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BMC unveils 80,952-cr budget

Mumbai

The Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) on Wednesday tabled a Rs 80,952.56 crore budget for 2026-27, up 8.77 per cent from last year's Rs 74,427.41 crore outlay, aligning the civic body's spending priorities with the Mahayuti alliance's pre-civic poll promise of strengthening Mumbai's urban infrastructure.

No new big ticket infrastructure project was announced as the civic body focused on pushing the existing projects along with augmenting water supply in the city involving the Gargai Dam project — a pet project of Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis that was scrapped by former chief minister Uddhav Thackeray-led MVA government.

Presenting the budget before the standing committee, municipal commissioner Bhushan Gagrani said, "The budget reflects our commitment to strengthen Mumbai's civic infrastructure, improve essential services and ensuring a balanced and sustainable growth."

"Through disciplined financial management and sustained implementation, we have maintained fiscal stability while delivering significant progress across various sectors," added Gagrani.

"The budget is focused on the sectors of financial prudence, building trust and further through infrastructure, investing in health and education, sustainability and greening, emergency and disaster preparedness as well as ease of doing business alongside administrative efficiency," said Gagrani.

Capital expenditure accounts for 60 per cent of the total outlay, underscoring the civic body's focus on large infrastructure projects. Capital expenditure for 2026-27 has been pegged at Rs 48,164.28 crore, while revenue expenditure stands at Rs 32,698.44 crore. Of the total capital outlay, 42 per cent has been allocated to four key projects, the Mumbai Coastal Road (South), seven



waste water treatment facilities, the Goregaon Mulund Link Road and the ongoing road concretisation works.

Revenue income for 2026-27 is estimated at Rs 51,510.94 crore, a 19.35 per cent increase over the previous year's budget estimate. The civic body expects to close the year with a surplus of Rs 89.84 crore.

In a first, the BMC has announced plans to raise municipal green bonds to finance sustainable infrastructure projects such as waste water treatment and desalination plants. Civic sources said the BMC aims to generate between Rs 5,000 crore and Rs 10,000 crore through such bonds.

The civic body's reserve funds have witnessed a marginal dip. Fixed deposits stand at Rs 81,449.32 crore, of which Rs 44,826.23 crore is committed towards liabilities, including Provident Fund, pension, gratuity and contractor security deposits, leaving Rs 36,623.09 crore available for infrastructure works. The total size of infrastructure projects undertaken by the BMC stands at Rs 2.13 lakh crore. Last year, fixed deposits stood at Rs 81,774.42 crore.

Among key allocations, Rs 5,690 crore has been proposed for waste water treatment projects, Rs 5,520 crore for road concretisation, Rs 4,000 crore for the Mumbai Coastal Road Project

(Versova-Bhayander) and Rs 2,650 crore for the Goregaon Mulund Link Road. The bridges department has been allocated Rs 9,650 crore, a jump of over 70 per cent from last year's Rs 5,519 crore, while the roads and traffic department has been earmarked Rs 6,875 crore for 2026-27.

As of January 2026, the BMC generated Rs 34,033 crore in revenue for the ongoing fiscal that includes Rs 11,981 crore from compensation in lieu of octroi, Rs 8,138 crore from DP fees and premium and Rs 4,812 crore from property tax.

Amid concerns over deteriorating air quality, the allocation for the environment and climate change department has been doubled to Rs 159 crore from Rs 76 crore last year.

For water supply augmentation, Rs 6,475 crore has been allocated, including Rs 500 crore for the proposed desalination plant at Manori and Rs 437.51 crore for the Gargai Dam project.

On the health front, the budget outlines expansion of primary healthcare, preventive screening, TB control, maternal health services and PPP-based advanced treatment facilities across the city. AI-based diabetic retinopathy screening will be introduced at BMC dispensaries and Aapla Dawakhana centres.

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Sanjay Mangesh Bhaire Appointed Maharashtra Vice President of Digital Media Editors Journalists Association

Mumbai

Under the leadership of the association's central president, Raja Mane Saheb, the Digital Media Editors Journalists Association Maharashtra State has taken a significant step for the rights of digital journalists. Sanjay Mangesh Bhaire, an editor, has been selected as the Maharashtra Vice President. He has expressed heartfelt gratitude to central president Raja Mane Saheb for this honor.

Sanjay Mangesh Bhaire is recognized as an experienced journalist in the digital medium. Speaking about his selection, Bhaire said, "Under the visionary leadership of



respected Raja Mane Saheb, working for the rights, this association is tirelessly recognition, and welfare

of journalists in the digital medium. I have been a witness to the success achieved under your guidance in securing government advertisements and recognition for digital media. The work done through initiatives like Pratibimb Pratishtan for the education and health of journalists' families is truly inspiring."

Bhaire further stated, "I am grateful for the trust you have placed in me by assigning this important position. This role gives me an opportunity to work with even greater responsibility. I assure you that I will work with full dedication towards the objectives of the

association, for the welfare of digital journalists, and in accordance with your guidance." He expressed sincere thanks from the bottom of his heart for Raja Mane Saheb's affectionate trust and this honor.

The Digital Media Editors Journalists Association Maharashtra State serves as a platform for digital journalists and is consistently striving for government recognition, advertisements, and welfare schemes. With Sanjay Bhaire's leadership, new initiatives are expected to be implemented for digital journalists across Maharashtra.

BMC's Rs 7,457 crore health outlay lacks programme-wise clarity

Mumbai

The Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation has earmarked Rs 7,456.80 crore for the health sector in its 2026-27 budget, accounting for 9 per cent of the total Rs 80,952 crore civic outlay. While the allocation appears substantial on paper, the budget document offers little clarity on programme-specific spending across key public health initiatives.

Of the total health allocation, Rs 5,237.09 crore has been set aside for revenue expenditure and Rs 2,219.71 crore for capital works. The civic body has flagged hospital expansion, preventive health measures, digital health systems and public-private partnerships as focus areas. However, the budget does not provide a detailed break-up for individual schemes.

The much-publicised Zero Prescription Scheme—announced in 2023 by Deputy Chief Minister Eknath Shinde to ensure free availability of essential medicines in municipal hospitals—did not



find mention in the 2026-27 budget speech.

The scheme has already missed three implementation deadlines.

Municipal Commissioner Bhushan Gagrani acknowledged procurement challenges. While 979 scheduled medicines have been procured, tenders for 198 drugs failed due to poor

response or cancellations. Implant procurement has also stalled owing to specification mismatches. "This is a continuous process," Gagrani said, adding that only 50 to 60 per cent of items under a mega tender for 4,000 medical supplies have received bids.

On the infrastructure front, the budget projects completion of several major hospital works by December 2026, adding 4,556 new beds by 2027. These include redevelopments or new facilities at Kasturba, Bhagwati, K B Bhabha, Rajawadi, Siddharth, Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Super Specialty Hospital in Kandivali, Bhandup Multispecialty Hospital and Krantiveer Mahatma Jyotiba Phule Hospital in Vikhroli.

However, timelines remain staggered. Rajawadi Hospital's phased redevelopment will see only 600 of its proposed 1,020 beds operational by 2030, raising concerns over delays and cost escalations.

The civic body has also proposed

launching a Fit Mumbai initiative to promote healthy lifestyles through awareness campaigns at workplaces and public spaces, funded through corporate social responsibility. A Healthy Campus initiative is planned across 100 colleges. In addition, a centralised dashboard is being developed to track bed availability across hospitals and maternity homes.

Despite these announcements, several core public health areas lack explicit allocations. There is no clear budgetary break-up for malaria, dengue and chikungunya control programmes, even as Mumbai continues to witness seasonal outbreaks. Tuberculosis control, non-communicable disease programmes covering diabetes, hypertension and cancer, and family welfare services remain broadly outlined without fresh funding details. The Hindufridaysamrat

Balasaheb Thackeray Aapla Dawakhana clinics also see no specific new allocation.

Selection of Legal Advisory Board and Project Management Consultant for Mahim Marathi Nagar Redevelopment Project

Protection of Society's Interests a Top Priority

Mumbai, March 20, 2026

The Federation of Cooperative Housing Societies (Mahim Marathi Nagar) Limited has taken a significant decision to appoint a legal advisory board and Project Management Consultant in the backdrop of the redevelopment project. This move is expected to safeguard the interests of thousands of members from over 50 societies. According to an official letter issued by the federation, leading lawyer Ameet Mehta from Solicis Lex Advisory and Suren Desai of SP consultants have been appointed as the legal advisor & PMC respectively for this project.

The letter was issued by Federation President Nilesh Tare, bearing the signatures of Datta Gadkar (Secretary) and Ravindra Patil (Treasurer). Mahim Marathi Nagar is a prominent Marathi settlement in Mumbai's E Ward, located along General A.K. Vaidya Marg near Shriram Temple, where numerous cooperative housing societies are situated. With the average age of buildings in the area exceeding 40 years, the need for redevelopment has been underscored for several years. A detailed discussion on this topic took place during a special meeting on February 19, 2026 (date: 19/02/2026). The attending members unanimously approved the establishment of the legal advisory board. The primary objective of this board is to protect the rights of the societies and their members during the redevelopment process, scrutinize agreement documents, and ensure transparency in negotiations with builders.

In the letter, Federation



President Nilesh Tare stated, "The redevelopment project is an opportunity for us, but it involves numerous legal complexities. For this project under E Ward (2) (10), we are now selecting a legal advisory board. This board will safeguard the society's interests and secure appropriate benefits for the members." The letter further mentions that legal advisor

Ameet Mehta has extensive experience in successful cases related to redevelopment under the Maharashtra Co-operative Societies Act, 1960. His appointment is expected to expedite and secure the project process. The PMC is also very experienced to guide members which deserves so much attention.

In this context, disputes have arisen in recent years among

cooperative housing societies in Mumbai due to irregularities in the name of redevelopment. However, the societies in Mahim Marathi Nagar are coming together to take this step, which could serve as a model for other areas. The federation has clarified in the letter that the selection of the board was done transparently, with the participation of all office-bearers of the society. Regular reports will be submitted by the legal advisor for the members' benefit, and all members will be informed before making important decisions. This project is anticipated to provide residents of the Mahim area with new buildings equipped with modern amenities, including parking, lifts, a gym, and a community hall. Additionally, provisions for temporary accommodation and rent compensation will be made during the redevelopment period. Federation Treasurer Ravindra Patil said, "Our aim is not just redevelopment, but the long-term protection of members' interests. With the assistance of legal advisors, we will stay away from any kind of deception."

The E Ward office of the Mumbai Municipal Corporation has granted preliminary approval for the project, and the builder selection process is expected to commence soon. This decision has generated enthusiasm among the residents of the Marathi community in Mahim Marathi Nagar. The society's initiative could guide other cooperative housing societies as well. Overall, this decision is being viewed as a positive step in Mumbai's redevelopment sector.

PMLA case- ED attaches Anil Ambani's 'Abode' worth Rs 3,716 crore

Mumbai

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) on Wednesday said it has attached Reliance Group chairman Anil Ambani's Mumbai house, 'Abode', worth Rs 3,716 crore under the anti-money laundering law.

The attachment comes a day before Ambani, 66, is expected to appear before the federal probe agency here for his second round of questioning on Thursday in a case linked to the alleged bank loan fraud involving Reliance Communications (RCOM).

The luxurious house, which is stated to be 66-metre high with 17 floors, is located in the Pali Hill area of Mumbai.

A provisional order has been issued under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) to attach the multi-storeyed house in the case linked to an alleged bank fraud by



Ambani's group company RCOM, the federal probe agency said in a statement.

It stated that the value of the attached asset was Rs 3,716.83 crore.

A part of this property,

worth Rs 473.17 crore, was similarly attached by the ED in November, 2025.

RCOM and its group companies availed loans from domestic and foreign lenders with a total outstanding of Rs

40,185 crore, as per the ED.

The ED issues a provisional attachment order against an immovable or movable asset to prevent the accused from transacting, selling, or transferring it during the investigation.

Once the PMLA Adjudicating Authority confirms this order within the stipulated 180 days, the ED can confiscate the property and, in the case of a house, ask residents to vacate it.

Probe found that, among other assets, the Pali Hill property (Abode) was aggregated into the RiseE Trust, a private family trust of the members of Ambani's family.

"This was done to make it appear as though Mr Anil Ambani is not involved. The intended effect of this corporate restructuring was to ensure wealth preservation and resource generation by aggregation of the property in the RiseE Trust and shield it from the personal liabilities

of Mr Anil Ambani in the form of Personal Guarantees extended by him to lender banks against the loans sanctioned to RCOM," the agency claimed.

It added that the property was intended to be "beneficially" used and owned by the Anil Ambani family and not for the distressed public banks whose loans became non-performing assets (NPAs).

With the latest order, the total value of the attachment in this case stands at about Rs 15,700 crore.

Ambani first deposed before the ED in August 2025 and had his statement recorded under the PMLA.

The agency recently constituted a special investigation team to probe multiple cases of alleged bank fraud and linked financial irregularities against the Anil Dhirubhai Ambani Group (ADAG) on the directions of the Supreme Court.

Sunetra Pawar to contest Baramati Assembly by-election, Parth Pawar set for Rajya Sabha

Mumbai

The Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) has finalised Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Sunetra Pawar as its candidate for the Baramati Assembly by-election, which was held was NCP chief Ajit Pawar. The decision was taken during a key party meeting held on Tuesday, sources said.

Baramati assembly seat fell vacant after the sudden death of her husband and former Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar in a plane crash on January 28.

In the 2024 Assembly elections, Ajit Pawar won the Baramati seat by 1,00,899 votes over his nephew and NCP (SP) candidate Yugendra Pawar. He polled 1,81,132 votes while Yugendra polled 80,233 votes.



At the same meeting, the party leadership also finalised Parth Pawar's nomination to the Rajya Sabha.

He will replace his mother, Sunetra Pawar, in the Upper House. Sunetra has stepped in as the deputy chief minister in the Mahayuti government in Maharashtra following her husband's death.

Elections to seven Rajya Sabha vacancies in Maharashtra are scheduled to be held on

March 16.

Meanwhile, the NCP is set to elect its new national president on Thursday (February 26). The election has been scheduled to take place this evening at the Worli Dome in Mumbai, where party MLAs, MPs, and senior office bearers will be present.

Party sources confirmed that Sunetra Pawar's name will be formally approved as the national president. Her elevation comes in the wake of recent developments within the party following the death of Ajit Pawar in a plane crash, after which the leadership unanimously agreed on her name for the top organisational post.

Sunetra Pawar currently serves as Deputy Chief Minister in the government and is also the leader of the legislative party.

Rohit Pawar refuses to back down on allegations against DGCA in Ajit Pawar plane crash

Mumbai

NCP (SP) MLA Rohit Pawar on Wednesday attacked aviation regulator DGCA, claiming that it had earlier attempted to give aviation company VSR Ventures a "clean chit", but later admitted that the firm had flouted safety norms.

