

# Aryan Age

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Zepto Riders Protest Pay

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I never had any insecurity from others: Raveena Tandon

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Stock markets jump nearly 2 per cent as Trump halts strikes on Iran's energy infrastructure

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## Fadnavis informs House about godman's misdeeds

**Mumbai:** Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis informed the Legislative Assembly here on Tuesday that arrested godman "Captain" Ashok Kharat who claimed to be a "divine incarnation", sexually exploited women and tortured them.

Fadnavis said that a total of eight cases have been registered against the godman and assured that nobody who helped Ashok Kharat will be spared.

The Chief Minister also said that further investigation is underway in this case and information will be provided about it from time to time.

The police have identified six victims and registered a total of six cases, including five crimes based on the statements of five victims and one crime based on the statement of a witness regarding the incident involving his wife, Fadnavis said.

"A total of eight cases have been registered in this entire case. Out of these, seven cases are being investigated by a special investigation team (SIT) headed by IPS official Tejaswini Satpute, while one case is being investigated by the Nashik City Crime Unit," Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis informed the house.

Fadnavis said that the SIT was formed on March 13 to investigate both the serious cases registered against the godman at Vavi and Shirdi police stations. After this, a woman filed a complaint at Sarkarwada police station on March 17, 2026. The victim said that Kharat had abused her by taking advantage of her religious beliefs and giving her a sleeping pill or sedative. Kharat was arrested the same night on March 17, Fadnavis said.

He said that since there is a possibility that Kharat might flee the country, a lookout circular was issued against him on March

10, 2026. Fadnavis said that the accused had allegedly demanded



a ransom of Rs 5 crore from a woman by threatening to make her photographs go viral. A case has been registered in Nashik

police station in this case, he said. Survivors of the godman's atrocities have been taken into confidence and counseled and without making any of their identities public when cases were registered, he said.

"A woman filed a complaint at Sarkarwada police station. This woman was raped repeatedly by giving her a sedative and he also threatened to kill her husband. In the name of ritual, he would move his hands over their stomachs and insert his fingers into their private parts. He would urinate over them. He would also threaten that if anyone disclosed anything, the person would incur

divine wrath, since he claimed to be a divine incarnation," Fadnavis said.

During the preliminary investigation of this crime, Rs 6 lakh cash, two laptops were seized. A DVR, revolver, live cartridges and five fired cartridges have been found, he said.

Some more female survivors have been identified and they are prepared to file a complaint. Work is underway to delete the photos and videos of female survivors from Facebook and other social media, Fadnavis said.

Properties owned by Ashok Kharat including 33 acres of land, a farmhouse and other lands,

flats, 40 gunthas of land in Panvel, a flat in Pune in the name of his daughter and a marriage hall in Sinnar have been seized.

So far, assets worth Rs 40 crore have come to light. An investigation is underway to find out details about properties in the names of Ashok Kharat's relatives, Fadnavis said.

The Shivnika Sansthan Trust run by the accused is being investigated. Both survivors and the accused in this case have been medically examined. Statements of priests and other people who were with them have also been recorded, Fadnavis informed the house.

## Fadnavis knew about godman in October but sat quiet, alleges Maha Congress chief

**Mumbai:** Maharashtra Pradesh Congress Committee President Harshwardhan Sapkal today alleged that Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis was informed about the crimes of arrested godman "Captain" Ashok Kharat as early as October 2025, but chose not to take any action.

"Around Diwali, Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis had received information about the fraud godman Ashok Kharat's case. The Home Department is headed by Devendra Fadnavis. So the question which arises is what was Fadnavis doing for six months? Why did he fail to act?" Sapkal demanded.

Talking to media persons in Buldhana, Sapkal said, "The kind of discussions triggered off due to the godman 'Captain' Ashok Kharat case is not good for Maharashtra. Additional support must be given to SIT, a task force must be formed and strict action must be taken against the accused to bring the case to a conclusion."

Significantly, Sapkal's

statement came exactly a day after Uddhav Thackeray-led Shiv Sena Rajya Sabha MP and chief Sena spokesperson Sanjay Raut



alleged that a photograph showing arrested godman Ashok Kharat with Devendra Fadnavis has come to light and that some serving cabinet ministers regularly visited the godman.

Shortly after Raut's allegation, Fadnavis told media persons that no conclusions about the case can be reached from photographs alone.

Stating that the godman could dupe people due to the prevailing atmosphere of

superstition, the state Congress chief said, "Everyone knows who is fuelling superstition, creating conflicts between

be taken against all others involved by filing cases against them," Sapkal demanded. "Now, even serving ministers of the ruling alliance are getting beaten up by the police. There is infighting within the ruling alliance itself. Ministers Shambhuraj Desai and Makarand Patil have claimed that they were assaulted by the police. The fact that ministers themselves are being beaten in Maharashtra is a major sign that democracy has hit rock bottom. What happened in Satara also reaffirms allegations of vote theft," he said.

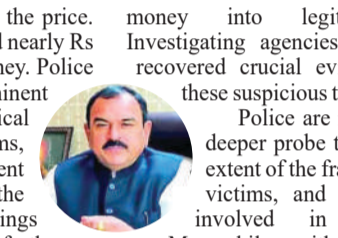
Sapkal stated that Maharashtra was the first state in the country to enact a law against superstition. "Dr Narendra Dabholkar fought against superstition throughout his life, and his work must be carried forward by taking a pledge to eradicate such practices so that people like Kharat never emerge again in Maharashtra," Sapkal added.

## Fake 'Turkish honey' racket: Self-styled godman Ashok Kharat accused of multi-crore fraud

**Mumbai:** Shocking details have emerged in the case involving self-styled godman Ashok Kharat, also known as "Captain," who allegedly duped businessmen and political figures by selling so-called rare "Turkish honey" at exorbitant prices.

According to investigators, Kharat claimed that the honey—sourced from sea caves in Turkey—had unique aphrodisiac and strength-enhancing properties. He reportedly targeted men suffering from sexual health issues, convincing them of its supposed medicinal benefits. The most

startling aspect of the scam is the price. Victims were allegedly charged nearly Rs 9 lakh per kilogram for the honey. Police suspect that several prominent businessmen and political personalities paid huge sums, falling prey to the fraudulent claims. Authorities believe the racket generated illegal earnings worth crores of rupees. Sources further revealed that instead of keeping the money personally, Kharat routed the funds through accounts linked to his trust, allegedly using them to convert black



money into legitimate income. Investigating agencies have reportedly recovered crucial evidence related to these suspicious transactions.

Police are now conducting a deeper probe to identify the full extent of the fraud, the number of victims, and other individuals involved in the network. Meanwhile, with Kharat's police custody period ending, he is scheduled to be produced in court. Officials are likely to seek an extension of his custody for further investigation.

## Tribal leader Deepak Borhade on indefinite fast in Mumbai, community members extend solidarity

**Beed:** Dhangar community leader Deepak Borhade has been on an indefinite hunger strike for the past eight days at Azad Maidan in Mumbai, demanding the implementation of reservation for the tribal community under the Scheduled Tribes (ST) category. The protest, which began earlier, has now gained momentum with growing support from community members across regions.

Responding to Borhade's call, members of the Dhangar community from Limbaganesh of Beed district set out for Mumbai with

enthusiasm to extend their support. During the mobilisation, a procession accompanied with traditional drum beats was taken out from Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Chowk to Punyashlok Ahilyadevi Holkar Chowk. The atmosphere echoed with slogans such as "Yelkot Yelkot Jai Malhar", "Victory to Punyashlok Ahilyadevi Holkar", "Deepak Bhau, move forward, we are with you", and "Reservation is our right, not anyone's favour".

While pressing their demands, community members urged the

government to take an immediate decision declaring Dhangar and Dhangad as the same community, without delaying the matter in court procedures or committee processes. They also demanded that a recommendation letter, signed by the Governor, be sent to the President to clear the path for reservation. Protesters strongly appealed to the authorities to resolve Borhade's hunger strike at the earliest and ensure his safety.

Several leaders and participants including Rajebhau Appa Gire,

Balasaheb Mule, Ganpat Tagad, Ramkisan Gire, Shahadev Dhalpe, Sandeep Mule, Ramdas Mule, Bankat Vishwambar Mule, Pravin Mule and Prakash Mule were present in the agitation. Members from various communities, including those from the broader social groups, also extended their support in large numbers. Among the prominent attendees were Maratha Sevak Dr Ganesh Dhavale, Sarpanch Balasaheb Jadhav, Balkrishna Thorat, Hariom Kshirsagar, Shivaji Rankhamb, Tukaram Gaikwad and Arun Nirmal.

## Railways Approves 648 Crore for Key Infrastructure Projects



**New Delhi:** The Ministry of Railways has sanctioned two major infrastructure projects totaling ₹647.58 crore to enhance rail connectivity and operational efficiency in Gujarat and Bihar. The first project is the Kosamba Rail Over Rail (RoR) flyover in Gujarat, estimated at ₹344.38 crore. This 9.20-km project will provide a seamless link to the Kosamba-Umrappa gauge conversion section on the busy Mumbai-Vadodara main line, eliminating current technical bottlenecks and improving train fluidity in the region.

The second major approval is the 13.38-km

Bhagalpur Bypass in Bihar, costing ₹303.20 crore. This bypass will connect Gonudham Halt with Sabour, effectively decongesting the Bhagalpur junction which currently operates at 125 percent capacity. By removing the need for time-consuming engine reversals for trains moving between the Barahat and Sahibganj sections, the bypass is expected to significantly improve punctuality. The Ministry stated that these strategic works are part of a broader effort to strengthen high-traffic routes and ensure safer, more efficient movement for both passenger and freight services.

## Pakistan Emerges as Potential Mediator in West Asia Conflict

**New Delhi:** Reports suggest Pakistan is positioning itself as a mediator to end the four-week-old Middle East war. On Tuesday, Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian and Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif discussed regional developments following a high-level ministerial call on March 23. While unconfirmed, rumors indicate Islamabad may host peace talks. During the call, Pezeshkian urged Islamic nations to refuse the use of their territory for attacks against Iran. Prime Minister Sharif called for collective efforts among Muslim nations to de-escalate tensions and restore stability, emphasizing that dialogue is the only way to safeguard regional and global economic interests.

## US Issues Level 4 "Leave Now" Advisory for Citizens in Iraq

**Baghdad:** The US Embassy in Iraq has escalated its security warning to Level 4, urging all Americans to leave immediately. The advisory cites increased threats from Iran-aligned militant groups targeting US interests with missiles, drones, and rockets. Diplomatic missions, energy infrastructure, and hotels are at significant risk, with concerns over potential kidnappings. While the mission remains operational under ordered departure, Iraqi airspace is closed and commercial flights are suspended. Americans are advised to use overland routes to neighboring countries like Kuwait or Jordan, as those remaining in Iraq face significant risk while the regional security situation deteriorates.

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## US B-52 Bomber Issues Emergency Alert Over United Kingdom

**London:** A US B-52H Stratofortress transmitted a general emergency "7700" squawk code while flying east of Bristol on Tuesday. The nature of the emergency remains undisclosed, but the incident occurred during high geopolitical tensions between Washington and Tehran. Simultaneously, UK Defence Secretary John Healey clarified to Parliament that British bases would not be permitted for offensive



strikes against Iranian energy infrastructure. This defensive stance follows Donald Trump's claims of productive talks with Tehran, which Iranian Parliament Speaker

Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf dismissed as "fake news" intended to manipulate markets, further complicating the international diplomatic and military landscape.

## Iranian Missiles Strike Tel Aviv Amid Diplomatic Confusion

**Tel Aviv:** Central Israel, including Tel Aviv, suffered significant damage early Tuesday from seven waves of Iranian missile strikes. Visuals showed burning vehicles and damaged buildings, with sirens sounding near the Negev Nuclear Research Center in Dimona. While the IDF

retaliated against 50 targets in Iran, US President Donald



Trump claimed a "15-point agreement" and a strike

pause had been reached. However, Tehran swiftly denied any dialogue with Washington. This rejection re-introduced extreme uncertainty to global markets, while a Knesset session was briefly halted in Jerusalem due to emergency alerts triggered by the ongoing strikes.

## Explosion at Texas Refinery Prompts Shelter-in-Place Order

**Houston:** A massive explosion at the Valero Energy refinery in Port Arthur, Texas, on Monday sent thick smoke and flames into the sky. Authorities issued a shelter-in-place order for residents, likely caused by an industrial heater. Air monitoring equipment has been deployed to assess toxic fumes, though Port Arthur Mayor Charlotte

M. Moses confirmed all personnel are accounted for with no injuries reported. The facility processes 435,000 barrels of oil daily, and this disruption has added pressure to global fuel prices already volatile from Middle East tensions. Jefferson County Sheriff Zena Stephens confirmed emergency crews worked quickly to secure the site.

# PM Modi Warns of Global Energy Crisis in Rajya Sabha



**New Delhi:** Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressed the Rajya Sabha on Tuesday, warning that the four-week-old war in West Asia has triggered a "serious energy crisis" with significant risks to India's economy and trade. Highlighting the strategic importance of the Strait of Hormuz, the Prime Minister noted that disruptions to

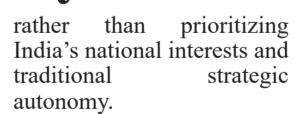
maritime movement have made the supply of petrol, diesel, and fertilizers increasingly challenging. He emphasized that the safety of the 10 million Indians living in the Gulf remains a top priority, specifically mentioning concerns for Indian crew members currently stranded on international vessels in the region.

