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Thane, Kalyan-Dombivli, Mira-Bhayandar GET NEW MAYOR

Mumbai

New mayors were elected on Tuesday in three municipal corporations of the Mumbai Metropolitan Region (MMR) – Kalyan-Dombivli, Thane and Mira-Bhayandar.

With the new leadership taking charge, elected representatives returned after four-six years of gap in these corporations, which were ruled by state-appointed administrators.

In the Thane Municipal Corporation, Shiv Sena corporator Sharmila Pimpalkar was elected Mayor, while BJP's Krishna Patil was elected Deputy Mayor. Both were elected here also without contest at



a special meeting held at the civic auditorium.

The election was overseen by district collector Dr Shrikrishnanath Panchal.

Thane Municipal Corporation had been run by an appointed officer for the past four years.

The Shiv Sena and BJP have decided to share the Mayor's post, with each party getting a term of 15 months.

In the Kalyan-Dombivli Municipal Corporation, Advocate Harshali Thawil-Chaudhary of the Deputy Chief Minister Eknath Shinde-led Shiv Sena was elected Mayor, while BJP's Rahul Damle was elected Deputy Mayor. Both were elected unopposed as no other candidates filed nominations.

The decision was taken at a special

meeting chaired by district collector Anchal Goyal.

The corporation had been under administrator's rule since 2020 after the tenure of the previously elected House was over. Elections were delayed during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The meeting saw heated arguments between ruling party members and the Opposition. Shiv Sena councillor Sachin Pote made remarks against the Shiv Sena (UBT), leading to shouting and protests inside the House.

Later, members observed silence in memory of former Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar, who died in a plane crash last week.

In the Mira-Bhayandar Municipal Corporation, BJP corporator Dimple Mehta was elected Mayor with 79

votes, while BJP's Dhruvkishor Patil was elected Deputy Mayor with the same number of votes.

Congress candidate Rubina Sheikh received 16 votes.

The Mira-Bhayandar election was held amid protests outside the municipal corporation building where groups including the Marathi Ekikaran Samiti and the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena opposed Mehta's election, saying the city should have a Marathi-speaking Mayor. Despite the protests, voting went ahead as scheduled.

Reacting to the protests, BJP MLA Pratap Sarnaik said similar objections were not raised earlier when non-Marathi leaders were elected in the region.

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'Fadnavis has no right to comment'

Sharad Pawar slams Maharashtra CM over NCP merger remarks

Baramati

NCP (SP) chief Sharad Pawar on Wednesday said Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis had no role in the merger talks between the two factions of the Nationalist Congress Party and therefore had no authority to comment on the issue.

Speaking to reporters in Baramati, the former Union minister said the discussions were being led by NCP (SP) leader Jayant Patil and his nephew, NCP chief Ajit Pawar.

Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar died in a plane crash in Baramati, Pune district, on January 28. Following his death, Sharad Pawar and other party leaders stated that the merger talks were at an advanced stage and



that Ajit Pawar had finalised February 12 as the date to announce the reunification of the rival factions.

Chief Minister Fadnavis, however, countered the

claim, saying that if the merger talks were indeed underway, Ajit Pawar would have shared the details with him.

Fadnavis has no right to

comment on NCP merger: Sharad Pawar

Asked about Fadnavis's remarks, Sharad Pawar said, "I do not understand, what right he has to mention my name? As he was nowhere in the merger talks, he has no right to comment on it."

He said that NCP (SP) leader Jayant Patil and NCP head Ajit Pawar had been leading the merger talks.

Asked if the merger will take place now, Sharad Pawar said that currently their priority is to support each other and then decide how to go ahead.

"As far as political discussions are concerned, we are not talking to anyone," he added.

To a question on the appointment of Ajit Pawar's wife Sunetra as deputy CM

after his demise, the senior Pawar said it is a matter of happiness and satisfaction that she got the opportunity to serve in the post.

He, however, denied having any knowledge about a memorial for Ajit Pawar being planned on the premises of Vidya Pratishtan, the educational institution founded by the Pawar family in Baramati.

"I have read about it in the newspapers. There has been no discussion on it yet. We will sit together and decide," he said.

Notably, Kiran Gujar, a close aide of Ajit Pawar and confidant of the Pawar family, on Sunday said the memorial has been planned on the Vidya Pratishtan premises where the NCP leader's last rites were performed.

21-year-old IIT Bombay student jumps to death from hostel terrace

Mumbai

A 21-year-old IIT Bombay student allegedly died by suicide after jumping from the terrace of the hostel in the wee hours of Wednesday, Mumbai Police said. The deceased has been identified as Naman Agarwal. The incident occurred at around

1 am at the hostel located in Mumbai's Powai area.

Agarwal, a second-year engineering student at the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Bombay, allegedly jumped from the

terrace of hostel no. 4. The student was a native of Pilani in Rajasthan.

The reason behind the extreme step is yet to be ascertained, a Powai police official said.

The incident sent shockwaves across the campus, leaving students and staff deeply shaken. Agarwal was immediately rushed for medical assistance, but doctors declared him dead on arrival.

Police have registered an Accidental Death Report (ADR) and further investigation is underway to determine the circumstances leading to the incident, officials added.



Praful Patel says Sunetra Pawar appointed Deputy CM after discussion, bows out of NCP chief contest

New Delhi

In the wake of NCP chief and Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar's death in a tragic plane crash, questions have emerged regarding party leadership and decision-making. Senior NCP leader Praful Patel has now clarified the party's stance on a plethora of issues.

The NCP Rajya Sabha MP said Ajit Pawar was a key leader of the party and Sunetra Pawar was appointed as Deputy Chief Minister of the state after holding consultations with senior party leaders.

"Considering the sentiments of both the party and the public, Sunetra Tai accepted our request to take on this responsibility. The Pawar family observed three days of mourning, after which the swearing-in ceremony was held," Patel said.

Patel also emphasised that responsibility for following legislative procedures and making key decisions lies with him and senior leader Sunil Tatkare. He noted that outsiders,

who have never contested elections, have been giving statements against the party leadership, which is entirely inappropriate.

NCP chief to be appointed by right person

On the appointment of party president,

Praful Patel said the decision in this regard will be taken by the right person and that will happen without his participation.

"The decision on the party president will be made by the right person. This will happen without me. I will not take that position. Our decision-making process will remain within our limits, and no external



discussions will influence it," he said.

On local body elections, Patel clarified that the NCP has adopted different strategies in different areas to avoid vote splitting. "For example, in Ahilyanagar we contested against BJP, while in Nashik it was against Shinde Shiv Sena. The NCP-SP alliance was only for local body elections," he said.

Discussed Finance Ministry issue with CM, says Patel

On Sunetra Pawar not being allocated the Finance Ministry, Patel said that the issue was discussed with CM Fadnavis and he decided to keep the portfolio temporarily, especially with the budget underway. He said the CM felt Sunetra Pawar is new and she should not face any problem.

Patel reiterated that he only holds temporary leadership responsibility and will not become the national president of the NCP.

Sharad Pawar holds closed-door meeting with Ajit Pawar's sons in Baramati

Baramati

A closed-door meeting between NCP (SP) chief Sharad Pawar and the sons of late Maharashtra deputy chief minister Ajit Pawar -- Parth Pawar and Jay Pawar -- was held in Baramati on Wednesday, sources said.

The meeting was held on the premises of Vidya Pratishthan, an educational institute in the Pawar family's hometown Baramati. It lasted about one and a half hours, they said.

There was no immediate official word on the agenda



of the meeting. The discussions might have centred on the possible merger of the two NCP factions and the upcoming Zila Parishad elections, the sources said.

Deputy CM Ajit Pawar died in a plane crash at Baramati in Pune district on January 28. Three days later,

his wife Sunetra Pawar took oath as deputy CM.

After Ajit Pawar's death, Sharad Pawar and other leaders of his party claimed that merger talks were in advanced stages and the late deputy CM had finalised February 12 as the date to announce the reunification of the NCP factions.

A seemingly counterclaim emerged through Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis, who said that if the merger talks were really in progress, then Ajit Pawar would have shared the details with him.

Bombay High Court forms high powered committee to monitor air pollution control in Mumbai region

Mumbai

The Bombay High Court has constituted a high-powered committee comprising former Chief Justice of the Himachal Pradesh High Court Amjad A Sayed and retired Bombay High Court Justice Anuja Prabhudessai to monitor and supervise compliance with earlier court directives aimed at curbing air pollution in Mumbai and Navi Mumbai.

Justice Sayed served as a judge of the Bombay High Court for 15 years before being elevated as Chief Justice of the Himachal Pradesh High Court in 2023.

The committee was formed following observations by a bench of Chief Justice Shree Chandrashekhar and Justice Gautam A Ankhad, which noted that air pollution levels in Mumbai and surrounding areas had not declined and that there was "insufficient monitoring" by civic authorities. The bench took the decision on January 29, while the detailed order was made available on Tuesday. The High Court has been hearing a suo motu public interest litigation along with other petitions initiated after taking note of multiple media reports, including The Indian Express series Death by Breath, which highlighted an "alarming scenario" of air pollution beginning in November 2023.

The committee will examine reports submitted by municipal commissioners and officials of the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation, Navi Mumbai Municipal Corporation and the Maharashtra Pollution Control Board. It will also consider the findings of an advocates committee earlier appointed by the High Court to inspect construction sites in Mumbai and make recommendations to authorities. The court directed that the committee's recommendations should cover "immediate, medium term and longterm measures to combat and prevent air pollution in Mumbai and the Mumbai Metropolitan Region, including advising them on the formulation of a Graded Response Action Plan for Mumbai and Navi Mumbai." The High Court said the committee may submit a preliminary report by March 5, followed by monthly reports, and may also suggest "additional measures to ensure effective compliance and reduction of pollution." The bench further stated that the committee "may seek inputs, as and when required," from Virendra Sethi, Emeritus Fellow in Environmental Science and Engineering at IIT Bombay, and Dr Indu Khosla, a pediatric pulmonologist, and "may consult any other expert body if necessary."

Deputy CM Sunetra replaces Ajit Pawar as guardian minister of Pune and Beed

Mumbai

Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Sunetra Pawar has been appointed as the guardian minister of Pune and Beed districts. Earlier, Ajit Pawar was assigned the responsibility of these districts. The same responsibility has now been assigned to Sunetra Pawar. An official government order regarding this decision has been issued.

Ajit Pawar died after his charter plane crashed during landing in Baramati on January 28. After his untimely demise, Sunetra Pawar took the oath as deputy Chief Minister of Maharashtra, replacing her husband.

She will also be allotted the same office chambers in the Secretariat that were previously used by Ajit Pawar.

The state government has finalised its decision on the matter, following which the General Administration Department (GAD) has issued an official order. Sunetra Pawar is likely to formally take charge of her office by the end of this week.

Sunetra Pawar, after being sworn in as deputy Chief Minister, has been entrusted with key portfolios including State Excise, Sports and Youth Welfare, Minority Affairs and Waqf. Several important ministries like Finance and Planning, which



Ajit Pawar helmed, have not been assigned to her.

Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis will likely hold the charge of these portfolios and present the Budget next month.

Sunetra Pawar, 62, has stepped down from her Rajya Sabha seat. She is currently not part of either house of the state legislature. Sources indicate that she is likely to enter the fray in the upcoming by-election from the Baramati assembly seat, which was earlier held by her late husband.

A small chartered aircraft carrying Ajit Pawar took off from Mumbai at around 8 am. About 45 minutes later, the plane crashed while attempting to land near Baramati airport. Besides Ajit Pawar, four other people were on board and no one survived the accident.

BMC to slap ₹20,000 fine for construction debris in Mumbai, tightens rules on public spitting and littering

Mumbai

Days after the Solid Waste Management rules of 2026 were notified by the Ministry of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change, the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) on Monday issued its Solid Waste Management bylaws 2025, announcing stricter penalties for littering in public places, construction debris, and overall waste management in Mumbai.

According to the new bylaws, people will be fined up to Rs 500 for littering, urinating, defecating, washing vehicles or feeding animals and birds in public, and Rs 300 for bathing and washing of utensils in the open. Spitting in public places will result in a fine of Rs 250.

The civic body has also stipulated tight regulations while handling construction debris, with a fine of

Rs 20,000 against unauthorised dumping and Rs 25,000 in fines on vehicles illegally transporting construction debris.

"At a time when the solid waste management is making efforts to improve waste efficiency, the new by-laws have been framed to regulate every aspect of segregation and processing of wet and dry waste generated in the Mumbai Metropolitan Region," Ashwini Joshi, Additional Municipal Commissioner, BMC, said on Monday.

Much higher penalties have been introduced for larger waste management in public, with a Rs 1,000 fine proposed for bulk generators who fail to separate waste, while Rs 200 is imposed on individuals who do not segregate waste.

'Arre baba...': Ajit Pawar's last call to cousin 6 minutes before plane crashed in Baramati

Baramati

A phone call made by Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar just six minutes before his aircraft crashed at Baramati airport on January 28, 2026, has now come to light, adding a poignant note to the ongoing investigation into the fatal incident.

Ajit Pawar had spoken to his cousin and Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) worker Shrijit Pawar shortly before the aircraft went down. Shrijit Pawar played an excerpt of the recorded conversation at a press conference on Tuesday, saying the call was made in response to a message he had sent regarding local election-related issues.

According to Shrijit Pawar, he had messaged Ajit Pawar suggesting representation for the Mali community in district council elections. Ajit Pawar, who was travelling at the time, called him directly from the



aircraft to clarify the issue.

"He told me that we are taking all communities along with us. I wanted the world to know that till his last breath, he worked for everyone, across caste and religion. 'We must move forward taking everyone together' was his last message and his last voice," Shrijit Pawar said.

He added that Ajit Pawar was

known for personally responding to messages and calls. "Whenever I had a problem, I would message him and he would call me back. Even that day, while he was inside the aircraft, he called me," he said.

An excerpt of the conversation was also shared. Ajit Pawar can be heard saying, "We do not do things without information. We take all castes and communities along with us."

In response, Shrijit Pawar said, "Ajit dada, I only shared what I felt with you."

Ajit Pawar replied, "I agree, you are right. But I have already given a district council ticket to the Mali community. That seat falls under OBC reservation. Other parties have fielded different candidates. We have done our part."

Shrijit Pawar then said, "Dada, you take the final decision you think is right."

Addressing questions over why the recording appeared incomplete, Shrijit Pawar explained that Ajit Pawar had begun speaking directly on the issue without formal greetings as he had already read the message and recognised the caller's number.

Ajit Pawar was travelling from Mumbai to Baramati for campaigning in the Zilla Parishad and Panchayat Samiti elections. The aircraft was scheduled to land at Baramati airport at 8.45 am. According to officials, the pilot aborted the first landing attempt, circled the area, and during the second attempt, the aircraft veered off the runway and crashed in an open area near the airstrip.

