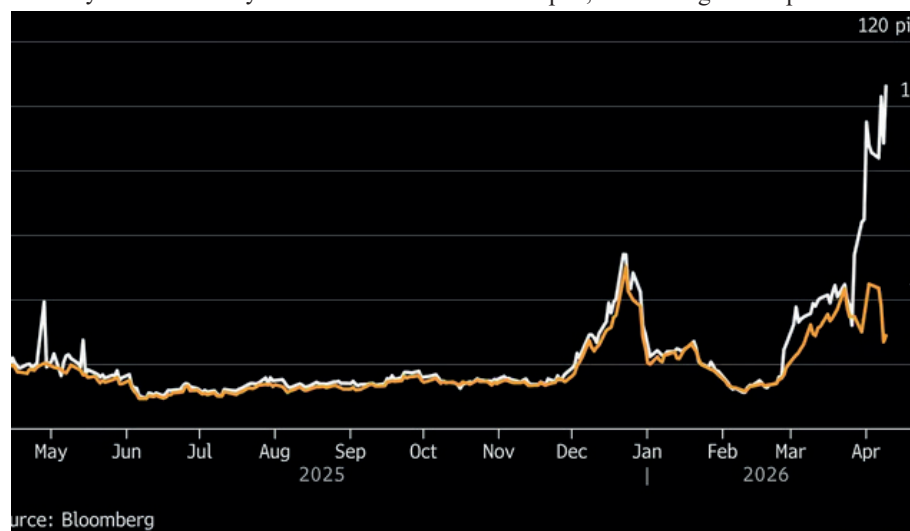
Former Securities and Exchange Board of India board member Ananth Narayan said there's been a substantial build-up of bets against the rupee over the past two years, some for hedging but others likely speculative. Excessive one-sided positioning can be destabilizing, he said, making the RBI's pushback understandable even if the timing is debatable.

Some analysts say the RBI's measures offer only limited relief for an economy facing a current-account deficit and capital outflows. High oil prices may worsen inflation and the deficit, accelerating the rupee's decline. The currency pressure isn't likely to dissipate soon given the war, said Rajeswari Sengupta, associate professor at Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research in Mumbai.

The policy's effectiveness depends on what's driving speculative bets. If trades were momentum-driven, they may unwind and help stabilize the rupee. But if they reflect deeper views about the outlook, investors may “lick their wounds and hold on,” and the fundamentals will re-assert themselves over time, said Jayanth R. Varma, a former member of the RBI Monetary Policy Committee.

For now, the NDF curbs have eroded liquidity and made hedging more difficult. The widening gap between onshore and offshore markets is already weighing on foreign demand for Indian bonds and could dent further inflows.

“Foreign investors need a reliable and predictable investment framework to maintain or increase their portfolio allocations to India,” said Rajeev De Mello, global macro portfolio manager at Gama Asset Management SA.



speculative trades had become as large and destabilizing as policymakers suggest, why was it allowed to build up in the first place? The bankers asked not to be identified discussing private matters.

Some foreign investors said they may stay away from India even after the current uncertainties ease, the bankers added.

One senior executive at a European bank also said it would be difficult to return to the NDF market even after the RBI lifts restrictions because of the heightened perception of regulatory risk. Participation may take years to recover, he said, asking not to be identified as those deliberations are private.

As a result of the new measures, offshore 12-month forward points — a gauge of hedging costs overseas — jumped to their highest level since 2013, while the onshore costs hit the highest since 2022. Foreign investors have cut almost \$1 billion from their holdings of index-eligible bonds.

Jefferies estimates banks could face losses of up to 50 billion rupees (\$539 million) from the forced unwinding. Bloomberg News previously reported that State Bank of India, the country's largest lender, had about \$5 billion in such positions and expects losses of around \$32 million.

The RBI's urgency reflects a deteriorating external backdrop, including higher US tariffs and a spike in energy prices after the Iran war — a

knowledge of the matter, who asked not to be identified to discuss confidential matters. This reflects the government's worry that foreign institutional investors may stay on the sidelines if depreciation risks increase, the person said.

An email to the Finance Ministry went unanswered, and the RBI didn't immediately respond to a request for comment on concerns about regulatory risks among foreign investors and bankers.

## RBI Intervention

Authorities have long been cautious about opening up to the NDF market, a key channel for speculative pressure during the 2013 taper tantrum. The RBI took a big step in 2020 by allowing local banks to trade the rupee in places like London and Singapore, and later let them offer these contracts to domestic clients. It has also, at times, informally urged banks to avoid building new offshore positions, but the latest measures are the most draconian yet.

The RBI, too, has used the offshore market for its own intervention. Over the past few months, its forward book has widened to \$78 billion in dollar liabilities as of February, some of which includes overseas bets. Those positions eventually need to be settled, creating fresh demand for dollars that can weigh on the local currency.