VSR Ventures Private Limited was the company that operated the ill-fated Learjet 45 aircraft (VT-SSK) plane which crashed near the Baramati airstrip in Pune district on January 28, killing Maharashtra deputy chief minister Ajit Pawar and four



others.

Speaking to reporters on the Vidhan Bhavan premises here, Pawar said the report issued by the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) at 1.36 pm on January 28 pm had stated that during the last regulatory audit conducted in February 2025, no "Level-I findings" were reported against VSR Ventures.

US slaps 126% preliminary duty on Indian solar imports

New Delhi

The US has imposed a hefty 126 per cent preliminary duty on solar imports from India, alleging that the products are being unfairly subsidised by New Delhi.

The move, which is expected to benefit US manufacturers but could also raise prices for consumers, follows a petition filed last year by a group of US solar companies seeking relief from what they termed “unfairly traded imports”.

Similar duties have also been slapped on Indonesia (104.38 per cent) and Laos (80.67 per cent), according to a factsheet issued by the US Commerce Department.

The Trump administration

has argued that the subsidies undermined domestic producers by allowing foreign companies to sell their goods in the US market at prices below their cost of production.

The US imported 57 per cent of its solar modules from India, Indonesia and Laos in the first half of 2025. After the US levied high duties on four South-East Asian nations that had previously accounted for a majority of the imports, some developers switched to obtaining panels from that region, as per the trade data.

Reacting sharply, Congress MP Jairam Ramesh posted on X, “It is quite extraordinary that the US has just imposed 125.87 per cent



duty on the import of solar modules from India. What does this say of President Trump’s commitment in letter and spirit to the India-US trade deal so much praised and applauded by his good friend in New Delhi

as opening doors for India’s exports to the US?”

Jairam alleged that the deal was “distinctly one-sided”. “India’s imports from the US will be freed up, but exports to the US will be subject to the whims and

fancies of the US President. The only way forward is: India must be bold and put the deal on hold.”

Meanwhile, the shares of solar energy companies like Waaree Energies, Premier Energies and Vikram Solar were trading with significant losses in the early trade on Wednesday after the development.

Waaree Energies plunged as much as 14.2 per cent to Rs 2,591.1 on the NSE. Premier Energies shares also fell 10 per cent at Rs 699.35 apiece. However, the stock saw recovery later. Vikram Solar shares plummeted over 7.5 per cent to Rs 171 apiece in the early trade.

Class 10 admit cards accompanied by pass certificates can be used as ID: SC in West Bengal SIR

New Delhi

The Supreme Court on Wednesday clarified that Class 10 admit card accompanied by pass certificate can be produced as supplementary documents for identity verification in the ongoing Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls in West Bengal.

A bench led by CJI Surya Kant passed the order after senior advocate DS Naidu mentioned the matter. Naidu sought clarification if such admit cards can be permitted as a standalone identity document.

SC refuses to ban or change film title ‘Yadav Ji ki Love Story’

The Supreme Court on Wednesday dismissed a petition seeking a ban or a change in the title of the upcoming film “Yadav Ji ki Love Story”, saying the name didn’t portray the Yadav community in poor light.

A bench led by Justice BV Nagarathna rejected the petition filed by the chief of the Vishwa Yadav Parishad.

After perusing the material on record, the bench noted that the main grievance was that the name of the film reflected the Yadav community in bad light in the society.

SC refuses to entertain a plea challenging validity of certain

provisions of BNSS

The Supreme Court on Wednesday dismissed a petition challenging the constitutional validity of certain provisions of the BNSS that allow appointment of serving or retired judicial officers as directors, and serving judicial officers as deputy directors of prosecution and assistant directors of prosecution.

A bench led by CJI Surya Kant said the petition filed by petitioner Subesh PS was misconceived and had no legal basis.

The petitioner had challenged the validity of provisions contained in Section 20 sub-clauses (2)(a) & (2)(b) of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023 (BNSS).

SC stays trial in money laundering case against Jharkhand CM Hemant Soren

The Supreme Court on Wednesday stayed the trial in a money laundering case against Jharkhand Chief Minister Hemant Soren.

A bench led by Chief Justice of India Surya Kant issued notice to the Enforcement Directorate (ED) on Soren’s plea seeking quashing of the case. Soren has also challenged the repetitive summons issued to him by ED.

Quietly slipped off to Israel after my challenge to scrap US deal: Rahul’s dig at PM Modi

New Delhi

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Wednesday took a swipe at Prime Minister Narendra Modi, saying it has been more than 24 hours since he challenged the PM to scrap the India-US interim trade deal and once again, he (Modi) has “quietly slipped off to Israel”.

In a post in Hindi on X, Gandhi said, “Narendra ‘Surrender’ Modi, it’s been more than 24 hours since I challenged you to cancel the US trade deal — and once again, you’ve quietly slipped off to Israel.”

“At least once, you’ve already ‘danced and sung’ in Israel at Epstein’s behest — so this time, on whose orders will you striking a deal against the country’s interests and return?” the leader of opposition in Lok Sabha said.

Speaking in Bhopal, Gandhi on Tuesday had said the Indo-US interim trade deal was sealed under pressure and dared Prime Minister Modi to scrap the “anti-farmer” agreement, following the US Supreme Court ruling.

Addressing the ‘Kisan Mahachaupal’ rally, the former Congress chief had described the agreement as “an arrow in the heart of farmers”.

“After the US Supreme Court ruling on the trade deal (global



tariffs), I challenge PM Modi to scrap it if he has courage...but he won’t be able to do so,” Gandhi had said.

In a major setback to Trump’s pivotal economic agenda for his second term, the US Supreme Court, in a 6-3 verdict, ruled that the tariffs imposed by the president on nations around the world were illegal and that he had exceeded his authority when he imposed the sweeping levies.

Gandhi has alleged that the prime minister approved the agreement under external pressure linked to the threat of releasing “Epstein files” and an ongoing criminal case involving industrialist Gautam Adani in the US.

'Won't allow anyone to defame judiciary': CJI Kant on NCERT Class 8 textbook row

New Delhi

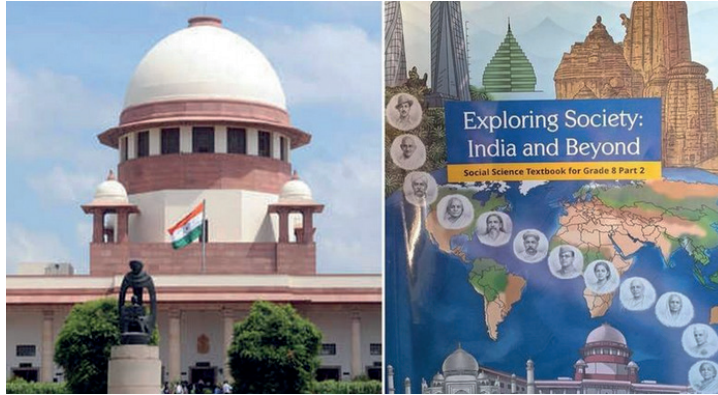
Taking strong exception to a chapter on judicial corruption in an NCERT Class 8 textbook, Chief Justice of India Surya Kant on Wednesday asserted that nobody on the earth would be allowed to defame the Judiciary and taint its integrity.

"I will not allow anyone to defame the institution. I know how to deal with it... It seems to be a calculated move," Chief Justice of India Surya Kant said after senior counsel Kapil Sibal mentioned the issue, requesting him to take cognisance of the issue.

The matter will be taken up for hearing by the CJI-led Bench at 10:30 am on Thursday.

Flanked by senior advocates Abhishek Manu Singhvi, Mukul Rohatgi and others, Sibal raised the issue before a Bench of CJI Kant, Justice Joymalya Bagchi and Justice Vipul M Pancholi as soon as the Bench assembled to initiate the day's proceedings.

"We are deeply disturbed as members of this institution to find that children of Class 8 students are being



taught about corruption in the judiciary. It is part of the NCERT. We have great stake in the institution; it is entirely scandalous. We have the copies of the book," Sibal submitted before the Bench.

"I can assure all of you. I am fully aware of it," the CJI told the senior lawyers.

As Sibal urged the Bench to take suo motu cognisance of the matter, the CJI said, "Wait for a day. This is definitely concerning the entire institution. The Bar and the Bench are perturbed. Every stakeholder in the system is really perturbed; I am receiving lots of calls and messages. There are judges of high courts who are perturbed. Since you have mentioned, I am informing you, I have already passed

an order and am taking the matter suo motu.

"I will not allow anyone on the Earth to taint the integrity of the institution and defame the institution. At any cost, I will not permit it. Whosoever high it may be, the law will take its course. I know how to deal with it," CJI said.

"It seems to be a very calculated and deep-rooted measure to...we don't want to say anything more...I am aware and I have done my duty," the CJI said as he thanked Sibal and Singhvi for bringing the issue to his notice.

Singhvi said the Judiciary was selectively targeted and that there was not a word about corruption in bureaucracy, politics, public

life and other institutions.

Justice Bagchi pointed out that "Constitutional integrity to the basic structure is missing in the structure of the book."

The newly released social science textbook for Class 8 published by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) has introduced a section on "Corruption in the Judiciary" and also mentions pending cases in the chapter titled 'The Role of the Judiciary in Our Society'.

The Part II of the NCERT Social Science Textbook for Class 8 was released on February 23 after a huge delay. The section on "Corruption in the Judiciary" stated that judges are bound by a code of conduct that governs not only their behaviour in court but also their conduct outside it.

The chapter highlighted the judiciary's internal accountability mechanisms and refers to the established procedure for receiving complaints through the Centralised Public Grievance Redress and

Monitoring System (CPGRAMS). According to the book, more than 1,600 complaints were received through this mechanism between 2017 and 2021.

It quoted former CJI BR Gavai, who in July 2025, said, "However, the path to rebuilding this trust lies in the swift, decisive and transparent action taken to address and resolve these issues...Transparency and accountability are democratic virtues."

The chapter on judiciary also listed the approximate number of pending cases in the Supreme Court (81,000), high courts (62,40,000), and district and subordinate courts (4,70,00,000).

"While the number of pending cases shows a part of the problem, the real issue is the long time that it takes to resolve a case. In the high courts, for example, nearly three-fourths of pending cases have been unresolved for over a year, and half of them have been pending for more than three years. Some cases have remained unresolved for more than 50 years!" read the chapter.

India and Nepal sign MoU to strengthen cooperation in forests, wildlife

New Delhi

The Union Environment Ministry on Wednesday signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Ministry of Forests and Environment, Government of Nepal. The aim was to promote bilateral cooperation in the areas of forests, wildlife, environment, biodiversity conservation and climate change, including restoration of wildlife corridors and interlinking areas, and exchange of knowledge, technical expertise and best practices.

India and Nepal have established extensive networks of protected areas in their respective territories. Both countries are also parties to several multilateral environmental agreements and conventions. In view of the shared ecosystems and transboundary wildlife habitats, a need was felt to further

strengthen coordination and cooperation between the two governments in the fields of forests, wildlife, environment, biodiversity conservation and climate change.

The MoU envisages cooperation in formulation of biodiversity conservation strategies at the landscape level with emphasis on key species such as elephant, Gangetic dolphin, rhinoceros, snow leopard, tiger and vultures. It also provides for strengthened forest and protected area management; restoration of corridors and other interlinking areas towards creation of transboundary conservation landscapes; addressing biodiversity conservation threats; combating forest and wildlife crime; strengthening the capacity of frontline staff of enforcement agencies; and promoting smart green infrastructure in biodiversity hotspots.

Shiv Sena MP Shrikant Shinde to head India-Indonesia Parliamentary Friendship Group

Mumbai

Shiv Sena MP Dr. Shrikant Shinde has been appointed to lead the India-Indonesia Parliamentary Friendship Group, a move aimed at strengthening legislative and diplomatic engagement between the two countries.

Shinde, who represents Kalyan in Maharashtra, said the responsibility was a matter of "immense pride" and an opportunity to deepen India's outreach on the global stage.

He also added that the Parliamentary Friendship Group

would serve as a platform to strengthen democratic dialogue and expand cooperation in cultural, economic and social sectors between India and Indonesia.

The India-Indonesia Parliamentary Friendship Group is part of a broader mechanism through which Members

of Parliament from both countries engage in structured exchanges, discuss legislative practices and promote people-to-people ties.

At 39, Shinde will be among the youngest MPs to head such a parliamentary delegation.



PM Modi, Netanyahu Discuss Wide Range Of Issues Aimed At Boosting Bilateral Ties

Jerusalem

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Israeli counterpart Benjamin Netanyahu on Wednesday held an "excellent" meeting during which they discussed a wide range of issues aimed at boosting bilateral ties and key developments in the region.

Modi, who is visiting Israel for the second time in nine years, was received by Netanyahu and his wife Sara at the airport. The Prime Minister received a red-carpet welcome and a guard of honour at the Ben Gurion International Airport. The two leaders held a private meeting at the airport after the welcoming ceremony.

"Had an excellent meeting with Prime Minister Netanyahu. Expressed gratitude to him for the warm welcome earlier in the day. It is a delight to be back in Israel after 9 years," Modi said in a post on 'X'.

We discussed a wide range of subjects aimed at boosting bilateral ties. Sectors such as technology, water management, agriculture, talent partnership and more offer immense scope for close collaboration. We also discussed key developments in the region," he said.

Modi earlier said he was looking forward to "engaging in bilateral discussions and fruitful outcomes that strengthen the India-Israel friendship".

The Prime Minister said he



was "deeply touched by the warm welcome extended by my friend, PM Netanyahu. May the India-Israel friendship continue to soar higher!"

Netanyahu said he and Modi share a "close personal relationship, speak often, and I believe that the deep friendship between us powerfully

reflects on the ties between our two countries."

"Tomorrow we will visit Yad Vashem, and afterwards hold another meeting together with our teams, during which we will sign a series of agreements in the economic, security, and diplomatic spheres that will further advance cooperation between Israel and India," he added.

When Modi arrived at the Hotel King David in Jerusalem, he was welcomed by the members of the Indian community, which included Indian-origin Jews, students, professionals and workers.

Indian and Israeli artists presented colourful cultural performances, including traditional Thiruvathira dance recital from Kerala, Israeli folk dance Hava Nagila and Rajasthan's Ghoomer. Specially-abled singers also performed on the occasion. Modi's visit assumed greater significance as it is taking place amid the ongoing tensions in the Middle East, including deteriorating ties between the US and Iran.

The India-Israel relationship was elevated to the level of a strategic partnership during his first visit to that country in July 2017. There has been an upswing in India-Israel ties in the last few years, including in areas such as defence, scientific research, cybersecurity and innovation.

'El Mencho' Killing A Blow To Mexican-Chinese Drug Cartel Nexus In Indian Waters: Experts

New Delhi

Following the elimination of Mexican drug lord Nemesio Ruben Oseguera Cervantes, known as "El Mencho," experts from India's security establishment believe the incident might have broken a major connection between Mexican-Chinese drug kingpins who were utilising the Indian sea route to transport drugs.