The Prime Minister asserted that India is aggressively pursuing a diplomatic offensive to restore peace, maintaining constant contact with leaders in Iran, Israel, and the United States. He characterized attacks on commercial shipping as "unacceptable" and reiterated India's firm opposition to strikes on critical energy infrastructure.

Despite the volatility, Modi assured the House that the government is working to secure uninterrupted supplies, noting that several crude oil and LPG shipments have successfully arrived in India recently. He concluded by stressing that dialogue remains the only path to reopening vital waterways and stabilizing global markets.

## Rahul Gandhi Claims India's Foreign Policy is "Compromised"

**New Delhi:** Shortly after the Prime Minister's address, Senior Congress leader Rahul Gandhi launched a scathing attack on the government's handling of the West Asia conflict. Speaking to reporters in Parliament, Gandhi alleged that India's foreign policy is "compromised" because Prime Minister Modi himself is under external pressure. He accused the Prime Minister of failing to act independently, claiming that "Modi only does what the United States and Israel want him to do,"



rather than prioritizing India's national interests and traditional strategic autonomy.

government highlighted its efforts to diversify energy imports and engage in de-escalation diplomacy with multiple stakeholders, Gandhi argued that these actions lack the "courage" required to protect the common man. The Congress party continues to push for a broader debate on the conflict's impact on household budgets and small businesses, signaling a deepening political divide over India's diplomatic stance in the evolving geopolitical crisis.

## Mamata Banerjee slams Election Commission over 'BJP Stamp' letter row

**Kolkata:** West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on Tuesday launched a sharp attack on the Election Commission, alleging bias after a controversy over a letter purportedly bearing the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) stamp.

Speaking to the media at Dum Dum airport before leaving for a campaign tour in North Bengal, Banerjee displayed a copy of the contentious letter, claiming it pointed to alleged links between the poll body and the BJP.

"The cat is out of the bag. It is clear who is behind all this. The Election Commission's functioning and whose directions it follows are now evident.

Why act from behind? Come and fight openly," she said.

The Trinamool Congress supremo further questioned the explanation of a "clerical mistake," by the Election Commission of India.

"This letter is not only about Kerala. It clearly mentions that it



applies to all states and union Territories. Is this a clerical mistake or a political agenda?" she asked.

Appealing to opposition parties to stand united against the EC, Banerjee urged unity against what she termed as "one-sided functioning"

of the Commission.

"I appeal to all opposition parties to protest together against this. We must unite beyond political colours," she said.

The controversy dates back to 2019, when a letter sent by the Elec-

tion Commission was made public by the CPI(M) in Kerala.

The document, which surfaced on social media on Monday, allegedly carried a BJP symbol and stamp, triggering widespread debate.

Leaders including Abhishek Banerjee had also shared the letter online, reiterating allegations of a nexus between the Commission and the ruling party at the Centre.

"I brought this to show all of you. Look carefully, the Election Commission sent a letter with a BJP stamp. The truth is now exposed," Banerjee said, holding a paper clipping in front of everybody.

She also raised concerns over the late-night publication of an additional voter list on Monday.

"Why was the list released at midnight? What is the fear? There is clearly a lack of transparency. What names have been removed? Have any been added unilaterally?" she questioned.

## Seethakka targets BJP in Assembly, defends state welfare push during budget debate

**Hyderabad:** Telangana Panchayat Raj, Women and Child Welfare Minister Danasari Anasuya Seethakka on Tuesday launched a sharp attack on the BJP during the general discussion on the State Budget 2026-27, while strongly defending the government's welfare initiatives. Participating in the debate, she alleged that the BJP, despite making "grandiose claims," has failed to enhance pensions for differently-abled persons and widows over the past decade. She also said the controversial farm laws were withdrawn only after sustained protests led by Rahul Gandhi and farmers across the country.

The Minister accused the Centre of favouring big industrialists, claiming that loans worth Rs 16 lakh crore were waived for them, while farmers were denied similar relief. She further criticised the BJP for making "baseless



allegations" regarding interest-free loans, stating that the state government had already facilitated bank loans worth Rs 58,000 crore. Seethakka said that despite receiving "no support" from the Centre, the Telangana government is spending heavily on welfare schemes and implementing the promised 'Six Guarantees'. These include free electricity, bonus payments for fine-grade paddy, and construction of 4.5 lakh Indiramma houses. Questioning BJP MPs from

Telangana, she asked whether it was not their responsibility to secure funds for the state. "The public has no use for empty speeches," she remarked, also taking aim at unfulfilled national promises such as Rs 15 lakh deposits from black money and cheaper fuel prices. The Minister alleged that Telangana has not received adequate support in the union Budget, with no projects granted national status in the past 12 years and pending dues since 2014 yet to be cleared.

## UP emerges as national leader in healthcare services

**Lucknow:** Uttar Pradesh has witnessed unprecedented transformation in healthcare services over the past nine years.

Government has strengthened infrastructure while achieving new milestones in digital health, emergency services and maternal and child care. As a result, UP now ranks among the top states in country across several health indicators.

Official here on Tuesday said state has made significant progress in digital health by generating over 5.76 crore electronic health records. Under the microsite project, 35 microsites are operational, with over 440,000 records registered, placing UP at the top nationwide. Unified Disease Surveillance Portal has improved disease monitoring and prevention. 'Care Model' has been implemented in hospitals to monitor medical equipment availability and efficiency.

Significant progress has also been made in maternal and child health. Pregnant women are provided free ultrasound services through e-vouchers.

Under the "Janani Suraksha Yojana", 1,351,044 beneficiaries have been covered, while 879,642 children have been treated under child health programs. "Dastak campaign" has been actively combating diseases like AES and JE. Scale of healthcare expansion is evident with 22,681 Ayushman Bharat Health and Wellness Centres now operational. Over 13.18 crore people have been registered under the Ayushman Bharat Health Account. With 81,615 registrations in the Health Professional Registry, UP leads the nation.

Official said under the Ayushman Bharat scheme, health cards have been issued to 1.31 crore families, covering 5.59 crore beneficiaries. More than 9 crore people have received free healthcare coverage up to ₹5

lakh. Under the "Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana", 7.34 crore people have benefited. Additionally, under the "Chief Minister's Jan Arogya Abhiyan", 50.64 lakh families have been provided health security.

Free dialysis services are now available in hospitals across all 75 districts, benefiting over 41.46 lakh patients. CT scan services have also been introduced at the district level. Telemedicine and teleconsultation services have made specialist care accessible in remote areas. The establishment of Uttar Pradesh Medical Supply Corporation has improved transparency in medicine supply and quality. Additionally, 798 health units have received National Quality Assurance Certification. Furthermore, Pandit Deendayal Upadhyay Cashless Medical Scheme has been implemented for state employees and pensioners, providing cashless treatment.

## Three injured in clashes between two groups in Manipur

**Imphal:** Fresh incidents of firing were reported on Tuesday in Manipur's Ukhrul and Kamjong districts, further escalating tensions in the already volatile hill region, in which three persons sustained serious bullet wounds.

Heavy firing was reported in the two hill districts since Tuesday morning.

The Tangkhul Naga Foothills Organisation (TNFO) issued a strong demand for immediate State intervention.

Gunfire broke out in areas around Litan, Sinakeithe, and Mongkot Chepu, triggering panic among residents. Security forces rushed reinforcements to the affected zones and intensified patrolling as intermittent firing continued.

The fresh violence comes as a continuation of a series of firing incidents reported over the past few

days along the Ukhrul and Kangpokpi fringe. Earlier confrontations in Mongkot Chepu and adjoining areas involved prolonged exchanges of fire lasting several hours, with civilians reportedly caught in the crossfire and some sustaining injuries.

In this backdrop, the TNFO, in a press statement issued on Tuesday, expressed grave concern over the ongoing violence in the foothill regions. The organisation alleged that armed elements have been firing sophisticated weapons from multiple locations, including along the Chassad-Kamjong axis and nearby villages such as Shangikai and Mongkot Chepu, targeting Tangkhul-inhabited villages.

The statement further reported that at least two civilians were injured in recent firing incidents, suffer-



ing bullet wounds to their legs and feet. It termed the attacks as "indiscriminate" and warned that such acts pose a serious threat to peace, stability, and communal harmony in the region.

Raising concerns over the presence of central security forces during the incidents, the organisation questioned the effectiveness of existing security arrangements and called for accountability of authorities responsible for maintaining law and order.

The TNFO also recalled its earlier memorandum submitted on February 21, seeking upgradation of Litan Police Station and deployment of additional security forces in vulnerable villages such as Sinakeithe, Hongman, Mapao Zingsho, and Zingun. It expressed dissatisfaction that only limited deployment has been made so far. Demanding immediate action, the organisation urged the State government to deploy adequate security forces in affected

villages, including Thoyee and Sharkaphung, to ensure the safety of civilians and restore normalcy.

Violence that erupted on May 3, 2023, in Churachandpur district has spread across the entire state, and even today Meiteis cannot move along national highways, while Kukis face difficulties reaching the airport. There is also tension in Tamenglong and Noney districts, as Kuki militants allegedly torched some important ecological parks and lakes, which are opposed by the Zeliangrong Naga community. The assault of some Tangkhul Naga youths by Kuki armed miscreants led to a major conflict in Ukhrul and Kamjong districts. Kuki groups have blocked highways and other roads used by Meitei and Naga communities; hence, Meiteis and Nagas are mostly relying on air services.

## Telangana Govt pushes EV adoption among employees; top officials lead by example

**Hyderabad:** In a significant push towards clean mobility, senior officials of the Telangana government, including Chief Secretary Ramakrishna Rao and DGP Shivadhar Reddy, inspected various electric vehicle (EV) models in front of the Secretariat on Tuesday as part of an initiative to encourage government employees to switch to electric vehicles.

Acting on the suggestion of Transport Minister Ponnampalabharathi, the Chief Secretary has purchased an electric vehicle for personal use, setting an example for government staff.

Addressing the media at the Secretariat, Transport Minister Ponnampalabharathi, along with the Chief Secretary and the DGP, said that under the 'Praja Palana'

(People's Administration) government, Chief Minister Revanth Reddy introduced the EV Policy to prevent Hyderabad from facing severe pollution levels like those in Delhi.

He said the policy aims to mitigate environmental pollution and promote clean mobility. The EV Policy offers exemptions from road tax and registration fees, and despite a potential revenue loss of nearly Rs 1,000 crore, the government remains committed to encouraging EV adoption.

He said that since the rollout of the policy, the use of electric vehicles has increased significantly across the state.

During a recent review meeting, the Transport Department urged vehicle manufacturers to provide special incentives to promoting EV

employees. Accordingly, companies such as Mahindra Electric, Ather Energy, Graviton Motors, and Ola are offering discounts of 10-20 per cent.

The Minister said the Chief Minister has directed all government departments and organisations to prioritise EVs while purchasing or leasing new vehicles. EV charging stations have been established across the state, including through REDCO, to support the growing number of electric vehicles.

Electric buses are already operational in CURE (Clean Urban and Rural Energy) zones, and the government has decided to convert existing diesel-powered auto-rickshaws in these areas into electric vehicles, he added. Chief Secretary Ramakrishna Rao said the government is promoting EV

adoption to transform Hyderabad into a pollution-free city. He noted that nearly 30 per cent of the state's population resides in the capital, making it crucial to ensure a clean and green environment.

He said the government plans to expand the CURE initiative across nearly 2,000 kilometres and emphasised that increasing EV usage is key to tackling deteriorating air quality in urban centres. He also urged both government and private sector employees to take advantage of the incentives offered and welcomed the participation of EV companies in supporting the initiative.

Transport Commissioner Ilambathi, I&PR Commissioner Priyanka, and leaders of employee unions were present on the occasion.

## Odisha to conduct statewide fire safety mock drill on March 28

**Bhubaneswar:** In a major step to improve fire safety across the state, Director General of Odisha Fire Services, Dr Sudhansu Sarangi, announced that a statewide fire safety mock drill will be held on March 28. He urged all Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) to actively cooperate to ensure the success of this important initiative.

Dr Sarangi made the announcement during a high-level virtual workshop on Fire Safety Awareness and Preparedness, organized by the Housing & Urban Development (H&UD) Department in collaboration with Odisha Fire Services.

The session aimed to synchronize emergency response protocols and enhance the technical preparedness of all ULBs in Odisha.

In his address, the DG of Fire Services shared valuable insights on preventive measures, the use of modern firefighting equipment, and the need for institutional readiness to tackle fire hazards.

He lauded the H&UD Department

for being the first in the state to organize such a comprehensive sensitization initiative, setting a new benchmark for inter-departmental coordination in fire safety efforts.

The workshop was led by Usha Padhee, Additional Chief Secretary of the H&UD Department, who emphasized the importance of integrating fire safety into urban governance. "Fire safety should not be treated as just a compliance requirement," she said.

"It must be embedded in every aspect of urban development," Padhee further instructed ULBs to incorporate fire safety measures into the upcoming financial year's Mukhya Mantri Sahari Bikas Yojana (MSBY), a major urban development programme.

The virtual session saw active participation from Commissioners of Municipal Corporations, Executive Officers of Municipalities, Notified Area Councils (NACs), Fire Officers, and Deputy Fire Officers, ensuring a cohesive and unified approach to fire safety across Odisha.

The workshop discussions focused on three strategic pillars: preparedness, prevention, and public awareness. The recent spate of fire incidents in the state underscored the urgency of strengthening safety standards.