Ajit Pawar and five others were killed on the spot. Authorities have said a detailed probe is under way to determine whether the crash was accidental or the result of sabotage.

Tunnel breakthrough achieved in Palghar for Mumbai-Ahmedabad bullet train project



Mumbai

The Mumbai-Ahmedabad bullet train project achieved its second tunnel breakthrough in a month in Palghar district of Maharashtra on Tuesday, officials said. Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw witnessed the breakthrough near Saphale village virtually from New Delhi through a video link.

The tunnel, MT-6, is 454 metres long and 14.4 metres wide, and will house both up

and down tracks of the high-speed rail corridor, an official said.

This is the second bullet train tunnel breakthrough in Palghar in a month, after the completion of the MT-5 tunnel near Saphale on January 2, he said.

The MT-6 tunnel was excavated from both ends using the New Austrian Tunnelling Method (NATM), a drill-and-controlled blasting technique suited for complex

geological conditions.

The excavation was completed within 12 months, the official said.

The 508-km railway project connecting Mumbai and Ahmedabad, which passes through Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Dadra and Nagar Haveli, is India's only high-speed rail project designed to operate bullet trains at a speed of 320 kmph.

According to officials, the construction of seven bullet train tunnels is underway in Palghar, with tunnel excavation and allied works at various stages of completion. Work on the high-speed corridor is underway at multiple locations in Maharashtra, including river bridges over the Vaitarna, Ulhas and Jagani rivers, station buildings,

highway crossings and a 21-km underground tunnel between the Bandra-Kurla Complex and Shilphata. As of January 27, around 334 km of viaducts, 17 river bridges and 12 major crossings over national highways, railways and other infrastructure have been completed. Track laying and electrification works have gathered pace in the Gujarat section.

Top Jaish commander among 2 terrorists killed in encounter in Udhampur

3 minor sisters jump off 9th floor in Ghaziabad after parents object to 'Korean love' online gaming

Udhampur

Two Pakistani terrorists, including a self-styled top commander of Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) outfit, were killed on Wednesday after they were trapped inside a cave in Udhampur district of Jammu and Kashmir, officials said.

Several powerful blasts were heard when the forces stormed the cave around noon.

Officials said one of the deceased terrorist is Rubani alias Abu Mavia, a top self-styled commander of Jaish-e-Mohammad outfit, who was active in the area for the last several years.

While body of one of the terrorists was lying on the mouth of the cave, another was found lying deep inside it.

The terrorists were located by joint troops of Army, police and CRPF amid intensified search operations in the higher reaches of Ramnagar-Basantgarh area around 4 pm on Tuesday, leading to a fierce gunfight, the officials said.

Army named the over 20-hour long operation as "Kiya" and said though it is over, the area still remains under surveillance.

"Based on specific intelligence input provided by police, troops of Counter-Intelligence Force Delta, White Knight Corps planned and executed a focused joint counter-terror operation in the general area of Jophar Forest, Basantgarh in coordination with police and CRPF reinforcing the cordon, ensuring effective area domination to prevent escape of terrorists.

"Contact with terrorists was established yesterday and since then, terrorists were prevented from breaking contact. Following



a calibrated and coordinated response, two terrorists have been successfully neutralised. The operation highlighted seamless inter-agency coordination, tactical precision and high standards of professionalism," the Army's White Knight Corps said in a post on X.

A large quantity of arms and ammunition, including an M4 carbine and an AK assault rifle, were recovered from the slain terrorists, the officials said.

The officials said intense gunfight and deafening explosions initially rocked the Jaffer, Gujrada and Chigla Balotha forests for over an hour, resulting in injuries to one of the terrorists who along with his associate managed to retreat into the cave, the officials said.

Heavy gunfire and explosions was reported for a brief period around 7.30 pm when the terrorists attempted to flee under the cover of darkness, the officials said, adding Army reinforcements, including paratroopers and dog squads, were rushed in to further tighten the cordon.

The night passed without any firing, and security forces maintained a tight vigil over the area, particularly around the cave, using drones for surveillance, before launching a final assault on the cave this morning, the officials said.

This was the second encounter in Udhampur since December 15 when a policeman was killed in an encounter at Soan village. However, the terrorists had managed to escape taking advantage of thick foliage and darkness.

A series of encounters -- three in Kathua district and four in Chatroo forest belt in Kishtwar -- also occurred in January, resulting in the killing of top JeM terrorist, Usman of Pakistan, in Kathua and a paratrooper in Kishtwar amid intensified operations to hunt down terrorists hiding in the upper reaches of Jammu region.

Usman was part of the same group eliminated in Udhampur district and got separated following the Soan encounter, the officials said.

Ghaziabad

Three minor sisters allegedly jumped to their death from the ninth floor of their apartment building in Uttar Pradesh's Ghaziabad, reportedly after their

together, including bathing, eating, going to school and sleeping. Police said the girls became addicted to online gaming during the Covid-19 pandemic and were playing a



task-based "Korean love game" online.

The girls had reportedly stopped attending school regularly, which had become a major concern for their parents. Police sources as saying that the parents had repeatedly objected to their daughters' gaming addiction and

parents objected to their excessive online gaming habits.

Atul Kumar Singh, Assistant Police Commissioner, said the deceased have been identified as Pakhi (12), Prachi (14), and Vishika (16). The incident took place around 2 am on Wednesday at Bharat City, a residential township in the Crossings Republik area.

Report says the three sisters were extremely close and did everything

counselled them about their studies.

Following an argument at home on Tuesday night over the issue, the sisters allegedly took the extreme step. Residents of the society alerted the police after hearing a loud noise in the early hours.

Police reached the spot and found the bodies within the apartment complex. The bodies have been sent for post-mortem examination.

Yumnam Khemchand Singh takes oath as Manipur Chief Minister

Imphal

Yumnam Khemchand Singh took oath as the Chief Minister of Manipur on Wednesday. The oath was administered by Governor Ajay Bhalla at Lok Bhavan. Singh had been elected as the BJP's legislative party leader the previous day.

Earlier, Singh met Governor Bhalla to stake claim to form the government in the state. "We met the governor in the presence of our newly elected legislature party leader and BJP observer Tarun Chugh. The NDA staked a claim to form a popular government in the state," state BJP chief A Sharda Devi said.



Trade deal with US protects India's agriculture, dairy sectors- Goyal amid Opposition protests in Lok Sabha

New Delhi

Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal on Wednesday said that India had protected its interests in sensitive sectors such as agriculture and dairy under the trade agreement with the United States.

While addressing the Lok Sabha amid vociferous protests by the Opposition, Goyal, while reading out a statement on the India-US trade deal, which was announced late night on February 2, informed the Lower House that the deal would support the goals of Viksit Bharat and strengthen the Atmanirbhar Bharat initiative.

The Commerce Minister further said that ensuring the energy security of India's 140 crore people remained the government's foremost priority, even as global energy dynamics continued to evolve.

"I want to make it clear that ensuring the energy security needs of 140 crore Indians is the government's top priority. In line with the changing international scenario, we are diversifying our energy sources with this objective in mind," Goyal said



Addressing concerns over trade and strategic interests, the minister said India's sensitivities in key sectors had been safeguarded.

"India's sensitivities in the fertiliser and agriculture sectors have been fully taken into account," he

said, adding that the government had protected the interests of farmers and dairy producers," he informed further.

Goyal said both India and its partners would move ahead keeping their respective economic priorities in focus.

"Both sides will want to move forward while keeping their respective economies in mind and safeguarding their own interests. India has been successful in protecting the interests of its agriculture and dairy sectors," he said.

"On February 2, 2026, PM and US President Donald Trump held a telephonic conversation on several matters of bilateral and international importance. After this, President Trump announced the reduction in tariff to 18 per cent. I would like to emphasise on the fact that this tariff is lower than the US tariff on several competitor nations," he told Lok Sabha.

Even as he spoke at 12 pm when the House reassembled after an earlier adjournment, massive ruckus and sloganeering broke out in the Lok Sabha during his address.

Opposition members displayed banners and yelled slogans, leading to the adjournment of the lower house of Parliament, soon after Goyal finished reading out the statement.

Lawyers, litigants throng CJ's courtroom to see West Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee argue in SIR case

New Delhi

Scores of lawyers and litigants thronged the hallowed precincts of the CJ's courtroom on Wednesday to witness the rare occasion of a chief minister, Mamata Banerjee in this case, putting forwards arguments before an apex court bench.

Banerjee did so on Wednesday in a case filed in connection with the ongoing Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of the electoral rolls in West Bengal.

Clad in a traditional white saree along with a black scarf, the West Bengal Chief Minister reached the Supreme Court's gate around 10 am flanked by her lawyers, including Trinamool Congress (TMC) MP and senior advocate Kalyan Banerjee.

According to sources, the Chief Minister had already applied for and granted the entry pass by the apex court registry to enter the premises.

The moment she entered the court complex, the waiting mediapersons merrily clicked



her pictures and shot videos on their mobile phones.

Entering the elevator, the TMC supremo did not answer the mediapersons' query as to whether she would advance the submissions herself.

At around 10.05 am, Banerjee, along with her lawyers, entered the Chief Justice of India's courtroom and sat on a chair in the visitors' gallery.

She was seen in the first row meant for lawyers at 12.55

pm, when the CJ-led bench commenced the hearing on her petition.

For some time, senior advocate Shyam Divan argued for her and later, Banerjee sought permission from the bench to put forward the arguments herself, which was granted.

The case has been adjourned for further hearing on February 9 and according to sources, Banerjee may appear in the apex court

DRDO successfully tests solid fuel ducted ramjet tech, paving way for long-range air missiles

New Delhi

The Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) carried out a successful demonstration of the Solid Fuel Ducted Ramjet (SFDR) technology from the Integrated Test Range (ITR) at Chandipur, off the coast of Odisha, on February 3. This is part of a project to design a long-range air missile that can hit targets at 350 km.

The successful demonstration places India into an elite league of nations possessing this technology that enables developing long-range air-to-air missiles to give tactical edge over the adversaries, DRDO said.

All the subsystems including nozzle-less booster, solid fuel ducted ramjet motor and fuel flow controller performed as per expectations after being initially propelled by a ground booster motor to the desired Mach number.

According to technical literature available on the subject, SFDR is a missile propulsion system that includes a 'thrust modulated ducted rocket' with a reduced smoke nozzle-less missile booster. Thrust modulation is achieved using a hot gas flow controller and the system utilises a solid fuelled air-breathing ramjet engine. Unlike a solid-propellant rocket, the ramjet takes up oxygen from the atmosphere during flight

Safeguards in place for farmers under trade deal: Chouhan

New Delhi

Union Agriculture Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan on Tuesday said that adequate safeguards had been built in to protect sensitive sectors such as agriculture and dairy from unfair competition under the proposed India-US free trade deal.

He was responding to concerns raised by farmer organisations that the agreement could adversely affect Indian agriculture and the dairy sector by exposing small and marginal farmers to unfair competition.

Speaking in the Lok Sabha, the minister said issues relating to farmers were addressed proactively and expeditiously by the government to ensure their socio-economic well-being.

"India is a net agricultural exporter. The government undertakes negotiations for Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) only after carefully safeguarding the interests of Indian agriculture, allied sectors and farmers, including small and marginal farmers. Adequate safeguards are built in to protect sensitive sectors such as agriculture and dairy from unfair competition," he said.

The remarks come amid statements by US Secretary of Agriculture Brooke Rollins, who announced that the "new US-India deal" would allow greater exports of American farm products into India, describing it as a major win for American farmers and rural communities.

"The new US-India deal will export more



American farm products to India's massive market, lifting prices, and pumping cash into rural America," Rollins said in a post, thanking US President Donald Trump for "once again delivering for our American farmers".

Asked about the Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM) announcing renewed nationwide protests citing continued agrarian distress and the non-fulfilment of assurances given after the repeal of the three farm laws in 2021, Chouhan said most related issues had been addressed.

These included concerns linked to the Electricity Amendment Bill; the setting up of national commissions for chilli, turmeric and other spices;

rights of tribal communities over water, forests and land under the Fifth Schedule; stricter punishment for the manufacture of fake or spurious seeds, fertilisers and pesticides and the rationalisation of penal provisions related to paddy-straw burning.

He added that farmer unions' concerns relating to rural employment and farm incomes had been addressed under the newly enacted Viksit Bharat - Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Grameen).

Chouhan said that to restore and strengthen farmers' trust, the government was engaging with them through initiatives such as the Viksit Krishi Sankalp Abhiyan, interactive field visits and meetings with farmers' organisations.

"To ensure remunerative prices, MSP is fixed at 1.5 times the cost of production for 22 agricultural crops, along with undertaking record procurement. To promote crop diversification, the government is procuring tur, urad and masoor under the Pulses Atmanirbharta Mission and cotton under the Cotton Mission through the National Agricultural Cooperative Marketing Federation of India Ltd. A digital price discovery platform, the National Agriculture Market (e-NAM), is being implemented across 23 states and four Union Territories to enable farmers to make informed decisions," he added.

Sanjay Raut expresses 'suspicion' over Ajit Pawar's death, seeks detailed probe into plane crash

New Delhi

Shiv Sena (UBT) MP Sanjay Raut on Monday raised questions over the death of former Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar, suggesting possible foul play in the plane crash that killed him. His remarks came at a time when speculation was rife about a possible reunion between the two warring factions of the Nationalist Congress Party. Raut alleged that Ajit Pawar faced pressure after expressing support for the proposed NCP merger and claimed the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) had used irrigation scam files to threaten him. According to Raut, the sudden death of Ajit Pawar within days of this episode was troubling.

"Questions will



indeed be raised on the accident of Ajit Dada... questions should indeed be raised. The manner in which a leader like Ajit Pawar... a tall leader of Maharashtra died in a plane crash and the facts which are coming to light - it should be investigated... I think there is something dubious here," he said. "Something did happen behind the curtains... He died mysteriously within 10 days of that. What do we understand from this? This reminds us of Justice Loya," he added.

Earlier, NCP



leader Amol Mitkari had echoed similar suspicions, pointing to a sudden pilot change, a shift in the aircraft's route and the condition of the bodies recovered from the crash site. "Not a single piece of paper was burned, but the bodies were burned. This raises some suspicions," he said. Mitkari said he had urged the Maharashtra Chief Minister to initiate a CBI probe and would also seek the intervention of Union Home Minister Amit Shah to ensure a high-level inquiry.

Uttarakhand government set to scrap Madarsa Board, constitutes state minority education authority

Dehradun

The Uttarakhand government is going to abolish the Madarsa Board from July 2026. Under the new system, the Uttarakhand State Minority Education Authority has been constituted. Special Secretary Dr Parag Madhukar Dhakate stated that during the last Assembly session, Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami had announced the abolition of the Madarsa Board and said that from July this year, all minority institutions would be brought under the umbrella of the Uttarakhand State Minority Education Authority, and their recognition would be done through the Uttarakhand Board of School Education.