According to experts, the elimination of the drug lord on Sunday helped Indian agencies fight a major drug cartel from establishing its manufacturing units in India.

"As far as the Mexico-China nexus is concerned,

synthetic chemicals used for making Methamphetamine drugs are found in China and these chemicals were going to Mexico in a big way using the India sea route," Sanjay Kumar Singh, former deputy director general (operation) of the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) told Wednesday.

Asserting that Mexico is better known for manufacturing cocaine, Singh said, "India is not a big consumer of Mexican drugs. However, the Mexican drugs find their destination in other countries like Australia and others using the India sea route."

Singh said that in October 2024, the NCB busted a clandestine methamphetamine manufacturing laboratory linked to a major Mexican drug cartel operating out of an industrial area in Greater Noida and arrested five people, including a Mexican national connected to Mexico's JNGC drug cartel.

Investigations revealed that the arrested Mexican national was sent to India to set up the factory and ensure the purity of the manufactured drug before exporting it.

The operation found about 95 kg of methamphetamine in solid and liquid forms, chemicals

like acetone, sodium hydroxide, methylene chloride, premium grade ethanol, toluene, red phosphorous and ethyl acetate for manufacturing.

The senior NCB official said that Indian security agencies did not find any major availability of Mexican drugs in the country until 2023. "I was in the NCB till 2023. In fact, during my stint, I have not come across any such Mexican cartel," Singh said.

On November 25, 2024, the Indian Coast Guard (ICG) apprehended a Myanmar fishing boat 'Soe Wai Yan Htoo', carrying approx. 5,500 kgs of prohibited drug

Methamphetamine along with one portable Inmarsat Satellite phone in the Andaman seas.

An ICG Dornier aircraft, while on a reconnaissance sortie, detected a boat operating in a suspicious manner. The information was passed on to the Joint Operation Centre, which subsequently deployed a Fast Patrol Vessel from Sri Vijaya Puram to intercept the suspicious boat.

Valued at an estimated Rs 6,000 crore, the seizure provided the first concrete evidence that El Mencho's Jalisco New Generation Cartel (JNGC) had expanded its footprint into Indian waters.

Construction Projects to Be Monitored Through 'IoT-AI' – CM Fadnavis

Mumbai

To ensure effective and transparent supervision of all construction projects in Mumbai, instructions have been issued to develop an IoT (Internet of Things) and Artificial Intelligence-based monitoring system. Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis informed the Legislative Council during Question Hour that clear directives have been given to the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai (BMC) to establish a dynamic, real-time monitoring system to ensure 100 percent control and supervision over all construction projects.

The question was raised by member Kiran Sarnaik, while supplementary questions were asked by members Abhijit Wanjari and Dhiraj Lingade.

Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis



stated that the IoT-AI system is currently being partially implemented in some projects, and it will now be expanded to cover all construction projects across the city. Considering the rapid growth of infrastructure and building projects in Mumbai, maintaining transparent, technology-driven, and continuous monitoring is essential.

He further explained that this new system will enable uniform oversight of both government and private construction activities. Through digital monitoring, authorities will be able to track construction quality and compliance with safety regulations. Any irregularities or violations will be immediately detected, enabling prompt action against those responsible.

Strict action will be taken to those who found to be causing pollution - Pankaja Munde

Providing additional information, Environment and Climate Change Minister Pankaja Munde stated that the authenticity of data related to pollution and dust generated from construction activities must be verified through official mechanisms. She noted that a significant amount of

debris is generated from construction activities in Mumbai, and a concrete action plan for processing this debris will be prepared within the next three to six months.

She further mentioned that extensive monitoring systems are already operational at several locations in Mumbai to assess air quality. Additionally, the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai has initiated the process of installing independent monitoring devices at every major construction site, which will be directly connected to a central dashboard.

Environment Minister Pankaja Munde clarified that strict action will be taken immediately if any construction or development activity is found to be causing pollution.

E-Auction of 12 Properties Launched

Mumbai

Taking strict action against major property tax defaulters, the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) has intensified its drive of property attachment and auction proceedings. As part of this campaign, the Corporation's Assessment and Collection Department initiated a public e-auction process yesterday, February 23, 2026, for a total of 12 properties.

These include 10 open plots, 1 commercial building, and 1 mixed-use property. The total outstanding property tax dues from these 12 defaulting establishments, including penalties, amount to a substantial ₹378 crore 63 lakh 67 thousand 557.

Despite repeated notices, the defaulters failed to clear their dues. Consequently, long-term notices granting 21 days have been issued to the concerned property holders, directing them to pay the pending tax within this period. If the dues are not cleared within the stipulated time, the properties will be auctioned, and the necessary



procedures for the same have already been initiated.

Additional Municipal Commissioner (City) Dr. (Mrs.) Ashwini Joshi has clarified that similarly strict action will continue against property tax defaulters in the future.

Under the clear directives of Municipal Commissioner Mr. Bhushan Gagrani and Additional Municipal Commissioner (City) Dr. (Mrs.) Ashwini Joshi, and under the guidance of Joint Commissioner (Assessment and Collection) Mr. Vishwas

Shankarwar, extensive and systematic efforts are underway to ensure effective recovery of property tax from property holders within the jurisdiction of the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation. The drive is being carried out under the supervision of Assistant Commissioner (Properties) Mr. Gajanan Bellale.

In this context, auction notices have been issued under Section 206 (2) of the amended Mumbai Municipal Corporation Act 1888 for tax-defaulter properties

located in the H West, S, R South, and E administrative wards of the BMC. These 12 properties will be sold through a public e-auction process.

The properties include:

* A plot in H West Ward in the name of M/s Sumer Associates (outstanding dues: ₹188 crore 46 lakh 24 thousand 247).

* A commercial building in Bhandup (S Ward) in the name of M/s Rajhans Associates (outstanding dues: ₹47 crore 2 lakh 99 thousand 687).

* A plot in Kandivali East (R South Ward) in the name of Mr. Vitthalrao Khapre (outstanding dues: ₹64 lakh 29 thousand 461).

* A plot in H West Ward in the name of Mr. Ramchandra Hemnandas Setpal and others (outstanding dues: ₹10 crore 4 lakh 27 thousand 825).

* Three plots at Reay Road (E Ward) in the name of Mr. Mulla Ghulam Ali (outstanding dues: ₹9 crore 39 lakh 10 thousand 668; ₹4 crore 15 lakh 19 thousand 830; and ₹85 crore 38 lakh 78

thousand 185 respectively).

* A plot in Khar (H West Ward) in the name of Mr. P.K. Modi (outstanding dues: ₹2 crore 14 lakh 53 thousand 046).

* A mixed-use property in H West Ward in the name of M/s Elco Arcade Residential and Non-Residential Cooperative Housing Society (outstanding dues: ₹9 crore 76 lakh 20 thousand 336).

* A plot in Khar West in the name of Mr. Yusuf Ahmed (outstanding dues: ₹2 crore 47 lakh 45 thousand 999).

* A plot in Bandra in the name of the Assistant Priest, St. Peter's Church (outstanding dues: ₹12 crore 64 lakh 98 thousand 742).

* A plot in Santacruz West in the name of Mrs. Hardevi P. Rajpal (outstanding dues: ₹6 crore 49 lakh 92 thousand 531).

The Corporation has reiterated that strict recovery measures will continue against large defaulters to ensure timely payment of property taxes and safeguard civic revenues.

Trump claims Shehbaz Sharif told him- 35 million people would have died, but for his intervention

Washington

US President Donald Trump in his state of the Union Address on Tuesday night (local time) once again claimed that he had ended eight wars, including the India-Pakistan conflict that arose in the aftermath of the Pahalgam Terror attacks last year.

In his address, the US President also made a stunning revelation saying that Pakistan PM Shehbaz Sharif had told him that almost 35 million people would have died had he not intervened in the conflict.

"In my first 10 months, I ended eight wars... Cambodia and Thailand...

Pakistan and India would have had a nuclear war. As many as 35 million people, said the Prime Minister of Pakistan, would have died if it were not for my involvement," he claimed.

India has denied any involvement of the United States in the agreement to cease hostilities with Pakistan, maintaining that the request to end military operations had come from the Director General of Military operations in Pakistan.

Meanwhile, in his State of the Union Address, the US President said his administration was "working hard" to end "the killing and slaughter



between Russia and Ukraine, calling it "a war which would have never happened if I were President."

Addressing the situation in

Iran, Trump kept his options open saying he still preferred a diplomatic solution.

"They have already developed missiles that can threaten Europe and our bases overseas, and they are working to build missiles that will soon reach the United States of America...My preference is to solve this problem through diplomacy. But one thing is certain, I will never allow the world's number one sponsor of terror, which they are by far, to have a nuclear weapon. Can't happen," Trump said.

'Big lies': Iran hits back at Trump after he calls Tehran 'world's number one sponsor of terror'



Tehran

Iranian foreign ministry spokesman Esmail Baqaei, on Wednesday, February 25, said the claims about the country's nuclear facilities and ballistic missiles were "big lies". His remarks came after US President Donald Trump, during his State of the Union address, described Iran as the world's biggest sponsor of terrorism and vowed he would never allow Tehran to obtain a nuclear weapon.

Professional liars are good at creating the 'illusion of truth.' 'Repeat a lie often enough, and it becomes the truth', is a law of propaganda coined by Nazi Joseph Goebbels. This is now systematically used by the US administration and the war profiteers encircling it, particularly the genocidal Israeli regime, to serve their sinister disinformation & misinformation campaign against the Nation of Iran," Baqaei said in a post on X.

"Whatever they're alleging in regards to Iran's nuclear programme, Iran's ballistic missiles, and the number of casualties during January's unrest is simply the repetition of 'big lies'. No one should be fooled by these prominent untruths," he said without directly naming Trump.



Trump's warning to Iran

The US President, about 90 minutes into his annual address to a joint session of the Senate and House of Representatives, accused the Islamic Republic of restarting its nuclear programme, and working to build missiles that would "soon" be capable of reaching the United States.

The US President added that while he seeks peace wherever possible, he would not hesitate to confront threats to America. Recalling last summer's airstrikes under "Operation Midnight Hammer", Trump claimed the strikes severely degraded Tehran's nuclear capabilities and that Iran had been warned not to rebuild. "We wiped it out and they want to start all over again," he said.

"My preference is to solve this problem through diplomacy. But one thing is certain, I will never allow the world's number one sponsor of terror to have a nuclear weapon. Can't let that happen," he said.

Trump also recalled the US killing of Iranian commander Qasem Soleimani, saying, "We took out Soleimani... it had a huge impact. Qasem Soleimani was the father of roadside IEDs."

PM Modi calls for zero tolerance on terror in Knesset address, receives Israel's highest parliamentary honour



Jerusalem

In a speech marked by repeated standing ovations, civilisational references and visible political theatre, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday addressed Israel's Parliament, declaring that "no cause can justify the murder of civilians" and reaffirming India's unwavering stand against terrorism.

Greeting the House with a resonant "Shalom! Namaste!", Modi said it was an honour to stand before the Knesset as "the Prime Minister of India and as a representative of one ancient civilisation addressing another."

He conveyed the greetings of 1.4 billion

Indians and described India-Israel ties as rooted in history, strengthened by shared democratic values and elevated into a strategic partnership of growing global consequence.

There were many rounds of applause as he spoke, particularly when he expressed condolences for the victims of the October 7 Hamas attack and reiterated India's "zero tolerance" policy against terrorism. Drawing parallels with India's own experience, including the 26/11 Mumbai attacks that claimed Israeli lives, Modi said India stands with Israel "firmly, with full conviction, in this moment, and beyond."

Waste burden: New rules must be strictly enforced

GETTING the basics right is a prerequisite for achieving the grand goal of Viksit Bharat. Among the civic challenges, solid waste management (SWM) continues to stick out like a sore thumb. Both urban and rural areas are plagued by overflowing landfills, improper waste segregation and inefficient disposal. The Supreme Court has flagged “uneven compliance” with the decade-old SWM Rules across the country, weeks before the new norms come into force. The SC has observed that the treatment of solid waste is not just an environmental issue — it also concerns public health and the economy. The ever-increasing garbage burden is adversely affecting ease of living, laying bare gaps in the implementation of flagship schemes like AMRUT (Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation) and the Smart Cities Mission.



The Court has put the onus on local bodies and elected representatives (councillors/corporators) to encourage a sense of

responsibility among residents. Public awareness must go hand in hand with deterrence. It's clear that there is no room for leniency. The imposition of fines at the initial stage, followed by criminal prosecution when repeat offenders are involved, can potently demonstrate a zero-

tolerance approach. Cracking the whip on negligent officials can send a strong message against dereliction of duty.

There is a dire need for close coordination between the authorities and resident welfare associations. India's rise as a global economic powerhouse is expected to boost consumption and, consequently, increase waste generation. The Union government's new scheme to overhaul urban infrastructure with an investment of Rs 1 lakh crore is a step in the right direction. However, India's cities will struggle to meet the demands of a growing population unless policy-makers prioritise solid waste management. A waste-free India is just a chimera, but every sincere effort made today can prove to be worthwhile in the long run.

// sātyāsya pārāmāṃ nidhānām //

“DREAM IS NOT THAT WHICH YOU SEE WHILE SLEEPING, IT IS SOMETHING THAT DOES NOT LET YOU SLEEP.”

- DR. A.P.J. ABDUL KALAM

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Mistreatment of northeastern people a blot on India

IN May last year, Prime Minister Narendra Modi described the North-East as the “most diverse region of our diverse nation”. Alas, India's much-cherished diversity is repeatedly being shamed as people from northeastern states are bearing the brunt of racial prejudice. Less than two months after Tripura student Anjel Chakma was murdered in Dehradun, three women from Arunachal Pradesh were called “dhandhewali” (prostitutes) by their neighbours in New Delhi and told to “go sell momos”. They were branded as outsiders in their own country — and that too in the national capital. This wasn't mere abuse hurled in a fit of rage. It was a targeted attack on identity and ethnicity.

A man and his wife have been booked for allegedly promoting enmity on the grounds of religion, race, place of birth, etc., besides other charges. Their disgraceful conduct has laid bare a deeper malaise that belies the government's lofty slogan, “Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas”. From the 2014 death of Nido Tania to the 2025 killing of Anjel Chakma, the pattern is unmistakable. Students or workers



from the North-East are targeted over their physical features, their food, their languages. Women in particular are viewed with suspicion and baselessly accused of involvement in immoral activities.

The Supreme Court has warned of divisions caused by hardening regional identities. Racial hostility is an ugly manifestation of this phenomenon. What's quite chilling in the Delhi episode is the assertion of social superiority — the boast of

being linked to a “big politician,” the sneer about “aukaat” (status). It reveals a sense of entitlement and the mistaken belief that some Indians are more Indian than others. The Arunachali trio's lawyer, who hails from Sikkim, has affirmed, “We are as much Indian as anyone else.” Indeed, every Indian has the right to live with dignity anywhere in the country. Ensuring that no citizen is deprived of this right is an acid test of pluralism in India.