The Department of Fire Services highlighted key action points, including continuous training and sensitization of both officials and citizens, mandatory periodic safety inspections for both public and private buildings, and grassroots-level awareness campaigns aimed at fire prevention and emergency response.

Arindam Dakua, Director of Municipal Administration, set the tone for the workshop, emphasizing the need for a coordinated, statewide effort to improve fire safety preparedness in all ULBs.

The session concluded with clear instructions for ULB heads to initiate safety audits and launch awareness drives in their respective jurisdictions to mitigate fire risks and prevent future disasters.

## Ultimatum to striking revenue officers, govt warns of strict action

**Patna:** Taking a tough stance against striking revenue officers, the Bihar government termed their mass leave illegal and issued a strict ultimatum to resume duties by March 25.

Bihar Deputy Chief Minister and Revenue and Land Reforms Minister Vijay Kumar Sinha warned that officers failing to return to work within the stipulated deadline will face stringent disciplinary action.

Sinha said that the mass leave announced by some members of the Bihar Revenue Service since March 9, is not only against rules but is also disrupting public services.

He emphasized that the state government will not compromise on public interest and administrative func-



tioning.

Highlighting the importance of ongoing government initiatives, he stated that the responsibilities of revenue officers increase significantly during key events such as Chief Minister Nitish Kumar's "Samridhi Yatra" and the Land Reforms Public

Welfare Dialogue programmes. Absence during such crucial periods, he said, amounts to serious negligence.

The Deputy Chief Minister made it clear that all concerned officers must report back to duty by 5:00 PM on March 25. Those who fail to comply will face consequences including break in service, salary cuts, and other strict disciplinary measures. However, he added that officers who return within the deadline may be considered for adjustment of their leave period on compassionate grounds, as per rules. Sinha appealed to all officers to end the strike immediately and resume their responsibilities to ensure that the general public does not face inconvenience.

## Small businesses paralyzed by gas shortage and black marketing

**Lucknow:** The deepening shortage of LPG (cooking gas) and skyrocketing prices in Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh, have crippled small business owners and migrant workers alike.

The situation has become so dire that many labourers and street vendors—who originally hail from the districts of the Purvanchal region—are being forced to shut down their operations and return to their villages.

Migrants from districts such as Azamgarh, Basti, Deoria, Mau, Ballia, Jaunpur, and Kushinagar report that the erratic supply of gas—coupled with the fact that cylinders are available only on the black market at double the standard price—has made it nearly impossible to earn a livelihood.

Rakesh Maurya, who runs a tea stall serving "bun-makkhan" (bun and butter) in Hazratganj, explains that his earnings are dwindling while his expenditure on gas continues to rise.



Meanwhile, Arvind Mishra—a Basti native who operates a fast-food cart in Indira Nagar—states that he has not received a gas cylinder for the past 10 days, bringing his business to a complete standstill. Arvind, who previously earned up to ₹500 a day, is now unable to even pay his rent and has made the difficult decision to return to his village.

Rahul Verma, a Deoria native who sells 'chaat' (street food) in

Nishatganj, notes that LPG cylinders are currently available on the black market at exorbitant rates. Out of sheer necessity, he purchased an induction cooktop; however, this has slowed down his cooking process, causing customers to lose patience and walk away rather than wait.

In Gombi Nagar, Manoj Singh from Ballia shared that with gas selling at double its usual price, continuing to run his shop has become an

impossibility.

According to Mohammad Arif from Kushinagar, who sells 'kebab-paratha' in the Chowk area, he attempted to cook using firewood after his gas supply ran out. However, his landlord refused to grant permission for this, resulting in a complete disruption of his income.

The impact of this crisis is not limited solely to street vendors and cart operators. Daily-wage labourers in areas such as Transport Nagar, the Talkatora Industrial Area, and Chinhat are also facing a severe crisis. Many workers can now be seen leaving the city, their bags and bedding in tow. Workers employed in small-scale units in Sarojini Nagar and Amausi state that, despite the availability of work, making ends meet has become difficult due to the high cost of gas.

Manoj Kumar from Unnao, who works at a packaging unit in Chinhat, says that even when gas is available, it is so expensive that purchasing it is simply not feasible.

# Zepto Riders Protest Pay

**Thane** : Delivery partners for the quick-commerce platform Zepto staged a demonstration in Thane to voice their dissatisfaction with current wage structures. Approximately 60 riders gathered outside a local facility to announce a strike, claiming that their compensation has plummeted to as low as ₹15 per delivery.

The protestors argued that despite working shifts exceeding seven hours, their daily earnings are stagnant between ₹450 and ₹500, which is insufficient to cov-

er rising living costs.

The delivery personnel highlighted that the financial strain is compounded by soaring fuel prices and the physical toll of working in extreme summer temperatures. Beyond the low pay, riders alleged a lack of operational support, noting they are often expected to carry heavy grocery loads and large water canisters without assistance from store staff.

The group warned that while the gig may work for part-time earners, it has

become unsustainable for full-time workers who rely on the app to support their families.

The demonstration by Zepto delivery partners in Thane marks a significant flashpoint in the evolving narrative of India's quick-commerce sector, highlighting the growing friction between platform algorithms and the human labor that powers them. Approximately 60 riders congregated outside a local distribution hub, effectively halting operations to draw



public and corporate attention to what they describe as a "plummeting" wage structure.

This protest is not mere-

ly an isolated incident but a reflection of the systemic challenges faced by gig workers who operate at the final mile of the digital

economy, where the promise of flexibility often clashes with the reality of diminishing returns.

At the core of the riders' grievances is a stark reduction in per-delivery compensation, which protestors claim has dropped to as low as ₹15.

For individuals who rely on these micro-payments to build a daily income, such a low baseline makes it nearly impossible to achieve financial stability.

The riders argued that even after dedicating more

than seven hours to the platform—often during peak demand periods—their total daily earnings are stagnating between ₹450 and ₹500. When viewed against the backdrop of an expensive urban center like Thane, these figures represent a wage that many feel is decoupled from the actual cost of living.

The financial strain on these delivery partners is further exacerbated by the overhead costs of maintaining their own vehicles, specifically the "soaring"

fuel prices that eat into their take-home pay. Since gig workers are typically responsible for their own petrol, maintenance, and insurance, a flat or decreasing delivery fee means their profit margins are being squeezed from both ends. The protestors emphasized that while the platform's efficiency depends on their speed and reliability, the current economic model does not seem to account for the inflationary pressures affecting the very tools they use to perform their jobs.

## Wadala Traffic Diversions Announced

**Mumbai** : Commuters in Wadala should prepare for significant travel changes as the Mumbai Traffic Police has implemented road closures and diversions to facilitate essential infrastructure work. Starting March 24, the northbound corridor between Monorail Pole No. 1 L-322 and the Wadala Depot Monorail Station will be off-limits to vehicles. The restriction is expected to remain in place until May 22 to allow the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation to execute sewerage pipeline repairs.

The project involves excavating a massive 25-foot diameter hole reaching a depth of 20 feet, which has left less than four feet of usable road surface for motorists. To prevent potential accidents, authorities have closed the route from RTO Chowk toward the Monorail Station.

During this period, the southbound road will be converted into a two-way lane to maintain connectivity. Drivers heading north can use this alternative path before merging back onto the original route via the first available open crossing past the construction zone. The Mumbai Traffic Police have officially implemented a series of strategic road closures and traffic diversions in the Wadala area, signaling a period of significant adjustment for local commuters and heavy-vehicle operators. This move is a direct response to the commencement of critical infrastructure maintenance by the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC), specifically targeting the repair of essential sewerage pipelines. As of March 24, 2026, the northbound corridor stretching between Monorail Pole No. 1 L-322 and the Wadala

Depot Monorail Station has been cordoned off, effectively removing a major artery from the standard traffic map for a projected duration of two months.

The scale of the engineering task at hand is formidable, involving the excavation of a massive 25-foot diameter shaft that reaches a depth of approximately 20 feet below the road surface. This deep-trenching operation is a necessity for maintaining the city's subterranean utility network, but it has left a mere four feet of usable asphalt for motorists—a width entirely insufficient for safe vehicular passage. Recognizing the high risk of accidents or structural subsidence, the traffic authorities determined that a total closure of the route from RTO Chowk toward the Monorail Station was the only viable safety measure.

To mitigate the inevitable

congestion, the Mumbai Traffic Police have opted to convert the existing southbound road into a temporary two-way thoroughfare. This "contraflow" arrangement is designed to maintain a degree of connectivity for residents and transit vehicles who rely on this specific corridor for daily movement. Under this new plan, drivers heading north are directed to use the repurposed southbound lane before merging back into their original path via the first available open crossing situated past the construction zone, ensuring that the flow of traffic—while slowed—does not come to a complete standstill. The timing of these restrictions, set to remain in place until May 22, suggests a race against the clock to complete the heavy excavation and pipe-laying work before the onset of the monsoon season. Early

seasonal rains could complicate deep-trenching projects, potentially leading to waterlogging or soil instability. By launching the project now, the BMC and traffic officials are prioritizing long-term infrastructure health over short-term commuter convenience, aiming to have the road fully restored and the sewerage system reinforced before the city's drainage capacity is put to the ultimate test during the summer rains.

Traffic wardens and additional police personnel have been deployed at key junctions, including RTO Chowk, to guide confused motorists and manage the merging of vehicles into the two-way zone.

## Massive Ticketless Travel Fines

**Mumbai** : Central Railway authorities have ramped up their enforcement efforts, catching hundreds of unauthorized commuters during a specialized "fortress" ticket-checking operation. The drive, which targeted Vikhroli and Bhandup stations during the hectic evening rush, resulted in the apprehension of over 400 ticketless travelers at a single location. In just one day, officials collected more than ₹1 lakh in fines from Vikhroli alone, with Bhandup following closely at over ₹91,000.

The success of the operation has triggered a wave of reactions from regular commuters on social media, who are now calling for similar intensive checks on the Kasara, Karjat, and Harbour lines.

Many passengers expressed frustration that fare evasion is rampant in first-class compartments and on long-distance suburban trains. Railway officials emphasized that these high-visibility drives are essential not only to protect revenue but also to ensure that honest, fare-paying passengers have a better commuting experience.

The Central Railway has intensified its crackdown on fare evasion across the Mumbai suburban network, executing a high-impact "fortress" ticket-checking operation that has caught hundreds of unauthorized commuters off guard. This specialized drive, characterized by a sudden and heavy deployment of ticket examiners

and security personnel at specific entry and exit points, was strategically timed to coincide with the grueling evening rush hour. By focusing on key transit hubs like Vikhroli and Bhandup, authorities aimed to send a clear message that the culture of ticketless travel will no longer be overlooked during the most congested periods of the day.

The sheer scale of the operation's success is evident in the numbers reported from a single day of enforcement, where over 400 ticketless travelers were apprehended at a solitary location. At Vikhroli station alone, the intensive check resulted in the collection of more than ₹1 lakh in fines, proving that a significant portion of the commuting public had been bypassing the fare system. Bhandup station mirrored this trend, with officials recovering over ₹91,000 from unauthorized passengers, highlighting a widespread issue of revenue leakage that the railway administration is now determined to plug through these high-visibility "fortress" maneuvers.

The aggressive enforcement has sparked a massive wave of reactions from the Mumbai commuting community, particularly on social media platforms where regular passengers are sharing their own experiences with fare evasion. Many "honest" commuters, who diligently purchase monthly passes or daily tickets, have expressed a sense of vindication seeing the crackdown.

## Major SUV Crash in Juhu

**Mumbai** : A violent collision near a metro construction site in Juhu left a black SUV completely totaled on Tuesday afternoon. The accident, which occurred on Gulmohar Road opposite Suyog Hospital, resulted in the vehicle flipping over, leaving the chassis crushed and windows shattered.

Passersby and emergency responders rushed to the scene to assist the occupants, who were quickly transported to a nearby medical facility for urgent care.

While the severity of the damage suggests a high-impact crash, local authorities have yet to confirm the official cause of the accident or the total number of individuals injured.

Investigations are ongoing to determine if road conditions near the construction zone or vehicle speed played a role in the mishap. The wreckage caused temporary traffic snarls in the busy Juhu locality as crews worked to clear the

site and restore normal flow.

The violent collision on Gulmohar Road this Tuesday afternoon has left the Juhu community in a state of shock, as the sight of a completely totaled black SUV served as a grim reminder of the hazards present on Mumbai's busy thoroughfares. The accident occurred directly opposite Suyog Hospital, a location already prone to heavy footfall and vehicular movement, further complicated by the ongoing metro construction nearby.

The impact was severe enough to cause the vehicle to flip entirely, leaving its chassis crushed and windows shattered in a scene that drew immediate attention from everyone in the vicinity.

As the SUV came to a rest in its inverted position, the response from the public was instantaneous and heartening, with passersby and local shopkeepers rushing toward the wreckage

to check for survivors. These initial responders, alongside emergency teams that arrived shortly after, worked frantically to extricate the occupants from the mangled metal. The victims were quickly prioritized for medical intervention and transported to a nearby facility, where they are currently receiving urgent care for injuries sustained during the high-impact rollover.

The physical state of the vehicle—a high-end black SUV—speaks volumes about the velocity or the angle of the collision.

Images from the scene show a vehicle that is almost unrecognizable, with the roof caved in and the internal safety systems likely deployed to their full extent. While SUVs are generally built for robustness, the sheer level of destruction at the Juhu site suggests that the forces involved in this particular mishap were extraordinary, bypassing many of the standard structural protections of the car.