To be sure, the latest measures don't restrict foreign investors from hedging

# India–EU SDP and SAFE: New Delhi's Potential as a Non–EU Partner

India and the European Union (EU) formalised a landmark Security and Defense Partnership (SDP). For the EU, the SDP with India marks the diversification of its security partnerships, being the third such agreement after those with Japan and South Korea in the Indo-Pacific region. For New Delhi, the SDP serves as a strategic instrument to advance shared strategic interests, particularly defence-industrial cooperation with EU member states. The SDP enables India, as a non-EU partner, to access the €150 billion Security Action for Europe (SAFE) fund. It offers opportunities for New Delhi's 'Atmanirbharta' (self-reliance) programme, particularly through the co-development of defence (sub) systems, access to the EU's €150 billion SAFE fund via the 35 percent third-country component ceiling, and entry into the European defence supply chain through the CERTIDER registration system.

The SDP enables India, as a non-EU partner, to access the €150 billion Security Action for Europe (SAFE) fund.

India's existing bilateral defence-industrial cooperation with major European states lays the foundation for SAFE fund-based collaboration. Yet the partnership also presents structural challenges, including the EU's mandatory Design clause (Article 16), sovereignty-related risks arising from export controls, and a market architecture that inherently favours domestic European firms over non-EU partners such as India.

'ReArm Europe' and SAFE Provisions for Non-EU Partners

Since Russia's war against Ukraine, the EU's threat perceptions vis-à-vis Moscow have transformed into an existential challenge. The EU, in turn, has adopted the ReArm Europe Plan/

Readiness 2030, intended to build a long-term commitment to enhanced security. The five core pillars of the plan include: a SAFE financial instrument; boosting national defence funding for member states;



creating greater flexibility in EU instruments to support increased investment in defence; contributions from the European Investment Bank; and mobilising private capital to support start-ups and defence-industrial players. Among these five elements, the €150 billion SAFE fund is a key driver of deeper integration among Europe's defence industries and external strategic partners. The SAFE fund has been established for five years (2025–2030) under Article 122, utilising an emergency instrument to bypass the European Parliament and thereby vest decision-making authority in the European Council. Rising national-level defence spending among European states, along with the collaborative clause to onboard other member states to navigate EU financing rules, introduces a key limitation on the utilisation of SAFE funds.

By signing the SDP, India, as a non-EU member state, has effectively linked its ambitious defence-industrial base to the EU-based SAFE fund framework. SAFE fund support applies to at least two EU member states in

collaboration with an SDP partner, with a strict clause that components produced outside the EU may constitute no more than 35 percent of the end product's total cost. This provision ensures a

minimum 65 percent share for EU defence-industrial stakeholders.

The SAFE fund has been established for five years (2025–2030) under Article 122, utilising an emergency instrument to bypass the European Parliament and thereby vest decision-making authority in the European Council.

As a third party, India's private industry, MSMEs, and start-ups can unlock a range of defence contracts with Europe-based firms. Another equally important element is the Design Authority clause mentioned in Article 16 of the SAFE Regulation. The EU is careful to preserve its autonomy, ensuring that it does not rely on a non-EU country for permission to change, update, or replace its defence systems. Rather than viewing this as a hurdle, India could use this as a basis for co-development projects. The most effective approach would be a 'Nested Intellectual Property' model, in which Indian companies provide subsystems that remain Indian-owned and are integrated into a European platform to enable functionality. In

this arrangement, the main European contractor retains the 'Design Authority' for the overall system, ensuring compliance with EU regulations, while the Indian partner retains ownership of the core technical knowledge within the sub-system. This ensures that India is not merely a provider of replaceable materials or simple hardware, but a custodian of high-value, state-of-the-art technology essential for the platforms to operate efficiently.

To improve industrial exchanges, Indian branch offices or partners based in Europe must use the CERTIDER system, the EU's official register of approved defence companies, which controls access to supply chains within the EU. Registration in this system is mandatory for any company that wants to move sensitive goods across borders with ease (especially if they are European). For Indian companies, being CERTIDER-compliant allows hardware to be sent to EU member states and to partners such as Norway and Iceland under a general licence. This effectively places authorised Indian companies on a 'white list' of trusted groups, simplifying export and import procedures. This rule-based harmony is further strengthened by the value-added tax (VAT) exemption (Article 20 of the Council Regulations for SAFE) for shared purchases under the SAFE framework. Indian-made hardware exported through these channels is temporarily exempt from value-added tax (VAT), giving it an edge over traditional non-EU rivals and major defence exporters such as the United States and Israel. This price advantage could become a strong tool for India to replace existing suppliers and gain a larger market share.

Implications and Opportunities for New Delhi

The momentum of the India–EU defence-industrial partnership is boosted by Article 28 of the SAFE Regulation, which addresses 'Emergency Urgency' and fosters faster defence hardware procurement. In a crisis, shared purchases are rushed through, allowing private negotiations and bypassing the long process of publicly announcing contract bids. This creates a 'closed' environment to foster agile bureaucratic processes, which are paramount in times of crisis. Indian companies that have already built strong partnerships with major European contractors can move through these faster channels more easily than they could through the standard open bidding route.

India and the EU have officially launched negotiations for a Security of Information Agreement (SoIA), which would serve as the 'legal safeguards' for the exchange of sensitive and classified information, including defence-industrial secrets.

India and the EU have officially launched negotiations for a Security of Information Agreement (SoIA), which would serve as the 'legal safeguards' for the exchange of sensitive and classified information, including defence-industrial secrets. The SoIA will support the materialisation of the India–EU Defence Industry Forum within the SDP-based framework. The mechanism is relevant for 'Category 1' products, as explained in Article 1 of the SAFE Council Regulations, such as ammunition, drones, and artillery. At present, the EU's internal production capacity is lagging in meeting the 'emergency' needs to support military readiness. The Indian defence industry could help fill these capability gaps in defence production.