The Increasing Difficulty of Running Parliament

Indian politics has reached a stage that was once unimaginable. This marks an extremely serious phase in India's parliamentary history, where a notice for a no-confidence motion against the Speaker of the Lok Sabha was submitted, while simultaneously a substantive motion was sought against the Leader of the Opposition, Rahul Gandhi. BJP MP Nishikant Dubey wrote to the Lok Sabha Speaker demanding that a substantive motion be brought against Rahul Gandhi. Earlier, the BJP had spoken of moving a privilege motion against him, but it has now taken the initiative to introduce a substantive motion, which is considered more serious than a privilege motion.

A substantive motion is an independent proposal that leads to a clear decision regarding a Member of Parliament. It is debated and voted upon, and if passed, reflects the official stand and opinion of the House. It can determine whether the conduct and character of the concerned MP are in keeping with parliamentary standards, whether they should continue as a member, and even whether they should be allowed to contest future elections. Based on such a motion, action can be taken against the member, including termination of

House membership. The Election Commission may also be recommended to bar the member from contesting elections.

After receiving the no-confidence notice, Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla



stopped presiding over the House. Once a no-confidence motion is moved against the Speaker, they cannot chair the proceedings until the debate and outcome are decided, hence this step. However, this does not apply to an MP or the Leader of the Opposition. Even if a privilege motion or substantive motion is admitted, the concerned member can participate in proceedings and is given an opportunity to present their case.

The debate on the no-confidence motion against Om Birla is likely to take

place on March 9. Around the same time, it will become clear whether the substantive motion against Rahul Gandhi is accepted. Since the BJP-led NDA holds a majority in the Lok Sabha, the no-confidence motion against

Om Birla is expected to fail. However, the same logic does not necessarily apply to the substantive motion. On the basis of its majority, the NDA could pass a proposal for action against Rahul Gandhi. Yet, there appears to be little concern among his supporters within the Congress. On the contrary, they seem pleased, claiming that Rahul Gandhi is setting the agenda in Parliament and that even the debate around the substantive motion will revolve around him. This suggests the direction in which Rahul Gandhi and his strategists are

heading. If this is what they consider setting the national agenda, then the Congress appears to be on uncertain ground. Rahul Gandhi, it is argued, is not fulfilling his national responsibilities effectively.

It seems that some Congress leaders may even want action to be taken against Rahul Gandhi, hoping to generate public sympathy and derive political benefit from it. However, what about the sustained campaign they have run against Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla? Questions were even raised about his daughter's success in the civil services examination. A letter written to him by Congress women MPs was considered even more disgraceful. Congress MPs have tried to create such difficult circumstances for the Speaker that decision-making itself becomes problematic. Om Birla is not merely an individual; he occupies the dignified constitutional office of Speaker of the Lok Sabha.

There may be personal disagreements or dislike toward him, but it is the primary responsibility of leaders and Parliament to respect and uphold the dignity of the office. If Rahul Gandhi's supporters believe that setting the agenda of debate in Parliament is a major political achievement,

a similar situation was seen earlier regarding the SIR and the Election Commission. With full preparation, Rahul Gandhi questioned the SIR and the Election Commission and even undertook a voter rights march in Bihar. However, the results of the Bihar elections did not favor him. In Maharashtra, the Adani issue was projected as paramount, yet there too the party suffered a heavy defeat.

The Speaker suspended Congress MPs only after they repeatedly entered the Well of the House, threw papers toward the Chair, and refused to follow rules and regulations. There are established procedures and traditions for running the House. When members attempt to trample these norms, the Speaker is compelled to take action. Since the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, the Congress has become more aggressive. It appears unwilling to allow even a single day of normal functioning in Parliament. Rahul Gandhi did not deliver a speech in a session on the President's Address. Instead, he raises what are described as fabricated issues and presents them in the House, accusing the Speaker when restrained. Such conduct, it is argued, leaves little room for a constructive democratic path forward.

The Road to an India-U.S. Trade Agreement

After the U.S. Supreme Court declared former President Donald Trump's tariff policy unconstitutional, the anticipated trade talks between India and the United States were delayed. In this context, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman's statement that it is difficult to say anything at present regarding changes in tariffs has only added to the uncertainty over when a trade agreement between the two countries might materialize.

Earlier, when the U.S. President had announced a reduction of tariffs from 25 percent to 18 percent and the removal of the additional 25 percent tariff imposed due to India's purchase of oil from Russia, optimism had grown. Following that announcement, a joint statement was issued by both nations expressing their commitment toward a trade agreement. At the time, it was widely believed that the agreement would be finalized by March.



Subsequently, expectations shifted from March to April. However, after the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling and Trump's reported displeasure with the decision, he announced the imposition of a 10 percent tariff on all countries, later increasing it to 15 percent. These developments have once again cast doubt on the prospects of a trade deal. At present, it is unclear when an interim trade agreement with the United States might be concluded, or what the final tariff rates under such an agreement would look like.

While India's Commerce Ministry is reviewing the evolving situation, much will depend on the stance of the Trump administration, which has often appeared unpredictable. In such circumstances, it would be prudent for India to accelerate trade negotiations with other countries. Agreements that are already in progress or concluded with nations such as the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Oman, and the

European Union should be finalized at the earliest.

There is no denying that the United States remains a major market for India and that a trade agreement with it would benefit Indian businesses and the broader economy. Nevertheless, India must continue to prioritize the diversification of its export markets. It would not be wise to relax efforts on this front under the assumption that a deal with the United States is inevitable.

India's long-term interest lies in expanding the global footprint of its products and services. Exploring markets beyond the United States is also crucial if India aims to reduce China's dominance in global supply chains. Many countries view India as a key player under the "China Plus One" strategy, and India can fulfill these expectations by positioning itself as a reliable alternative manufacturing and services hub.

However, achieving this goal will require Indian businesses to ensure that their products meet global standards of quality and productivity. Only by strengthening competitiveness and maintaining consistent standards can India truly capitalize on emerging global opportunities and secure a stronger role in international trade.

Deepening Caste Divides

Questions Raised Over UGC's Move

The recent guidelines issued by the University Grants Commission (UGC) in the name of promoting equality in higher education campuses have not only brought caste discourse back to the center of public debate, but have also made Hindu society appear once again divided along caste lines. The lines of caste division that had begun to blur over time due to economic and educational development now seem to be deepening once more.

The present circumstances evoke memories of the period following the implementation of the Mandal Commission report, when Hindu society was sharply divided.

Today, society appears to be moving in a similar direction. Some political parties that thrive on caste-based mobilization are fueling this discourse among students to reap electoral benefits. On the other hand, sections of the upper-caste community are also mobilizing students to safeguard their perceived interests. If an inclusive and widely acceptable solution to the UGC's guidelines is not found, it could directly impact future politics. It may not only affect social harmony but also jeopardize the broader goal of Hindu unity.

While social, educational, and economic progress had weakened caste barriers, politics has succeeded in reviving them. The primary credit for bringing caste discourse to the center of power in the name of uplifting backward classes goes to former Prime Minister Vishwanath Pratap Singh. In 1990, he implemented the Mandal Commission report, reportedly to counter the political influence of Chaudhary Devi Lal. That decision deeply divided Hindu society at both ideological and

social levels.

At the time, large parts of North India erupted in protest against the Mandal Commission's recommendations, and many upper-caste youths felt their future had turned bleak. Rather than bridging the social divide created by Mandal, subsequent politics has often deepened it further. As society gradually began to accept reservations



for backward classes in government jobs, the government led by Manmohan Singh in 2006 extended reservation provisions to admissions in higher educational institutions as well.

This move once again pushed students onto the streets in protest, widening social fissures. Just as the country was beginning to move beyond memories of these past conflicts, the new UGC guidelines have placed Indian society once more at the brink of internal tension and social confrontation. Although this conflict has not yet erupted openly on the streets, university campuses are already experiencing ideological polarization. Academic institutions currently appear divided into two clear camps—strong supporters of the guidelines on one side and vocal opponents on the other.

India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, had written a detailed letter to all chief ministers on June 27, 1961. In that letter, he effectively expressed reservations about caste-based reservation policies as they exist today. He favored the creation of a "knowledge-centered society" over development driven by quotas. Nehru wrote explicitly: "I dislike any kind of reservation, particularly in services. I am against any step that promotes inefficiency and

leads us toward mediocrity."

Nehru believed that if India were to become modern and competitive, merit would have to be given priority. Ironically, if critics of the current UGC guidelines were to repeat Nehru's words today, they might immediately be labeled as opponents of "social justice." This highlights how dramatically India's political and social discourse has evolved over the past six decades.

After the implementation of the Mandal Commission, the dominant political narrative was such that the upper-caste community often remained silent, fearing being branded as anti-progress. However, in later years—particularly amid allegations of misuse of the SC/ST Act and the continued expansion of reservation policies—resentment began to build within this section. After the Ram Temple movement, the upper-caste community had largely aligned itself with the BJP, but the new guidelines have left many feeling stunned. That sense of shock is now reportedly turning into anger.

Opposition parties waiting for political opportunity are said to be quietly encouraging this dissatisfaction, even if they avoid speaking openly. They fear that overtly supporting upper-caste concerns might alienate their backward-class vote banks. Meanwhile, the BJP government and its top leadership are trying to cool the caste debate. However, the longer it takes to find a solution, the sharper the caste discourse is likely to become. If the anger within sections of the upper-caste community is not addressed in time, it could pose new and difficult electoral challenges for the BJP in the future.

Collusion Between Bangladeshi and Pakistani Terror Groups Raises India's Concerns

The arrest of eight suspected terrorists from Tamil Nadu and West Bengal by the Delhi Police, reportedly linked to a major attack plot in the national capital, indicates that the audacity of terror outfits shows no signs of diminishing. Most of those arrested are said to be Bangladeshi nationals, but they were allegedly operating at the behest of the Pakistan-based terror organization Lashkar-e-Taiba.

Their handler is believed to be a notorious Kashmiri terrorist operating from Bangladesh. This suggests the emergence of a nexus between Bangladeshi and Pakistani terror organizations. Such coordination represents a new and troubling threat, naturally heightening India's security concerns. There are credible reasons to believe that this collaboration developed over the past year and a half, during the period when Muhammad Yunus was heading Bangladesh's interim government.

It is no secret that during this time, anti-India radical elements within



Bangladesh were allegedly emboldened, and efforts were made to strengthen ties with Pakistan. It would not be surprising if, amid these developments, leaders of Pakistani terror outfits found safe passage or support within Bangladesh. Whatever the case, India's security agencies need to intensify their vigilance, especially as

terrorist elements continue to exploit the Kashmir issue to provoke and radicalize individuals.

The brazenness of the arrested suspects is evident from reports that they pasted anti-India posters in Delhi and Kolkata. It was through the investigation of these posters that the Delhi Police

reportedly traced the suspects. It may be recalled that a few months ago, associates of a terrorist involved in a blast near the Red Fort in Delhi had similarly put up anti-India posters in Srinagar.

Investigations into the posters in Srinagar had earlier led to the exposure of a terror module in Faridabad that allegedly included several doctors. One of them reportedly carried out a suicide car blast near the Red Fort. These incidents underline the importance of taking even seemingly minor activities—such as the appearance of provocative posters—seriously and conducting thorough investigations.

Fake Aadhaar cards were reportedly recovered from the suspects arrested by the Delhi Police, and these forged documents were used to secure work in Tamil Nadu and Kolkata. This highlights the need for greater public awareness. Employers must carefully verify identity documents before hiring anyone, as lapses in such checks can be exploited by anti-national elements posing under false identities.

MSP on raw jute approved by Cabinet to enhance quality, farmers' incomes: PM Modi

States raise Rs 46,100 Crore via RBI yield-based auction

New Delhi

Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on Tuesday that the Minimum Support Prices (MSP) of Raw Jute for Marketing season 2026-27, approved by the Union Cabinet today will not only promote higher production and better quality, but also enhance the incomes of farmers associated with this sector across the country.

Taking to social media platform X, PM Modi said, "We are leaving no stone unturned to make life easier for our jute-growing farmer brothers and sisters. In this direction, our government has taken an important decision to increase the Minimum Support Price (MSP) of raw jute. This will not only promote higher production and better quality, but also enhance the incomes of farmers



associated with this sector across the country."

The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs, chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has approved the MSP of Raw Jute for Marketing season 2026-27. The MSP of Raw Jute (TD-3 grade) has been fixed at Rs 5,925 per quintal for 2026-27 season.

The government said this would ensure a return of 61.8 per cent over the all-India weighted average cost of production. The

announced MSP of raw jute for Marketing season 2026-27 is in line with the principle of fixing MSP at a level of at least 1.5 times all India weighted average cost of production as announced by the Government in the Budget 2018-19.

The MSP of Raw Jute for Marketing season 2026-27 is an increase of Rs 275 per quintal over the previous Marketing season 2025-26.

Government has increased MSP of Raw jute from Rs 2400 per quintal in 2014-15 to Rs 5,925 per quintal in 2026-27, registering an increase of Rs 3,525 per quintal (2.5 times).

The MSP amount paid to Jute growing farmers during the period 2014-15 to 2025-26 was Rs 1342 Crore, while during the period 2004-05 to 2013-14, Rs 441 Crore amount was paid.

RBI launches March 2026 round of rural, urban consumer confidence surveys

Mumbai

Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has launched March 2026 round of the Rural and Urban Consumer Confidence Survey. The RBI has been regularly conducting such Surveys.

The Rural Consumer Confidence Survey seeks current perceptions and one year ahead expectations of households on generaleconomic situation, employment scenario, overall price situation, own income and spending from the households residing in the rural and semi-urban areas across 31 states/ UTs viz., Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Goa, Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, NCT of Delhi, Odisha, Punjab, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Tripura, Union Territory of Ladakh, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand and West Bengal.

The agency, Ipsos Research Private Ltd., Gurugram has been



engaged to conduct the survey of this round on behalf of the Reserve Bank of India.

The Urban Consumer Confidence Survey seeks qualitative responses from households, regarding their sentiments on general economic situation, employment scenario, price level, households' income and spending. The survey is conducted regularly in 19 cities, viz., Ahmedabad, Bengaluru, Bhopal, Bhubaneswar,

Chandigarh, Chennai, Delhi, Guwahati, Hyderabad, Jaipur, Jammu, Kolkata, Lucknow, Mumbai, Nagpur, Patna, Raipur, Ranchi and Thiruvananthapuram.

The agency, M/s Hansa Research Group Pvt. Ltd., Mumbai has been engaged to conduct the survey of this round on behalf of the Reserve Bank of India.