## Editorial

### Modi's Record-Breaking Journey

Indian politics has witnessed many eras of leadership; however, some journeys transcend the mere pursuit of power—they shape history. Narendra Modi's journey—from serving as the Chief Minister of Gujarat to becoming the Prime Minister of the nation—is the saga of just such a unique blend of political and administrative success. By continuously leading the government for 8,931 days, he has established a new record—a feat regarded as a testament to his consistent work ethic and his deep-rooted popular mandate. This milestone represents not merely a statistical figure, but a reflection of the shifting currents within Indian democracy and the emergence of a new style of leadership.

Throughout the long history of Indian democracy, numerous leaders have left their indelible mark in their own distinct ways; yet, Narendra Modi's trajectory—from the Chief Ministership of Gujarat to the Prime Ministership of the nation—has been more than just a political ascent; it has proven to be a golden era of record-breaking achievements. Rising from a humble background, this dedicated political worker not only defied established political equations on his ascent to the pinnacle of power but also etched his name indelibly into India's administrative history. Most recently, he set an unprecedented record by serving as the Head of Government for 8,931 days. With this accomplishment, he surpassed the long-standing record of 8,930 days held by Pawan Kumar Chamling, the former Chief Minister of Sikkim, for the longest tenure as a Head of Government. Having served three consecutive terms as the Chief Minister of Gujarat and now in his third term as the Prime Minister of the nation, Modi has become the first elected representative in India to lead a government for such an extended duration. While his cabinet colleagues have showered him with accolades upon reaching this historic milestone, it is a journey that has been forged and tempered in the crucible of struggle.

When discussing Narendra Modi's records, comparisons are frequently drawn between him and the nation's first Prime Minister, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. Critics within the Congress party have often invoked Nehru's historic stature while critiquing the duration of Modi's tenure. Pandit Nehru was not merely a Prime Minister; he was also a leading stalwart of the freedom struggle. He endured imprisonment for over nine years, a period during which he authored timeless works such as 'The Discovery of India'. However, with the changing times, the very criteria for leadership have also evolved. Atal Bihari Vajpayee himself acknowledged during the Pokhran nuclear tests in 1998 that it was Nehru who had laid the robust foundation for the nation's nuclear program. The subsequent generations—most notably Indira Gandhi—benefited from this legacy established by Nehru, as well as from the Congress party's contribution to the freedom struggle. It was precisely this enduring tradition that fostered a form of dynastic hegemony within the Congress party. Even when distinguished scholars like P.V. Narasimha Rao or Dr. Manmohan Singh ascended to the office of Prime Minister, the "remote control" of power remained firmly in the hands of the Gandhi family. It was Narendra Modi alone who accomplished the remarkable feat of shattering this "political monopoly" of the Congress—a dominance that had persisted for decades—and, for the very first time, ushering in a non-Congress government at the Centre with an absolute majority.

Modi's journey has never been easy or straightforward. The very United States that had denied him a visa in the wake of the 2002 Gujarat riots was compelled by Modi to execute a complete 360-degree shift in its stance. The reputation he cultivated as Gujarat's 'Man of Development' (\*Vikas Purush\*) was so compelling that American Senators felt compelled to visit Gujarat personally to witness the 'Gujarat Model' firsthand. When representatives of a global superpower declare, "We feel safe in Gujarat," it stands as a resounding triumph for Modi's administrative prowess. At the time of his entry into national politics, obstacles were erected not only by his political adversaries but also by senior leaders within his own party. Stalwart leaders—figures of the stature of Lal Krishna Advani—went so far as to tender their resignations to register their displeasure. Breaking through this wall of internal dissent, Modi established a direct dialogue with the masses and steered the BJP to a historic victory in 2014. The fact that he ascended the party to the throne of power relying solely on the strength of the people—even in the absence of cooperation from his own party's seniors—stands as the ultimate testament to his organizational genius.

During Modi's tenure as Prime Minister, numerous events unfolded that had previously been deemed impossible. The issue of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya had remained unresolved for decades. Silencing his critics—who used to taunt him with the jibe, "We will build the temple, but we won't tell you the date"—Modi transformed the dream of a magnificent Ram Temple into reality. Modi took the audacious decision to abrogate Article 370 in Kashmir, thereby truly integrating the state into India's national mainstream. Furthermore, by abolishing the practice of 'Triple Talaq'—a looming threat that hung over the heads of Muslim women—he secured for them a measure of social justice.

This decision was not merely confined to a religious framework; it has emerged as a monumental milestone in the journey toward women's empowerment. India's global stature has risen to such heights that, today, numerous Muslim nations have honored Prime Minister Modi by conferring upon him their highest civilian awards. The fact that India's voice is now accorded such weight amidst the assembly of world leaders stands as a testament to the success of Modi's foreign policy.

The current global climate has once again become fraught with tension. Certain controversial decisions taken by US President Donald Trump have disrupted the global fuel supply, and the repercussions of this are being felt in India as well. As the nation grapples with the looming shadow of a fuel shortage, Narendra Modi's leadership is once again being put to the test. Throughout his tenure, he has successfully navigated numerous difficult situations and established new benchmarks of achievement. To overcome the twin challenges of rising inflation and the energy crisis, he must now deliver yet another 'record-breaking' performance on the administrative front. The entire world is watching closely to see what steps he will take in the coming days to validate the unwavering belief held by his supporters and the general public: "If Modi is there, it is possible." All signs indicate that Modi's characteristic ability to find opportunities amidst crises—combined with his extensive experience—will undoubtedly steer the nation safely out of this economic predicament.

Today, against the backdrop of global instability, as India confronts a fresh set of challenges, the true mettle of Modi's vast experience and decisive leadership will be put to the ultimate test. His tenure has not merely set new records; it has also imparted a fresh direction to India's political and administrative ethos. The eyes of the nation—and indeed the world—are now fixed on the future, eager to witness the new heights to which this leadership will elevate the country in the times ahead.

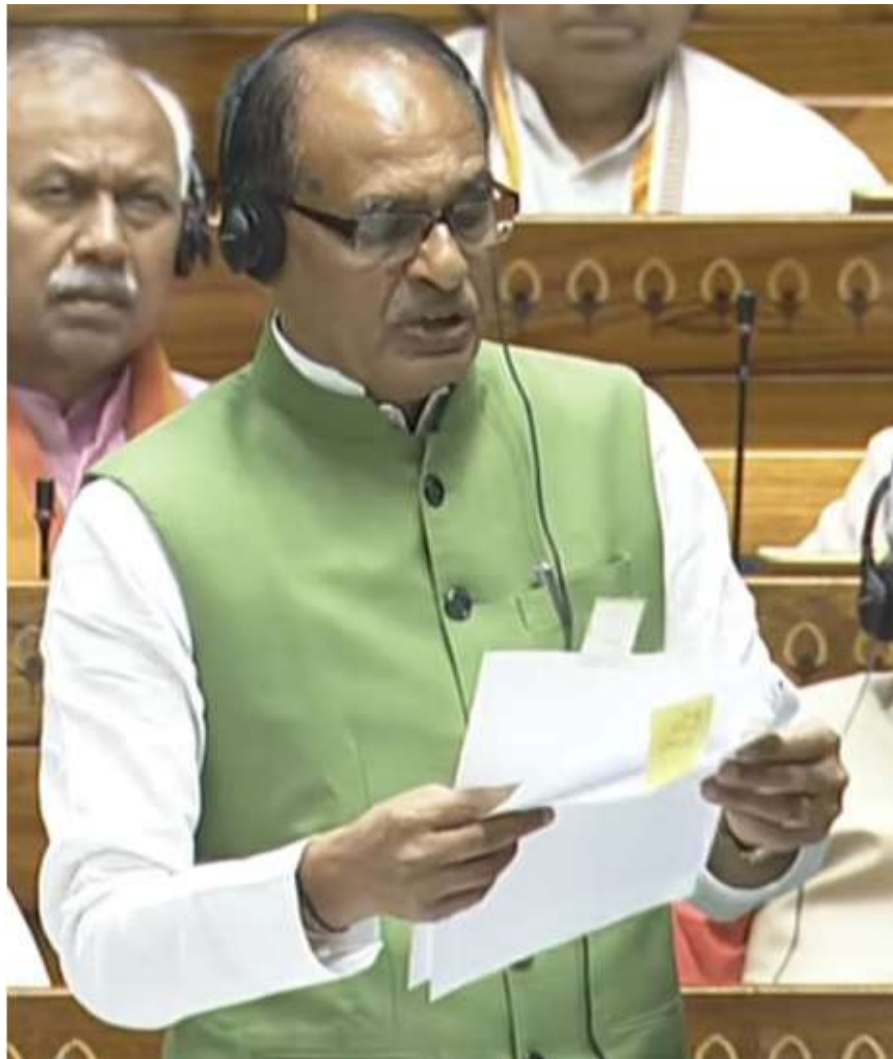
## Many farmer's incomes have doubled

Union Agriculture & Farmers' Welfare and Rural Development, Minister Shri Shivraj Singh Chouhan stated in the Lok Sabha today that under the leadership of Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi, the Central Government is committed to ensuring that farmers receive a fair price for their produce in every situation, and no effort will be spared at any level to rescue the 'annadatta' (food providers) from crisis. He said that the NDA government has provided a strong security shield to farmers' income through record purchases at Minimum Support Price (MSP), PM-AASHA, Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana, price difference payment, and Market Intervention Scheme, and farmers' incomes have doubled.

While answering various questions raised by MPs in the Lok Sabha, Union Agriculture Minister Shri Shivraj Singh Chouhan said that to increase farmers' incomes and protect their interests, the Central Government led by Shri Narendra Modi has taken several historic steps in the past years. He informed that agricultural production has increased by nearly 44 per cent, and a comprehensive campaign has been launched to simultaneously enhance farmers' productivity and income. Shri Chouhan said that in the previous governments' time, excuses were made in the name of implementing the Swaminathan Commission recommendations, even going to the extent of saying that giving MSP more than 50 per cent of the cost would distort the market. In contrast, the NDA government led by Shri Narendra Modi decided to determine the Minimum Support Price by taking into account 50 per cent profit on production cost and continuously implemented it, enabling farmers to get better returns for their hard work.

Union Minister Shri Shivraj Singh stated that merely announcing MSP is not enough; actually procuring at that price is more important, and in this direction, the government has provided direct benefits to farmers through record purchases at MSP not only for wheat, paddy, pulses, and oilseeds but also for various other crops. He said that this government has not remained limited to grains only but is also actively intervening for pulses, oilseeds, fruits, and vegetables so that farmers do not suffer losses if prices of any crop fall.

Shri Chouhan informed that Pradhan Mantri Annadata Aay Sanrakshan Abhiyan – PM-AASHA scheme, a significant initiative launched during Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi's tenure, provides security to those crops whose prices often fall below MSP. He said that under PM-AASHA, three types of arrangements have been made – direct purchase of pulses and oilseeds through Price Support Scheme, bridging the gap be-



tween MSP and market price through price difference payment mechanism, and providing protection to farmers through other means if needed.

On a question regarding Maharashtra, Union Agriculture Minister Shri Shivraj Singh Chouhan informed that during the recent natural calamities, the state government made full use of the Centre's policy-supported digital system and transferred ₹14,000 crore directly to farmers' accounts within just five days through Farmer ID, providing swift relief.

He said that on one hand, state governments compensate for crop losses through arrangements like SDRF, while on the other hand, the Central Government is leaving no stone unturned in providing insurance coverage and compensation to farmers under the Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana.

While mentioning crops like soybean in-

cluding pulses and oilseeds, Shri Chouhan said that in the event of price fall, the government does not rely only on purchase but also adopts the option of depositing the entire amount between MSP and market price directly into the farmer's account through price difference mechanism. Citing the example of Madhya Pradesh, he said that there, through the price difference payment scheme, farmers' income was protected without making them stand in queues, without additional logistics costs, and this model is inspirational for other states as well.

Union Agriculture Minister Shri Shivraj Singh said that through the Market Intervention Scheme (MIS), a model rate has been set for perishable fruits and vegetables as well, either by arranging direct purchase or by depositing the difference between model rate and market price into the farmer's account. In the context of products like grapes, chilli, po-

tato, onion, tomato, he clarified that if prices are very low in farmers' areas and farmers want to take their produce to mandis in big cities, then in such cases, the Central Government is even bearing the transportation cost, so that farmers can get better prices in distant mandis.

While replying in the Lok Sabha, Shri Shivraj Singh Chouhan reiterated that to ensure proper purchase of the entire produce of the farmer, FCI, NAFED, state government agencies, and other institutions are working in a coordinated manner, and purchase centers are being opened wherever and as many as required.

Emphasising the transparency and accuracy in the implementation of Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana, Shri Shivraj Singh informed that crop-cutting experiments are conducted at every panchayat level, and four such experiments are mandatorily carried out in each cluster/panchayat so that there is no doubt in the estimation of yield figures. He said that now, extensive use of technology has been adopted through satellite-based remote sensing method, which enables better assessment of actual yield and loss, and insurance claims can be paid on a more scientific and impartial basis; farmers are directly benefiting from this in the new crop insurance system.

Union Minister Shri Chouhan informed that during the NDA government's tenure, farmers have deposited a total of about ₹36,055 crore as premium under the Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana, in return for which about ₹1,92,477 crore of insurance claim amount have been deposited into farmers' accounts; this is proof that the scheme has been extremely beneficial for farmers. He also clarified that earlier, local level disasters or crop loss of any single farmer was generally not considered covered, and assessment mainly happened at tehsil/block unit level, but now the provisions have been changed to ensure that if even a single farmer's crop is damaged and yield figures prove it, then compensation for his loss will also be provided through the crop insurance scheme; no farmer will be deprived of insurance security.