# LA's Mansion Tax- Lessons for Urban India

A few years ago, Los Angeles (LA), the United States' (US) second-largest city, enacted a new tax, United to House LA (Measure ULA), popularly nicknamed the 'Mansion Tax'. Approved by the City Council in November 2022 with 58 percent in favour and 42 percent against, and effective from 1 April 2023, Measure ULA levies an additional tax on property transactions valued at more than US\$ 5 million. It imposes a 4 percent tax on property sales priced between US\$ 5 million and US\$ 10 million, and a 5.5 percent tax on sales priced at US\$ 10 million or more. This 'Mansion Tax' is in addition to the 0.45 percent tax that LA already charges on all real estate transactions and applies to all types of real estate within the city, including single-family residences, commercial and office buildings, soundstages (soundproofed studio buildings), and hotels. It is typically paid by the seller and is not a tax on profit; rather, it is based entirely on the sale price.

The 'mansion tax' has a broad social objective: to reduce homelessness and increase Los Angeles's affordable housing stock.

## Policy Objective and Revenue Allocation

The 'mansion tax' has a broad social objective: to reduce homelessness and increase Los Angeles's affordable housing stock. This move was necessitated by rising homelessness, making LA the city with the largest street-dweller population in the United States. The tax is designed to allocate 70 percent of the revenue collected to fund the construction, rehabilitation, and preservation of affordable housing. The remaining 30 percent is devoted to an ambitious 'homelessness prevention programme', aimed at stabilising lower-income tenants, primarily older persons and people with disabilities, and preventing their displacement from their homes. This portion primarily subsidises tenants at risk of homelessness.

## Judicial Validation of the Tax

The tax was challenged in court by the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association (HJTA) and others, who argued that it violated both the state constitution and the city's charter. The judiciary, however, rejected HJTA's arguments, holding that voters had the constitutional authority to enact property transfer taxes. "In the published portion of this opinion," the judgment stated, "we conclude the passage of Measure ULA pursuant to a majority vote of the city's electorate was a valid exercise of the people's initiative power."

## Measurable Gains: Housing and

## Homelessness Outcomes

The Mansion Tax has proved an effective tool for addressing homelessness. By December 2025, the LA Housing Department reported collections of US\$ 1.03 billion. The Council recently approved more than US\$ 300 million for affordable housing projects, including the construction of 1,700 units, and for homelessness prevention, including an emergency rental assistance programme that helped them remain in their homes. The income support programme also provided



US\$ 20,000 in cash assistance to approximately 500 qualifying households, primarily rent-burdened seniors and people with disabilities at risk of eviction. Figures released by the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority showed that, before the Mansion Tax, homelessness had risen by 4.1 percent since 2020. In February 2022, Los Angeles County recorded 69,144 people experiencing homelessness. The city also saw an 8.7 percent increase in its sheltered population from 2020 levels, reaching 13,522 individuals in temporary housing. In 2025, there were 43,699 homeless people in LA, 25,445 fewer than in 2022. Chronic long-term homelessness dropped by 22 percent.

Despite the gains, the Mansion Tax has come under severe criticism for what opponents describe as its adverse impact on LA's real estate market. Overall construction across residential types has declined since its imposition.

## Market Distortions and Revenue Shortfalls

Despite the gains, the Mansion Tax has come under severe criticism for what opponents describe as its adverse impact on LA's real estate market. Overall construction across

residential types has declined since its imposition. The tax has also led luxury homeowners to opt for remodelling rather than selling, reducing turnover and exacerbating supply constraints. Compared to 2018–2019 levels, construction of affordable housing units fell by 70 percent. Construction permits for multifamily projects—the primary source of affordable housing in LA—have also declined by 27 percent, indicating waning developer interest.

Overall, the real estate sector experienced a 40 percent decline.

Reports indicate that LA may be foregoing the construction of about 1,900 units per year, including at least 160 affordable. The scenario has also negatively affected property tax collection in the city, with the City Council estimated to incur an annual revenue loss of US\$ 25 million. Moreover, the Mansion Tax has not generated the expected revenue. By the end of 2024, it had raised US\$ 480 million, falling well below the expected range of US\$ 600 million to US\$ 1.1 billion.

To stimulate the depressed housing market, several councillors proposed a substantial amendment to the Mansion Tax, introducing a 15-year exemption for new construction and hardship relief for victims of the 2025 Palisades wildfire. The Palisades wildfire destroyed 6,845 structures and damaged 975 others; 12 people lost their lives. The amendment was hotly debated but ultimately failed to pass in the City Council, resulting in continued political acrimony over the Mansion Tax.

## India's Affordable Housing Deficit and Fiscal Constraints

In India, it is evident that such a tax cannot be levied by cities. Unlike US cities, which are empowered to

legislate through city councils, Indian cities have no authority to devise or impose new taxes; this power rests with the states. Moreover, property transactions in India are already heavily taxed. Stamp duty is levied on property transactions at varying rates across the country, typically ranging between 5 and 7 percent of the total consideration. All property transactions are also subject to a registration charge of approximately 1 percent.