The results of this survey provide useful inputs for monetary policy, RBI said.

New Delhi

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on Tuesday announced the results of the yield/price-based auction of State Government Securities (SGS), with states collectively accepting Rs 46,100 crore against the notified amount of Rs 44,550 crore, indicating additional subscriptions in select securities.

As many as 16 State Governments raised funds through a mix of fresh issuances and re-issues. The securities span maturities ranging from three years to 28 years, reflecting varied borrowing strategies aligned with states' fiscal requirements.

Among major issuances, Andhra Pradesh raised Rs 1,500 crore at a cut-off yield of 7.69 per cent for a 16-year tenor and Rs 1,600 crore at 7.70 per cent for 21 years, as per the data released by the RBI.

Bihar accepted Rs 1,500 crore at 7.72% (15-year) and Rs 1,600 crore at 7.69% (28-year). Chhattisgarh raised Rs 1,000 crore at 7.64% (14-year) and Rs 1,000 crore via a re-issue of its 7.59% SGS 2046 at a cut-off price of Rs 98.78 (7.7096%).

Goa raised Rs 100 crore at 7.50% (10-year), while Gujarat accepted Rs 1,500 crore against a notified Rs 1,000 crore at 7.24% for a 7-year and 6-month security, along with Rs 1,000 crore at 7.40% (10-year). Haryana raised Rs 1,000 crore at 7.67% (15-year) and Rs 1,000 crore through a re-issue of its 7.73% SGS 2045 at Rs 100.10 (7.7196%). Karnataka mobilised Rs 1,000 crore via a re-issue of

its 7.25% SGS 2033 at Rs 100.03 (7.2443%), besides multiple issuances totalling Rs 8,000 crore across 8-year, 8-year 6-month, 10-year, and 10-year 6-month tenors with yields ranging from 7.37% to 7.47%. Kerala accepted Rs 1,000 crore at 7.72% (19-year).

M a h a r a s h t r a accepted Rs 1,850 crore each across 4-year (6.77%), 8-year (7.34%), and 11-year (7.48%) securities against Rs 1,500 crore notified per tenor. Nagaland raised Rs 500 crore at 6.89% (4-year), Punjab Rs 2,000 crore at 7.54% (8-year), and Rajasthan Rs 2,000 crore at 7.44% (7-year).

Sikkim accepted Rs 250 crore at 7.53% (10-year). Tamil Nadu raised Rs 1,000 crore at 6.54% (3-year), Rs 1,000 crore via re-issue of 7.12% SGS 2032 at Rs 100.17 (7.0842%), Rs 2,000 crore at 7.43% (10-year), and Rs 1,000 crore via re-issue of 7.44% SGS 2055 at Rs 97.66 (7.6388%).

Uttar Pradesh accepted Rs 500 crore via re-issue of 7.24% SGS 2033 at Rs 99.52 (7.3192%), Rs 1,000 crore via re-issue of 7.59% SGS 2041 at Rs 99.27 (7.6687%), and Rs 1,500 crore at 7.71% (20-year). West Bengal raised Rs 1,000 crore at 7.72% (15-year) and Rs 2,000 crore through a re-issue of 7.74% SGS 2048 at Rs 100.12 (7.7283%). As per the RBI data, Gujarat accepted an additional Rs 500 crore in the 7-year 6-month security, while Maharashtra accepted an additional Rs 350 crore each across the 4-year, 8-year, and 11-year securities.

Economic indicators suggest India's growth moving fast: FM

New Delhi

Union Finance and Corporate Affairs Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said economic indicators suggested that the state of India's economic growth was moving very fast with all the engines fully functioning.

Speaking at the BS Manthan in New Delhi, Sitharaman said she credited the entire Finance Ministry for having kept a complete watch and being very meticulous about the way in which they had drawn inputs about the economic health of the country.

Assuring the healthy state of economy, she said the periodic reports, which had come from the banks, had not been in contradiction of what the Finance Ministry had outlined.

Speaking about economic challenges, Sitharaman emphasized that the country had challenges and some we could address but there were some which are beyond us yet they had the power to affect us.

"Luckily, in these past 5-6 years,



the government has been able to manage the challenges in form of global uncertainties. However, in order to overcome it, we have signed trade agreements; taxation related agreements have been updated, and countries are coming in line to explore the Indian market."

In terms of Bilateral Investment Treaties (BIT), the FM said the 2016 model BIT, which the government had come up with, had been tweaked completely based on the bilateral requirements. For instance, the BIT with UAE, Saudi Arabia and Oman saw tweaking.

"There are countries which asked for BIT during negotiations and there are some nations which are investing without asking BIT, so the world of investment today seems to be going through different priorities," she added. Asked about relaxing the rules for China's investment in India, Sitharaman said both the countries were very different from each other from an economic point of view.

"I will be concerned about the ultimate beneficiary owner and what kind of money or investments is coming from China or from any other country for that matter. We have to be assuring that such money can be traced to the ultimate owner," she added.

India becoming global manufacturing hub for smartphones as exports hit USD 30 billion: Ashwini Vaishnaw

New Delhi

India is becoming the smartphone manufacturing factory for the world, with exports for the calendar year 2025 (January to December) reaching USD 30 billion, said Union Electronics and IT Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw.

In a social media post on X, the minister said, "India is becoming the smartphone manufacturing factory for the world." Sharing the data, he added that the smartphone exports for the calendar year 2025 (January to December) reached USD 30 billion.

Last month, Vaishnaw had highlighted that India achieved record electronics exports of worth USD 47 billion (Rs 4.15 lakh crore) in 2025.

The Minister also noted that India's electronics exports have grown 11x since 2014-15, when the BJP government assumed power.

Electronics is now India's third-largest export item, providing 25 lakh new jobs,



strong women's participation, opportunities for MSMEs, and long-term skilling for the youth.

India saw a 6X ramp-up in electronics production, and exports increased 8X over the last 11 years.

Electronic goods production rose from Rs 1.9 lakh crore in 2014-15 to Rs 11.3 lakh crore in 2024-25. Exports during the period rose from Rs 0.38 lakh crore to Rs 3.3 lakh crore.

The PLI Scheme for Large Scale Electronics Manufacturing (LSEM) attracted over Rs 13,475 crore

in investment, with production of Rs 9.8 lakh crore achieved, the Union minister said earlier in the year.

Notably, India is the second-largest mobile manufacturing country in the world. Mobile manufacturing units in India have risen from 2 in 2014-15 to about 300 now. In fact, 99.2 per cent of mobile handsets sold in India are 'Made in India'.

Mobile phone production rose from Rs 0.18 lakh crore to Rs 5.5 lakh crore, while its exports rose from negligible Rs 0.01 lakh crore to Rs 2 lakh crore, reflecting the 'Make in India' initiative.

The government's initial focus was on finished products. Now, the government is aiming to build capacity for modules, components, sub-modules, raw materials, and the machines that make them. The Electronics Component Manufacturing Scheme is supporting this shift.

No change to SIM Binding rules as security takes precedence, says Jyotiraditya Scindia

New Delhi

Communications Minister Jyotiraditya Scindia stated that the government maintained its stance on SIM binding rules, prioritising national security over revenue implications.

Speaking to the media off camera, the Minister clarified that there was "no thought on relaxing the mandatory logout of web sessions beyond six hours." He noted that the "rules stood as they were" and the "logout requirement was only meant for virtual connections rather than direct connections on phones."

As per Scindia, security issues took precedence on national interest grounds when weighed against potential revenue impacts.

Regarding the timelines for the next spectrum auction, the Minister confirmed that the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) had submitted its recommendations. He said that the Department of Telecommunications (DoT) would take a view on the matter. The department was expected to come out with recommendations across various spectrum bands and reserve pricing. Scindia noted that these "recommendations would be evaluated and the specific timeline would be released at a later date." The Minister also addressed the progress of satellite spectrum allocation, stating that he is "eager to start satellite services in India." He explained that the initiation of these services depended on the responsibility of fixing the price of spectrum assignment and ensuring all security compliances were fulfilled.

Govt exploring "most effective" measures to promote electric mobility: H D Kumaraswamy

New Delhi Union Minister for Heavy Industries and Steel, H D Kumaraswamy on Wednesday said the government is exploring the most effective measures to promote electric mobility, noting that discussions with key stakeholders are already underway.

While speaking with the media, on the sidelines of the 3rd FICCI National Conference on Electric Vehicles, Kumaraswamy said, "Whatever the best way we have to encourage electric mobility, we are going to take that issue."

He further revealed that a meeting had been held with stakeholders and the Ministry of Power. "Already, we had a meeting with stakeholders and the power ministry. After the meeting with the stakeholders, the power ministry has sent the proposal to the PM's office," he added.

The minister's remarks come amid

continued policy deliberations aimed at accelerating India's transition towards cleaner and sustainable transportation solutions.

Further, while addressing the conference, Minister K u m a r a s w a m y emphasised that electric mobility is central to India's broader economic and environmental strategy.

"India's transition to electric mobility is aligned with Hon'ble Prime Minister Narendra Modi's broader national vision of Aatmanirbhar Bharat and Viksit Bharat 2047, and our commitment to achieve Net Zero by 2070," he said.

Highlighting the expanding scope of the sector, the Minister described electric mobility as far more than a climate intervention.

"Electric mobility today is not merely a climate initiative; it is an industrial strategy, a manufacturing opportunity, a supply-chain recalibration, and



a technological leap," Kumaraswamy noted.

He underscored the proactive role being played by the Ministry of Heavy Industries in shaping India's EV growth trajectory through targeted schemes, incentives and ecosystem development. According to the Minister, flagship initiatives of the Ministry are delivering measurable outcomes across segments.

Citing the progress of the PM E-DRIVE scheme, Kumaraswamy stated, "As of February 2026, more than 28 lakh electric vehicles have

sanctioned across major cities under an allocation of Rs 4,391 crore," he said, adding that the large-scale deployment is improving urban air quality while providing policy continuity for domestic manufacturers.

K u m a r a s w a m y pointed to the Ministry's Production Linked Incentive framework as a key enabler of long-term competitiveness. He noted that the PLI scheme for Advanced Chemistry Cell battery storage, with an outlay of Rs 18,100 crore, is laying the foundation for 50 GWh of domestic battery manufacturing capacity, of which 40 GWh has already been awarded.

In parallel, incentives under the PLI Scheme for Automobile and Auto Components have supported over 13.6 lakh electric vehicles across categories, further strengthening the domestic value chain.

Addressing the importance of critical minerals security, the

Minister referred to the Rs 7,280 crore initiative to promote domestic manufacturing of Sintered Rare Earth Permanent Magnets, describing it as a first-of-its-kind effort to build a robust REPM ecosystem in India.

Kumaraswamy also highlighted India's growing export potential in the automotive and EV components space.

"Over the past decade, automotive component exports have nearly doubled, rising from about USD 8 billion to USD 16.9 billion, reflecting India's deepening integration into global value chains and its growing credibility as a manufacturing hub," he observed.

With India expanding its network of Free Trade Agreements with partners including the EU, UK, Australia and the UAE, the Minister urged industry stakeholders to actively pursue global markets as domestic scale consolidates.

MoRTH road execution to moderate in FY27; toll growth seen at 6-8%: ICRA

New Delhi

Road execution by the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH) is expected to moderate to 9,000-9,500 km in FY2026-27, primarily due to a sustained slowdown in project awarding over the past three years, according to a ICRA report released on Wednesday.

Road execution by the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH) to moderate to 9,500-10,000 km in FY2025-26 and further to 9,000-9,500 km in FY2026-27 owing to decline in project awarding by MoRTH in the past three years.

The toll collections remain healthy in FY2025-26, with expectation of 7-9% growth in FY2025-26e. Amid soft Wholesale Price Index (WPI)

inflation, the inflation-linked toll rate is likely to increase by around 3.3% for newer projects linked to December WPI and 2.5-3.0% for older projects linked to March WPI in FY2026-27.

ICRA projects road awards by the MoRTH at 7,250-7,750 km for FY2025-26, largely in line with 7,538 km of road awards for FY2024-25, while remaining lower than FY2020-21 - FY2022-23 levels.

Road awards for 8M FY2025-26 stood at 1,951 km, 24% lower than 2,558 km awarded in 8M FY2024-25, with higher awarding expected in Q4 FY2025-26. Several projects are in the bidding process at present, but awarding is yet to happen.

Airtel Foundation, Indian Army strengthen education tie-up in J-K

Udhampur

Bharti Airtel Foundation and the Northern Command of the Indian Army have reaffirmed their joint commitment to delivering equitable, high-quality education to children in Jammu & Kashmir through the Army Goodwill Schools (AGS) Program.

The announcement was made after a high-level meeting, held on February 23, between Lieutenant General Pratik Sharma, SYSM, PVSM, AVSM, SM, General Officer Commanding-in-Chief (GOC-in-C), Northern Command, and Binu Nair, Chief Operating Officer of the Bharti Airtel Foundation, held at the Northern Command headquarters in

Udhampur.

For over nine years, Bharti Airtel Foundation's Quality Support Program has worked with the Northern Command to strengthen teacher capacity, improve classroom practice, and expand student opportunities, helping build stronger and more resilient Army Goodwill Schools ecosystems.

According to the release by Bharti Airtel Foundation, "As part of the next phase of engagement, Bharti Airtel Foundation announced the rollout of specially created professional development courses for AGS educators through TheTeacherApp, its free-for-life digital learning platform dedicated to continuous teacher growth."

India-Armenia Security Ties Amidst Rising Trilateral Threats

On 1 February 2026, India's Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), General Anil Chauhan, led a defence delegation on a four-day official visit to the Republic of Armenia. The visit sought to reinforce long-term defence and security cooperation amid shifting geopolitical dynamics and emerging regional alignments in the South Caucasus. It marked a step towards expanding bilateral defence industry collaboration, including joint initiatives and R&D projects, to strengthen cooperation and advance shared strategic objectives.

The CDS met Armenian Defence Minister Suren Papkyan, addressed students at the National Defence Research University (NDRU) on integrating technology into modern warfare, and inaugurated the IT laboratory and distance-learning centre at the Vazgen Sargsyan Military Academy. Both sides also emphasised professional training, exercises, and drills to facilitate the exchange of operational experience across security sectors.

Driven by shared geopolitical and geostrategic interests, a historically rooted partnership between India and Armenia has evolved into a frontline strategic partnership.

Driven by shared geopolitical and geostrategic interests, a historically rooted partnership between India and Armenia has evolved into a frontline strategic partnership. This strategic realignment goes beyond a diplomatic gesture; it reflects a shared aspiration for a multipolar order amid perceived threats from neighbouring states.

Expansion of Defence Engagements

Armenia and India established diplomatic relations in 1992. In 2020, India secured a US\$ 40 million contract to supply Swathi weapon-locating radars, which provide rapid and accurate detection of enemy weapons within a 50-kilometre range. Armenian security agencies considered the indigenously developed Swathi system superior to Russian and Polish radar systems during the bidding process. This defence agreement supported Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Make in India initiative to boost defence exports. The relationship became more strategic and security-focused following the visit of India's External Affairs Minister to Armenia in October 2021, leading to deeper defence cooperation.