He said that these are not just paper schemes but concrete steps implemented at the ground level, whose direct benefits are visible in farmers' income and security. Union Agriculture Minister Shri Shivraj Singh Chouhan said that PM Modi's government is farmer-friendly, which stands firmly with the 'annadatta' and life-giver farmer in every crisis. He said that we will never back down from the resolve to give farmers the full price of their sweat in any situation; protecting the farmer's hard work and honour is our topmost priority.

## India's Total Exports Rise to USD 714.73 Billion

India's trade performance has remained robust and resilient, with exports recording a steady upward trajectory both in the current fiscal year (FY 2025-26, Apr-Jan) and over the longer term (FY 2021-25). Despite persistent global uncertainty, supply chain disruptions, and volatile commodity prices, India's exports have continued to expand in a broad-based manner. During Apr-Jan of FY 2025-26, total exports of merchandise and services rose by USD 36 billion, registering a growth of 5.26% from USD 679.02 billion in FY 2024-25 (Apr-Jan) to USD 714.73 billion. Over the period 2021-22 to 2024-25, exports achieved a compound annual growth rate of 6.9%, with values increasing sharply from USD 497.90 billion in 2020-21 to USD 828.25 billion in 2024-25. This consistent expansion underscores India's ability to sustain diversified and resilient export growth, positioning the country as a strong player in global trade even under challenging external conditions.

The Government is consistently working to boost exports and expand the country's global footprint, combining traditional strengths with emerging technology-driven sectors. Central to this ambition is the creation of a supportive ecosystem where exporters, particularly MSMEs, can compete confidently in international markets. This effort is reinforced by a dynamic policy framework, strong financial incentives, a growing digital infrastructure, improved trade facilitation, and a determined push to secure deeper market access through next-generation trade agreements.

The Foreign Trade Policy (FTP) 2023, designed as a flexible and evolving frame-

work to adapt to global shifts, has emerged as a key enabler of India's export momentum. Built on four core pillars—trade facilitation, export promotion, state-level partnerships, and digital integration—the FTP is further reinforced by targeted export promotion schemes that collectively enhance India's competitiveness in global markets.

finance and credit enhancement) and Niryat Disha (focusing on export logistics, warehousing, and market access), specifically targeting MSME competitiveness.

The Government has recently notified a time-limited "RELIEF" Scheme, an intervention under the Export Promotion Mission, to be implemented through the Export Credit Guarantee

abled trade governance. A strong digital backbone powered by platforms such as the 24x7 EIC interface, the Trade Intelligence & Analytics platform, the Common Digital Platform for Certificates of Origin, and the Trade e-Connect portal has transformed how exporters access information, approvals, and global markets. These systems enable fully

Over the past few years, India has actively pursued Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) as a key pillar of its trade policy. Currently, the country has 19 FTAs in force, reflecting its growing engagement with global trading partners.

Since 2021, there has been a renewed push in India's trade negotiations, with the country either conclud-

open up new opportunities for Indian businesses in one of the world's largest markets.

Another notable agreement is the India-European Free Trade Association (EFTA) Trade and Economic Partnership Agreement (TEPA). This agreement stands out as India's first FTA to include a dedicated commitment to increase foreign direct investment (FDI) from partner countries.

The TEPA is expected to encourage long-term investments from EFTA nations, thereby strengthening India's industrial and economic base. It also reflects a shift in India's trade strategy toward investment-linked partnerships.

In addition to these agreements, India is advancing negotiations with countries such as New Zealand, Oman, and the United Kingdom. These proposed trade deals are expected to further broaden India's global trade footprint.

The agreements under discussion aim to enhance services mobility, allowing Indian professionals greater access to international markets. They are also expected to create more predictable and transparent regulatory environments for businesses. Furthermore, these trade deals are likely to secure long-term investments and facilitate smoother cross-border trade. This will help Indian companies expand globally while attracting foreign firms to invest in India.

India is also actively engaged in negotiations with several other partners, including Israel, Canada, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations, Chile, and Peru. These ongoing talks indicate the country's determination to expand high-value trade corridors across different regions.



The RoDTEP scheme plays a central role by neutralizing embedded taxes on exports and enabling Indian goods to remain competitive worldwide. The recently launched Export Promotion Mission (EPM) 2 further reinforces this effort through two targeted pillars: expanded access to affordable trade finance and upgrading quality, logistics, branding, and market-readiness across the export value chain. The Government has approved the EPM with a budgetary outlay of Rs. 25,060 crores (FY 2025-26 to FY 2030-31). It operates through Niryat Protsahan (focusing on trade

Corporation of India (ECGC), is operationalised to address elevated export risks arising from geopolitical disruptions in the Gulf and West Asia maritime corridor.

Together with the Export Credit Guarantee Corporation (ECGC), which provides critical risk-mitigation support for exports, and schemes like Trade Infrastructure for Export Scheme (TIES) that build export-linked infrastructure across the country.

Running parallel to these financial and policy instruments is India's accelerating shift toward technology-en-

online processing, real-time compliance updates, digital certification, faster turnaround times, and easier access to global market intelligence. The outcome is a trade ecosystem that is more transparent, data-driven, efficient, and equitable. India's proactive trade diplomacy is increasingly complementing its domestic policy measures and expanding digital infrastructure, strengthening the country's position in global markets. This strategic alignment is aimed at improving market access for Indian goods and services while enhancing overall export competitiveness.

ing or making significant progress on eight major agreements. This marks a decisive shift toward deeper economic integration with key global economies. One of the most significant developments in this regard is the India-European Union Free Trade Agreement (FTA). This landmark pact is expected to provide Indian exporters access to nearly the entire tariff universe of the European Union.

The agreement with the EU is seen as a major step toward integrating India more deeply into global value chains. It is expected to boost exports across sectors and

## Priority to CNG projects; Instructions given to ensure smooth LPG supply

**Pune:** The central government has directed that work related to CNG projects across the country be expedited on a priority basis. At the same time, emphasis has also been placed on resolving issues in LPG supply to ensure uninterrupted service to citizens.

This information was shared by BJP national spokesperson and Petroleum Dealers Association national member, Ali Daru-wala.

In a letter sent by the concerned central government department to states and union territories, instructions have been issued to complete pending work related to CNG infrastructure development on an urgent basis. This includes



laying pipelines, obtaining necessary permissions, approvals for road excavation, and improving coordination among various departments.

Additionally, directions have been given to review and address the difficulties arising in LPG supply in certain areas. The objective is to improve the distribution system and ensure smooth availability of gas in both rural and urban regions.

In this context, it has also been clarified that state governments, local self-governing bodies, and concerned agencies should work in coordination to provide citizens with safe, affordable, and uninterrupted energy services.

## Haffkine Accused of Favouring Private Firm; Vijay Wadettiwar Raises Alarm in Assembly

**Mumbai:** Senior Congress leader Vijay Wadettiwar on Tuesday raised serious concerns in the Maharashtra Legislative Assembly, alleging that the state-funded Haffkine Institute is prioritising private interests over public health-care responsibilities. His remarks sparked a debate over the handling of critical biological resources and the role of public institutions in vaccine production.

Raising the issue through a 'Point of Information', Vijay Wadettiwar claimed that there is a questionable move underway to transfer a highly valuable biological asset—referred to as a "strain"—to a private entity. This strain, he noted, is crucial for manufacturing life-saving vaccines and holds immense scientific and

strategic importance.

He specifically referred to the strain used in the production of the DPT (diphtheria, pertussis, and tetanus) vaccine, describing it as a rare and historic resource developed over decades. According to him, such assets are not merely scientific materials but national resources that should remain under public control.

Vijay Wadettiwar alleged that the process to transfer this strain gained momentum following a proposal from Reliance Life Sciences. He further claimed that the institute initiated an Expression of Interest (EoI) process without sufficient scrutiny or transparency.

Estimating the value of this biological asset at nearly ₹1,500 crore, he questioned the rationale behind trans-

ferring such a high-value resource. He argued that decisions of this magnitude should involve rigorous evaluation and public accountability, given their long-term implications.

He also pointed out that the Haffkine Institute itself possesses the capability to manufacture vaccines. In this context, he questioned why a state-run institution would consider handing over a critical component of vaccine production to a private player instead of strengthening its own infrastructure.

According to Vijay Wadettiwar, such a move could signal a shift away from public-sector self-reliance in healthcare. He expressed concern that it may reflect a broader trend of favouring private entities at the cost of public institutions.

## HC orders fresh trial for accused convicted to death in rape & murder of minor

**Mumbai:** The Bombay High Court on Tuesday ordered a fresh trial in a rape and murder case involving a minor, setting aside the death sentence earlier awarded to the accused by a Nashik sessions court. The court observed that the accused was denied proper legal representation during crucial stages of the trial, thereby violating his fundamental rights.

A division bench comprising Justices Sarang Kotwal and Sandesh Patil emphasized that the right to a fair trial is a cornerstone of the justice system. While acknowledging that the crime in question was "horrific and grave," the bench made it clear that the seriousness of the offence cannot override the constitutional rights of the accused.

The court noted that the victim's family continues to await justice, but stressed that due process must be followed to ensure that justice is both fair



and legally sound. It underlined that a conviction obtained in violation of fundamental rights cannot be sustained.

A key finding of the Bombay High Court was that the accused had no legal representation from the stage of framing of charges to the examination of important prosecution witnesses. This absence of counsel, the court said, deprived the accused of a meaningful opportunity to defend himself.

Highlighting the importance of legal assistance, the bench observed that the presence of a lawyer is not a mere

formality but a valuable and essential right. Without proper representation, the accused could not effectively challenge the prosecution's case or present his defense.

The court held that this lapse amounted to a clear violation of the principles of a fair trial and resulted in a miscarriage of justice. It further stated that such a situation is incompatible with the guarantees provided under the Constitution.

Referring to Article 21, which ensures the right to life and personal liberty, the bench said that a fair and reasonable procedure is integral to this right. Denying legal aid, it noted, directly infringes upon this constitutional protection. The Bombay High Court also criticized the Nashik special court that conducted the original trial under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (POCSO Act).

## Details emerge of alleged sexual exploitation and moneylending case

**Mumbai:** A disturbing case of an illegal money-lending business linked to alleged sexual exploitation has surfaced in Dombivli, with the accused identified as Rahim Padmasi alias Karim Mohammad Jain alias Karan Joshi. Police investigations suggest that the accused operated under multiple identities while running an unlawful lending racket.

According to the FIR registered at Ramnagar Police Station on March 8, the accused allegedly lured financially distressed women by offering them loans. Instead of charging interest in cash, he is accused of co-



ercing women into providing sexual favors.

The complaint further states that the accused exploited the vulnerability of victims and subjected them to repeated harassment.

The FIR includes charges related to cheat-

ing, criminal intimidation, and exploitation of women, along with provisions under relevant sections of the Indian Penal Code. Police officials indicated that more sections may be added as additional victims come forward and statements are

recorded. Following the registration of the case, the accused went absconding.

He later approached the Kalyan District Sessions Court seeking anticipatory bail.

However, the court rejected his plea after considering the seriousness of the allegations and arguments presented by the complainant's lawyer, Mahesh Shivdas.

Police have intensified their search operations, and efforts are underway to track down and arrest the accused, while urging more victims to come forward and report their complaints.

## Families of missing Indians remain in Maldives amid search operations

### Two decorated sports personalities still untraced after boat accident

**Mumbai :** Even as Raymond Group Chairman Gautam Singhania continues to recover in a Mumbai hospital, the families of two outstanding Indian sports personalities who went missing after a speed boat accident in the Maldives on March 20, have remained in the island nation, awaiting updates on the ongoing search operations.

A cigarette racing boat carrying seven persons capsized near Felidhoo Island in Vaavu Atoll, approximately two nautical miles southwest of Keyodhoo. The passengers included five Indian men and two foreign women—one British and one Russian. According to reports, five people survived the accident, while two Indian nationals remain missing.

Singhania, aged 60,

was flown back to Mumbai following the incident and admitted to Breach Candy Hospital for treatment. Meanwhile, the search continues for Hari Singh (59) and Commander Mahesh Ramachandran (Retd) (60), both of whom were closely associated with Singhania and his family-run business.

Hari Singh, widely known as the "Gypsy King", was among India's most celebrated rally drivers. A five-time Indian National Rally Champion and the first Indian to secure victory in the Asia Zone Rally Championship, he was also a mentor at JK Tyre Motorsport and held a legendary status in Indian motorsport circles.

Commander Mahesh Ramachandran, an Arjuna Award-winning sailor, was



a former naval aviator and a distinguished medal winner at both the Asian Games and the World Military Games. He was also recognised as a towering figure in Indian sailing and served as the skipper of Singhania's yacht, TT Ashena.

Authorities in the Maldives, including the Maldives National Defence Force's Male Area Command, Coast Guard Second Squadron and Air Corps,

have been engaged in extensive efforts to locate the missing duo. Despite continuous operations, no breakthrough has been reported so far.