A ring-fenced tax on high-value property sales, directed entirely towards affordable housing in Indian cities, appears to be the need of the hour.

However, the money collected through stamp duty is not ring-fenced for affordable housing, nor is it collected with that objective in mind. Indian cities, like others around the world, therefore face an 'affordable housing problem', likely more acute than in developed countries due to the sheer scale of demand. Moreover, as housing is a 'state subject' under the Constitution of India, states are directly responsible for its provision. States, however, have fared poorly on this front. According to the Economic Survey 2025–26, the share of affordable housing units priced below INR 5 million declined in India's top eight cities from 52.4 percent in 2018 to 17 percent by 2025. On the other hand, demand for such housing is estimated to reach 30 million units by 2030. A CII–Knight Frank report put the figure at 31.2 million units by 2030, up from 10.1 million units currently.

It is evident that if the creation of affordable housing is left to market forces, production in this high-volume, low-profit sector will not occur at scale. The government would have to step in. The Government of India's PMAY (Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana) has achieved significant success in villages and smaller urban areas. However, land constraints have prevented PMAY-U (Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Urban) from succeeding in metros, where most of the affordable housing shortage is concentrated, as evident from the backlog reports cited above.

The situation strongly indicates the need for spatial re-engineering, combined with soft loans and strong coordination among the Government of India, state governments, parastatals, and urban local bodies (ULBs) to address this critical urban deficit. A ring-fenced tax on high-value property sales, directed entirely towards affordable housing in Indian cities, appears to be the need of the hour.

# India's CBDC Experiment: Digital Rupee, Developmental Ambition

India's approach to digital finance has followed a unique path. By using monetary infrastructure as a driver for economic change, the country has transitioned from traditional systems to a sophisticated digital ecosystem. The success of the Unified Payments Interface (UPI) established a foundation for this shift, moving digital transactions into the mainstream.

The current focus has expanded to include Central Bank Digital Currencies (CBDCs). Initial developments indicate that the digital rupee is being positioned as a functional layer within the existing financial framework. The Reserve Bank of India is currently in discussions with four to five central banks, spanning partners across Asia and advanced European economies, to build cross-border transaction systems using CBDCs. The proposed framework is expected to cover both wholesale and retail transactions. Separately, in February 2026, India's first CBDC-based Public Distribution System in Gujarat, using programmable digital currency to deliver subsidised grain to beneficiaries through an automated Grain ATM, was launched. Taken together, these two developments, one quietly diplomatic, the other publicly inaugurated, point to an Indian CBDC strategy that is beginning to acquire both domestic and international dimensions.

## Cross-Border Ambitions

The cross-border initiative deserves particular attention. India remains one of the world's largest recipients of inward remittances, with the United States contributing the largest share at 27.7 percent of total inflows, followed by the UAE at 19.2 percent, the United Kingdom at 10.5 percent, Saudi Arabia at 6.7 percent, and Singapore at 6 percent. The existing remittance infrastructure is layered, costly, and slow, involving multiple correspondent banks, compliance checks, and currency conversions that erode the value of transfers before they reach recipients.

For a country where remittance inflows constitute a meaningful share of household income, particularly in states like Kerala and Bihar, even marginal reductions in transfer costs would have distributional consequences at scale.

A CBDC-linked bilateral settlement framework would, in principle, compress many of these layers. By enabling direct settlement, it could reduce both the cost and the processing time of cross-border transactions significantly. For a country where remittance inflows constitute a meaningful share of household income,



particularly in states like Kerala and Bihar, even marginal reductions in transfer costs would have distributional consequences at scale. Whether the RBI's ongoing discussions translate into operational infrastructure remains to be seen, but the direction of travel is clear.

## Programming Money for Development

The Gujarat initiative introduces a different but equally significant dimension: programmable money as a tool for welfare delivery. The concept of programmable money, digital currency embedded with predefined rules and conditions that govern its use, has been discussed in central banking circles for several years. India appears to be among the first large economies to deploy it specifically within a public distribution context.

A CBDC-based PDS replaces the existing chain of physical vouchers, ration cards, and intermediary dealers with a system in which entitlements are encoded directly into the digital currency itself. The Annapurta Grain ATM, capable of dispensing 25 kilograms of grain in 35 seconds, is the physical endpoint of a transaction that begins with a programmable digital token. The token can only be redeemed for a specific quantity of a specific commodity at an authorised point. It cannot be diverted, resold, or siphoned by intermediaries.

Programmable CBDC does not eliminate all vectors of manipulation, but it does close several of them simultaneously. The transaction is logged, traceable, and conditional, three properties that the existing system cannot easily replicate.

Leakage within India's PDS has been a persistent and well-documented problem. Estimates of diversion, grain that never reaches its intended beneficiary, have been significant in certain states, though reforms over

the past decade have narrowed this gap. Programmable CBDC does not eliminate all vectors of manipulation, but it does close several of them simultaneously. The transaction is logged, traceable, and conditional, three properties that the existing system cannot easily replicate.

## Opportunity and Oversight

The potential advantages of programmable digital money extend well beyond food distribution. In theory, the same architecture could be applied to skill development disbursements that are released only after training completion, agricultural input subsidies that are redeemable only for seeds or fertilisers, or housing scheme tranches linked to verified construction milestones. The programmability removes discretion from the disbursement chain and with it, the opportunity for rent extraction at each node.