Evolving regional and geopolitical tensions have contributed to India's growing ties with Armenia. During the 44-day Nagorno-Karabakh conflict



in 2020, Türkiye provided active support to Azerbaijan in its conflict with Armenia. Pakistan also supported Baku, driven by a close strategic partnership and shared perspectives on issues such as Kashmir and Nagorno-Karabakh. According to Armenian sources, the Pakistani military, including special units, participated in combat operations alongside Azerbaijani forces during the conflict, contributing to Baku's victory.

Amid these tensions, Moscow—the primary arms supplier to Armenia, accounting for 94 percent of total supplies from 2011 to 2020—arranged a ceasefire and deployed Russian peacekeepers but reportedly held back arms deliveries to Armenia due to its focus on Ukraine. As a result, Yerevan began seeking a more reliable partner for arms transfers, prompting it to turn to India. Additionally, Indian arms and defence systems were easily harmonised with the Armenian armed forces, as both countries had imported most of their arms from Russia.

Between 2020 and 2024, Yerevan emerged as the principal recipient of Indian defence exports, with contracts estimated at approximately US\$ 2 billion.

In 2022, Armenia became the first foreign buyer of the Akash missile system, placing an order for 15 units valued at US\$ 720 million. Designed by India's Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) and produced by Bharat Dynamics Limited (BDL), the system protects against a range of air threats, including fighter aircraft, guided missiles, and drones. In 2024, New Delhi began delivering the system, significantly enhancing Yerevan's military capabilities and reinforcing its defence

posture. To strengthen Armenia's protection against unmanned aerial threats, India also supplied an advanced anti-drone system capable of detecting, tracking, and neutralising rogue drones, thereby improving resilience against UAV attacks.

As defence and security cooperation between the two countries deepened, Yerevan appointed a defence attaché to its embassy in New Delhi in 2023 to strengthen military coordination. Armenia also finalised agreements to acquire Pinaka multi-barrel rocket launcher batteries, with deliveries commencing in July 2023 and an additional consignment dispatched from Nagpur in January 2026. Earlier variants had a range of up to 37.5 kilometres; recent upgrades have extended this to 75 kilometres, improving both range and accuracy.

Between 2020 and 2024, Yerevan emerged as the principal recipient of Indian defence exports, with contracts estimated at approximately US\$ 2 billion. Armenia has also expressed interest in procuring 8 to 12 Indian-manufactured Su-30MKI multirole fighter jets, valued at around US\$ 3 billion. This follows Azerbaijan's acquisition of China-made JF-17 fighter jets from Pakistan under a deal reportedly worth US\$ 4.6 billion.

Due to Russia's ongoing involvement in Ukraine, Armenia is pursuing joint production and development of high-tech arms with India to reduce reliance on a single foreign supplier.

The Strategic Calculus Behind India-Armenia Cooperation

Due to Russia's ongoing involvement in Ukraine, Armenia is pursuing joint production and development of high-tech arms with

India to reduce reliance on a single foreign supplier. New Delhi has also supported Yerevan in rebuilding its security architecture and supplied advanced military hardware. During his visit, the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) underscored the importance of joint exercises and training. This approach ensures that Armenian personnel are trained in India's modern mountain-warfare doctrines, replacing outdated practices and further strengthening the bilateral defence partnership.

The India-Armenia bilateral relationship has acquired significant strategic weight amid the evolving geopolitical landscape of Eurasia. This trajectory reflects a calibrated response to shifting power dynamics beyond India's immediate neighbourhood, particularly as the Pakistan-Türkiye-Azerbaijan axis expands its influence across the Caucasus, South Asia, and Central Asia. New Delhi recognised that closer ties with Yerevan would secure a strategic foothold in the South Caucasus, help offset this alignment, and underscore the region's changing geopolitical context. India's defence exports to Armenia were intended to preserve the regional balance of power rather than escalate tensions. In this sense, they also contributed to creating conditions conducive to the subsequent peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Although initially rooted in shared security concerns, India-Armenia defence cooperation has acquired wider strategic and geopolitical significance, as the South Caucasus emerges as an arena of renewed great-power competition.

This trajectory reflects a calibrated response to shifting power dynamics beyond India's immediate neighbourhood, particularly as the Pakistan-Türkiye-Azerbaijan axis expands its influence across the Caucasus, South Asia, and Central Asia.

The expanding defence relationship between Armenia and India signifies a significant shift in the evolving geopolitical framework of the South Caucasus. With this relationship having matured into a comprehensive strategic partnership, it consolidates India's strategic presence in Eurasia. New Delhi, through its carefully coordinated efforts, not only maintains regional peace and balance of power but also demonstrates its emergence as a dependable defence exporter and a staunch supporter of a multipolar world founded on principles of equality rather than coercion.

The Political Economy Behind India's Burgeoning Middle Class

As India marks its emergence as the world's fourth-largest economy, the country's ascent to upper middle-income status is likely to be influenced by a slew of interacting forces: political governance, institutional independence, and the rights of economic agents. As an agglomeration of diverse regional political economies shaped by equally divergent talents, resources, and aspirations, India's transition into an economic powerhouse is predicated on the collective wellbeing of these constituent units. In a federated structure built on the twin pillars of democracy and the distribution of power, the rise of an aspirational economy driven by its people's discretionary spending cannot be overemphasised. In that sense, India's evolution on the global stage is not strictly comparable to that of the world's second-largest economy, China.

Even though India and China gained independence around the same time, the political economies that have come to shape these two giant South Asian nations as we know them today are vastly different. While China pursued economic reforms with a razor-tight grip on political freedoms, India followed a socialist economic path founded on political freedoms, enshrined as fundamental rights in the country's Constitution. This distinction assumes significance, as any meaningful comparison between the two nations, sans consideration of their political economies, is destined to generate flawed assertions. Peter Rosendorff highlights this point by showing that power structures sympathetic towards authoritarianism tend to produce flatter incomes, depleting capital stock, and a decrease in the relative size of the workforce. It is therefore unsurprising that, on the World Bank's consumption-based Gini measure for comparable years, India (25.5) records



lower inequality than China (35.7), though cross-country comparisons remain sensitive to underlying methodology.

The provision of socio-economic benefits afforded by a democratic set-up such as India's cannot be readily compared with China's state-capitalist political economy under single-party rule. The liberty available to private enterprise to challenge the state before an independent judiciary constitutes a significant non-pecuniary reward congruous with democracy.

As China transitions from a middle-income economy to an aspirational society seeking to emulate standards of living seen in the West, its growth model has remained largely concentrated on export-led manufacturing, even as sectoral imbalances persist, exacerbated by real estate woes. Jeffrey Sachs, an eminent economist, has underscored the critical role of finance and investment in driving economic development.

Consider financial intermediation in China. While the country has traditionally relied on lending institutions,

limited borrowing avenues for individuals have contributed to the proliferation of shadow banking activities, often circumventing regulatory strictures. Worryingly, bad loans arising from high levels of non-performing assets (NPAs) directly impair the quality of bank balance sheets. This, in turn, creates systemic risks for the broader economy. Amid continuing geo-economic pressures in the form of tariffs and trade barriers that continue to dent growth forecasts, compounded further by global uncertainty, the IMF expects China's growth rate to decline from 5 percent in 2025 to 4.5 percent in 2026. The Bank has advocated a structural shift from export- and investment-led growth towards greater consumption.

The provision of socio-economic benefits afforded by a democratic set-up such as India's cannot be readily compared with China's state-capitalist political economy under single-party rule. The liberty available to private enterprise to challenge the state before an independent judiciary constitutes a

significant non-pecuniary reward congruous with democracy. The landmark verdict of the Indian judiciary setting aside the retrospective tax demand on Vodafone illustrates the capacity of institutional checks and balances to restrain executive overreach. Such checks and balances remain imperative for private enterprises to bolster country-specific investments and encourage country-specific, long-term capital formation. India's burgeoning middle class, in turn, stands to benefit directly from sustained private-sector investment and growth.

Even during a once-in-a-century event such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the government largely relied on in-kind welfare support rather than inflation-inducing cash transfers, thereby averting the inflationary shocks that affected many Western economies.

The middle class is defined as a household earning between INR 5 lakh and INR 30 lakh annually and is projected to reach 715 million people by 2030 — an increase from 14 percent of the

population in 2004-05 to 46 percent in 2030. While some economists caution against comparing income levels in non-dollar terms, it is worth noting that, from a purchasing power parity perspective, measurement in local currency offers greater precision in capturing economic wellbeing.

Equally, a country the size of India can ill afford to neglect the economic wellbeing of its citizens at the bottom of the pyramid. The government bears a moral obligation to enforce the social contract through the sustained provision of welfare measures aimed at improving their living standards. Even during a once-in-a-century event such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the government largely relied on in-kind welfare support rather than inflation-inducing cash transfers, thereby averting the inflationary shocks that affected many Western economies.

Finally, the role of India's private sector in bolstering the economy cannot be overstated. As India remains relatively well insulated from ongoing geopolitical gyrations, the timing could not be more propitious for the private sector to unleash its animal spirits and adopt a risk-on approach. There is only so much the public sector can achieve in stimulating investment and consumption without incurring the costs associated with crowding out. The reformed Indian labour codes also represent a step in the right direction, seeking to balance the divergent interests of employers and employees. While India may still be some distance from matching higher per capita income levels, the country's progress as a vibrant democracy remains sustainable and better suited to delivering results over the long haul. After all, a nation's progress is not a 100-metre sprint but, verily, a marathon.

Screen Time May Be Rising Steadily Among Older Indians

In the Odyssey, Odysseus prepares to sail past the Sirens, whose songs lure sailors off course. The crew seals their ears with wax, while Odysseus, curious enough to listen, is bound tightly to the mast. The instruction is given in advance and is non-negotiable: whatever he demands once the singing begins, he is not to be untied until the ship has passed. The scene hinges on a familiar human flaw. The moment the song starts, Odysseus pleads to be released. The restraint holds because it was designed before his judgment was compromised and enforced by others who did not hear what he heard. India's older adults are entering a comparable current, though the pull comes in the form of messages, videos, alerts, and frictionless payments. The lesson is clear: guardrails work best when set in advance, before judgment is pulled off course.

A household telecom survey (2025) from the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation notes that about 85.5 percent of households possessed at least one smartphone, possibly driven by rising incomes, increasing internet penetration across the country, and a large domestic market. Phones arrived late in many households, often without settled etiquette for message forwards, advertising cues, or credibility checks. With smartphones now increasingly linked to bank accounts, the costs of a mistake can rise sharply. 'Digital arrest' frauds, in which victims are kept on video calls for hours and pressured into making payments, have become prominent enough to reach the Supreme Court of India.

Teenagers face school rules and parental supervision; older adults largely regulate their own use and often have fewer people around to notice when screen time spills into insomnia, anxiety or compulsive checking.

Extended screen time amplifies these risks. Many older Indians now keep their phones close throughout the day and into the night, checking content in short, frequent bursts rather than in a single sitting. As a result, they spend more time in a digital space where information and influence come rapidly and demand immediate attention, leading to increased sitting, less physical activity, reduced sleep, and a cumulative rise in lifestyle-related risks.

Evidence Now Shows Older Cohorts Are Becoming Heavy Screen Users

Reporting in *The Economist* offers a useful corrective to a debate that has focused too heavily on teenagers and youth cohorts. In its framing, the steepest change is occurring higher up the age pyramid, as cohorts that have been online since midlife approach retirement with established digital habits and more time to spend. Device mix also matters. Device ownership by age group in selected high-income countries for Q1 2025 (Figure 1) shows older adults as enthusiastic multi-device users. Smartphone ownership among those aged 65 and above sits near the top of the distribution, and the same group



also demonstrates substantial ownership of computers, smart televisions and tablets. Some categories skew younger, particularly game consoles, but the overall picture is of older users accumulating screens rather than limiting themselves to a single device.

This pattern helps explain why total screen exposure can rise even among older adults who remain heavy television viewers. In Britain, Ofcom data show that those aged over 75 still spend long hours with broadcast TV, while time online on smartphones, computers and tablets has also increased. The guardrails are different. Teenagers face school rules and parental supervision; older adults largely regulate their own use and often have fewer people around to notice when screen time spills into insomnia, anxiety or compulsive checking.

India has Widespread Device Access but Uneven Digital Comfort

India, by contrast, lacks a single, routinely tracked national statistic on daily screen time among older adults. What exists instead is a set of partial indicators that, taken together, reveal widening exposure alongside uneven capability. The Longitudinal Ageing Study in India (LASI) reports mobile phones as the most prevalent consumer durable in Indian households aged 45 and above, with access higher in urban areas at 93.6 percent than in rural areas at 84.1 percent. Yet usage does not equate to comfort. A NITI Aayog position paper on senior care reforms (2024) notes that only 13 percent of Indians aged 60 or older have ever used the internet, well below the national internet penetration rate.

Future national surveys should track older adults' screen exposure and digital skills across states, income groups, and rural-urban settings, rather than relying solely on device access to infer behaviour.

Where older adults do adopt phones, the pattern often takes the form of limited, task-specific use. A study of older Indian cancer patients found that 81 percent used mobile phones, but only 25 percent accessed the internet, with use lower among those with no education or impaired cognition. An analysis using National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) data shows large wealth and urban-rural gradients in reported internet use, suggesting that exposure and capability are likely to remain stratified across adult ages. An Indian adult nomophobia study (or no-mobile-phone phobia, the anxiety or discomfort some people feel when they cannot access their phone or stay connected) reported that about 42 percent of participants used smartphones for more than four hours a day for non-work activities, with longer daily use predicting higher nomophobia scores. The missing piece is measurement that matches the scale of the issue. Future national surveys should track older adults' screen exposure and digital skills across states, income groups, and rural-urban settings, rather than relying solely on device access to infer behaviour.

For some older adults, digital tools can reduce isolation, expand access to services, and support cognitive engagement, even as the social and financial vulnerabilities of a screen-heavy adulthood become increasingly apparent. Chronic disease management can now routinely be conducted via a phone, whether used directly by the older person or mediated by family members. eSanjeevani has expanded teleconsultations nationwide, serving as a routine access channel, particularly when travel to health facilities is difficult. The Ayushman

Bharat Digital Mission (ABDM) has developed the ABHA (Ayushman Bharat Health Account) application as a citizen-facing platform to view and share medical records with consent, reducing repeated paperwork and lost prescriptions for older patients who move between providers. Large consumer platforms also engage older adults in health-related phone use, including teleconsultations, medicine ordering, and diagnostics (Apollo 24/7, Practo), as well as information-focused services (Tata 1mg). Samsung Health has introduced a 'Find Care' feature in partnership with PharmEasy and Tata 1mg, enabling medicine ordering, diagnostics booking, and online consultations directly within the health app.