The incident has triggered strong reactions from the sporting community and beyond. Olympic badminton player PV Sindhu expressed deep sorrow, recalling her interactions with Hari Singh describing him as a legend who in-

spired many. She also paid tribute to Commander Ramachandran, calling him an outstanding sportsman who brought immense pride to the country, and extended condolences to their families. Endurance athlete Adil Nargolwala also mourned Singh's reported death, recalling their association dating back to the 1990 Himalayan Rally and several subsequent motorsport events. He remembered Singh as a lively personality who remained passionate about racing and friendships, and conveyed his sympathies to the bereaved family. Car enthusiast Ratan Dhillon also reacted to the tragic development, reflecting the widespread grief and shock within the motorsport and sporting communities over the loss of two eminent personalities.

## Nashik Police issue helpline numbers in Ashok Kharat case as victims hesitate to come forward

**Nashik:** In the ongoing case against self-styled godman Ashok Kharat, police have noted that several women victims are hesitant to come forward and file formal complaints due to fear, stigma, and social pressure. This reluctance has posed a challenge to the investigation, as authorities believe more victims may still be silent. To encourage reporting, the Nashik Police have issued two dedicated helpline numbers — 9593270224 and 7775816389 — urging victims to reach out. Officials have assured that all complaints will be handled with strict confidentiality to protect the identity and safety of those who come forward. Initially, only a single case had been registered against Ashok Kharat. However, in recent days, the number has risen significantly, with five additional cases being filed. Encouragingly, three more complaints have also surfaced, indicating that victims are gradually gain-

ing the courage to speak out. The cases involve serious allegations, including sexual assault, cheating, and outraging the modesty of women. Investigators believe the pattern of complaints points toward a systematic modus operandi rather than isolated incidents. According to preliminary findings, Ashok Kharat allegedly lured women by claiming to possess divine or supernatural powers. Using this guise, he is accused of exploiting victims physically and emotionally. Police have also uncovered allegations that he duped several individuals of large sums of money by promising jobs, financial benefits, or other forms of assistance. These claims suggest that the case extends beyond sexual exploitation into financial fraud. Given the seriousness and complexity of the allegations, the Nashik Police have constituted a Special Investigation Team (SIT) to handle the case. The forma-

tion of the SIT underscores the scale and sensitivity of the investigation.

The SIT is currently examining multiple aspects, including Ashok Kharat's properties, bank transactions, and his network of associates. Authorities aim to uncover the full extent of the alleged activities and identify any possible accomplices.

Investigators are also probing whether others may have assisted him in carrying out these acts, either by facilitating contact with victims or by helping manage financial dealings. Meanwhile, Ashok Kharat's police custody is set to end today, after which he will be produced before a Nashik court. The hearing is expected to be crucial in determining the next phase of the investigation. Given the growing number of complaints and the ongoing probe, police are likely to seek an extension of his custody to allow further questioning and evidence collection.

## Strict action ordered against food adulteration, Illegal stock worth over 2.42 crore seized in recent months

**Ch. Sambhajinagar:** The district administration on March 24 intensified its food safety enforcement drive in Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar, directing the Food and Drug Administration to scale up inspections and ensure that consumers have access to safe and quality food products. The move reflects growing concern over adulteration and the need for stricter monitoring of food-related businesses across the district. Additional District Collector Sambhaji Adkone issued clear instructions for strengthened surveillance of food establishments, emphasizing the importance of regular inspections and scientific testing of food samples. He stressed that enforcement must be consistent and thorough to effectively curb violations. Officials were directed to carry out frequent checks on hotels, sweet shops, and vendors dealing in milk, paneer, and other dairy products. Periodic collection and laboratory testing of samples were also mandated to en-

sure compliance with safety standards. Sambhaji Adkone made it clear that strict legal action would be taken in all cases of food adulteration, underlining a zero-tolerance policy. He warned that any compromise on public health would not be tolerated under any circumstances. The directives were issued during a district-level Food Safety Committee review meeting held at the Collector's office. The meeting brought together key officials from various departments to discuss strategies for strengthening enforcement and coordination. Among those present were Dayanand Patil, Assistant Commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration, Health Officer Dr Sarika Bhawale, Assistant Police Sub-Inspector Sarla Gadekar, Assistant Supply Officer Sandeep Shinde, Laboratory Analyst S B Badade, and Deputy Education Officer Dipali Thawre, along with other concerned officials.

During the meeting, officials highlighted the need

for sustained and coordinated inspections of sweet marts, hotels, and retail outlets. They pointed out that commonly consumed items such as milk, paneer, ghee, bhagar, edible oil, and barfi are particularly vulnerable to adulteration and require close monitoring. Sambhaji Adkone further directed that all food manufacturing and selling units be brought under continuous surveillance. He cautioned that establishments found guilty of adulteration could face severe penalties, including suspension of their licenses. He also emphasized the importance of public awareness in combating food adulteration. Officials were instructed to conduct awareness campaigns, supported by laboratory expertise, to help citizens identify unsafe food and take preventive measures. The administration believes that informed consumers can play a key role in reducing the circulation of adulterated products, thereby strengthening overall food safety in the district.

## Gadkari attends listing of NHAI-backed Raajmarg Infra Investment Trust on BSE

**Mumbai:** The maiden public issue of the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) sponsored Raajmarg Infra Investment Trust (RIIT) was listed on the Bombay Stock Exchange (BSE) here on Tuesday, March 24.

The listing ceremony was held in the presence of union Minister for Road Transport and Highways Nitin Gadkari, along with senior officials from the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH) and NHAI.

The IPO witnessed an overwhelming response from investors and was oversubscribed nearly 14 times, with participation from a diverse range of investor categories. The strong subscription underscores robust investor confidence in India's growth story, the strength of its financial markets, as well as the Government of India's transparent and reform-oriented asset monetisation programme aimed at efficient capital recycling and accelerated infrastructure development.

The NHAI-sponsored Raajmarg Infra Investment Trust is designed to unlock the value of operational National Highway assets while offering a high-quality, long-term investment



avenue, particularly for retail and domestic investors.

The initiative represents a significant step towards broadening public participation in the National Highways sector and further strengthening the infrastructure financing ecosystem in the country.

The Rs 6,000-crore IPO, the first publicly listed infrastructure investment trust sponsored by the state-owned NHAI, witnessed robust investor interest, getting subscribed 13.88 times.

Investor participation remained

strong despite heightened volatility in the secondary markets amid escalating geopolitical tensions in the Middle East.

The qualified institutional buyers (QIB) portion was subscribed 19.34 times, while the non-institutional investor (NII) segment saw a 7.33 times subscription.

Speaking at the listing ceremony at the BSE here on Tuesday, union Minister for Road Transport and Highways Nitin Gadkari said that the remaining work on the long-pending Mumbai-Goa highway project will

be over within the next two months.

Gadkari said that the ambitious road project, a crucial link between Maharashtra's financial capital and the Konkan region, is currently 93pc complete, adding that he will personally inspect the highway on April 10 to review progress of work.

Land acquisition issues and contractor-related delays have delayed progress in certain sections of the Mumbai-Goa highway project.

"There are some problem areas where land acquisition has taken time, and in a few places, contractors have not performed as expected. Corrective steps are being taken to ensure its timely completion," Gadkari said at the listing ceremony.

Another challenge has been waterlogging in low-lying stretches, particularly during the monsoon season, which has affected construction work and road usability. However, Gadkari said that challenges like waterlogging in low lying stretches of the highway during monsoon which affected construction work, are limited in scope and will be sorted out soon. "There are a few portions where roads are incomplete because they pass through forest areas.

## Director Mani Shankar to return with sequel to '16 December'

**Mumbai:** Hindi-language filmmaker and screenwriter Mani Shankar is set to make a big screen comeback with a sequel to his 2002 action-thriller 16 December.

More than two decades after the release of the original film, Mani is actively working on the sequel, tentatively titled 16 December 2, signalling a return to the espionage genre that helped define his early career.

The original 16 December had earned recognition for its forward-looking depiction of technology at a time when such themes were still relatively new in Bollywood.

As a true-blue spy thriller, the film set a new benchmark for the genre, influencing the way espionage narratives were later developed in Hindi cinema.

Its innovative integration of futuristic technology into a story rooted in Indian settings made it both engaging and ahead of its time.

The film went on to become one of the top ten highest-grossing movies of 2002,



cementing its commercial as well as critical success.

It featured a strong ensemble cast, including Milind Soman, Danny Denzongpa, Gulshan Grover, Dipannita Sharma, Sushant Singh, Aditi Gowitrikar, and Vinay Varma.

One of the standout aspects of the film was its introduction of a surveillance command control centre, a

concept that later became a recurring element in spy thrillers.

According to industry observers, the film's technical vision and narrative ambition helped shape the evolution of the genre in the years that followed.

The character of Sheba, a grim, combat-ready female operative, also left a lasting impact and became a tem-

plate for many strong female spy characters in later films.

The story's incorporation of broader geopolitical themes was another distinguishing feature, adding depth and realism to the narrative.

Sharing an update on the sequel, Mani Shankar revealed that the script for 16 December 2 is almost complete.

## Ranveer Singh's Dhurandhar: The Revenge joins Rs 500 crore club

**Mumbai:** The film Dhurandhar: The Revenge, starring Ranveer Singh, has created a massive impact at the Indian box office by crossing the ₹500 crore milestone within just five days of its release. The high-octane sequel has reportedly collected over ₹519 crore, marking one of the fastest runs to this landmark in recent times.

Directed by Aditya Dhar, the film serves as a follow-up to the blockbuster Dhurandhar. Building on the success of its predecessor, the sequel has amplified its scale, action, and narrative intensity, which appears to have resonated strongly with audiences across the country.

The film boasts a powerful ensemble cast alongside Ranveer Singh, including R. Madhavan, Arjun Rampal, Sanjay Dutt, Rakesh Bedi, and Sara Arjun in pivotal roles. This multi-starrer lineup has contributed significantly to the film's widespread appeal.

According to trade data from SacNik, the film got off to a flying start even before its official release. It earned approximately ₹43 crore during paid previews on March 18,



setting the stage for a record-breaking opening.

On its first day, March 19, Dhurandhar: The Revenge collected an impressive ₹102.55 crore, immediately establishing itself as a box office juggernaut. The strong opening indicated robust audience interest and positive word-of-mouth.

The momentum continued on day two, with the film earning ₹80.72 crore. Despite the typical drop seen after opening day, the collections remained exceptionally high, showcasing sustained audience turnout. On the third day, the film saw a significant jump, collecting ₹113 crore.

This surge reflected the impact of weekend footfall, as more viewers flocked to the-

atres to watch the action-packed entertainer.

Day four proved even stronger, with the film raking in ₹114.85 crore, further solidifying its blockbuster status. The consistency in collections highlighted the film's strong hold at the box office. By the fifth day, the film added another ₹65 crore to its total. Although slightly lower than the weekend peak, the figure still demonstrated remarkable stability for a weekday performance. In total, Dhurandhar: The Revenge has amassed approximately ₹519.12 crore in the Indian market within just five days, an extraordinary achievement that places it among the top-performing films in recent history.

## Ali Fazal takes a short break after months of continuous shooting

**Mumbai:** Bollywood actor Ali Fazal has decided to take a short but much-needed break from work after an intense period of back-to-back and travel commitments that kept him constantly on the move. Known for his versatility and dedication, the actor has been juggling multiple high-profile projects across films and streaming platforms, leaving little room for rest over the past few months. The actor's schedule had been particularly demanding, with frequent travel for

shoots and professional engagements. From hopping between locations to managing long working hours on sets, Ali Fazal has been operating at a relentless pace, which eventually prompted him to pause and prioritize his well-being. One of the major commitments keeping him occupied has been Mirzapur The Movie, an extension of the hugely popular crime drama franchise. The project has generated significant anticipation among fans, and its scale and expectations have naturally required extensive time and effort from the actor.

In addition to this, Ali Fazal has also been working on ambitious ventures like Partition 1947, which is expected to explore historical themes, and Lust Series 3, further

showcasing his range across genres. Balancing such diverse roles has contributed to his packed calendar.

The continuous juggling of projects across different formats—cinema and digital—has meant that Ali Fazal has barely had time to slow down. Each project demands a different creative approach, requiring the actor to constantly shift gears both physically and mentally.

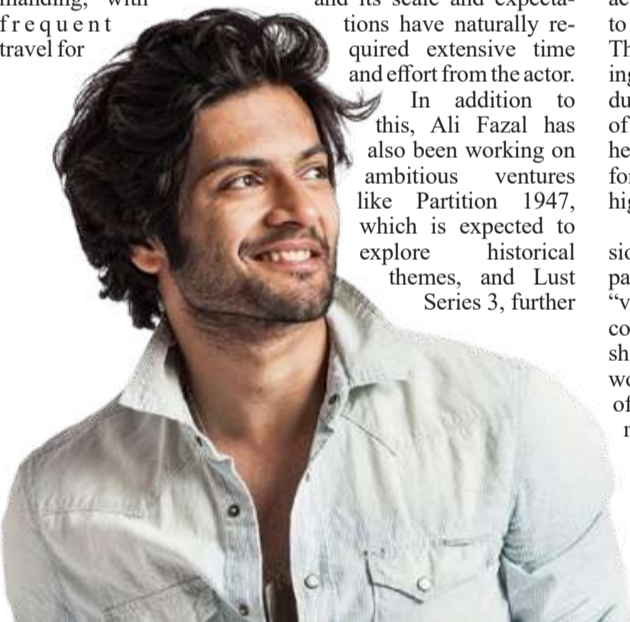
Recognizing the toll that such a schedule can take, the actor has consciously chosen to step back, even if briefly. This decision reflects a growing awareness within the industry about the importance of mental and physical health, especially for performers dealing with high-pressure environments.