Efficiency gains are also plausible at the systemic level. Smart contracts executing conditional payments reduce the need for manual verification, inter-departmental reconciliation, and the bureaucratic overhead that currently accompanies large welfare programmes. Cross-border, the elimination of correspondent banking layers could reduce both cost and settlement time in ways that benefit both individual remittance recipients and institutional counterparties.

The programmability removes discretion from the disbursement chain and with it, the opportunity for rent extraction at each node.

Yet the complications are real and should not be understated. Programmable money, by design, restricts how funds can be used, and this restriction cuts both ways. A token redeemable only for chickpeas cannot be used to buy medicine in an emergency. The very feature that prevents diversion also limits the recipient's autonomy over their own entitlement. There is a meaningful difference between a welfare system that delivers efficiently and one that delivers on its own terms, without allowing beneficiaries to exercise judgment about their own needs.

Privacy concerns sit alongside autonomy ones. Every CBDC transaction is, in principle, traceable to its origin and destination. The same traceability that guards against money laundering and leakage also creates a detailed record of individual economic behaviour, one that resides within state-controlled infrastructure. The People's Bank of China has faced sustained criticism on precisely this point, with observers noting that programmability

and traceability, taken together, expand the central bank's capacity for financial surveillance well beyond what conventional currency permits. India's regulatory environment and democratic context differ significantly from China's, but the architecture raises comparable questions that deserve serious public deliberation.

Cybersecurity risk is a further consideration. In a CBDC infrastructure that integrates with national registries, property records, ration entitlements, and identity databases, the consequences of a successful attack expand accordingly. A breach is no longer merely a financial event. It becomes a welfare event, potentially affecting the food security of millions of beneficiaries simultaneously.

There is a meaningful difference between a welfare system that delivers efficiently and one that delivers on its own terms, without allowing beneficiaries to exercise judgment about their own needs.

## Promising, Not Proven

It would be premature to render a definitive verdict on India's CBDC trajectory. The cross-border initiative is still in discussion; the Gujarat PDS deployment is a pilot in a single state. The gap between a promising early experiment and a nationally scaled, operationally resilient system is considerable, and India's history with technology-led welfare reform includes both significant successes and well-documented implementation failures.

What is clear is that India is approaching CBDCs with a developmental logic rather than a purely financial one. Where many jurisdictions are debating digital currencies primarily in terms of monetary policy transmission or payment efficiency, India appears to be asking a different question: can programmable money solve problems that conventional welfare architecture has failed to solve for decades?

The current outlook is one of cautious optimism. While the underlying technology is robust, its adoption remains in the early stages, and the associated risks are manageable through a well-designed regulatory framework. For a country with India's scale of development challenges—the leakages to plug, the remittance corridors to cheapen, the last-mile delivery problems to solve—programmable digital money represents a genuinely promising avenue. Whether it proves to be a transformative one will depend less on the technology itself and more on the institutional capacity, regulatory discipline, and political will that surround it.

# How OP Nayyar shaped Asha Bhosle's career and ended her 'Lata phobia'

Asha Bhosle's voice shaped Bollywood music for eight decades and she credited much of it to her long-time collaborator OP Nayyar, with whom she later parted ways but never quite stopped acknowledging.

Nayyar, the maverick composer who chose not to work with Bhosle's elder sister, the more widely known Lata Mangeshkar, did not just record songs with Bhosle but played a key role in shaping her artistic identity.

The story is detailed in author Raju Bharatan's book "Asha Bhosle: A Musical Biography".

Bhosle, who died on Sunday at the age of 92, credited Nayyar for getting her rid of her "Lata phobia".

"Say what you like about the man but he made me. What was I in front of Lata Mangeshkar until Nayyar saab took me in hand? He rid me of my Lata phobia," Bhosle is quoted as saying in the book.

The phobia was real. Through the early 1950s, most music directors composed with Mangeshkar's voice as their reference point due to her unique pitch and varied range.

Bhosle, younger and less established, was expected to follow.

"In the case of most music directors, they would ask me to sing at a higher pitch and scale," she recalled.

Nayyar, who died at the age of 81 in 2007, saw something that the others missed.

"He used to point out that I had a very strong and smooth low register and also a very long breath. He would often use this quality, especially in the slow, sad and melancholic numbers," she said in the book.

Rather than pushing her toward Mangeshkar's strength, Nayyar composed music that was more attuned to Bhosle's style of singing.

The results defined an era.

From the foot-tapping "Leke pehla pehla pyaar", the 1956 "C.I.D." chartbuster featuring Bhosle alongside Mohammed Rafi and Shamshad Begum, to the sublime "Bahut shukriya badi



meherbani", the Rafi-Bhosle dream duet from "Ek Musafir Ek Haseena" (1962), Nayyar gave the pair some of Hindi cinema's most enduring melodies.

The hauntingly melancholic "Main shaayad tumhaare liye ajnabi hoon" and the evocative "Yehi woh jagah hai", both from "Yeh Raat Phir Na Aayegi" (1966), showcased what Nayyar could draw from Bhosle's voice at its most expressive.