Dr Parag further said that as per the instructions of CM Dhami, eminent professors and scholars have been nominated to this Authority, who will determine the academic curriculum for minority students. Educators from all minority communities have been included in it. He informed that Dr Surjit Singh Gandhi has

been appointed as Chairman, while Professor Rakesh Jain, Dr Syed Ali Hamid, Professor Pema Tenzin, Dr Elba Medrile, Professor Robina Aman, and Professor Gurmeet Singh have been appointed as members.



Social worker Rajendra Bisht and retired officer Chandrashekhar Bhatt have also been made members. The Director of Higher Education, Director of the State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT), and Director of Minority Welfare will also be members of the Authority.

"Our government has decided to constitute the State Minority Education Authority. Our government had taken the decision to abolish the Madarsa Board. Now this authority will decide what kind of education will be provided to minority children. This authority will determine the syllabus. All minority institutions will obtain recognition from the Uttarakhand Board of School Education," Dr Parag added.

Rahul Gandhi displays unreleased 'memoir' of Naravane in Parliament premises, claims PM shed responsibility

New Delhi

Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi on Wednesday cited former Army chief MM Naravane's 'unreleased memoir' to claim that Prime Minister Narendra Modi shed responsibility during the India-China conflict in 2020 and passed the buck on to Naravane.

Addressing reporters in the premises of the Parliament House complex, Gandhi held up Naravane's unreleased memoir and said he would like the youngsters in India to know that this 'book' exists despite the government claiming otherwise.

"The Speaker has said this book does not exist, the government has said it does not exist, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh ji has said this book does not exist. Every youngster in India should see this book exists," Gandhi said.

He said Naravane has written the full account of what happened in Ladakh.

Gandhi said he has been told that he cannot quote from this "memoir" in the Lok Sabha.

"The main line is what the PM said — 'jo uchit samjho woh karo'. The chief of Army staff Gen Naravane called Rajnath Singh and said 'Chinese tanks have come on Kailash ridge, what should we do?' Rajnath Singh did not reply to him at first. He (Naravane) asked S Jaishankar, NSA (Ajit Doval) and Rajnath Singh ji, but did not get a reply," the Congress



leader said citing the "memoir".

"He (Naravane) again called Rajnath Singh ji who said 'I will ask from the top'. There was a standing order from the top that if 'Chinese forces come in then do not fire on them without asking us'. Naravane ji and our army wanted to fire on those tanks because they had entered our territory," he said.

"Narendra Modi gave the message — 'jo uchit samjho woh karo'. Meaning he shed responsibility. 'Unhone Army chief se kaha aapko jo karna hai karo meri bas ki nahi hai' (He told the Army chief, you do whatever you want, it is beyond me)" Gandhi said, citing the memoir.

The former Congress chief further said the Army chief has written that he felt alone and was abandoned by the entire establishment.

"This is what they are scared of me saying in Parliament," Gandhi said.

"I don't think the PM will have the guts to come to the Lok Sabha today. If he comes, I am going to give him this book," he said.

Later, in a post in Hindi on X, Gandhi said, "Today, if the Prime Minister comes to Parliament, I will present him with a book. This book is not by any opposition leader.

This book is not by any foreign author. This book is by the country's former Army chief, General Naravane "and the surprising thing is that, according to the Cabinet Ministers, this book does not even exist".

"This book clearly states that when the Chinese army had entered our border, in such a critical moment, the Army Chief was made to wait.

And when the time came to take a decision, the Prime Minister simply said 'jo aapko uchit lage woh kijiye'," Gandhi said.

"In other words, in the most serious crisis for the country's security, Modi ji evaded political responsibility," he said.

"The country is asking questions, and the government is running away from answering those questions," Gandhi added.

The government-opposition faceoff in the Lok Sabha intensified on Tuesday as eight protesting MPs were suspended for "unruly behaviour" after Gandhi was disallowed for the second day from quoting an article that cited the unpublished "memoir" of Naravane on the 2020 India-China conflict.

The seven MPs from the Congress and one from the CPI (M) were suspended for the remainder of the Budget session, which ends on April 2, for trying to climb on the table of the secretary general, tearing papers and hurling them at the Chair.

Gandhi has also written to Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla, lodging his strong protest over being disallowed from speaking in the House on a matter of national security and terming it a "blot on our democracy". He has also said that it was for the first time in history that LoP was not allowed to speak on the Motion of Thanks on the President's address.

Over 100 Nigerians detained for document verification in Palghar, cocaine seized

Palghar

In a crackdown against foreigners living illegally in the district, police on Wednesday detained 109 Nigerian nationals for verification of documents in Nalasopara East area and seized about 2 kg of cocaine during the searches, an official said.

So far, none of them has produced valid travel and residential

documents, she said.

Teams of Mira-Bhayandar Vasai-Virar (MBVV) Police launched a combing operation at 6 in the morning, said Deputy Commissioner of Police Poornima Chowgule-Shringi.

"In one place, we seized 2 kg of cocaine from a person, and an offence is being registered," she said.

Foreign nationals including those from Nigeria, Uganda and Ghana living in Nalasopara, Achole and Tulinj have been repeatedly found to be involved in drug peddling, said the official.

"These foreign nationals have been continuously involved in drug peddling, and recently it also came to

light that they have set up illegal shops. The Vasai-Virar Municipal Corporation also had information about these activities. Hence, we initiated a coordinated action against drugs and illegal establishments," Chowgule-Shringi said.

Police gave the detained persons the opportunity to produce their travel and

residential documents, she said, adding, "So far, not a single person has been able to show valid documents...."

Those who can produce legal documents will be allowed to stay, while those who fail to do so will face further legal action, including repatriation," the DCP said.

Sino-Russian foreign policy 'tandem' key factor of global stability- Putin

Moscow

The Sino-Russian foreign policy "tandem" remains a key stabilising factor amid growing global turbulence, Russian president Vladimir Putin said on Wednesday during a video conversation with the Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping.

"As for the international situation, amid growing global turbulence, the foreign policy axis between Moscow and Beijing remains an important stabilising factor," Putin said during the conversation, excerpts of which were shared by the Kremlin.

"We are ready to continue the closest coordination on global and regional issues, both bilaterally and within all multilateral structures, such as the UN, BRICS, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and others, where the Russian-Chinese tandem plays a key role in

many areas," he added.

Speaking about China's chairmanship of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), Putin wished the country every success and pledged that Russia would provide its Chinese partners with all necessary assistance.

As China prepares for the Lunar New Year, Putin congratulated Xi in his video call.

"My dear friend, once again, Happy New Year and Happy Spring Festival. It's always springtime in our bilateral relations," Putin said, wishing the friendly Chinese people peace and prosperity.

Putin pointed to growing all-around cooperation with China, including in the energy sector.

Briefing reporters on the Putin-Xi video call, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said, "The good



tradition of video calls has been going on since 2020. The leaders cherish and maintain the tradition and always hold video calls before the Chinese New Year."

The two leaders had a confidential conversation on the entire range of international issues and bilateral relations.

Jaishankar, Rubio welcome trade deal; discuss energy, nuclear, defence, critical minerals

New Delhi

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar and US Secretary of State Marco Rubio "welcomed" the trade deal reached between President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and discussed "formalising" bilateral cooperation on critical minerals exploration and mining during their meeting in Washington DC on Tuesday.

Rubio held bilateral discussions with Jaishankar at the State Department, ahead of the inaugural Critical Minerals Ministerial meeting being convened by the US on Wednesday.

"Delighted to meet US @ SecRubio this afternoon. A wide ranging conversation that covered our bilateral cooperation agenda, regional and global issues," Jaishankar posted on X after the meeting.

"Facets of India-US Strategic Partnership discussed included trade, energy, nuclear, defence,

critical minerals and technology. Agreed on the early meetings of various mechanisms to advance our shared interests," he wrote.

A readout of the bilateral meeting provided by State Department Principal Deputy Spokesperson Tommy Pigott said that Rubio and Jaishankar "welcomed the trade deal reached between President Trump and Prime Minister Modi. The two leaders emphasised the importance of our democracies working together to unlock new economic opportunities and advance our shared energy security goals."

Pigott further said that Rubio and Jaishankar "discussed formalising bilateral cooperation on critical minerals exploration, mining and processing."

Rubio and Jaishankar "concluded their meeting by expressing their commitment to expanding bilateral and multilateral cooperation through the



Quad. They acknowledged that a prosperous Indo-Pacific region remains vital to advancing our shared interests," the readout said, referring to the four-nation grouping of Australia, India, Japan and the US.

In an X post, Rubio said he met with Jaishankar to "discuss our bilateral cooperation on critical minerals exploration and work together to unlock new economic opportunities between our two countries. We also commended the

trade deal between the United States and India."

Jaishankar is on a visit to the United States from February 2-4 and will participate in the Critical Minerals Ministerial being convened by Rubio.

During the visit, he will also hold meetings with senior members of the US administration, the Ministry of External Affairs had said.

The meeting between Jaishankar and Rubio came a day after Trump announced on Truth Social that India and

the US agreed to a trade deal under which Washington will bring down reciprocal tariff on Delhi from 25 to 18 per cent.

At the inaugural Critical Minerals Ministerial, the US will welcome delegations to advance collective efforts to strengthen and diversify critical minerals supply chains.

"This historic gathering will create momentum for collaboration to secure these critical components vital to technological innovation, economic strength, and national security," the State Department has said.

US Vice President JD Vance, Rubio, Special Assistant to the President of the United States and Senior Director for Global Supply Chains David Copley, and Under Secretary of State for Economic Affairs Jacob Helberg will deliver opening remarks at the ministerial.

A Flat but Forward-Looking Union Budget

Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman presented this year's Union Budget. With India's debt hovering at around 56 percent of GDP, the Finance Minister has expressed a resolve to bring it below 50 percent. How far this goal will be achieved remains to be seen. This budget makes no attempt at populism—there are no eye-catching or attractive announcements. The general public is usually interested in income tax relief. Last year itself, Ms. Sitharaman announced zero income tax for those earning up to ₹12 lakh annually. There was little left to be done on this front, so while this section of taxpayers may not be particularly happy, they are not unhappy either.

Immediately after the budget was presented, the stock market witnessed a sharp decline. The steadily rising profits in the equity market now seem set to move into a phase of uncertainty. The increase in Securities Transaction Tax (STT) on futures and options had a direct impact on market sentiment. Meanwhile, US President Donald Trump has attempted to put India under pressure on several fronts and is reportedly extremely displeased with India's purchase of oil from Russia. At the same time, Trump's overtures of friendship towards Pakistan—India's sworn adversary—while targeting

India, which has consistently upheld its dignity, suggested that the country could be heading into difficult times.

However, even before this budget, certain pro-people changes in the GST system and some strategic policy decisions taken with European countries other than the US helped India demonstrate strong economic momentum, with growth exceeding seven percent, in defiance of American pressure. In this budget, the Finance Minister has focused on core fundamentals, with a substantial increase in allocations for the defence sector. Attention has also been given to energy, education, and healthcare. As stated by the Finance Minister, the objective is to reduce the debt burden by six percentage points of GDP.

To encourage global industries to invest in India and export their products from here, tax exemptions have been provided. This year, special importance has been given to shipping, which requires large containers. The government has finally begun paying attention to container manufacturing, though China remains far ahead of India in this sector. Rapid population growth in India's metropolitan cities has given rise to new challenges. To ease this pressure, efforts will be made this year to promote

the development of second- and third-tier cities. Creating a favourable environment to attract tourism to India also appears to be a productive step.

It also seems that the government has finally woken up to the need to provide capital and support to small and medium enterprises. Plans have been drawn up for high-speed trains to improve connectivity between major cities. Overall, however, this year's budget appears to offer very little to farmers. More than 50 percent of the country's population depends on agriculture, and this predominantly rural segment seems to have been largely ignored in the budget.

While India often boasts of being self-sufficient in food grains, the reality is that the country is still not self-reliant in pulses and oilseeds. After the textile industry, agriculture has been among the sectors most affected by America's trade war, yet the Finance Minister has chosen not to say a word on this issue. The promise of doubling farmers' income seems to have been forgotten, and not a single measure in the budget offers tangible relief to farmers. Old, worn-out schemes are being pushed forward with minor changes, and even the funds allocated for them often remain unutilised.

// sātyāsyā pārāmām nidhānām //

**“YOU ARE
NEVER TOO OLD
TO SET ANOTHER
GOAL OR TO DREAM
A NEW DREAM.”
— C.S. LEWIS**

The Politics of Superficial Allegations

The uproar that followed Rahul Gandhi's reference to an alleged excerpt from the unpublished book of former Army Chief M. M. Naravane on the bloody clash with the Chinese Army in Galwan was inevitable. During the debate, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh accused Rahul Gandhi of misleading the House, asking how he could cite a book that has not even been published. Home Minister Amit Shah also intervened, accusing him of making false statements, but Rahul Gandhi refused to budge. This led to chaos in the House, which ultimately could not function.

The Congress, in turn, alleged that its leader was prevented from speaking in the House. However, what Rahul Gandhi said before the disruption made it clear that he was trying to prove that the Modi government failed to show courage in response to the Chinese Army's aggressive actions. How well prepared he was can be gauged from the fact that while he intended to refer to Galwan, he ended up mentioning Doklam instead.

This is not the first time Rahul Gandhi has tried to suggest that Prime Minister Modi avoids confronting China

firmly. In an attempt to portray the Modi government as weak, he has repeatedly claimed that China has occupied Indian territory. He has even said that Chinese soldiers beat Indian troops—a statement



for which he was reprimanded by the Supreme Court. Despite this, he seems unwilling to understand that politics based on superficial allegations should not be played in matters of national security.

Everyone knows that the Chinese

Army was given a strong response in Galwan, which is why it was compelled to come to the negotiating table and why the status quo could be restored in several areas of Ladakh. Former Army Chief Naravane himself has stated this publicly not once but several times. As for his book, the fact remains that the Ministry of Defence has not yet granted permission for its publication. It is also a fact that the magazine which published the alleged excerpts and interpreted them in its own way is known for sensationalism based on half-baked facts.

Rahul Gandhi is not just a leader of the Congress; he is the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha. At the very least, on issues of national security, he should stand with the narrative of the Indian

armed forces. Unfortunately, he does not do so. While he targets the Modi government over China and Pakistan, he fails to remember that both these countries encroached upon Indian territory at a time when the Congress was in power.

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Rules That Ignore Equality: Supreme Court Puts a 'Stay' on UGC Regulations

In recent days, the University Grants Commission (UGC) issued a notification titled *Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions Regulations, 2026*. The objective of these rules was to eliminate discrimination in educational institutions on the basis of religion, caste, gender, place of birth, race, or disability. However, the regulations triggered widespread controversy. Students from the general category became apprehensive that the rules treated them as presumptively guilty. For the time being, the Supreme Court has stayed their implementation.