Speaking about his decision, Ali Fazal shared that the past few months have been "very hectic," marked by constant travel and long shooting schedules. His words highlight the intensity of his recent work commitments and the need to restore balance. He emphasized that taking a break is not just about *отдых* but also about regaining clarity and energy. According to him, such pauses are

essential to sustain creativity and performance, especially when working on demanding roles.

During this time off, Ali Fazal plans to unwind, catch up on aspects of life he may have missed, and spend some quiet time away from the spotlight. This period of rest is expected to help him reconnect with himself beyond his professional commitments. Short breaks like these, as the actor pointed out, play a crucial role in maintaining long-term productivity. By stepping away momentarily, artists can return with a refreshed perspective, something that often reflects positively in their work.

The decision also aligns with a broader shift in the entertainment industry, where actors are increasingly vocal about burnout and the need for self-care. Ali Fazal's move underscores the importance of setting boundaries even in a fast-paced profession. Fans of Ali Fazal can take comfort in the fact that this break is temporary. With several exciting projects already in the pipeline, the actor is expected to return to sets soon, bringing renewed enthusiasm to his performances.



## Alaya F: "I have not done anything"

**Mumbai:** Bollywood actress Alaya F recently addressed speculation surrounding her appearance after she walked the ramp at Lakmé Fashion Week, firmly denying rumours that she had undergone cosmetic procedures. The actress took to Instagram to directly respond to comments suggesting she had opted for a

nose job or lip fillers, choosing to clarify the matter in a candid and personal manner.

In a video shared on her Instagram story, Alaya F reassured her followers that she has not had any surgical enhancements. She stated that if she had undergone any such procedures, she would have been open about it, emphasizing that she has nothing to hide from her audience.

Addressing the speculation, Alaya F reiterated her stance by saying that she is not someone who would conceal such decisions if she had made them. Her repeated assurances highlighted her intent to put an end to the ongoing speculation and maintain transparency with her fans.

The rumours surfaced shortly after her appearance at the Lakmé Fashion Week, where she walked the ramp as part of the Max Fashion showcase. Her confident presence and styling during the show drew attention, which also led to heightened scrutiny on social media.

The showcase began with actor Siddhant Chaturvedi opening the Max Urban segment, setting a relaxed and youthful tone for the presentation. His entry brought energy to the runway and established the mood for the rest of the segment.

Later, Alaya F walked the ramp for the same segment, showcasing the collection with a confident and expressive demeanor. Her performance reflected the brand's emphasis on individuality and contemporary fashion, making her a natural fit for the showcase.

The core segment of the show featured Kalki Kochlin as the showstopper. Known for her distinct screen and stage presence, Kalki added a composed and elegant dimension to the event.

The evening concluded on a celebratory note as Kalki Kochlin, Siddhant Chaturvedi, and Alaya F returned to the runway together for the grand finale. Their joint appearance brought together the key faces of the showcase, marking a fitting end to the presentation.

On the professional front, Alaya F was last seen in the action entertainer Bade Miyan Chote Miyan alongside Akshay Kumar and Tiger Shroff. The film received a mixed response at the box office despite its high-profile cast.

Looking ahead, she is set to headline the upcoming series Storm, an Amazon Prime Video original backed by Hrithik Roshan.



## I never had any insecurity from others: Raveena Tandon

**Mumbai:** Bollywood actress Raveena Tandon has addressed ongoing speculation about professional rivalry in the film industry, firmly stating that she never experienced insecurity during her career. Taking to Instagram on Sunday, the veteran star used her story to clarify her stance and respond to recent conversations that had sparked curiosity among fans and media alike.

The discussion gained traction after remarks made by noted costume designer Ashley Rebelo, who recalled incidents from the sets of the 1994 cult comedy Andaz Apna Apna. His comments suggested that there were subtle competitive dynamics between actors at the time, particularly involving wardrobe choices during the shoot.

According to Rebelo, actress Karisma Kapoor would occasionally send members of her team to observe what Raveena Tandon was wearing on set. This anecdote reignited conversations around the idea of rivalry between leading actresses during the 1990s, a topic that has often been discussed in Bollywood circles.

Responding to the narrative, Raveena Tandon took a firm and composed stance. In her Instagram story, she emphasized that she never engaged in what she

described as "school classroom politics," distancing herself from any suggestion of behind-the-scenes competition or insecurity.

She wrote that she had always been content in her own space and deeply grateful for the opportunities that came her way. Her message carried a tone of calm assurance, highlighting her belief in focusing on her own journey rather than comparing herself to others in the industry.

Invoking a spiritual note, Raveena Tandon expressed gratitude to "Eeshwar" and concluded her message with "Jai Shiv Shambhu," underscoring her faith and sense of contentment. She reiterated that she never felt the need to disrespect anyone in her professional life.

Her statement also served as a reminder that those who truly know her would understand her values and approach. By addressing the issue directly, she aimed to put an end to speculation and reinforce her image as someone who stayed above industry politics.

The resurfacing of anecdotes from the making of Andaz Apna Apna has once again highlighted the intense scrutiny actors often faced during that era. While such stories can be intriguing, they also tend to be interpreted differently over time, sometimes leading to misconceptions.

During the 1990s, both Raveena Tandon and Karisma Kapoor were among the leading actresses in Bollywood, frequently working in high-profile films and sharing screen space with top stars. Their careers often ran parallel, naturally inviting comparisons from audiences and industry observers.

Despite the competitive environment, Raveena Tandon has consistently maintained that she focused on her own growth and remained unaffected by external pressures. Her recent clarification reinforces this long-held perspective.

The actress's response also sheds light on how narratives around rivalry can sometimes be exaggerated or misinterpreted. By speaking out, she has attempted to separate fact from speculation and provide clarity from her own point of view.

In an industry often characterized by rumors and perceptions, statements like these offer a more personal glimpse into the experiences of actors. Raveena Tandon's words suggest a philosophy rooted in self-assurance and gratitude rather than competition.

Her reaction has resonated with many fans, who appreciate her candidness and the dignified manner in which she addressed the issue. It also reflects a broader shift in how celebrities today choose to directly communicate with their audience through social media platforms.



## Rajkumar Hirani's son Vir Hirani to debut in small-town romantic comedy

**Mumbai:** Vir Hirani, the son of acclaimed filmmaker Rajkumar Hirani, is all set to carve his own path in the world of cinema with an upcoming small-town romantic comedy that already carries a sense of warmth and promise. The yet-untitled film marks an important milestone in Vir's creative journey, positioning him not just as a filmmaker's son but as a budding talent ready to explore storytelling on his own terms.

The project is being directed by Sonali Rattan Deshmukh, who is known for her experience in the industry and her sensitivity toward character-driven narratives.

The film is described as a feel-good love story rooted in the simplicity and charm of small-town India. With its focus on emotions, relationships, and everyday life, the narrative aims to capture the innocence and authenticity often associated with non-metropolitan settings.

This backdrop is expected to play a crucial role in shaping the tone of the story, offering audiences a refreshing departure from high-octane urban dramas and instead immersing them in a more grounded and relatable cinematic experience.

Adding to the film's appeal is the decision to cast two fresh faces in the lead roles. By introducing new actors, the makers appear keen on bringing a sense of novelty and realism to the story, allowing audiences to connect with the char-

acters without preconceived notions. This approach has often worked well in romantic dramas, where authenticity and chemistry can make all the difference, and it reflects a conscious effort to prioritize storytelling over star power.

The project is being backed by Jay Sevakramani under his banner Northern Lights Films. Known for supporting content-driven cinema, Sevakramani's involvement suggests that the film will focus on strong narrative elements and emotional depth rather than formulaic storytelling. His production house has been associated with projects that aim to strike a balance between commercial appeal and artistic integrity.

Vir Hirani's entry into filmmaking inevitably draws attention due to his lineage, as his father Rajkumar Hirani is widely regarded as one of the most successful and influential directors in Hindi cinema. Over the years, Rajkumar Hirani has delivered several blockbuster films that have combined entertainment with social messaging, setting a high benchmark for storytelling in Bollywood.

Among his most celebrated works are the iconic Munna Bhai series, the thought-provoking 3 Idiots, the satirical hit PK, and the biographical drama Sanju. Each of these films not only achieved massive commercial success but also resonated deeply with audiences, making Rajkumar Hirani a household name and a filmmaker synonymous with meaningful entertainment.

Before stepping into the spotlight, Vir has already gained valuable experience behind the scenes.

He worked as an assistant director on Sanju, where he had the opportunity to observe the filmmaking process up close and learn from seasoned professionals. This exposure is likely to influence his creative sensibilities and help him navigate the complexities of the industry with greater confidence.

# SPORTS

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## Hardik Singh & Navneet Kaur reflect on Hockey India 8th Annual Awards 2025 nominations

**New Delhi:** As Hockey India gears up to host 8th Annual Awards 2025 on March 27 here, Indian hockey stars Hardik Singh and Navneet Kaur expressed their gratitude and motivation after being nominated for the prestigious Hockey India Balbir Singh Sr. Award for Player of the Year 2025.

In addition to the top honour, Hardik has also been nominated for the Hockey India Ajit Pal Singh Award for Midfielder of the Year 2025, while Navneet is also in contention for the Hockey India Dhanraj Pillay Award for Forward of the Year 2025, underlining their consistent performances over the past year. Both players have been instrumental in India's success on the international stage in 2025. Hardik played a key role in India's Gold medal-winning campaign at the Asia Cup Rajgir, Bihar 2025, helping the team with strong midfield performances. Meanwhile, Navneet was a vital part of India's impressive run at the Women's Asia Cup Gongshu 2025, where the team clinched the Silver medal courtesy of the six goals scored by her in the campaign.

She also achieved the milestone of 200 international caps during the tournament. She also recently delivered a strong performance at the FIH Hockey World Cup 2026 Qualifiers in Hyderabad, Telangana, where India won Silver, with Navneet finishing as the third-highest goal scor-



er with four goals and was named 'Player of the Tournament.' Speaking about his nomination, Hardik said, "It feels really good to be nominated for the Hockey India Annual Awards. Whenever an athlete gets nominated for such awards, it feels like their hard work is being recognised. The dedication and passion you put in every day gets acknowledged, so it's a very special feeling."

Reflecting on his favourite moment from the past year, he added, "Winning the Asia Cup in Bihar was

very special. It was an important tournament for us because our momentum before that wasn't great. It was a tough challenge, but we came together as a team and overcame it. I felt my individual performance was good as well so that tournament stands out for me."

Speaking about his consistency and dedication towards the sport, Hardik shared, "I love hockey and I'm very passionate about what I do. For me, it's about giving my 110% on and off the field. My teammates and family have always sup-

ported me and that's what helps me express myself through hockey."

On the road ahead, he added, "I am extremely motivated for the upcoming FIH Hockey World Cup and Asian Games. You don't often get the opportunity to play three World Cups in a row, and very few players have achieved that. If I get the chance to play my third World Cup, I will give it my all." Navneet also expressed her happiness after being nominated.

She said, "I would like to thank Hockey India for

hosting the Hockey India Annual Awards every year. It feels very good and motivates the players. I am really happy to be nominated for the Hockey India Balbir Singh Sr. Award for Player of the Year and the Hockey India Dhanraj Pillay Award for Forward of the Year. "I would like to thank my family and my teammates who have always supported me, both on and off the field. Their belief in me means a lot," she added.

Looking back at her most memorable moment from 2025, Navneet shared, "Last year, our Asia Cup was a very good tournament. We played really well and it was special for me because I completed 200 matches for India. Of course, we couldn't win the Final, but our performance as a team was very strong and that remains a memorable moment for me."

Opening up about her strong run of form over the last few months, she said, "There is no secret,

it's just continuous hard work. I've been focusing on improving my game for the past few years, whether it is working on my penalty corner flicks or playing more freely in matches. Of course, experience also plays a key role." Looking ahead, Navneet added, "I am always excited and motivated when it comes to major tournaments like the FIH Hockey World Cup and Asian Games. We prepare for years for these moments and I am looking forward to giving my best for the team."

## Yash Dayal out, but not dropped: RCB stand firm despite allegations

**Bengaluru:** In Bengaluru, Royal Challengers Bengaluru (RCB) on Tuesday publicly backed pacer Yash Dayal even as they confirmed he will not be joining the squad for the upcoming Indian Premier League season at this stage.

The franchise's statement comes amid reports linking Dayal's absence to ongoing legal issues. While there has been widespread speculation, the team maintained a measured stance, emphasising support for the player during a difficult period.

RCB Director of Cricket Mo Bobat clarified that Dayal is currently dealing with a "personal situation" and that the franchise remains in close contact with him.

"Just to confirm that Yash will not be joining the squad. He is going through a personal situation currently. We've been very supportive of him and he remains under contract. We will continue to stay in touch with him," Bobat said during a press conference.

According to multiple media reports, Dayal is facing allegations of a sexual nature. A woman has reportedly accused him of engaging in a relationship under the pretext of commitment and later exploitation.

Reports suggest that a complaint has been filed and the matter is under legal scrutiny. However, no official verdict has been delivered so far, and the allegations remain unproven at this stage.

Despite the uncertainty surrounding the situation,



RCB's decision to continue backing the player has become a major talking point ahead of the new IPL season.

Bobat explained that the franchise had anticipated such contingencies during the player auction. He noted that the team had prepared for a worst-case scenario where Dayal might not be available.

"We went into the auction with a worst-case scenario in mind that he may not be available. So we recruited accordingly and we're confident in the options we have," he said.