Among Bhosle's personal favourites was "Jaadoogar saanwariyaa" from "Dhake Ki

Malmal" (1957). She called it a "truly beautiful song".

Another favourite was "Raaton ko chori chori" from "Mohabbat Zindagi Hai" (1966).

Where other composers were strict and expected singers to reproduce compositions exactly as it is, Nayyar actively invited Bhosle to stray.

"Often, to enjoy the fun at my expense, he would even suggest: 'Now you sing the next stanza the way you would like to,'" Bhosle recalled in the book.

"This was real fun and a

challenge. In my experience the majority of music directors stopped singers from improvisation. But never Nayyar saab." He also never let her feel inadequate about her Urdu.

"Nayyar saab had a very keen ear for the words of the song. He is very knowledgeable about Urdu and would try his utmost to ensure that every word in the song would stand out clearly," she said.

What makes this portrait of Nayyar even more striking is what Bhosle said about him as a performer. She placed him among an esteemed group of composers, alongside Madan Mohan, Roshan and S D Burman, who were "outstanding" singers in their own right.

"In fact, he used to be an outstanding singer—even better than the artistes who rendered his songs for playback," she said.

"That helped us singers to latch on, immediately, to the stress and the accents which gave the song its identity." And yet, by her own admission, neither she nor Rafi could fully match what they heard.

"I would even go to the extent of saying that neither Mohammed Rafi nor I could do cent per cent justice to the way Nayyar saab composed and sang his songs," Bhosle said.

"Small subtle pointing of words; a delicate bridge that was coloured with the feelings of the song—I honestly feel that all of us never exceeded 80 per cent of what Nayyarsaab expected from us." The duo later became estranged but musical record remains untouched by personal history.

"In my long career, I have sung with all the composers who had their distinct styles and excelled in their own branch of specializing. But there were just a few trendsetters. They not only brought in a different individual style but also influenced others to follow it. Nayyar was one such revolutionary trendsetter. He had many imitators but he remained the original," Bhosle said.

# Asha Bhosle: The culinary master behind a legendary voice

She had lent her voice to thousands of songs across seven decades, but when asked what she would have been had music not found her, Asha Bhosle had a ready answer — a cook.

This lesser-known facet of the legendary playback singer, who passed away in Mumbai on Sunday at the age of 92, was discussed at length in "Asha Bhosle: A Life in Music", a biography by author Ramya Sarma.

In the book's chapter "Her Culinary Skills", the author discussed the singer's lifelong passion for cooking and how it helped her deal with stress.

"I'd have cooked in four houses and made money," she is quoted as saying in the book.

The book revealed that Asha Bhosle's culinary reputation extended well beyond her family circle, with several film personalities recalling dishes she had cooked for them.

Members of the Kapoor family, for instance, were said to have continued requesting her paya curry, Goan fish curry and dal. Her kadhai gosht and biryani also had a devoted following.

"I find cooking de-stressing. Like with music, I love experimenting with flavours and ingredients. Like I sing all kinds of songs, I also cook all types of food. But I believe in being traditional — I like traditional clothing, traditional food,' and tends not to go beyond what



she does best, which is Indian vegetarian and non-vegetarian cuisine," the book says.

Even at 90-plus, the singer was perfectly willing to spend a few hours on her feet cooking for guests. She employed staff to handle daily meals, but reserved special dishes for herself when the occasion demanded.

Actor Poonam Dhillon was a frequent visitor to the Bhosle home and found the singer to be a "great cook and host".

"There is nothing else that relaxes her as much and gives her as much happiness — after all, she's not doing it for herself! She's cooking for her grandkids or her family or her friends. Other than being with her grandkids, that would probably be the most important thing for

her," the actor said.

The biography also chronicled how food became a binding force in Bhosle's personal life, especially her relationship with her late husband, music composer RD Burman.

The two, both accomplished kitchen hands, held friendly cooking competitions at home. Burman, described in the book as an impromptu chef, would cook with whatever he could find and still make it taste extraordinary.

Bhosle learned to make traditional Bengali prawn curry from Burman's grandmother, acquired a repertoire of Lucknowi specialities from lyricist Majrooh Sultanpuri's wife, and picked up the famed

Peshawari biryani recipe from none other than Raj Kapoor himself.

The singer's eclectic palate was on full display in the book. While her strength lay in Indian cuisine — particularly Maharashtrian, Goan and Bengali preparations — she also had an appreciation for Thai and Chinese food.

Her personal favourite meal, the biography noted, was a comforting plate of rice, dal and chilli pickle.

"I rarely go to bed without having a sweet. But I take care not to stuff myself. If I eat too much in the day, I skip dinner," said Bhosle.

Exercise was an unfamiliar idea to the singer, who considered music her form of

yoga.

The book also recounted a memorable kitchen encounter with superstar Rajesh Khanna, who once came to watch Bhosle cook. While she remained careful about adding too much ghee, something she had often described as the secret to her youthful spirit and glow, Khanna insisted she be more generous.

"Why just one, add three spoonfuls of ghee!" he once told her.

Bhosle's restaurant chain, Asha's, which operates in the Middle East and specialised in traditional North-western Indian cuisine, was a testament to how seriously she took her second passion.