The regulations do not appear to contain any concrete provisions for verifying the authenticity of complaints or for filtering out false allegations. While they mandate the immediate constitution of committees and swift action on every accusation, procedures relating to evaluation of evidence, examination of witnesses, confidentiality, and appeal have not been clearly defined. How can a fair investigation be ensured when action is rushed as soon

as an allegation is made? This is a major question. Another concern is how the UGC's new guidelines will reconcile the goals of the National Education Policy-2020 with constitutional impartiality. Justice must not only be done but must also be seen to be done; otherwise, public trust erodes.

From a legal perspective, when viewed in light of Article 14 of the Constitution, the new UGC regulations appear to disregard the right to equality, while Article 15(1) explicitly prohibits discrimination on the basis of caste. Courts have repeatedly held that dignity, fairness, and access to due process are integral to the right to life and personal liberty. If a teacher or student faces caste-based discrimination but does not belong to the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, or Other Backward Classes, the absence of any legal remedy amounts to procedural injustice. More importantly, the provisions of the UGC guidelines are internally inconsistent. While Rule 2 speaks of eliminating discrimination against disadvantaged groups, Rule

3(c) restricts the right to justice to only certain castes.

In February last year, the UGC had released a draft version of these regulations for public consultation. In that draft, Other Backward Classes (OBCs) were excluded from the ambit of caste-based discrimination. The draft also proposed discouraging false complaints by providing for penalties. However, the final notified regulations removed the provisions dealing with false complaints altogether. In fact, the removal of safeguards against false or malicious complaints has emerged as a structural weakness of these guidelines.

According to the All India Survey on Higher Education 2021-22, 60 percent of students in higher education belonged to reserved categories. This raises another significant question: if caste-based discrimination is committed by someone within this 60 percent, what then? The regulations remain silent on this issue. Just as there have been several instances under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, and

the anti-dowry harassment provision under Section 498A of the IPC where false or incorrect cases were filed and innocent persons were trapped, a similar risk was visible in the UGC's equity regulations as well. The Supreme Court itself, in 2018, expressed concern over the misuse of such laws and suggested preliminary inquiries before arrest.

Renowned universities and education systems around the world also adopt principles of diversity and equality. In the United States, every university has an independent unit that investigates complaints of discrimination or harassment. In these investigations, the rights of both the complainant and the accused are safeguarded. The investigation protocols clearly define standards of evidence, opportunities for appeal, confidentiality, and related procedures, ensuring that justice is both done and seen to be done.

Often, external or neutral investigators are appointed, reports are prepared in writing, and both parties are given a full opportunity to present

their case. Similarly, higher education institutions in the United Kingdom, Australia, and other countries have anti-discrimination policies that apply equally to everyone. Any student who faces harassment—whether from a minority group or a majority—has access to mechanisms for lodging complaints and obtaining justice.

Universities such as Harvard and Oxford have introduced regular sensitization workshops, mentoring programs, and diversity-focused coursework to cultivate mutual respect and sensitivity among students. The true meaning of equity is justice for all. Empowering one group by weakening another is not a solution. Progress lies in moving forward together. India is a democratic nation where the law is equal for everyone—this is the core spirit of our Constitution. If a student from the general category is wronged, they too deserve justice. Efforts should also be made to create an environment where the need to file complaints itself is minimized.

It Is Necessary to Fulfil Economic Duties

Kartavya is a word of Sanskrit origin. Simply calling it "duty" in the English sense makes its meaning seem diluted. It is derived from *kr̥* and *tavya*: *kr̥* means to do, to act, to engage in work, while *tavya* denotes necessity or obligation. Thus, *Kartavya* is not merely a moral sentiment or a voluntary resolve; it is an intellectual assertion of what must necessarily be done amid circumstances, constraints, and unavoidable compromises. At a time when the global order is unstable, when Trump-era tariff politics in the United States is turning trade into a weapon, and when India is surrounded by complex and uncooperative neighbours, this deeper meaning of duty becomes even more significant.

In such geopolitical tensions, the legitimacy of policy does not arise from announcements alone, but from clarity about which essential tasks the state chooses and the courage it shows in carrying them out. Seen from this perspective, the Union Budget 2026-27 is important. It focuses on three "duties": sustaining growth, building capabilities and aspirations, and ensuring access and participation. This reflects a deliberate attempt to move the budget away from being a mere compilation of schemes toward becoming a principle of state action—one that asks a fundamental question: if the ambition of a developed India by 2047 is to remain credible, what must the government do today?

The first "duty"—to accelerate and sustain growth—reflects this realism. Growth here is not viewed as a

variable that can be boosted only through incentives, but as an outcome of competitiveness, resilience, and domestic capabilities. The industrial strategy spanning biopharma, semiconductors, electronic components, rare earths, chemicals, capital goods, textiles, and sports equipment signals a response to a tariff-laden global order in which ownership of production ecosystems has become decisive. To this end, ₹10,000 crore has been allocated over five years to build biopharma strength, and ₹40,000 crore to expand support for electronic components.

Plans have also been announced to create rare earth corridors in four states and to launch a ₹10,000 crore container manufacturing programme. Emphasis on shared infrastructure and risk-sharing is as important as firm-specific incentives. High-tech tool rooms, chemical parks, mega textile parks, and the revival of 200 legacy industrial clusters are aimed at reducing fixed costs across the economy. The Infrastructure Risk Guarantee Fund is another acknowledgement of reality: in a global environment of high interest rates and risk aversion, private capital will not flow unless early-stage risks are partially underwritten by the public sector.

The second "duty"—building aspirations and capabilities—extends this discipline to human capital. Here, skills are defined not as welfare assistance but as productive capacity. A services-sector-focused approach, backed by a Standing Committee on education-to-employment and entrepreneurship, reflects a clear ambition of securing a 10 percent share in global services exports

by 2047. The emphasis is not on promises but on concrete policies: training one lakh allied health professionals over five years, preparing 1.5 lakh caregivers in the coming year, and scaling up institutional investment in sectors such as AVGC, design, tourism, and sports.

The third "duty"—access and participation—provides the political foundation to this framework. In times of geopolitical instability, growth that lacks broad-based inclusion ultimately proves fragile. Participation is therefore defined as access to productive capacity. High-value agriculture and AI-enabled advisory systems, women-led enterprises, a skill-linked disability policy, expansion of mental health capacities, and targeted development of the "Purvodaya" states and the North-East are all part of this approach.

Together, these three duties form a coherent response to a harsh global economic environment. India cannot directly control tariffs imposed by other countries or sudden geopolitical shocks, but it can shape its institutional preparedness, productivity base, and social cohesion. The budget's fiscal stance further strengthens this credibility—emphasising strength without austerity, investment without excessive spending, and reform without disruption. *Duty* implies action that is performed consistently, beyond political cycles and immediate applause. In a world shaped by tariff politics and geopolitical instability, this represents the most plausible and realistic framework of wisdom that the government can adopt for India's journey toward 2047.

Self-Reliant India to Get a Boost

The increase in defence expenditure in the Union Budget is a signal of continuity amid global and regional strategic turbulence. The budget has allocated ₹7.85 lakh crore to the Ministry of Defence, up from ₹6.81 lakh crore last year. Of this, ₹2.19 lakh crore has been earmarked for the modernization of the armed forces. This includes ₹63,733 crore for aircraft and aero-engines and ₹25,023 crore for the Navy. The remaining ₹5.54 lakh crore is for revenue expenditure, which includes a provision of ₹1.71 lakh crore for pensions.

It is evident that the government has sought to advance its long-term objectives of defence self-reliance. The decision to exempt components and parts required for the manufacture of civil, training, and other aircraft from basic customs duty, and to waive duties on raw materials used in aircraft maintenance, repair, and overhaul, indicates an effort to align fiscal policy with industrial strategy. These measures are aimed at strengthening domestic aerospace manufacturing and reducing import dependence, a particularly apt approach in the premium segment of the defence supply chain.

India's defence budget has been rising steadily, driven by recognition of the country's complex security environment—ranging from tensions along the north-western borders to intensifying competition in the Indo-Pacific region. In such a scenario, modernization of outdated military equipment is no longer a choice but a necessity. However, increasing allocations should not get trapped in technical complications such as the rising costs of new technologies. The focus must remain on ensuring that allocated funds are spent effectively. The quality of expenditure is undoubtedly a crucial factor here.

In this context, it is encouraging that over the past few years the share of capital expenditure—spending on new technologies and modernization—in the defence budget has increased. Between financial years 2020 and 2025, defence capital expenditure grew at an annual rate of about 9.1 percent, nearly double the rate seen in the previous decade. Correspondingly, the share of revenue expenditure on salaries, pensions, and maintenance has declined. Clearly, a calibrated increase in capital expenditure will play a significant role in shaping future military capabilities. Such a shift has become strategically essential. If India is to enhance its conventional military strength, it must invest in advanced aircraft, submarines, drones, and network-centric warfare capabilities.

While the rise in capital expenditure is welcome, it is still lower than what is required. It must be remembered that fiscal constraints, competing development priorities, and the structural burden of revenue expenditure limit the pace of military modernization. The increasingly decisive role of technology cannot be ignored. Therefore, efforts need to be accelerated—especially in comparison



with countries like China, which is spending far more than India on next-generation platforms, cyber capabilities, space assets, and AI-enabled systems. Over time, Indian strategic planners have also begun prioritizing cyber, electronic warfare, space, and drone technologies, but budgetary allocations for these areas remain relatively modest compared to investments in traditional platforms.

has recorded a sharp rise, and defence exports have grown rapidly to reach around ₹23,500 crore. Exports to nearly 90 countries reflect increasing diversification. Clearly, such growth enhances India's geopolitical stature while strengthening its strategic partnerships.

This also underscores the growing role of the private sector in defence production. Nevertheless, self-reliance has its limits. Dependence on foreign sources persists, particularly in high-end and cutting-edge technologies and weapons. Bridging this gap will require not just policy intent but clear resolve. Continuous investment in research and development, a capable ecosystem, and greater efficiency in procurement and budget implementation will be essential. Despite steady increases, India's defence spending remains stuck at around 2.2 percent of GDP.

This level may be seen as necessary to balance other fiscal pressures and competing priorities, but committed expenditures such as revenue spending further constrain flexibility. As a result, balancing immediate operational needs with long-term strategic transformation remains a major challenge for Indian strategic planners. On this yardstick, the defence budget reflects enduring contradictions between ambition and financial constraints. While the increased allocation makes the future direction of the defence sector clear, failure to implement it effectively could slow the pace of capability enhancement.



If India is to bridge this gap, sustained growth in defence research and development will be critical.

In recent years, the *Atmanirbhar Bharat* (Self-Reliant India) initiative has also reshaped the structure of defence spending. Over 70 percent of capital procurement in recent years has been earmarked for domestic sources, reflecting firm resolve to build indigenous manufacturing capacity and reduce dependence on imports. This strategy has delivered tangible results. Defence production

India's interests fully protected in US trade deal, \$500 bn commitment over five years: Govt source

New Delhi

Government sources on Tuesday sought to clarify key aspects of the India-US trade agreement after US President Donald Trump's social media post triggered questions around tariffs, energy imports and strategic autonomy.

Addressing Donald Trump's claim of a \$500 billion commitment, a government source said, "Trump forgot to write \$500 billion in 5 years." Officials clarified that the figure refers to five years and includes a wide range of merchandise imports.

"\$500 billion dollars commitment is over a five year period, includes many merchandise goods like energy, coal, gold, silver, tech, aircraft, data centre," a government source said.

On energy purchases and Russian oil, officials stressed that India continues to follow an independent and diversified import policy.



"We always believe in diversifying our import sources. We don't dictate any companies to buy or not buy Russian oil. Those who want to buy sanctioned oil, buy," a government source said, underlining that commercial decisions are left to companies.

Responding to concerns over increased imports from the US,

sources said the agreement reflects India's genuine requirements in critical sectors.

"What they have to offer, we don't have. We don't have NVIDIA chips, or data centres. Our imports will increase, and what we will import is what we need," the source added.

On sensitive areas such as agriculture and genetically modified

crops, the government maintained that safeguards are in place. A source said, "All sensitivities have been taken care of."

India imported goods worth \$45.33 billion from the United States in FY25.

Earlier, US President Donald Trump had said in a post on Truth Social that Prime Minister Narendra Modi had agreed to "BUY AMERICAN" at a much higher level, including over "\$500 BILLION DOLLARS of U.S. Energy, Technology, Agricultural, Coal, and many other products."

Government sources, however, reiterated that the trade deal is structured to serve India's economic priorities, technology needs and long-term growth, while preserving strategic and policy autonomy.

Centre earmarks Rs 2.2 lakh crore war chest in Budget to beef up armed forces' ammo

New Delhi

The government on February 1 announced an allocation of Rs 7.84 lakh crore for India's defence spending for the financial year 2026-27, with a significant chunk of the outlay reserved for the modernisation of the country's armed forces.

According to the Budget documents, Rs 2.19 lakh crore has been reserved for capital expenditure of the armed forces, largely for the acquisition of new weapons, warships, aircraft and other military hardware. For FY26, the government had allocated Rs 6.81 lakh crore for defence expenditure, with overall defence budget for the next financial year witnessing a hike of 15 percent.

The announcement comes in the backdrop of the country's border challenges from China and Pakistan. Last year, India successfully responded to Pakistan-sponsored terrorist attack in Pahalgam, through Operation Sindoor.

Defence minister Rajnath



Singh lauded the defence allocation, saying the historic success of Operation Sindoor has further cemented India's resolve to beef up its defence system.

The capital outlay is over Rs 39,000 crore higher than the current fiscal's budgetary estimate Rs 1.8 lakh crore. The revised capital outlay for 2025-26 has been estimated at Rs 1,86,454 crore.

Under capital expenditure, Rs 63,733 crore has been set aside for aircraft and aero

engines, while Rs 25,023 crore is allocated for the naval fleet. The revenue expenditure has been put at Rs 5,53,668 crore that includes Rs 1,71,338 crore for pensions.

In her budget speech, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman proposed exempting basic customs duty on components and parts required for the manufacture of civilian, training and other aircraft.

She also announced

waiving basic customs duty on raw materials imported for the manufacture of parts of aircraft to be used in maintenance, repair or overhaul requirements by units in the defence sector.

The two decisions are expected to help the defence aerospace industry.

Defence Minister Singh said the "most important" aspect of the budget is the modernisation of the three services. "I express my heartfelt gratitude to our

Prime Minister Modi ji for allocating Rs 7.85 lakh crore for the defence sector," he said.