Guardrails can Reduce Harm without Infantilising Older Adults

Since ancient times, every generation has believed that the next is being negatively affected by some new medium. A more useful approach—especially for India's older adults—is to treat heavy phone use as a matter of environment and oversight rather than personal weakness. Teenagers still encounter friction through school routines and household monitoring. Many older adults have fewer such mediators, and late adoption can mean weaker instincts for distinguishing a credible claim from a manufactured one.

Guardrails against dark patterns can be applied beyond niche categories, with clearer consent, fewer manipulative defaults, and transparency around recommendation systems and auto-play.

Screen time among older adults rises due to mundane factors. The phone becomes the easiest way to fill gaps between tasks, manage loneliness without leaving home, and keep up with family. That convenience collides with designs built to hold attention. Infinite scroll, auto-play, streaks, and timed rewards can turn minutes into hours without a clear endpoint. Notifications and group chats keep attention on a short leash, while algorithmic feeds learn what provokes reactions and then serve more of it. Much of this is not 'content' in the traditional sense, but a stream of prompts that trains checking behaviour.

Trump's Judicial Battles and Global Fallout

The unintended pun on “Liberation Day” couldn't have been more appropriate when the Supreme Court of the United States (Scotus) ruled 6-3 against Donald Trump's emergency tariffs. At the heart of the legislation was the question of whether the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) authorises the President to impose tariffs. The ruling invalidated Mr Trump's decision to impose tariffs on goods from almost every country that America trades with, highlighting that the IEEPA law does not provide power to the President to unilaterally impose tariffs of unlimited amount, duration and scope. Although the decision may give an impression that an unpredictable era of Trump tariffs is over, another seems to be in the offing.

In a reflection of that anticipation, using Section 122 of the 1974 Trade Act, Mr Trump has doubled down by imposing 15 per cent reciprocal global tariffs on all countries, following an initial announcement of 10 per cent tariffs.

As might be expected from an aggressive executive under the second Trump administration, it is hard to imagine the executive bowing to another branch of government. In a reflection of that anticipation, using Section 122 of the 1974 Trade Act, Mr Trump has doubled down by imposing 15 per cent reciprocal global tariffs on all countries, following an initial announcement of 10 per cent tariffs. In effect, these decisions are meant to serve the twin purpose of countering the Supreme Court's ruling and compensating for the estimated economic gains lost due to the erstwhile tariffs. On the ground, the real-time implications of Mr Trump's retaliation to the Supreme court's ruling may be difficult to estimate just yet, specifically, as the as the new ruling announced by Mr Trump does not apply across the spectrum. Certain agricultural products, beef, foreign autos, aluminium and steel are some of the products that may be shielded from the current tariff back-and-forth, as they either have been spared by earlier carve-outs or fall under national security-related sectors. The resultant uncertainty



is going to affect consumers inside the US as well as countries across the globe.

For states trading with the US and at the receiving end of Mr Trump's tariffs, especially India, the duality brought about by the tussle between its judiciary and the executive should be a moment of pause. While the Supreme Court's decision may be laudable, betting on the judiciary to override the executive consistently and prevail may be a risky bet — especially so when the Supreme Court currently has a conservative supermajority with six conservative judges against three liberals.

The expansive scope of these laws within the reach of the executive branch under Mr Trump can hardly be overstated.

Much of the credit for the current Supreme Court's decision striking down Mr Trump's tariffs has been accorded to the splintering among two of the six conservative judges

who crossed over to join Chief Justice John Roberts — Justices Neil M Gorsuch and Amy Coney Barrett. These developments reflect a churn within the US governance system and appear to be an outcome of internal readjustments, less so a function of external pressure. At best, the Court's leanings on external factors may have been influenced by the consideration of America's status as a global leader in the face of punitive tariffs.

The new ruling to end Mr Trump's emergency tariffs is bound to create confusion and uncertainty among trade partners and companies. The fact that Mr Trump has warned nations to stick to their respective trade deals may be a clear signal that nations whose hands were forced to negotiate a trade deal that was less favourable to them than the US, especially compared to past arrangements, will grab the first opportunity to reverse to the status quo ante.

For countries that have agreed to levy zero tariffs on the US, like Indonesia, the current uncertainty would seem like an opportunity. However, Mr Trump has made the explicit threat to make use of “other alternatives” to circumvent the Supreme Court's decision. In particular, Mr Trump has three key arsenals — Section 122 of the Trade Act of 1974, which allows the President to impose tariffs on grounds of addressing balance of payment deficits; Section 301 of the US Trade Act of 1974, which allows tariffs on a trading partner for “unfair trade” practices; and tariffs based on Section 232 of the US Trade Expansion Act of 1962, which are levied on specific sectors on grounds of national security. The expansive scope of these laws within the reach of the executive branch under Mr Trump can hardly be overstated. All these can again be challenged in court but one thing is certain, the blunting of IEEPA may have dealt a blow to the weaponisation of tariffs.

Coming from a judiciary that has been seen as favourable to the Trump administration, this decision is more consequential and symbolic.

Regardless of how opportunistic or banal the latest Scotus ruling may appear to other trading partners of the US, it is a monumental development constitutive of a pushback against an unrestrained executive. Coming from a judiciary that has been seen as favourable to the Trump administration, this decision is more consequential and symbolic. It hands the Trump administration a definitive setback that complicates Mr Trump's economic and political agenda, even as it approaches the midterm elections later this year. Internally, the current ruling sets the stage for other key rulings anticipated from both inside and outside the US. From India's perspective, a key legislation for debate is the one on the validity of birthright citizenship in the US. The ruling could reshape the people-to-people connect, which has strongly undergirded the bilateral relationship between the US and India for decades.

SC refuses to ban movie title 'Yadav Ji ki Love Story', says it does not portray caste in bad light

New Delhi

The Supreme Court on Wednesday rejected a plea seeking a ban or a change in the title of the upcoming film "Yadav Ji ki Love Story," saying the name does not portray the Yadav community in a poor light.

A bench comprising Justices BV Nagarathna and Ujjal Bhuyan rejected the petition filed by the chief of the Vishwa Yadav Parishad.

It perused the material on record and noted that the main grievance was that the name of the film reflected the Yadav community in bad light in the society.

"Therefore, the contention is that the name of the film is to be changed. We fail to understand as to how the title of a film can reflect the community in a bad light. The title of the film nowhere has any adjective or any word that portrays the Yadav community in bad light," Justice Nagarathna said.

The bench termed the apprehensions as "wholly unfounded" and distinguished its earlier order in a similar case related to 'Ghooskhor Pandat' in



no such negativity is attached to the Yadav community. Neither of the reasonable restrictions under Article 19(2) (reasonable restrictions to freedom of speech and expression) under the Constitution are attracted. The name in no way portrays the Yadav community in bad light or any negative way. The writ petition is accordingly dismissed," the order said.

The petitioner had alleged that the title created an offensive stereotype against the community and raised concerns over the depiction of the female lead.

During the hearing, the counsel for the petitioner argued that while they do not oppose inter-community marriages, the film's portrayal of a woman was unacceptable.

"A lady cannot be publicised this way," the counsel said, adding that the film claims to be based on a true story.

However, the bench remained unconvinced, categorising the film as a work of fiction.

which it had asked the producer to change the title of that movie.

"The expression 'ghooskhor' in English means corrupt. Therefore a negative meaning was being attached to the community. In the instant case

Delhi to host International Film Festival from March 25 screening 125 plus movies



New Delhi

Delhi is poised to position itself as a global hub of cinema, art and culture with the national capital set to host an international film festival from March 25 to 31, Chief Minister Rekha Gupta said on Wednesday.

At the curtain-raiser of the International Film Festival Delhi (IFFD) 2026 at the Delhi Secretariat, the chief minister said the movie gala will mark a significant step towards positioning Delhi as a global cultural and cinematic destination.

Gupta said the festival would go beyond film screenings and celebrate Delhi's creative energy, cultural heritage and contemporary outlook.

Designed as a public, city-wide festival, the festival aims to bring world cinema closer to ordinary citizens while offering local filmmakers and technicians an international platform for exchange and collaboration.

The festival will be held at multiple prominent venues across New Delhi, including Bharat Mandapam.

The chief minister said the initiative is aligned with the Delhi government's film

policy, which focuses on single-window clearances, production support and industry partnerships to make the city an attractive destination for film shoots.

She added that the festival is expected to boost film tourism, talent development, creative industries and employment generation.

According to a statement, more than 125 Indian and international films will be screened during the seven-day event, along with gala premieres, masterclasses, industry interactions, workshops and cultural performances.

The festival is being organised by the Delhi Tourism and Transportation Development Corporation and is envisioned as a long-term cultural project to establish Delhi as a global film hub.

Delhi Tourism Minister Kapil Mishra said the city is emerging as a "creative capital" under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Delhi CM Gupta.

The government has also planned cultural evenings and live performances at the festival to give it a broader public and celebratory character.

Amitabh Bachchan shooting for 'Kalki 2' in Hyderabad, shares BTS photo with Kamal Haasan

Hyderabad

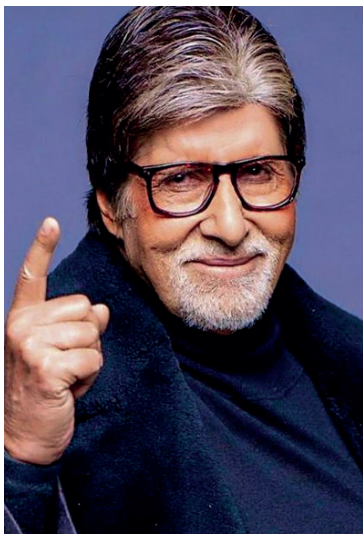
Megastar Amitabh Bachchan has shared behind the scenes photos with Tamil superstar Kamal Haasan from the sets of the "Kalki 2", which marks their first project together since 1985's "Geraftaar".

In a post on his official blog on Tumblr, the 83-year-old said he has begun shooting for the project, which is a follow-up to the 2024 Telugu blockbuster "Kalki 2898 AD".

"Meeting up with the great KAMAL HAASAN, we shall be working together after ages .. last in 'Giraftar'," Bachchan wrote.

In the photos, the two cinema icons are seen sharing a warm hug, with Bachchan dressed as Ashwatthama, the character he essayed in the first part.

"Kalki 2' begun the work .. and shall ever cherish the love and affection of anticipated presence on the Sunday .. but hopefully shall be with all this coming Sunday," he added.



Inspired by Hindu scriptures, "Kalki 2898 AD" served as the first instalment in the planned Kalki Cinematic Universe in 2024.

Set in a post-apocalyptic world, the film followed a group of people set out to save a woman pregnant with Lord Vishnu's 10th and final avatar, Kalki, from an evil supreme god-king, Yaskin.

It featured Prabhas as Bhairava/Karna, Bachchan as Ashwatthama, Haasan as Supreme Yaskin and Deepika Padukone as Sumathi aka SUM-80.

The film released in June 2024 and earned over Rs 1000 crore at the global box office.

Bachchan also shared images of a crowd waiting outside his Mumbai residence Jalsa to catch a glimpse of the actor.

"Told them that this Sunday I shall not be able to come, since I was shooting in Hyderabad .. but still they come .. to confirm ... but apologies .. work first .. rest later," he said.

Akshay Kumar drops spooky motion poster of upcoming film Bhoot Bangla

Mumbai

Akshay Kumar on Tuesday dropped a striking first-look motion poster of his much-awaited horror-comedy 'Bhoot Bangla'.

Taking to Instagram on February 24, the actor shared an intriguing glimpse of his character, instantly sparking excitement among fans.

The motion poster presents Akshay in a dramatic 'tantrik-like' avatar, marking a distinct shift from his recent on-screen personas.

Seated shirtless on an eerie, intricately carved throne adorned with demonic faces, he sports black sunglasses and multiple strands of Rudraksha beads.

Holding a rosary, the actor appears mid-scream, his mouth wide open, creating an intense yet theatrical visual that hints at the film's horror-comedy tone.

Accompanying the poster was a playful caption that read, "Dus ko denge das-tak, intejar karo tab tak... Let the fun begin!"

Akshay also confirmed that 'Bhoot Bangla' has been preponed. Originally slated to release on May 15, the film will now arrive in cinemas earlier, on April 10, 2026.

'Bhoot Bangla' also marks the much-awaited reunion of Akshay Kumar and director Priyadarshan after a gap of nearly 16 years.

The duo last collaborated on 'Khatta Meetha' in 2010.

The film boasts a massive ensemble cast featuring Tabu, Paresh Rawal, Rajpal Yadav, Wamiqa Gabbi, and veteran actor Asrani.

Presented by Balaji Motion Pictures, a division



of Balaji Telefilms Ltd, in association with Cape of Good Films, Bhoot Bangla is produced by Akshay Kumar, Shobha Kapoor, and Ekta Kapoor.

Tom Hanks to star as Abraham Lincoln in 'Lincoln in the Bardo'

Hollywood veteran Tom Hanks is set to portray former US president Abraham Lincoln in the upcoming film adaptation of the book "Lincoln in the Bardo". Oscar-nominated filmmaker Duke Johnson, known for 2015's "Anomalisa", is attached to direct and produce the project with author George Saunders, who penned the 2017 bestselling novel, adapting the screenplay.



According to Variety, Hanks will also produce the project, which is a hybrid of live-action and stop-motion animation, through his Playtone banner with longtime collaborator Gary Goetzman. While Lincoln's

leadership during the Civil War and the abolition of slavery, as well as his assassination in 1865, have frequently been depicted on screen — most notably in Steven Spielberg's "Lincoln", which earned Daniel Day-Lewis an Oscar — "Lincoln in the Bardo" focuses on a more intimate chapter of the president's life: his relationship with his recently deceased 11-year-old son, Willie Lincoln.

Johnson, Paul Young and Devon Young Rabinowitz will produce the film for Starburns Industries. Steven Shareshian, Aaron Mitchell and Saunders will serve as executive producers. Production is set to take place in London.

Namaskar steals spotlight as Alia presents at BAFTAs

Bollywood star Alia Bhatt, who made her debut at the 79th edition of the BAFTA Awards as a presenter, surprised the audience by starting her speech in Hindi. As the videos from the event, which took place on Sunday at London's Royal Festival Hall surfaced online, several users went on to praise the actor. "Namaskar! Agla award ek aisi film ke liye hai, jo angrezi mein nahi hai," she is heard saying in the video. "Don't reach for the subtitles just yet. I was only saying in Hindi that the next award is for a film not in the English language. Because while film speaks in countless voices, what we always

celebrate is the language of cinema. And that one we all speak fluently. And the incredible nominees are," she further added.