She spent three months personally curating the menu and trained the chefs herself over a six-month period, drawing from the full range of regional Indian cooking she had absorbed over a lifetime.

"If a restaurant is to have my name, then it has to be successful, so I want the food to be exactly the way I cook it," Bhosle once told a journalist.

Cooking had also been Bhosle's refuge in grief. Following the death of her daughter Varsha in 2012, she channelled her pain into both music and the kitchen.

"Ashatai has always loved to cook and feed family and friends. Now, cooking has also become her way of dealing with the pain," recalled a relative in the book.

## Indian film industry mourns Asha Bhosle's death

Tributes poured in from across the film industry for legendary playback singer Asha Bhosle, who passed away at the age of 92 following multi-organ failure at Mumbai's Breach Candy Hospital on Sunday.

Celebrities, including veteran actor-politician Hema Malini, superstar Akshay Kumar, filmmaker Karan Johar, actors JR NTR and Vicky, paid homage to the late singer on social media.

"She has made many of my songs so popular with her unique voice and style. I had a very special relationship with both Lata ji and Asha ji, who have contributed in no small measure to my rise in the film industry," she wrote. It is a huge loss for Maharashtra and for the whole of India that can never be compensated or replaced ever." — Hema Malini

"No words can convey the loss I feel at Asha Bhosle ji's demise. Unki surily awaaz hamesha hamesha ke liye amar rahegi (Her melodious

voice will remain immortal forever).

Om Shanti." — Akshay Kumar

"A voice that defined not only one generation but across a span of cinematic universe. Your music will live on forever and we are blessed to experience the magic you have left behind." — Karan Johar

"Ashatai was, is and will always be a legend .. as a singer , as a persona and as a human being .. loved everything about her.. from her love of life, food and sense of humour and off course her first love .. her singing! I remember going for one of her recordings for a song that never released. I was 19 and she was amazing! What she made out of that simple melody was like watching a film... I told her then that if I could bring one tenth of what she gave the song I would be a great actor... the only word that comes to mind to describe her is Magnificent. Now and forever! RIP @asha.bhosle .. u will forever be Ashatai to us." —



Kajol

"She leaves behind a legacy that will live on for generations and will always be remembered with respect and love. My deepest condolences to her family." — Jr NTR.

"Your melodies, your kindness, your grace and warmth will live on forever." — Vicky Kaushal

"Her voice inspired me and awed me in equal measure. There was something magical about it, the way it could hold so many emotions at once with such ease. As an actor, I have always admired how effortlessly she could bring a song to life. Her music is timeless and will continue to stay with all of us. An irreplaceable legacy." — Manoj Bajpayee.

"Unforgettable... Asha ji." — Zoya Akhtar

"It's truly sad to learn about Asha Tai's passing. Her voice has been one of the pillars of Indian cinema and will continue to resonate world over for centuries to come... A talent that will outlive many, she always showered me with blessings and love and I will miss her. Rest in Peace Asha Tai. Love you." — Shah Rukh Khan

## Man United undone by errors as Leeds end drought at Old Trafford



Manchester United suffered a damaging 2-1 defeat at home to Leeds United. Leeds secured their first victory at Old Trafford since 1981. Defensive mistakes and a red card proving decisive in a heated contest.

The game turned in the first half, where Noah Okafor scored twice, capitalising on errors from Leny Yoro and Lisandro Martinez. United struggled defensively, particularly in dealing with aerial balls and second phases, allowing Leeds to take firm control early on.

The situation worsened shortly after the break when Martinez was sent off following a VAR review for pulling Dominic Calvert-Lewin's hair — a decision that sparked debate but left United with 10 men for most of the second half.

Despite that setback, United showed a response. Casemiro

pulled one back in the 69th minute with a header, and the hosts pushed forward late on. They came close to an equaliser through multiple aerial chances, including a header cleared off the line, but could not find a second goal.

United's issues were clear. Defensive organisation and individual errors cost them early, while their attacking threat only became effective once they shifted to a more direct approach late in the game.

For Leeds, the result is significant. It marks their first league win at Old Trafford in decades and boosts their chances of survival.

For United, currently third, it raises fresh concerns about consistency at a crucial stage in the race for Champions League qualification.

## Former Indian cricketer Mithali Raj, shuttler Srikanth Kidambi visit Tirumala Venkateswara Temple

### Tirupati

Former Indian cricketer Mithali Raj and current Indian badminton player Srikanth Kidambi visited the Tirumala Venkateswara Temple in Tirupati district on Wednesday.

Mithali offered prayers to Lord Sri Venkateswara Swamy at Tirumala during the Thomala Seva. Srikanth Kidambi, on the other hand, visited the temple along with his wife.

Mithali Raj, who captained the India women's cricket team from 2005 to 2022, is widely regarded as one of the greatest cricketers to have represented the country. Over a remarkable 23-year career, she became the leading run-scorer in women's ODIs with 7,805 runs and played a pivotal role in elevating the status of women's cricket in India.

Across formats, Mithali represented India in 333 matches and amassed 10,868 international runs, the highest by any player in women's international cricket. In recognition of her outstanding contributions to the game, she was recently honoured with the BCCI Lifetime Achievement Award for Women.

As captain, she guided India to two ICC Women's World Cup finals, inspiring a new generation of cricketers and leaving a lasting impact on the global rise of Indian

women's cricket.