"The most important aspect of this Budget is the modernisation of our three services. For this, a provision of Rs 1.85 lakh crore has been made this year, which is approximately 24 per cent higher than the previous financial year," he said.

"As a result of this increase, our military capability will become even more powerful," Singh added.

The defence minister said the welfare of ex-servicemen and their families has also been given importance in this budget. "Under the Ex-Servicemen Contributory Health Scheme, a provision of Rs 12,100 crore has been made, which is an increase of approximately 45 per cent compared to the current year," he said.

"This budget strengthens the balance between security, development, and self-reliance," he noted.

Southern states gain heft in urban CPI as UP's share declines in revised inflation basket

India sees scope to increase coking coal imports from US

New Delhi

Uttar Pradesh's influence on India's urban inflation is set to weaken, while southern states are poised to play a larger role in shaping urban price dynamics, according to a Moneycontrol analysis of the revised CPI weights for 2024.

The updated inflation basket as per expert group recommendations shows a clear rebalancing of state-wise weights compared with the 2012 series. While Uttar Pradesh remains the single largest contributor to rural inflation, its share in the urban basket has declined, signalling a relative slowdown in its urban consumption footprint compared with faster-growing regions.

In the 2012 series, Uttar Pradesh accounted for 9.54 percent of India's urban CPI weight. Under the revised 2024 basket, that share is expected to fall to 8.9 percent, a decline of 0.6 percentage points. In contrast, its rural weight is expected to rise to 15.46 percent from 14.83 percent, reinforcing the state's continued dominance in rural inflation but highlighting a divergence between rural and urban consumption trends.

India's inflation basket has turned more rural, with share of rural in inflation dynamics moving up to 55 percent compared with 54 percent earlier as per Expert Group report released by statistics ministry.

Southern states, meanwhile, have gained prominence in the urban inflation map. Tamil Nadu's urban weight will increase to 10.13 percent from 9.2 percent earlier, while Karnataka's share will edged up to 7.11 percent from 6.81 percent. Telangana may see one of the sharpest increases, with its urban weight rising by nearly a full percentage point to 5.34 percent. Kerala stands out even



more distinctly: despite a fall in its rural weight, its urban share will jump to 5.41 percent from 3.46 percent—a two percentage point increase, among the largest shifts in the new series.

Maharashtra continues to dominate the urban inflation basket but with a significantly reduced footprint. Its urban weight has fallen sharply to 14.45 percent from 18.86 percent in 2012. Even with the decline, Maharashtra will remain the single largest contributor to urban CPI movements.

Delhi's role has also diminished. The National Capital Territory's urban weight has dropped to 5.04 percent from 5.64 percent. West Bengal, Punjab and Andhra Pradesh have similarly seen reductions in their urban shares, pointing to slower relative growth in urban consumption compared with the

national average.

In contrast, several smaller and eastern states have recorded incremental gains. Bihar's urban weight has increased modestly to 2.06 percent from 1.62 percent, while Odisha, Assam and Rajasthan have also seen small but consistent rises. These shifts suggest a gradual broadening of urban consumption beyond the traditional metropolitan centres, even as the South pulls ahead.

Overall, the revised CPI weights underline a structural shift in India's inflation dynamics. Urban price trends will increasingly be influenced by southern states with faster urbanisation, higher service-sector intensity and greater discretionary spending, while populous northern states such as Uttar Pradesh will continue to shape rural inflation outcomes more decisively.



New Delhi

The world's second-biggest crude steel producer relies on imports for about 85% of its coking coal needs, more than half of which comes from Australia

India sees significant potential to import more coking coal from the United States as the South Asian nation expands its steelmaking capacity, Vikram Dutt, the top official at the country's coal ministry, said on Thursday.

India held bilateral discussions with officials from the U.S. Department of Energy ahead of the India Energy Week event, which is currently underway, Dutt said.

The world's second-biggest crude steel producer relies on imports for about 85% of its coking coal needs, more than half of which comes from Australia. New Delhi has been seeking to diversify its supplies.

The U.S. currently accounts for about 10%

of India's coking coal imports.

The high ash content in India's domestic coal limits its use in steelmaking.

The United States is "actively trying" to support its coal industry and increase exports, Kyle Haustveit, an official with the U.S. Department of Energy, said.

"We're here to meet with the Indian government to ensure that we're partnering together through innovation and technology transfer," Haustveit said.

Neither Haustveit nor Dutt indicated by how much India could increase its imports of coking coal.

Indian and U.S. officials are also holding discussions on a potential bilateral trade deal, after talks collapsed last year following a breakdown in communication between the two governments.

We will shortly issue joint statement along with details, which we will be inking...: Piyush Goyal on India-US trade deal

New Delhi

Union Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal on Tuesday said the India-US trade deal is an agreement that every Indian can be proud of and it is under the final stages of detailing between the negotiating teams of the two countries.

Addressing a press conference here, he said that as soon as the final understanding of the deal is inked, joint statement is finalized and technical processes completed, details will be shared.

"Indians are celebrating a trade deal which is under the final stages of detailing between the negotiating teams of both countries. We will shortly be issuing a joint statement by both countries along with the details, which we will be shortly inking between the United States of America and India. As soon as the final understanding of the deal is inked and the joint statement is finalised, technical processes are completed, full details will be shared," he said.

He expressed confidence that the deal will make every Indian proud, protect the interest of every Indian and provide huge opportunities for all the people of the country.

Goyal said the trade deal will open up huge opportunities for India's labour-intensive sectors.

"I can assure the people of India, that this is a deal that will make every Indian proud, that will protect the interest of every Indian and provide huge opportunities for all the people of India and will protect the sensitive

sectors, the interests of our agriculture and our dairy sectors in full respect, opening up huge opportunities for our labor-intensive sectors, export sectors in textiles, plastics, apparel, home decor, leather and footwear, gems and jewelry, organic chemicals, rubber, goods, machinery, so many products, aircraft components. This is truly a deal that every Indian can be proud of," he said.

He noted that Prime Minister Narendra Modi has always safeguarded the interests of agriculture and dairy farmers and has never allowed any compromise in these sectors. "Even in the deal with the US, India's national interests have been fully protected," the minister said.

Goyal described the agreement as a "future-defining deal" that will add immense value to India's growth prospects. He said the trade deal will open up vast opportunities for Indian businesses across sectors.

"This trade agreement is the best possible deal for India when compared to competing countries," he added.

Referring to the opposition, Goyal said that opposition leaders had been questioning for days about when the trade deal with the US would be finalised. He strongly criticised them over disruptions in Parliament.

"I strongly condemn the opposition for not allowing Parliament to function, forcing me to share these important details through a press briefing instead of on

the floor of Parliament," the Union Minister said.

Goyal had said earlier that the India-US trade deal unlocks the power of two large democracies working together for the shared prosperity of their people, and the bilateral partnership will co-create technologies and co-develop solutions.

He said the trade deal unlocks unprecedented opportunities for farmers, MSMEs, entrepreneurs, and skilled workers.

In a post on X,

Goyal also said that the trade deal will help India get technology from the United States and accelerate India's journey towards Viksit Bharat 2047.

He lauded Prime Minister Narendra Modi and US President Donald Trump for the trade deal.

"Congratulations to Prime Minister @NarendraModi ji and President @RealDonaldTrump as well as to the people of India and the United States, on the landmark

trade agreement. This reflects the power of two like-minded, fair-trading democracies working together for shared prosperity," he said.

"Grateful for PM @NarendraModi ji and President @realDonaldTrump visionary and decisive leadership, and strong commitment to strengthening India-U.S. ties," he added. He said the trade deal also opens opportunities for Make in India for

the world, Design in India for the world, and Innovate in India for the world. "This unlocks the power of two large democracies working together for the shared prosperity of their people. Both India and US are natural allies and our partnership will co-create technologies, co-develop solutions, and work together for peace, growth, and a brighter future for India and US," he said.

Adani, Italian helicopter maker Leonardo ink MoU for military copters in India

New Delhi

Italy-headquartered aviation major Leonardo and the Adani Defence and Aerospace today announced a tie-up to make military helicopters in India. They will be positioning to bid for two separate helicopter requirements – one sought by the Navy and another sought for reconnaissance and surveillance by the Army and the Indian Air Force (IAF).

The Ministry of Defence has floated two separate requirements that would result in procurement of 275 helicopters. One tranche is for 200 Light Reconnaissance and Surveillance Helicopters (RSH) — 120 are for the Army and 80 for the IAF. The second tranche is for 76 marine helicopters – 51 for the Navy and 25 for the Coast Guard.

Post the MoU, the Adani Defence and Aerospace said it was pitching in the Leonardo's advanced AW169M and AW109 TrekkerM helicopters for the two bids.

The AW169M is in the 5-tonne class of helicopters and that is class being sought for the needs of the Navy and the Coast Guard. The tender for 200 RSH seeks a 3 tonne copter. The Leonardo AW109 is of that class.

"The collaboration will deliver phased indigenisation, robust maintenance, repair and



overhaul (MRO) capabilities, and comprehensive pilot training," a company statement said.

Adani Defence and Aerospace and Leonardo have 'strategic partnership' to Build India's Helicopter ecosystem. 'It will develop, manufacture and sustain a helicopter manufacturing ecosystem in India,' the company said.

The partnership has the potential for the civil domestic demand, with dedicated localised industrial activities, and support the international supply chain.

Jeet Adani, Director, Adani Defence & Aerospace, said: "This alliance with Leonardo is a pivotal stride toward a

resilient, future-proof helicopter ecosystem in India".

Ashish Rajvanshi, CEO, Adani Defence & Aerospace, added: "Armed Forces have projected a demand for over 1000 helicopters in the coming decade, this partnership realises our vision for sovereign manufacturing".

Leonardo is an international industrial group, with 60,000 employees and has production capabilities in Italy, the UK, Poland, and the USA. In 2024 Leonardo recorded new orders for Euro 20.9 billion with an order book of Euro 44.2 billion and consolidated revenues of Euro 17.8 billion.

Budget 2026-27: Implications for India's Urban Local Bodies

On 1 February 2026, the Finance Minister (FM) Nirmala Sitharaman of India unveiled the 2026-27 national budget, her ninth consecutive Union Budget. The budgetary provisions for Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) and cities offer insight into the government's urban priorities and their implications for the long-term trajectory of urban growth.

Urban Local Bodies Across Previous Union Budgets

It is useful to take a directional view of how the last five Union Budgets have addressed urban issues. In 2021, the Budget strengthened allocations for cities' physical and social infrastructure to support the expansion and improvement of select urban services. In 2022, the FM turned her attention to urban planning and outlined a complete overhaul of how it was being addressed. In 2023, there was an extended focus on municipal reforms and seeking implementation through an incentivisation package for the states and urban local bodies (ULBs). In 2024, the emphasis moved to urban housing and street vendors. Last year, the concept of an Urban Challenge Fund for developing 'Cities as Growth Hubs' was initiated, and the idea of incentivising state-level reforms in urban governance, municipal services, urban planning, and urban land was mooted.

Last year, the concept of an Urban Challenge Fund for developing 'Cities as Growth Hubs' was initiated, and the idea of incentivising state-level reforms in urban governance, municipal services, urban planning, and urban land was mooted.

Provision for Cities and Urban Local Bodies in Budget 2026-27

In this year's national budget, there is an emphasis on cities with over half a million population, Tier II and Tier III ULBs, identified as emerging growth centres. The first mention of this idea appears in Para 15 (vi) of the FM's speech under the government of India's first 'kartavya', 'developing city economic zones'. There will now be a stronger emphasis on developing their infrastructure, as mentioned in para 32 of the speech. In Para 39 of her speech, she reiterates this emphasis and includes temple towns, noting their need for modern infrastructure and basic amenities. She adds that this budget aims to further augment their potential to contribute to the economic power of agglomerations. The strategy would be to map city economic regions (CER) based on their specific growth drivers. To achieve the aforesaid objectives, the budget allocates INR 50 billion per CER over five years. Cities could implement their plans through a 'challenge mode with a reform-cum-results based



financing mechanism.'

In para 40 of the speech, the FM addresses environmentally sustainable public transport systems. The budget would support the creation of seven high-speed rail corridors between major cities and craft them as growth connectors. These corridors are i) Mumbai-Pune, ii) Pune-Hyderabad, iii) Hyderabad-Bengaluru, iv) Hyderabad-Chennai, v) Chennai-Bengaluru, vi) Delhi-Varanasi and vii) Varanasi-Siliguri.

Para 46 outlines municipal bonds. The objective is to promote the issuance of high-value municipal bonds by large cities. Accordingly, an incentive of INR 1 billion is allocated for a single bond issuance of more than INR 10 billion. For smaller cities, the ongoing scheme under the Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT) — which provides incentives for bond issuances of INR 2 billion or less — continues to support such ULBs.

Cities could implement their plans through a 'challenge mode with a reform-cum-results based financing mechanism.'

Para 62 mentions support for states through the challenge route for creating five university townships in the neighbourhood of major industrial and logistics corridors. These will develop as strategic academic zones that will host several universities, colleges, research institutions, skill centres, and residential complexes. While this

transportation routes stimulate growth and generate new economic centres. Therefore, the development of such routes needs to be expedited and multiplied to create additional centres of economic activity and help distribute rural-urban migration more evenly. The idea of municipal bonds has a long history in India, but has struggled to gain traction. Except for some of the larger cities, the municipal bond market remains underdeveloped. The provisions in the budget lack sufficient detail to establish municipal bonds as a primary borrowing tool for Indian ULBs, unlike in the United States. Most Indian ULBs are financially weak and cannot yet attain credit ratings attractive to investors. Before the bond market is promoted, the government of India and state governments need to prioritise the financial strengthening of municipal bodies.

The smaller and medium cities have suffered neglect ever since the Integrated Development of Small and Medium Towns (IDSMT) programme was abandoned.

Some of the incentives provided in the budget for ULBs are through the challenge mode. In the last budget, an INR 1,000 billion Urban Challenge Fund (UCF) was created to transform cities into growth hubs. Unfortunately, the UCF has largely remained on paper, as its initial allocation has not been implemented. Rules framed for the scheme by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MOHUA) failed to receive Cabinet approval, making it unlikely that the fiscal targets will be achieved in the current year. This raises concerns about the programme outlined in this year's budget, which also relies on the challenge mode.

Finally, the allocation of INR 14 billion to the States in 2026-27 is for rural local bodies, disaster management, and urban local bodies. There is no clarity on how this allocation will be divided. As the funds are allocated to the states, their distribution will depend on state priorities. In this context, ULBs have often been disadvantaged, particularly in predominantly rural states.

While the budget proposals for ULBs move in the right direction, they do not appear robust enough given the scale of the urban problem. The urban effort appears limited despite enhanced government engagement with urban matters. The results of the past five national budgets, despite provisions for reforms in urban planning, infrastructure, and housing, have been constrained by state-level obstacles and city-level limitations, limiting their impact on the fundamental challenges facing Indian cities. The government of India needs to commit greater resources and resolve to Indian cities.