Bhatt presented the Best Film not in English Language category BAFTA to Norwegian filmmaker Joachim Trier for his film Sentimental Value. "We live in a time when images are thrown at us at the rapid speed we could imagine. A lot of these images are seen on our phones and a lot of these images are trying to sell us the ideas, things, ideology and they are seeking us out to try to use the moving image for that. I feel that the films this year are the films that are made for deep

viewing, for humanist viewing where we can sit together in rooms like this and experience to see the other, hopefully, through empathy, curiosity and open up the possibility of the theatrical experience for that," Trier said while accepting the award.

Bhatt opted for a custom silver Gucci dress and complemented it with a white stole for the ceremony. Bhatt was among a star-studded lineup of celebrities as presenters, which included the names of Alicia Vikander, Bryan Cranston, Cillian Murphy, Emily Watson and Monica Bellucci.



Sesko keeps United's top-4 push on track

Manchester United edged past Everton 1-0 at Hill Dickinson Stadium on Monday, with substitute Benjamin Sesko scoring the decisive goal to secure all three points. The narrow victory extended United's unbeaten run and underlined their ability to manage tight contests, even as Everton remained competitive for long spells without finding a breakthrough.

The first half offered little in terms of quality, with neither side able to create clear chances. Everton showed intent in midfield but lacked penetration in the final third, while United remained cautious and compact, focusing on defensive shape rather than attacking fluency.

The second half followed a similar pattern until United found the breakthrough through a move involving their attacking signings. Matheus Cunha switched play with a diagonal pass to



Bryan Mbeumo, who drove forward before setting up Sesko. The striker, making a well-timed run into the box, finished calmly past Jordan Pickford in the 71st minute.

Sesko once again made a telling impact off the

bench. Starting among the substitutes for the sixth game in a row, the Slovenian scored for the third time in four appearances as a substitute, continuing a productive run despite limited minutes.

His bench role appears to

be a tactical decision rather than a reflection of form. United have often approached matches cautiously in the opening stages, with Carrick opting to introduce Sesko later, when space opens up and defenders begin to

tire. The approach paid off again, as his movement and composure proved decisive.

He is growing as a player," United head coach Michael Carrick said. "Sometimes it's big steps, sometimes it's little steps. He has taken some huge ones recently. The confidence and belief he is playing with is great to see."

Everton attempted to respond after falling behind but struggled to break down United's defensive structure, as the visitors saw out the closing stages to secure a clean sheet. The win moved United three points clear of both Liverpool and Chelsea in a tightly contested race for the top four. With only a small margin separating several sides and 10 games remaining, United's ability to pick up points in low-margin matches could prove crucial as they push for a Champions League return.

Players must not be excluded on grounds of nationality: England and Wales Cricket Board, The Hundred franchises

London

The England and Wales Cricket Board and franchises of The Hundred have issued a joint statement to assert that players must not be excluded on grounds of nationality amid fears that Pakistani cricketers could be deliberately ignored by at least four Indian-owned teams at next month's auction.

Four out of the eight franchises—Manchester Super Giants (RPSG Group), MI London (Reliance), Southern Brave (GMR) and Sunrisers Leeds (Sun Group) -- are linked to team owners in the IPL and according reports in the British media, all of them would avoid Pakistani players.

However, even without any Indian presence among the owners, only two Pakistan players were a part of The Hundred last year and overall just nine have managed to feature in the first five seasons.

The new owners will take charge of the operations from this season onwards.

"The Hundred was established to reach new audiences, grow the game of cricket and ensure that everyone



regardless of their ethnicity, gender, faith, nationality or other can feel they belong in our sport. Players must not be excluded on the grounds of their nationality," asserted the joint statement from the ECB and all eight owners, including the ones with IPL links.

"As the governing body responsible for running the tournament, the ECB is committed

to ensuring there is no place for discrimination, and has regulations in place to take robust action to tackle any such conduct.

"All eight teams commit to selection being based solely on cricketing performance, availability, and the needs of each team," the statement added.

On Monday, Pakistan opener Sahibzada Farhan had expressed his

desire to play in The Hundred.

As many as 67 male and female cricketers from Pakistan, including almost the entire men's T20 World Cup squad, have registered for the tournament's auction.

As far as the Indian Premier League is concerned, Pakistani players were barred from the tournament following the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attack that was carried out by terrorists from across the border.

No Pakistan cricketer has featured in SA20 since its launch in 2023, with all six teams owned by franchise groups linked to the IPL.

Similarly, in the UAE's ILT20, franchises controlled by the owners of MI London and Southern Brave have not signed a single Pakistan player across four seasons.

England captain Harry Brook had earlier said that it would be a shame if Pakistan cricketers did not take part in the competition and spinner Moeen Ali had warned that such an exclusion could lead to legal action against the owners.

India needed the shakeup, need to rethink about team composition- Shastri

Mumbai

The heavy loss to South Africa in their Super 8 opener was the "shakeup" title favourites India needed going into the business end of the T20 World Cup, said former head coach Ravi Shastri.

India will be desperate to make a strong comeback against Zimbabwe here on Thursday after the heavy 76-run defeat at the hands of South Africa in their Super 8 opener in Ahmedabad on Sunday.

The loss against the Proteas, incidentally, was India's first defeat after 12 successive victories across the last two editions of the T20 World Cup.

"You win 12 matches on the trot, there's bound to be an off day. And I'm glad it has come early. It might just be the shakeup India needed," Shastri told on the latest episode of The ICC



Review.

"It might also make them rethink their strategy as to the composition of the side going ahead.

"They would have learned from that last experience that they're not going to take things for granted because in this Super Eight if you lose one more (match), then you're really putting yourself under serious pressure."

Talking about the team

composition for Thursday's crucial match, Shastri advised India to play an extra spinner keeping in mind the spin-friendly Indian conditions.

He is in favour of bringing in vice-captain Axar Patel, who was replaced by Washington Sundar in the last match.

"They have to bring him (Axar Patel) back. You need that experience. I would say play both (Patel and Sundar).

Give yourself that extra option. Because on a given day, you're bound to have one bowler who's going to have an off day. Like for example, Varun Chakravarthy on Sunday," Shastri noted.

"If Axar Patel is playing, he might be batting at No.8. You have got Hardik Pandya at No.5, you've got Shivam Dube at No.6, you've got Washington Sundar at No.7. Axar can go at No.5 as well.

"Now, if eight batters can't do the job in T20 cricket, then something's wrong, especially with that kind of firepower. Where you're missing out is you're not giving yourself that extra option of a bowler, which I think is important."

Australia legend and ICC Hall of Famer, Ricky Ponting too feels that India missed a trick by not playing Axar against the Proteas, and expects the hosts to field their best possible XI.

"Listening to the commentary, the reason Axar didn't play (against South Africa) is because of the left handers in the opposition side. But there's still some right handers there. It just comes down to the art of the captain of being able to use Axar at the right time," said Ponting, who has led Australia to two ODI World Cup triumphs.

"I would be going back to the basics. I'd be just looking at their lineup. Who's our best XI for the conditions in Chennai?"

"If that has Axar Patel in it, great. If it has Kuldeep Yadav in it, that's the other one that I'd be thinking about bringing back because it doesn't matter with him if it's left-hand or right-hand. He can bowl wrong ones and spin the ball away from the left-hand outside edge of both those batters," he added.

Nishu, Yash shine at IIS Dangal Championship 2026

Hisar

The 2026 IIS Dangal Championship closed out on a high with U23 World Championships medallists Nishu and Yash bagging top honours in their respective weight categories, according to a release.

Organised by the Inspire Institute of Sport (IIS), the championship witnessed a record turnout, with over 300 entries and around 240 participants competing across nine categories at the Shaheed Madan Lal Dhingra Multipurpose Hall, Giri Centre, CCS HAU, Hisar.

53 kg wrestler Nishu, who recently won a U23 World Championship bronze in Novi Sad, Serbia, was in top form and proved too strong for her opponents as she eased her way to the gold medal. Yash (74 kg freestyle), representing the Delhi state team, also delivered a dominant performance to finish on top of the podium in his category. Apart from the honour of winning their respective titles, both wrestlers walked away with handsome prize money cheques, with Nishu receiving Rs 31,000 and



Yash Rs 51,000.

"It was an excellent opportunity for me to fight against some top-quality opponents. It always feels great to win a title. I hope more such events are organised, and wrestlers like me get to participate and improve," said Yash after his victory.

Encouraged by the strong response to the inaugural edition

in 2025, the second edition of the event opened its doors to participants from across the country. Nearly 20 per cent of the entries came from outside Haryana, reflecting the growing reach of the championship. Around 250 entries were registered in the men's categories, while over 50 entries were recorded in the women's categories.

Several notable names from the IIS stable also featured in the competition, including Kajal (+62 kg), Nishu (53 kg), Suraj (60 kg Greco-Roman, U17 World gold medallist), Sumit (60 kg Greco-Roman, U20 World bronze medallist), and Sumit Malik (57 kg freestyle, U20 World bronze medallist).

The championship was conducted in a single day, with three mats in action simultaneously to ensure maximum engagement for both athletes and spectators. The venue saw a packed house and a lively atmosphere, with continuous action throughout the day.

IIS Women's Coach Kosei Akaishi and High-Performance Director Gary Hall were present at the venue to scout emerging talent. The IIS Dangal Championship, along with other such initiatives, will serve as a key platform to identify, assess, and nurture promising wrestlers by giving them exposure to senior-level competition and a high-performance competitive environment.

Delivering Quality Healthcare to the Needy is True Service to the Nation - President

Mumbai

Providing accessible and quality medical services to the poorest citizens of the country should be our foremost objective, emphasized Droupadi Murmu. She underlined that ensuring quality healthcare for every Indian is a vital aspect of national service. The Central Government, she said, is consistently working to provide world-class healthcare facilities and is encouraging innovation in the sector by promoting research through artificial intelligence.

The inauguration ceremony of the nationwide campaign titled *‘‘Saving Lives and Building a Healthier Bharat’’* by P. D. Hinduja Hospital was held at the Durbar Hall of Lok Bhavan. The campaign was formally launched online at the hands of President Murmu.

President Murmu stated that India has made significant progress in the fields of pharmaceuticals and healthcare services. To ensure that all citizens remain healthy, more than one lakh Health and Wellness Centres are operational under the Ayushman Bharat initiative. Additionally,



immunization efforts have been strengthened through initiatives such as Mission Indradhanush.

She noted that more than 12 crore families across the country have been issued Ayushman Bharat cards, enabling millions of citizens to access much-needed medical treatment and financial support.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has also prioritized emergency medical services, focusing on expanding ambulance networks and trauma care centres. Alongside infrastructure,

raising public awareness about health remains essential. Timely access to accurate medical information and treatment facilities can save countless lives, she observed.

While India produces many essential medicines domestically, certain medical equipment and drugs still need to be imported. President Murmu urged stakeholders to strive toward manufacturing these within the country to achieve greater self-reliance in the healthcare sector.

Highlighting lessons from the post-

COVID era, she stressed the growing importance of mental health. Issues such as loneliness and depression create challenges in personal, family, and professional life. Therefore, she expressed the need for mental health services to be strengthened and made widely accessible.

She also mentioned that postgraduate seats in medical education have been increased. Several states have established All India Institutes of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), resulting in improved access to quality healthcare services and visible positive outcomes.

President Murmu emphasized that collective efforts are necessary to ensure that quality healthcare reaches every section of society. She commended the Hinduja Hospital Group for launching the ‘‘Saving Lives, Building a Healthier Bharat Mission.’’ Under this year-long initiative, healthcare services will be delivered in remote and rural areas, providing immediate medical assistance and saving lives. She praised the campaign as a noble effort contributing significantly to the nation’s well-being.

Sarnaik Issues Stern Warning to Those Obstructing ST Diesel Procurement

Mumbai

A major confrontation has erupted over diesel procurement for the Maharashtra State Road Transport Corporation (ST Corporation). Transport Minister and ST Corporation Chairman Pratap Sarnaik has issued a direct warning to companies allegedly attempting to obstruct the tender process.

‘‘No interference in the diesel procurement tender process will be tolerated. Those trying to stall the procedure by spreading misinformation or approaching the courts should be cautious,’’ Sarnaik said in strong words, reprimanding firms accused of creating hurdles.

The ST Corporation requires a massive 10.87 lakh liters of diesel every day. At present, it receives a discount of ₹3 per liter. However, states such as

Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh reportedly receive discounts exceeding ₹4 per liter. Notably, Andhra Pradesh is said to be getting a concession of ₹5.50 per liter.

‘‘Why should Maharashtra be denied similar concessions and suffer financial losses?’’ Sarnaik questioned angrily. He clarified that the decision to introduce a competitive tender process was taken precisely to secure higher discounts and ensure financial relief for the Corporation.

Currently, the ST Corporation is burdened with a cumulative loss of ₹12,000 crore, while its annual diesel expenditure stands at ₹3,400 crore. With 8,000 new diesel buses set to join the fleet soon, the yearly diesel expense is expected to rise to ₹4,700 crore.

In such a scenario, even a reduction of ₹1 per liter in diesel

prices could result in annual savings of ₹50 to ₹55 crore. This substantial saving, Sarnaik emphasized, is crucial for helping the Corporation recover from its financial crisis.

Some companies had approached the court seeking an extension to the tender process. However, the court reportedly declined to intervene. ‘‘Attempts to delay the process and cause losses to ST must stop. We will complete this procedure in a fully transparent and rule-bound manner,’’ Sarnaik asserted firmly.

He reiterated that no compromise would be made when it comes to protecting the interests of the ST Corporation. His strong stance has reportedly created significant unease among diesel supplier companies.

4 held for posing as Lawrence gang members, demanding Rs 30L from jeweller

Mumbai

Borivali police arrested four members of a gang that allegedly threatened a city based jeweller and demanded Rs 30 lakh while posing as associates of the Lawrence Bishnoi gang. Police said the main accused, who allegedly used international numbers to send WhatsApp messages threatening to kill the jeweller if the ransom was not paid, was still absconding. According to investigators, at least three jewellers in Vile Parle East, DN Nagar in Andheri and Borivali were targeted over the past few days. The arrested accused were identified as Riyazuddin Mohammad Bashir, 29, Mohammad Faiyaz Mohammad Qayyum Mansuri alias Saddam, 27, Mohammad Ashraf Qadri Mohammad Hasim Ansari, 36, and Mohammad Arbaaz Ansari Mohammad Izhar

Ansari, 27. All are residents of Wasseypur in Dhanbad district of Jharkhand and were allegedly acting on the instructions of the main accused. A police team has left for Dhanbad to trace the mastermind. The case came to light after a jeweller with a shop in Borivali West received a threatening message on February 18 from an international number beginning with +44. The caller demanded Rs 30 lakh, claimed to be a member of the Lawrence Bishnoi gang and warned that if the money was not paid, the jeweller would be killed in the same manner as ‘‘Baba Siddiqui’’. When the store manager answered the call, the threat was allegedly repeated and the ransom demand reiterated. The jeweller then approached the police and an FIR was registered.