Srikanth Kidambi, on the other hand, is set to form the core of India's men's squad for the upcoming 2026 Thomas and Uber Cup Finals to be held in Horsens, Denmark, from April 24 to May 3. The Badminton Association of India (BAI) has



selected a mix of experienced campaigners and in-form youngsters for the event.

India's men's team for the 2026 Thomas and Uber Cup Finals: Lakshya Sen, Ayush Shetty, Kidambi Srikanth, H. S. Prannoy, Kiran George, Satwiksairaj Rankireddy, Chirag Shetty, Hariharan Amsakarunan, M. R. Arjun, Dhruv Kapila.

Women's team: PV Sindhu, Unnati Hooda, Tanvi Sharma, Devika Sihag, Isharani Baruah, Treesa Jolly, Gayatri Gopichand Pullela, Kavipriya Selvam, Simran Singhi, Tanisha Crasto.

## FIFA World Cup fans face paying over \$100 for NJ transit rail fares

A final decision is expected to be made in the next few days, according to The Athletic, which first reported the proposal, citing people with knowledge of the matter.

New Jersey Transit is considering charging riders more than \$100 for return train tickets between New York's Penn Station and MetLife Stadium for World Cup games, according to a person familiar with the matter.

That would potentially be more than a seven-fold increase from its usual return ticket price for an adult.

"The ticket prices for match day travel have not been finalized," John Chartier, a spokesperson for NJ Transit, said in an emailed statement. "However, as the Governor has clearly stated, the cost for the eight matches will not be borne by our regular commuters. We can confirm that the overall cost to the agency is approximately \$48 million for the eight matches."

A spokesperson for the New York New Jersey Host Committee echoed that statement, saying prices aren't yet confirmed.



# Gorakhpur's Divya Singh becomes first Indian woman to reach Mount Everest Base Camp on a bicycle

Gorakhpur's Divya Singh has created history by becoming the first Indian woman to reach the Mount Everest Base Camp by bicycle and hoist the flag at an altitude of 17,560 feet.

On March 24, 2026, Divya became the first Indian woman--and the second woman globally--to reach the base camp of the world's highest peak, Mount Everest (at an altitude of 17,560 feet), by bicycle. At that time, the temperature at the Everest Base Camp stood at -12 degrees Celsius.

Divya's cycling expedition commenced on March 16, 2026, from Kathmandu. The journey took her through Kathmandu, Salleri, Surkhe, Phakding, Sagarmatha National Park, Namche Bazaar, Deboche, Pheriche, Lobuche, and Gorak Shep, before finally reaching the Mount Everest Base Camp. The entire cycling expedition took a total of 14 days.

Speaking to ANI, Divya shared that during her trek to Mount Everest Base Camp about a year and a half ago, she learned that no Indian woman had ever reached there by bicycle. This inspired her to take on the challenge herself.

"Ever since I got to know about Mount Everest, I have wanted to see it in person. About one and a half years ago, I went trekking to



the Mount Everest Base Camp and got to know that no woman has ever reached there by bicycle, and it occurred to me that I should try this," she said.

She said the journey was challenging due to high-altitude conditions, which caused issues like motion sickness, low oxygen levels, rapid heartbeat, and other physical difficulties.

"It was not easy; there were difficulties. When you reach high altitude, the entire environment changes. Your body reacts differently. You experience motion sickness, lack of oxygen, fast heartbeat and other environmental challenges," said Divya.

Divya's mentor, Kumar Singh, reiterated that although many people have reached Mount Everest Base Camp, no Indian woman had done so on a bicycle. Taking it as a challenge, Divya took it as a personal mission and began intense training, preparing her body for the challenge and ultimately achieving remarkable success.

Notably, Divya hails from the village of Banauda, under the post office of Amtoura, in the Piprauli Block of Gorakhpur District. Divya's father, Santraj Singh, is a farmer, while her mother, Urmila Singh, is a government school teacher.

# England captain Ben Stokes breaks silence on rift rumours with coach Brendon McCullum

England captain Ben Stokes has played down reports of disagreements with head coach Brendon McCullum but added that they do have different viewpoints at times.

British media reported that former New Zealand captain McCullum's relationship with test captain Stokes frayed during the recent 4-1 Ashes series defeat in Australia, though the duo have publicly backed each other.

"I am very confident in mine and Brendon's ability to be able to work together, because we've done it for such a long period of time now," Stokes said in an interview with the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB).

"But work together in a slightly different way. The main point of me and Brendon is our alignment towards winning things and making this team as good as they can be."



Since taking charge in 2022, McCullum and Stokes implemented an ultra-aggressive style of

play known as "Bazball", which has come under much scrutiny since England's Ashes defeat, which prompted the ECB to launch a thorough review into the team's preparations.

McCullum was retained as coach.

"Agreeing on every single thing, that's just impossible," Stokes said.

"We agree 95% of the time on things, but those 5% things that we might have different views on, we talk about it between each other and then we end up getting to the place where we want to get to.

"We put a lot of our heart and soul into this job. Brendon certainly has for the four years he's done it so far, and hopefully we'll still be together at the end of 2027, winning what we want to win."

England host New Zealand for a three-test series in June before eight limited-overs matches at home to India.

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