Analysis of the Budgetary Provisions

Of the urban initiatives outlined in the Budget, the notable aspect is the focus on tier II and tier III cities. The smaller and medium cities have suffered neglect ever since the Integrated Development of Small and Medium Towns (IDSMT) programme was abandoned. This is in part responsible for the skewed pattern of urbanisation, where most migration is concentrated in large cities of the country. Census 2011 listed about 4 dozen cities with populations between half a million and one million. An emphasis on the economic, physical, social and recreational infrastructure of these cities could improve the quality of life and attract migration, relieving pressure on overloaded metropolitan centres.

Similarly, the proposal to develop multiple transportation corridors as growth connectors is significant. In India,

Peace Without Mandate: The Fragility of Trump's Board of Peace

Expanding its ambit beyond the Gaza Peace Plan, US President Donald Trump pivoted towards turning the Board of Peace (BoP) into a 'membership-driven' institutional entity for resolving global conflicts. The United States (US) also hosted a signing ceremony for the 'Charter' on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos on 22 January 2026, with nearly 18 states joining him publicly as initial signatories. Framed as a nimble collective to the perceived failures of the United Nations (UN)-led peace efforts, the board's objective is to build peace through rapid action. While the advent of alternative global initiatives is not new, the creation of a US-led, institutionally ambiguous conflict-resolution 'board' raises fundamental concerns regarding consensus-based decision-making, legitimacy, and representation in the emerging global order.

While the advent of alternative global initiatives is not new, the creation of a US-led, institutionally ambiguous conflict-resolution 'board' raises fundamental concerns regarding consensus-based decision-making, legitimacy, and representation in the emerging global order.

Ambiguous Mandate and Institutional Design of Trump's BOP

Endorsed in late 2025 by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 2803 drafted by the US, the board was mandated to support stabilisation, demilitarisation, and reconstruction efforts in Gaza through 2027. Its stated purpose was to promote stability, restore dependable and lawful governance, and secure enduring peace in areas affected or threatened by conflict. However, the Board's charter does not explicitly define its mandate or mention Gaza, leaving significant scope for both functional and geographic interpretation.

Just days before the gathering in Davos, the US extended invitations to around 60 countries to join the initiative. Around 35 countries, including major regional players in the Middle East – Saudi Arabia, Turkey,



Jordan, UAE, Bahrain, and Qatar – signed up for the board. Other notable signatories included Azerbaijan, Morocco, Kosovo, Pakistan, and Indonesia. Israel also agreed to join the Board of Peace, despite reservations over a Gaza-specific panel and the involvement of Türkiye and Qatar in the Gaza peace process.

The Board's charter does not explicitly define its mandate or mention Gaza, leaving significant scope for both functional and geographic interpretation.

On the other hand, the traditional US allies have shown stoic reluctance to join the 'undefined' board, with Trump disinviting Canada following Prime Minister Mark Carney's pushback speech at Davos. Several states, such as Norway, Sweden, and France, opted out, citing misalignment with UN processes. Paris has, in turn, been threatened with punitive trade measures, including 200 percent tariffs on French wine and champagne. Russia and China had abstained from the initial UN resolution authorising the board and have joined several other middle powers that remain on the fence about participation.

US-Led Executive Club

While the driving force behind the Board was to bypass the limitations of the UN system, particularly regarding building peace in Gaza, the current structure resembles that of an executive club rather than a global collective for fostering international cooperation. With

conventional diplomacy at the UN being paralysed by veto politics and institutional inertia, a fast-acting peace mechanism carries intuitive appeal. However, the UN's legitimacy stemmed from the inclusive post-war negotiations that led to the adoption of its Charter, signed by almost 50 states at the San Francisco conference in 1945, a sharp contrast to Trump's Board, where the charter was drafted through a US-led process and could enter into force after securing the consent of only three states.

Moreover, President Trump will serve as the Board's chair and oversee the member countries he nominates for a three-year term. Member states, regardless of their position or capabilities, would be able to purchase a permanent seat in exchange for a US\$ 1 billion investment. Further, an Executive Board – appointed by the Chair – would be tasked with implementing decisions, and country-specific boards will constitute the lowest tier of the structure. In operational terms, President Trump launched Phase Two of his 20-Point Peace Plan by setting up the National Committee for the Administration of Gaza (NCAG) in January 2026. However, as of early 2026, no major state has formally committed to contributing the required US\$ 1 billion.

The charter vests extraordinary powers in the chairman – currently President Trump – including a veto over

all decisions, final interpretive control over the charter, unilateral rights to invite or remove members (subject only to a two-thirds override), and authority over the creation or dissolution of subsidiary bodies.

While the informality of 'executive-led' decision-making may accelerate action, within multilateral governance, it dilutes collective ownership and legitimacy. The most consequential feature of the Board of Peace lies in the distribution of authority within its institutional design. The charter vests extraordinary powers in the chairman – currently President Trump – including a veto over all decisions, final interpretive control over the charter, unilateral rights to invite or remove members (subject only to a two-thirds override), and authority over the creation or dissolution of subsidiary bodies. Even the board's continuation is contingent on the Chair's consent, with renewal or dissolution decisions scheduled for odd-numbered years unless extended. Unlike UN peace operations, the board is not subjected to Security Council oversight beyond its current mandate in Gaza, which expires in 2027.

Systemic Implications for Global Peace Governance

While the US administration maintains that it does not seek to dismantle the UN, the formal institutionalisation of an alternative board suggests a broader objective of reshaping

– if not replacing – the existing international architecture. The UN has faced persistent limitations. It has reflected enduring Western influence often constrained by decision-making deadlock, and is in clear need of structural reform, particularly in the realm of conflict resolution. In the short term, the board could act as a coordination platform for funding peacebuilding efforts, provide logistical support, and back-channel diplomacy in a fragmented landscape. However, the new 'executive' peace governance with unchecked scope for expansion and the absence of clear mandates is not a sustainable model for conflict resolution over the long term.

The new 'executive' peace governance with unchecked scope for expansion and the absence of clear mandates is not a sustainable model for conflict resolution over the long term.

Steve Witkoff, Trump's peace envoy and member of the group's executive board, listed Russia, Ukraine, Iran, Sudan, and Syria as the probable cases requiring the board's intervention in the future. Any such intervention aimed at conflict resolution, unless categorically mandated by the parties or the UNSC, will be resisted by most countries – especially the middle powers – in the interest of upholding their strategic autonomy and sovereignty. Moreover, a randomised selection based on geopolitical considerations rather than the urgency of humanitarian needs or peacebuilding will merely replace the existing lopsided order with a deeply centralised one. More states might join the board eventually; however, there exists no guarantee that these members would ratify the charter, invest in operations, or simply disregard the board's decisions – the very pitfalls of absence of institutionalised legitimacy and accountability. The executive-led model of conflict resolution might be the reality of the Trump-led US today; however, it carries a significant risk of becoming another feeble grouping in the absence of a clear long-term strategy.

Looking Seaward and Inward: India's Maritime Priorities

India's Union Budget 2026 marks a significant moment for the country's maritime ecosystem. By placing renewed emphasis on shipping, shipbuilding, container manufacturing, and waterways, the Budget acknowledges their growing role in economic growth, national security, and global competitiveness. At a time when global trade routes are evolving and supply chains are being recalibrated, the Budget clearly signals that India's maritime future will focus on domestic strength while pursuing its global ambitions.

With an expanded role for the Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways (MoPSW), the Budget allocates INR 5,164.8 crore for FY27, nearly 48 percent higher than last year, reflecting a commitment to strengthening maritime trade, infrastructure, and transport systems in line with national priorities. With effective implementation, these measures can enhance India's industrial capacity in the maritime sector, while reclaiming the cultural role of the seas.

Inland Waterways and Connectivity

The Budget promotes national waterways as a practical, viable, and sustainable transport alternative for India. It proposes the operationalisation of 20 additional National Waterways over the next five years, starting with National Waterway-5 in Odisha. This reflects an intent to expand India's river transport network. These routes will also help connect mineral-rich regions such as Talcher and Angul with ports like Paradip and Dhamra, reducing freight costs. Additionally, with cargo traffic growing 700 percent at a Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of 21 percent, the operational length of waterways has been extended from 2,716 km to more than 5,155 km, easing congestion on road and rail networks.

With an expanded role for the Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways (MoPSW), the Budget allocates INR 5,164.8 crore for FY27, nearly 48 percent higher than last year, reflecting a commitment to strengthening maritime trade, infrastructure, and transport systems in line with national priorities.

Currently, 32 of the 111 nationwide National Waterways identified by the Inland Waterways Act, 2016, are operational. Of these, National Waterway 1 along the Ganga-Bhagirathi-Hooghly route has already become commercially viable. Moreover, terminal upgrades and the recent announcement of new waterways and rail-linked infrastructure worth over INR 830 crore in West Bengal highlight the growing importance of the Hooghly stretch. These developments illustrate the role of inland waterways in efficiently connecting industrial clusters while offering greener options. The Budget also emphasises various connectivity initiatives in eastern and northeastern India, including industrial corridors and tourism hubs.

The Budget stresses multimodal integration through Dedicated Freight



Corridors. The proposed east-west link from Dankuni to Surat aims to connect rail, road, inland waterways, and ports into a seamless logistics corridor. Ship repair facilities are also being planned at Varanasi and Patna to build local capacity for inland vessels and expand river-based transport. These measures aim to gradually shift heavy freight movement from road and rail to energy-efficient inland water transport. Expanding such projects to other states with extensive inland waterways — including Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu — will also be crucial. While the Budget's long-term goal of increasing the share of inland waterways and coastal shipping from 6 percent to 12 percent by 2047, alongside the launch of a Coastal Cargo Promotion Scheme, may seem ambitious, it could help foster a more sustainable and resilient logistics framework for India.

While the Budget's long-term goal of increasing the share of inland waterways and coastal shipping from 6 percent to 12 percent by 2047, alongside the launch of a Coastal Cargo Promotion Scheme, may seem ambitious, it could help foster a more sustainable and resilient logistics framework for India.

Industry and Human Capital

With an INR 10,000 crore Container Manufacturing Assistance Scheme spread over five years, the Budget underscores the importance of expanding domestic manufacturing capabilities in the maritime sector. India continues to remain heavily dependent on container imports. Maritime trade accounts for nearly 95 percent of India's trade by volume and around 70 percent by value. Yet, India's global shipbuilding output is currently at less than 1 percent at a time when the country aims to become among the top five global shipbuilding nations by 2047. Developing domestic capacity in these areas will enhance both supply chain resilience and give India a competitive edge within global logistics value chains, as envisioned under the Maritime Amrit Kaal Vision 2047. To this end, the budget also offers extended

tax benefits for units in GIF1 IFSC (Gujarat International Finance Tec-City International Financial Services Centre) and Offshore Banking Units, with revised customs duty exemptions on vessels to encourage fleet expansion and domestic ownership.

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Rather than being limited to an industrial incentive, this initiative is part of the broader "Atmanirbhar Bharat" vision, aimed at fostering self-reliance across container manufacturing, port development, inland waterways, logistics parks, and shipbuilding. This will also mean the generation of 3,000 direct jobs and more than 50,000 indirect jobs, along with the emergence of ancillary industries, thereby reducing India's vulnerability to external shocks and geopolitical uncertainties in global shipping. Additionally, the Budget introduces incentives for indigenous seaplane manufacturing and operations to improve last-mile connectivity and promote tourism in remote and island geographies. This innovative approach shows that India is looking to diversify its transport mix and integrate new solutions into its existing transport networks.

Furthermore, the Budget promises simultaneous investments in human capital and capacity building. The proposed Regional Centres of Excellence for training in inland waterways and maritime operations aim to build a skilled workforce across riverine and coastal regions. This focus on training and skill development will be essential to sustain the long-term operational expansion of waterways, ports, and vessel services.

Maritime Heritage and Tourism

The Budget also highlights India's maritime heritage as a key strategic asset. It proposes developing 15 archaeological

sites as public destinations, including Lothal and Dholavira. Lothal — home to one of the world's earliest known dockyards and a major port of the Indus Valley Civilisation — currently hosts India's ambitious 400-acre National Maritime Heritage Complex (NMHC) in Gujarat, with an estimated cost of INR 4,500 crore.

Led by the MoPSW, the NMHC is being developed as a world-class museum and knowledge hub to showcase India's long-standing engagement with maritime trade and navigation. Expanding the complex and developing its surrounding areas could provide a significant boost to maritime heritage tourism and awareness, while ongoing initiatives at NMHC are already advancing further research and learning. Moreover, the upcoming Dholera Greenfield International Airport will provide direct air connectivity to Lothal for domestic and international tourists.

Developmental efforts at sites like Lothal and Dholavira can strengthen cultural identity and exchange, alongside supporting tourism and education, thereby linking India's ancient seafaring traditions with its maritime ambitions.

Recent collaborations through Memorandums of Understanding with countries such as Germany, the Netherlands, Vietnam, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Thailand, and Portugal, among others, highlight the global relevance of NMHC and India's growing leadership in maritime heritage preservation and community participation. Developmental efforts at sites like Lothal and Dholavira can strengthen cultural identity and exchange, alongside supporting tourism and education, thereby linking India's ancient seafaring traditions with its maritime ambitions.

Union Budget 2026 suggests a purposeful rethinking of India's maritime policy. As a coordinated approach linking infrastructure, manufacturing, skills development, and heritage, the Budget lays out actionable and forward-looking pathways. At the same time, the Budget refocuses attention on building domestic capabilities and generating new employment opportunities across the sector. Improved inland connectivity can help lower logistics costs and mitigate adverse environmental impacts, thereby supporting long-term competitiveness and enhancing resilience. Meanwhile, investment in maritime heritage reinforces India's cultural influence and soft power. However, the real test will lie in effective implementation and appropriate nationwide scaling-up to ensure broad-based benefits. Success and outcomes will depend on coordination across institutions, timely funding, workforce delivery, and the capacity to sustain momentum. If executed well, with people at the centre, these efforts can advance both economic and strategic objectives while linking India's maritime heritage to the possibilities of global ocean futures.

Big Tech and AI: The Environmental Challenge of Digital Growth

As the IndiaAI Summit, scheduled to be held in mid-February 2025 in New Delhi, brings global attention to the future of AI-led growth, the environmental externalities associated with the rapid expansion of AI-driven and AI-enabled technology sectors can no longer remain a secondary concern.

Big Tech's expanding data centre footprint, together with the rapid growth of AI-driven applications, has made technology-related environmental challenges more significant than ever. Under-reported emissions, concerns around greenwashing, creative accounting, and sharply rising electricity consumption have raised questions about whether AI and Big Tech-related emissions may ultimately outweigh the sustainability benefits often attributed to these technologies. In this context, the relationship between technology, economic growth and climate outcomes becomes increasingly important in the broader sustainability debate and warrants closer attention.

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The Environmental Impact of Big Tech

Big Tech refers to large, dominant multinational technology companies that are key drivers of the global digital economy. The technology sector has expanded rapidly in recent years and is expected to grow strongly throughout the decade, with electricity demand from Big Tech and AI projected to increase by more than 60 percent by 2030.

The technology sector generates emissions and environmental pressures through energy-intensive data centres, continued dependence on fossil fuels for electricity, growing volumes of electronic waste, high water consumption for cooling, and resource-intensive activities such as mining and manufacturing that contribute to pollution and ecosystem stress. These impacts can also be framed under the UN SDG framework, as shown in 1. On the emissions front, the environmental footprint of Big Tech can be grouped into two main categories. Scope 1 emissions emerge from sources directly owned or controlled by firms, such as on-site fuel use and



backup generators. Scope 2 emissions arise from purchased energy, most notably the electricity consumed by data centres and related digital infrastructure. As AI deployment expands, data centres are expected to become a more significant driver of emissions. Currently, emissions from data centres come from electricity use (Scope 2). Direct emissions from data centres themselves (Scope 1) account for roughly one percent of total emissions worldwide.

Although emissions accounting and the SDG framework provide useful tools to measure and frame Big Tech's environmental footprint, they offer only a partial view. The environmental impact of digitalisation is not static; it evolves with the scale, intensity, and trajectory of technological change, creating effects that unfold over time.

Technological Shocks and the Dynamics of Green Transition

Much like the historical relationship between industrialisation and emissions, the link between digitalisation and environmental outcomes is non-linear and dynamic. Evidence suggests that in the early stages of digital adoption, emissions often rise as energy demand increases and efficiency gains lag behind scale effects. As digitalisation deepens, this relationship can reverse. This is because, at more advanced stages, emissions and environmental footprints tend to decline, with declines driven by industrial upgrading and the diffusion of green technologies. This produces a classic

inverted U-relationship between technological adoption and emissions over time, a pattern also observed in China.

This dynamic aligns with the logic of creative destruction, in which technological progress renders older and more resource-intensive technologies obsolete and replaces them with more efficient alternatives. While major innovation shocks such as the internet, smartphones, and more recently AI are typically growth-enhancing in standard macroeconomic frameworks, they can also intensify environmental pressures during periods of rapid expansion. From an environmental perspective, a key question concerns how such technological innovations affect emissions and ecological outcomes. Evidence from BRICS economies suggests that when technological progress is paired with clean technologies and efficiency gains, carbon emissions tend to decline.

Technology-driven economic expansion, including the rapid establishment of data centres and the growing deployment of AI, has intensified Big Tech's carbon footprint. At the same time, technological progress itself offers the means to mitigate these emissions, provided there is a robust and binding environmental policy. This underscores the need for a form of creative destruction that is environmentally constructive, where high-emission technologies are gradually replaced by cleaner and

more efficient alternatives. To achieve this, the key lies in identifying and encouraging positive technological shocks that align innovation with cleaner growth, rather than allowing innovation to translate into environmentally harmful outcomes. Evidence suggests that technological shocks oriented towards clean energy deployment and efficiency improvements can significantly enhance sustainable development outcomes.

Against the backdrop of the technology-environment nexus and the growing role of technology shocks and clean technology progress, a critical question naturally arises in the context of Big Tech about the approaches of large technology firms to environmental management and the effectiveness of these strategies in addressing their expanding environmental footprint. While Big Tech firms have adopted a wide range of measures spanning climate targets, renewable energy procurement, and data centre efficiency improvements, a central and increasingly contentious concern is the role of greenwashing and positive environmental signalling. Sustainability strategies are often accompanied by carefully curated disclosures and headline claims that rely on practices such as the extensive use of Renewable Energy Certificates (RECs), the outsourcing of emissions across scopes, the framing of operational and technological efficiency gains as decarbonisation pathways, and heavy dependence on environmental, social and governance (ESG) marketing, carbon credits, and flexible emissions under-accounting. Collectively, these approaches function less as instruments of genuine emissions reduction and more as mechanisms for managing perceptions around environmental externalities. The result is a distortion of capital and resource allocation, weakened climate accountability, and delays in achieving meaningful decarbonisation. In effect, decarbonisation risks becoming an exercise in signalling and reputation management rather than a process of substantive, ground-level environmental transformation.

Madhur Bhandarkar wraps shooting for 'The Wives'; upcoming film inspired by lives of 'star wives'

Talking about the film, Madhur Bhandarkar said, "There is a lot of speculation around the lives of Bollywood star wives". Instagram/@imbhandarkar

Director Madhur Bhandarkar, best known for projects such as "Fashion", "Heroine" and "Page 3", has wrapped shooting for his next film, titled "The Wives".

The film, which features Sonali Kulkarni, Mouni Roy, Regina Cassandra, Rahul Bhatt, Saurabh Sachdeva, Arjan Bajwa and Freddy Daruvala. It also marks Bhandarkar's 16th directorial.

The filmmaker shared the news with a post on his Instagram handle on Wednesday.

It comprised a series of pictures of Bhandarkar alongside



the cast of the film and also had a picture of the cake with "Its a wrap. 'The Wives'," written over it.

"Today marks the wrap-up of my 16th film, #TheWives, #IntheShadowofStardom, an original & captivating story

set in the glamorous world of star wives that we have delved into. Bringing this project to life is beyond exciting. Your unwavering support means the world as we completed the principal photography of the film. Endless gratitude to the dedicated actors & technicians who poured their hearts day and night into this project. Thanks to the team of Bhandarkar Entertainment & PJ motion picture," he wrote in the caption.

Bhandarkar's last directorial was "Babli Bouncer", which released in 2022. The film starred Tamannaah Bhatia in the lead role.

He also served as a producer on a Marathi film "Circuit". It released in 2023 and was led by Vaibhav Tatwawadi.

Sunny Deol to headline Netflix's legal thriller 'Ikka'

Bollywood star Sunny Deol, who is riding high on the success of "Gadar 2" and "Border 2", is all set to make his OTT debut with Netflix's upcoming legal drama-thriller "Ikka", the streamer announced on Tuesday.

The film is part of Netflix's new slate and follows a high-profile advocate as he is arm-twisted into taking up a case, compelling him to deploy every trick of



the trade as professional duty clashes with unresolved grudges.

"Dhurandhar" star Akshaye Khanna will play the antagonist in it.

Directed by Siddharth P. Malhotra,

"Ikka" is written by Althea Kaushal and Mayank Tewari.

"It is a script that I wanted to make since I did Hichki. We only wanted Sunny and Akshaye sir for this

and luckily they all said yes," Malhotra said.

The film is produced by Malhotra and Sapna Malhotra under the banner of Alchemy Films, with Sapna Malhotra also serving as executive producer.

The cast includes Dia Mirza, Tillotama Shome, Sanjeeda Shaikh, Jyoti Mukerji, Shishir Sharma and Akansha Ranjan, alongside Deol and Khanna.

Delhi HC permits Sameer Wankhede to pursue defamation case over Aryan Khan's Netflix series

New Delhi

The Delhi High Court has permitted IRS officer Sameer Wankhede to take his defamation lawsuit against a Netflix show referencing the Aryan Khan case to a Mumbai court, after holding that the national capital court lacks territorial jurisdiction.

The matter came up before Justice Vikas Mahajan, who allowed Wankhede's application seeking liberty to present his



plaint before a competent court in Mumbai. The court asked the parties to appear before the Mumbai court on February 12, when Wankhede proposes to institute the suit.

During the hearing, counsel for Wankhede informed the court about the January 29 ruling of Justice Purushendra Kumar Kaurav, by which the plaint had been returned under the Civil Procedure Code, granting him permission to approach the appropriate forum. Acting on that liberty, Wankhede moved an application under Order VII Rule 10A CPC to facilitate the transfer of the case to Mumbai.

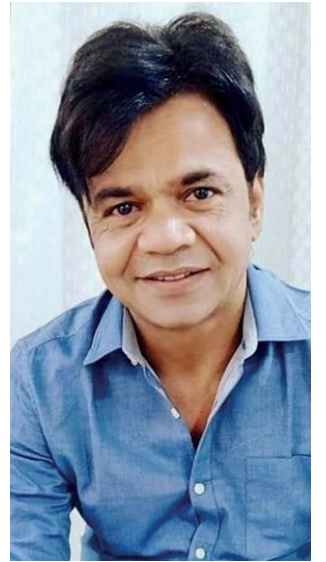
Delhi HC junks actor Rajpal Yadav's plea to extend deadline to surrender in cheque bounce cases

New Delhi

The Delhi High Court on Wednesday refused to extend a deadline given to actor Rajpal Yadav to surrender before jail authorities in connection with his conviction in cheque bounce cases.

The counsel for Yadav "who was on February 2 directed to surrender by 4 pm on Wednesday" submitted that the actor had arranged a sum of Rs 50 lakh and therefore sought one more week's time so that he could make the payment. Justice Swarana Kanta Sharma, however, rejected Yadav's application seeking extension of time to surrender, saying there was no ground to grant him the relief. "I rejected these submissions on that day itself and granted you two more days to surrender. I don't think there is any ground. You were to surrender on a particular day but you were granted two days because you said you were in Bombay. Today you have to surrender at 4 o'clock," the judge said.

The counsel said he was only making a "mercy plea" and urged the court to give at least a day's time to enable Yadav to make the payment of Rs 50 lakh. "This he has done at least 15-20 times in the past," the court said, observing that Yadav repeatedly failed to comply with its orders and his undertakings. "His conduct has been mentioned in the last order. He has not complied with any order, any undertaking I don't think there is any ground for him for any leniency anymore," the court said. In the order passed on February 2, while directing him to surrender by 4 pm on Wednesday, the court observed that Yadav's conduct deserved to be deprecated as he repeatedly breached his undertakings to the court to repay the amount to the complainant, M/s



Murali Projects Pvt Ltd. The court had noted that Yadav was required to make payments of Rs 1.35 crore in each of the seven cases against him and directed that the amount already deposited with the registrar general of the high court be released in favour of the complainant. In October 2025, two demand drafts (DDs) of Rs 75 lakh were deposited with the registrar general and an amount of Rs 9 crore remained payable, it noted in the order. The court's order came on revision petitions by Yadav and his wife challenging a 2019 decision of a sessions court, which upheld their conviction by a magisterial court in the cheque-bounce cases in April 2018. In June 2024, the high court temporarily suspended his conviction, subject to him adopting "sincere and genuine measures" to explore the possibility of reaching an amicable settlement with the opposite party. The magisterial court had sentenced him to undergo six months' imprisonment. At that time, Yadav's counsel had said it was a genuine transaction to finance the production of a movie, which bombed at the box office, resulting in huge financial losses.

Winning an Oscar didn't change the course of my career: Halle Berry

Hollywood actor Halle Berry says winning an Oscar back in 2002 didn't have a great impact on her career, and directors were still unsure of casting her in the films. The actor became the only Black woman to win in the Best Actress category for her role in 2001's film "Monster's Ball".

Directed by Marc Forster, it featured Berry in the role of Leticia Musgrove and revolved around Hank (Billy Bob Thornton), a prison guard, who is a part of a convicted murderer's execution. When he meets Leticia, a black woman, he is smitten with her, not knowing that she is the murderer's widow.

Berry, who will next feature in "Crime 101", said she expected to get plenty of offers after her win. She also recalled advising "Wicked" actor Cynthia Erivo not to put any weight on winning an Oscar.



"It didn't necessarily change the course of my career...After I won it, I thought there was going to be, like,

a script truck showing up outside my front door. While I was wildly proud of it, I was still Black that next

morning. Directors were still saying, 'If we put a Black woman in this role, what does this mean for the whole story? Do I have to cast a Black man? Then it's a Black movie. Black movies don't sell overseas,'" she told entertainment news outlet The Cut.

Although Berry remains the only Black actor to receive an Oscar in the Best Actress category, Erivo has been nominated in the category for her roles in "Harriet" and "Wicked".

"You deserve it, but I don't know that it's going to change your life. It cannot be the validation for what you do, right," Berry told the actor.

Berry's upcoming film is directed by Bart Layton and features the actor alongside Chris Hemsworth. She essays the role of an insurance broker, Sharon Colvin, in the film.

Superstar Mammooty comes on board for Dhanush's D55

Mammooty, veteran Malayalam superstar, has officially joined the cast of the upcoming Tamil movie D55, which will be directed by Rajkumar Periasamy and has Dhanush in the lead role. The announcement was made on Tuesday, not long after the creators released a mysterious poster

in the critically acclaimed Peranbu (2019), where he got a lot of praise for his performance. People are saying that his addition is a big boost to the project, which already has a strong creative team.

Wunderbar Films, Dhanush's own company, is working with RTake Studios to make the movie. At first, the project was announced under the Gopuram Films name, with Anbuezhayan and Sushmita Anbuezhayan as producers. However, the way it was made changed after that.

Along with Mammooty and Dhanush, Sai Pallavi and Sreeleela play important parts in D55. After Maari 2 (2018), Sai Pallavi and Dhanush work together again. They also work together again with director Rajkumar Periasamy after Amaran. While this is going on, Sreeleela's Tamil film career goes on with Parasakthi, which was directed by Sudha Kongara.

Sai Abhyankar will compose the music for the movie. The director has said before that the story is about "unsung heroes who blend into society," but plot details are still very secret. Now that Mammooty has been cast, excitement for D55 has reached an all-time high, and fans are looking forward to more news about the movie.



hinting at a big new cast member.

The message was, "You think you've seen them all, but the biggest one is still to come." The "M"ost awaited!! The "M"agnificent!!!" quickly got fans talking, and many of them correctly guessed that Mammooty would be involved.

The production team confirmed the news on X, saying, "When the Big M picks a story, it becomes history." We are so happy to have Megastar @mammukka join #D55! We are honored! The news has made a lot of people talk about the movie even more.

D55 is Mammooty's first Tamil movie in seven years. The last time people saw the legendary actor was

Shamita Shetty dating techno artist Deepesh Sharma after alleged breakup with Raqesh Bapat?

Shamita Shetty's personal life is once again drawing attention, this time sparked by fresh dating rumours involving techno music artist and entrepreneur Deepesh Sharma. The speculation began shortly after Shamita celebrated her 47th birthday on February 2, surrounded by close friends and family, including her sister Shilpa Shetty. What stood out for fans, however, was Shamita's appearance alongside Deepesh in several pictures from the celebration that quickly went viral online.

Adding fuel to the chatter was a warm birthday post shared by Deepesh on social media. Alongside pictures from the night, he wrote, "Love you my Shamster," a caption that instantly caught the internet's attention. Fans began speculating about the nature of their relationship, especially since this marks Shamita's first widely discussed link-up after her breakup with actor Raqesh Bapat in 2022.

Deepesh Sharma is a well-known name in Mumbai's nightlife and electronic music scene. A techno music artist by profession, he is also an entrepreneur who has successfully blended business with creativity. Deepesh is the co-founder of popular Mumbai nightlife destinations Milagro and The Cocktail Room, both of which have become familiar hangout spots for



the city's party crowd and celebrities alike.

Beyond music and nightlife, Deepesh is known for his close connections within the film industry. According to his Instagram profile, he shares a strong bond with Bollywood actor Sanjay Dutt, often posting pictures that reflect their long-standing friendship. This crossover between music, nightlife, and Bollywood circles has helped Deepesh carve out a distinct identity in the entertainment space.

It's difficult, I am not good with stats

Dhoni on why he avoids commentary box

Enigmatic former India captain Mahendra Singh Dhoni has all but ruled out grabbing a microphone inside the commentary box, describing the popular post-retirement job as a "difficult" balancing act driven by stats, which he finds tough to memorise.

The 44-year-old, under whom India won three ICC trophies, has rarely aired his views on issues related to the game since retiring in 2020. His cricketing connection is now limited to IPL appearances for the Chennai Super Kings.

"Commentary is very difficult. I feel there is a very fine line between describing the game and in that process getting into a zone where you start criticising individuals who are playing the game. It's a very thin line," Dhoni told sports broadcaster Jatin Sapru during a Youtube interaction.

"Often, you don't even



feel that what you are doing is may be borderline wrong. You would always like to be on the other side where you are describing the game. If you feel something is wrong you say it out.

"But how to put it, that is also an art, how to politely put it forward where nobody feels targeted...If the team is losing there are reasons behind it, and you need to have the skill of describing

those reasons without anybody feeling bad. That is the art of commentary," he said.

Aside from the delicate nature of the job, Dhoni feels not being able to memorise stats, even his own, puts him at a disadvantage.

"I'm not good with stats... but there are a lot of people who are very good with stats. They know stats...If you ask me about my stats, I'll be like

hmmm and there are certain people who know stats about not just Indian cricket team or the Indian players but everyone throughout the era," he said.

Good listener but not good with phones

Known to have Zen-like control on mind when faced with difficult decisions during his playing days, Dhoni was also asked whether he has ever needed advice on cricket and life.

The wicketkeeper-batter said he has rarely had to ask for it because of his habit of listening intently.

"I'm a very good listener. Yes I do speak with people who I'm comfortable with. But I'm more of a listener than a speaker. And if I don't know about the topic I don't speak much because I will be absorbing more if I'm listening," he said.

"I never feel that urge to contribute if I don't know... being a good listener you don't always have to look for

advice...They keep floating around just with certain people who you are having a conversation with.

"You need to have that intelligence to figure out what works the best for you," he added.

But with a wide grin, he admitted that he still hasn't become any better at answering the phone.

"I'm not good in that way of communicating. I like to sit across and speak to people. I'm not someone who's very good over the phone because I can't see a face. So, I'm a very awkward guy when it comes to speaking on the phone.

"So that's something I want to improve but I'm glad I haven't improved," he joked.

"You know when initially mobile phones came it was for the benefit of the people who own the phone. Now your mobile phone is for my benefit," he said.

Asian Championship: Pistol shooter Esha Singh helps India to two gold, Samrat settles for bronze

Olympian Esha Singh carried her excellent form from last year into the new season, clinching the women's individual 10m air pistol gold and helping the home team to another top-podium finish, even as world champion Samrat Rana settled for bronze on the opening day of the Asian Championship (pistol/rifle) here on Wednesday.

Esha, 21, came from behind to score 239.8 in the final, fending off challenges from two Chinese Taipei shooters -- Cheng Yen-Ching (235.4, silver) and Yu Ai-Wen (217.7, bronze) -- as well as compatriot Suruchi Singh, to claim her second individual senior Asian Championship gold.

The shooter, who had earlier secured the season-ending ISSF World Cup gold in Ningbo, China last year, had won her first continental title in Jakarta in 2024 at the age of 19.

Suruchi, 19, who led the



final after the first 10-shot stage, slipped dramatically in the elimination round to finish fourth, while Manu Bhaker, a double bronze medallist at the Paris Olympics and the third Indian to reach the eight-shooter final, ended up in seventh place.

In a competition that didn't rise to great levels, with all the shooters' scores swaying between the highs of upper 10s and the lows of 8s, it was Esha who kept her cool with three scores of 10.4 and above to take a big leap for gold, while the two Chinese Taipei shooters

fell back sharply, with some of their scores in the 9s and 8s.

In the qualification round, Suruchi finished second with a score of 576, while Manu and Esha both ended on 575. Manu edged ahead of Esha for qualification based on a higher 'inner 10' count, with all three advancing to the final.

The trio of Suruchi (576), Manu (575), and Esha (575) went on to win the team gold with a combined total of 1,726, comfortably ahead of Vietnam (1,713) and Chinese Taipei (1,711), who claimed the silver and bronze respectively.

Samrat Rana, who was the standout performer at last year's World Championships in Cairo -- where the Karnal shooter showed nerves of steel to win gold -- raised hopes of another top-podium finish in the season opener.

World Legends Pro T20 delivers a grand Finale in Goa

Panaji

The World Legends Pro T20 League signed off in spectacular fashion on Tuesday night, capping a tournament that successfully blended nostalgia, competitiveness, and high-quality cricket, while firmly establishing Goa as a destination capable of hosting marquee sporting events, according to a release.



Over the past few weeks, the league brought together some of the most iconic names in world cricket, delivering thrilling contests and moments that reminded fans why these players once ruled the global stage. Packed stadiums, strong broadcast viewership, and a

festive atmosphere both on and off the field underlined the tournament's growing appeal. World Cup-winning captain and League Commissioner Michael Clarke praised both the cricket on display and the setting. "Goa is already known globally as a holiday destination, but this tournament has shown that fans can now come here for a holiday and enjoy top-class cricket as well. The facilities have been excellent, the crowds have been fantastic, and the players have absolutely loved being part of it," Clarke said.

A 2024 repeat- Why Pakistan could miss Super 8 spot yet again at T20 World Cup 2026

On government orders, Pakistan are likely to skip their T20 World Cup 2026 group-stage encounter against India. This move could be costly because there are two important points at risk. Alongside bitter rivals India, the United States, the Netherlands, and Namibia, Pakistan have been placed in Group A.

The team will use the hybrid model authorized by the International Cricket Council (ICC) to play all of its matches in Sri Lanka, which is co-hosting the event with India. In order to guarantee Pakistan's participation, the ICC granted Sri Lanka



co-hosting rights after the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) declined to send their squad to India.

On February 7, Pakistan

will play their first match of the T20 World Cup 2026 against the Netherlands at the Sinhalese Sports Club in Colombo. After that, on

February 10, they will play the USA, and on February 15, they are likely skip the marquee match against India at the R Premadasa Stadium, as per a released statement from their government. On February 18, Pakistan's last group-stage game will take place at the Sinhalese Sports Club against Namibia.

Rain in Colombo, however, may cause problems in a number of matches, which could disadvantage Pakistan in terms of both points and net run rate. There is a nearly 90% chance of rain for Pakistan's tournament opener against the Netherlands, according to AccuWeather.

Their matches against the USA and India are not expected to see any rain, but there is a nearly 25% possibility of precipitation for their last group-stage match against Namibia. Weather-related delays might further hurt Pakistan's chances of making it to the Super 8 stage, as they remain steadfast in their decision to boycott the match against India.

Rain is a real concern as last month's second Twenty20 International between Sri Lanka and Pakistan was canceled without a ball being bowled in Dambulla.

England spinners seal Sri Lanka series sweep ahead of T20 World Cup

Spinners Jacob Bethell and Will Jacks led the way as England beat Sri Lanka by 12 runs in a low-scoring match on Tuesday to sweep their Twenty20 series 3-0 ahead of the World Cup.

England posted a meagre 128-9 with the bat, their lowest total against Sri Lanka in the format, as pace bowler Dushmantha Chameera bagged a five-wicket haul, but all-rounders Jacks (3-14) and Bethell (4-11) produced their best



bowling performances in the format to restrict the hosts to 116.

"We've shown we can adapt to surfaces... the way the spinners bowled, 16 overs against Sri Lanka in their own conditions was an awesome effort," England captain Harry Brook said.

Ben Duckett was dismissed for a golden duck by Chameera, and Bethell, Tom Banton and Brook fell cheaply, leaving England struggling at 34-4 in the sixth over.

Jos Buttler (25) was beaten by Maheesh Theekshana's sharp turn off Kandy's spin-friendly track, which found the gap between the England opener's bat and pad to hit the stumps.

Player of the match Sam Curran

made a battling 58 to lift England to a respectable total and Luke Wood removed Kamil Mishara for a duck in the first over. The spinners then took over, with Liam Dawson getting Pathum Nissanka caught at cover for

23. Adil Rashid bowled Pavan Rathnayake, before Jacks worked through Sri Lanka's middle order, dismissing Kusal Mendis (26), Kamindu Mendis (14) and Janith Liyanage (17) to reduce Sri Lanka to 97-6 in the 16th over.

Bethell took three wickets in the 18th over and with Sri Lanka needing 14 to win from the last over Theekshana's attempt to hit Bethell for six got him caught as the hosts were all out with three balls remaining.

"Great win to be part of, the way the boys kept fighting to the end... the World Cup is here, so when we have the opportunity to play here we have the experiences to carry over," Brook said.

England, twice world champions in the format, will fly to Mumbai to begin their T20 World Cup campaign against Nepal in Group C on Sunday, the same day Sri Lanka face Ireland at Colombo in Group B.

Anaya Bangar to undergo gender-affirming surgery, father Sanjay Bangar to bear cost



Anaya Bangar, the daughter of former India cricketer Sanjay Bangar, who has also served as the batting coach previously, is scheduled to get gender-affirming surgery in March. Anaya has been open about her experience of transformation and disclosed that her parents now support her. Anaya stated that although her younger brother Atharva has always been there for her, her parents also fully support her now, and Sanjay Bangar will pay for the entire surgery.

"I will be undergoing gender-affirming surgery (vaginoplasty) in March. Fashion designer Saisha Shinde and actress Trinetra Haldar Gummaraju, who have also undergone the procedure, guided me. I'll be having the surgery at the same clinic in Thailand, where I'll need to stay for at least a month. After that, I'll have to rest for a while. I won't be able to play cricket for at least six months, but I'm glad this is finally happening," Anaya

told media.

"I've waited for this moment for five years. This is who I am. I never felt aligned with the gender I was born with. The decision to undergo the gender-affirming surgery came after years of therapy, medical evaluations and deep self-reflection. I went through extensive psychological and medical assessments to ensure I'm ready," she added.

Anaya previously claimed that her father had informed that she had little chance of succeeding in cricket. She has, nevertheless, publicly discussed the inclusion of transgender athletes in international cricket.

"I received immense support from people and was in a better place financially, too. My father saw people taking pictures with me, standing by me and respecting me. Both my parents realised this wasn't a phase. They saw that I was serious about my life and my choices," Anaya said.

"I believe that's what led them to come around and offer me full support. My father is bearing the complete expenses of my surgery. At one point, I was completely on my own in the UK, and there is still a lot of stigma around LGBTQ+ people within families. I hope that by speaking out and by my family supporting me, it will help other trans women. It could make these conversations easier in someone else's home. In a country where conversations around gender identity are still difficult within families, my parents' support means everything."

India create history in U19 World semifinal vs Afghanistan

TO FACE ENGLAND IN FINAL FOR TITLE

New Delhi

India have created history as they have chased down the biggest target in the U19 World Cup ever with their stellar win over Afghanistan in the semifinal of the ongoing edition of the tournament. Led by Aaron George's stellar hundred, the Indian team chased down a mammoth target of 311 with ease at the Harare Sports Club to make their way into the final.

George slammed a match-defining 115 from 104 balls as the opener anchored the chase very well and got support from the likes of Vaibhav Suryavanshi and captain Ayush Mhatre, both of whom had hit half-centuries. The Indian team hunted down 311 with seven wickets in hand and 53 balls to spare.

This is now the highest-ever chase in the history of U19 World Cups, going past the previous highest of 305 that New Zealand did against Ireland in 2006. Meanwhile, the highest-ever chase in a World Cup knockout was 245, which was done by India against South Africa in the 2024 semifinal.

George was in brilliant touch. He provided India with a strong platform with an impressive opening stand, along with Vaibhav Suryavanshi. Chasing 311, India were off to a flier with a 90-run opening stand that came in just 9.3 overs when Suryavanshi



handed an easy catch to Osman Sadat off Nooristani Omarzai.

While Suryavanshi departed to give Afghanistan a breakthrough, captain Ayush Mhatre and George led the chase ahead as the two anchored the innings. They kept the scoreboard ticking in the crucial middle overs

phase and posted a 124-run stand for the second wicket. By the time Mhatre departed for 62, India were well on track to hunt the target down.

Vihaan Malhotra lent support to George, who completed his first century of the tournament. He hit a 95-ball ton and ended up scoring 115

from 104 balls before Wahidullah Zadran got him caught at backward point. However, George had done all the hard work and when he was dismissed the Indians needed just 11 runs, which were later scored with ease.

'My traitor friend, you will come back': Rahul Gandhi, Bittu engage in heated exchange outside Parliament

New Delhi

Congress MPs on Wednesday staged a protest accusing Prime Minister Narendra Modi of being "compromised", setting the stage for a heated exchange between Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi and Union Minister of State Ravneet Singh Bittu.

The protesting Congress MPs

assembled outside Parliament holding placards that read "PM is compromised", reiterating claims made a day earlier by Rahul Gandhi to the media over the India-US trade agreement.

As Bittu walked past the demonstrators, Rahul Gandhi directed a remark at him, calling him a "traitor friend" and pointing him out to his colleagues.



Gandhi then extended his hand towards Bittu, addressing him sarcastically

and suggesting that he would eventually return to the Congress. Bittu refused to

shake hands and responded angrily, accusing Gandhi of being against the country. The two were briefly seen exchanging sharp words. The verbal spat further heightened the charged atmosphere surrounding the protest, which had already drawn attention inside and outside Parliament.

The confrontation came amid heightened tensions in the Lok

Sabha following the suspension of eight opposition MPs for the remainder of the session. Those suspended include Gurjeet Singh Aujla, Hibi Eden, Dean Kuriakose, Amrinder Singh Raja Warring, B Manickam Tagore, Dr Prashant Yadaorao Padole, Chamala Kiran Kumar Reddy and S Venkatesan.