The focus then shifted to RCB's bowling resources, especially with Australian pacer Josh Hazlewood still working his way back to full fitness.

Bobat revealed that Hazlewood is currently undergoing a return-to-play programme in Australia, with the franchise maintaining close coordination with Cricket Australia.

"As soon as he is cleared, we hope to have him with us very soon," Bobat added, expressing optimism about the pacer's availability later in

the tournament. Dismissing concerns about a potentially weakened bowling attack, Bobat asserted that the squad has sufficient depth and quality to remain competitive.

"I disagree with that. We've got a very good squad of bowlers. We're not concerned," he said, signalling confidence in the team's bench strength.

He also highlighted domestic pace options within the squad, naming players like Rasikh, Abhinandan, and Mangesh as strong alternatives who have had solid preparation leading into the season.

Bobat further pointed to a broader issue affecting teams across the IPL, noting that several fast bowlers are either unavailable or expected to join late due to scheduling constraints.

"It's probably a symptom of the congested cricket schedule. Workload management is a real challenge. It's not an exact science yet, especially with players moving between formats," he explained.

He emphasised that managing player workload requires a tailored approach, with each bowler needing individualised monitoring and recovery plans.

On team selection, Bobat said no final XI has been decided yet, underlining that the management's priority is to maintain healthy competition for places within the squad. "We haven't selected a team for the first game. Our aim was to build a strong squad with depth and competition for places," he said.

## Workload no barrier as tireless Boland eyes Sheffield Shield final

**Sydney:** Scott Boland is eyeing his fifth Sheffield Shield title when he plays his 100th match in the final.

A fit and firing Boland is reaping the benefits of a modified approach to his bowling workload at the end of a long season, as he sets his sights on steering Victoria to Sheffield Shield glory.

The 36-year-old took time off after playing a crucial role in Australia's 3-1 Ashes series win, and has picked up where he left off on return to the domestic scene.

Boland has taken 26 wickets at 14.62 this season for runaway leaders Victoria, who will try to unseat champions South Australia in the final at Junction Oval starting on Thursday. The Vics' all-time leading wicket-taker will bring up his 100th Shield appearance in the final, which will also mark his 11th first-class match of the season, the first time he's accomplished that in his 15-year career. "My body's in a really good spot," Boland told reporters on Tuesday. "This will be my 11th red-ball game this summer, so it's a bigger workload than I've had the last few years." But with the benefit of having little breaks in be-



tween series or games, I can really invest back into my body to make sure I'm strong and keeping my little niggles at bay."

Boland's inner confidence has grown with experience, allowing him to better manage his workload.

"When I was younger I didn't have the belief that I could just rock up and put the ball in the right spot - I just wanted to keep bowling," he said. "But I think as I've got older and learnt what I need to do to make sure I'm bowling really well, I think I have a lot more belief now. I'd rather go into a game a touch underdone, knowing that I'll pick it up in the game, as opposed to coming into a game a bit fatigued and sore from bowling too much in the nets."

Boland will form part of

a five-man bowling unit for Victoria, with one of Mitch Perry and Sam Elliott set to make way for the returning Fergus O'Neill.

It will be a tough call, with Elliott (33 wickets in seven matches) and Perry (32 in eight matches) Victoria's most prolific Shield bowlers this season.

Perry (14 votes) was also named runner-up to South Australia's Liam Scott (15) in the umpire-voted Sheffield Shield player of the season award.

"Sam is probably the most inexperienced out of those guys, but whenever we've needed a wicket he's bowled some really good spells," Boland said.

"I don't envy the job of Buck (coach Chris Rogers) and the others this week picking the team."

## Voll enters top 10 of ICC Women's T20I batting rankings for first time

**Dubai:** Noteworthy performances across T20I series held in the Caribbean and New Zealand have led to several jumps in the ICC Women's Player Rankings updated on Tuesday.

Young Australian opener Georgia Voll made her first entry to the top 10 of the Women's ICC T20I Batting Rankings, moving up two spots to ninth with a career-high rating of 672.

Making 39 off 23 balls in the second T20I of the West Indies series in Saint Vincent, Voll will see another

rankings kick in the next update, following her maiden century (101) against the same opponents in match three which fell after Tuesday's deadline.

Voll's move is the headliner with the bat across the two series with veterans Ellyse Perry of Australia and Sophie Devine of New Zealand also making two spot jumps among top 20 players.

Devine (up to 18th) made two half-centuries in the White Ferns' series with South Africa at home, while Perry entered the top 20

again (20th) through scores of 36, 42 and 18.

ICC Emerging Player of the Year in 2024, Annerie Dercksen's unbeaten 55 in the fourth match of the series lifted her up 18 places to 55th with the bat. Qiana Joseph, who struck seven fours and a six in a quick-fire 45 (39) in a losing effort for the West Indies in match one of their series, made a 14-spot jump to 33rd (512).

Fanny Utagushimanine, who broke multiple World Records in her T20I debut innings of 111

not out (65) for Rwanda against Ghana, entered the rankings for the first time at 66th.

On the bowling side, it was Nonkululeko Mlaba to make a re-entry back into the top 10, climbing two spots to ninth (701) thanks to five wickets across three outings.

Outside of the top ten, Georgia Wareham's three-wicket effort across outings in the Caribbean has led to a four-step jump to 12th (672). Jess Kerr, whose six wickets for the White Ferns in the week and eight for the T20I

series has helped the hosts to an unassailable 3-1 series lead.

In the All-Rounder Rankings, it was Devine's efforts with the bat and three wickets across matches three and four of the Proteas series that pushed her back into the top ten, moving two spots to ninth (251).

Tahlia McGrath's efforts in the Caribbean led to a two spot jump to 14th, while Kiwi pair Suzie Bates and Jess Kerr made four and five spot jumps respectively to sit in 26th and 27th.

## Sabalenka races to Miami Open win as Gauff battles on

**Florida (USA):** World number one Aryna Sabalenka made swift work of her Miami Open match against Zheng Qinwen to cruise into the quarter-finals. The reigning champion took just an hour and 25 minutes to beat her Chinese opponent 6-3 6-4. Sabalenka, 27, has won the US Open in each of the past two years and looks in serene form. She will face Hailey Baptiste in the last eight after the American de-

feated Latvian Jelena Ostapenko - also by a 6-3 6-4 margin, according to BBC sport. Fourth seed Coco Gauff also reached the quarter-finals with a hard-fought 6-3 4-6 6-2 win over Sorana Cirstea of Romania. The 22-year-old American served six double faults and was broken five times in a sketchy display, but she had enough to win through and set up a match against Amanda Anisimova or Belinda



Bencic. The Miami tournament is Gauff's home event

and she is eager to win the title but will not be stressing herself over doing so this year. She came into the event on the back of a retirement at Indian Wells earlier in the month, when a nerve problem in her left arm caused her to abandon a third-round match. "I don't really feel pressure, I feel more supported at this event," she said. "I want to win this tournament so bad because it is my home tournament."

## Khalid Jamil names 23-member squad for Asian Cup qualifier against Hong Kong

**New Delhi:** All India Football Federation announced that Indian senior men's national team head coach Khalid Jamil has named a 23-member squad for the final match of the AFC Asian Cup Saudi Arabia 2027 Qualifiers Final Round against Hong Kong national football team.

The match is scheduled to be held on March 31 and will mark India's final outing in the current qualification cycle of the AFC Asian Cup.

The India national football team, popularly known as the Blue Tigers, began their preparatory camp in Kochi on Tuesday, with 20 players and support staff assembling for training.

Three players — Anwar Ali, Jeakson Singh Thounaojam, and Edmund Lalrindika — after expected to join the squad later are completing their club commitments. The trio featured in their final Indian Super League 2025-26 match for Mohammedan Sporting Club on Monday before heading to national duty. With India already out of contention for qualification, the upcoming fixture will serve as a crucial preparatory match for the team's future campaigns. Head coach Khalid Jamil emphasised



the importance of using this opportunity to build a strong foundation for the future of Indian football.

"This is a good opportunity for us to build for the future. We have a lot of promising players coming through," Jamil said, highlighting the transition phase within the squad. He pointed out that several young players are currently gaining valuable experience with the U20 and U23 national teams in international competitions. These include participation in the SAFF U20 Championship in Maldives and the U23 Tri-Nation tournament in Arunachal Pradesh. Jamil also noted that assistant coach Mahesh Gawli is leading the U20 side, which helps maintain continuity in playing style and tactical systems across age groups.

He added that such integration will allow young players to transition more smoothly into the senior team setup in the coming years.

The squad includes a mix of experienced internationals and emerging talents across all departments, reflecting a balanced approach. In goal, the team will rely on Gurpreet Singh Sandhu alongside Albino Gomes and Vishal Kaith for stability and leadership at the back. The defensive unit features seasoned names such as Sandesh Jhingan and Rahul Bheke, complemented by younger options like Akash Mishra and Roshan Singh Naorem.

In midfield, players like Sahal Abdul Samad, Lalengmawia Ralte, and Ashique Kuruniyan are expected to provide creativity and control.

The attacking line-up includes dynamic forwards such as Lallianzuala Chhangte, Manvir Singh, and Liston Colaco, who will look to deliver goals. Overall, the match against Hong Kong offers India a valuable chance to test combinations, assess squad depth, and prepare for upcoming international challenges despite being out of qualification contention.

## England bosses back leadership evolution after Ashes failure

**London:** English cricket bosses have defended the decision to back the leadership team that oversaw this winter's Ashes debacle, insisting the future of Brendon McCullum and Rob Key could not be settled by a football-style "popularity campaign".

The England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) had promised a "thorough review" in the wake of the resounding 4-1 defeat Down Under, a tour plagued by criticisms of sloppy preparation, excessive drinking and selection mistakes.

Captain Ben Stokes was never likely to be removed but the spotlight was on head coach McCullum and managing director Key. However, the governing body has concluded evolution is preferable to swinging the axe. A 4-0 loss in Australia

four years earlier saw both predecessors — Chris Silverwood and Ashley Giles — pay with their jobs.

But ECB chief executive Richard Gould — son of the former Wales and Wimbledon manager Bobby Gould and formerly CEO of Bristol City — insisted football's hire-and-fire culture was not a useful model.

Asked directly about McCullum's position, which sees him earn more than £1 million (\$A1.9m) a year and runs for another 18 months, Gould said a lot of consideration had been put in to keeping the same personnel. "Cricket is a very unique sport in that it takes a team of leadership... it's not like football where there's a single point of failure or success with a manager," he said. "We do keep a very close eye on all of our supporters... but we (are

not) going to select or deselect management based on a popularity campaign.

"My old man was a football manager: sacking was part of the job. It didn't necessarily do the right thing. Moving people on can sometimes be the easy thing to do. That's not the route that we're going to take."

"What we've seen is a determination from all those involved to adapt and evolve, to understand that there are different ways of doing things."

"We've got a lot of people hurt by what went on during the Ashes but equally determined to now put things right and looking forward to seeking revenge in 2027." Stokes subsequently backed the decision in a social media post.

"Being England captain is the greatest honour a

player can be given, and I do not take it for granted," he wrote.

"It has its highs and it has its lows, it makes you want to smile, it makes you want to cry. It completely and utterly consumes you and feels like it's the only thing in your life at times."

"The last three months has without a doubt been the hardest period of my captaincy journey, it's tested me in so many different ways and I'm sure every other captain has gone through this as well."

"Baz" (McCullum), Rob and myself have the passion and desire to take this team forward, we are going to give you everything we have. We know we made mistakes along the way and we have learnt from those mistakes, you learn more from failure than success."

BSE Sensex			Nifty 50			Nifty 500			Nifty Next 50			Nifty 100			Nifty Bank			Nifty Midcap 100		
Close	Percent change		Close	Percent change		Close	Percent change		Close	Percent change		Close	Percent change		Close	Percent change		Close	Percent change	
74,068.45	1.89%		22,912.40	1.78%		21,067.00	1.95%		62,360.70	1.54%		23,499.30	1.74%		52,605.65	2.27%		54,087.001	2.6%	
Previous close	Open		Previous close	Open		Previous close	Open		Previous close	Open		Previous close	Open		Previous close	Open		Previous close	Open	
72,696.39	74,212.47		22,512.65	22,878.45		20,664.25	21,045.45		61,414.90	62,668.15		23,098.25	23,489.50		51,437.75	52,384.80		52,717.55	53,878.30	
High	Low		High	Low		High	Low		High	Low		High	Low		High	Low		High	Low	
74,489.39	73,084.46		23,057.30	22,624.20		21,183.15	20,743.90		62,876.20	61,349.35		23,654.75	23,192.55		52,949.15	51,827.50		54,315.95	52,958.80	

## Top Gainers

Company	Current	% Gain
Larsen	3,516.80	5.22
Interglobe Avi	4,150.80	5.21
Eternal	237.94	4.84
Asian Paints	2,217.30	4.53
Bajaj Finance	849.00	4.48

## Top Losers

Company	Current	% Loss
Coal India	442.10	-2.89
Power Grid Corp	299.00	-1.03
Adani Enterpris	1,817.90	-0.82
Sun Pharma	1,753.30	-0.29
Cipla	1,219.40	-0.20

## Commodities

Commodity	Price	Change (%)
Gold Apr 02	139,637.00	377.00 0.27
Silver May 05	224,555.00	-612.00 -0.27
Crudeoil Apr 20	8,636.00	291.00 3.49
Naturalgas Mar 26	275.60	2.90 1.06

## Stock markets jump nearly 2 per cent as Trump halts strikes on Iran's energy infrastructure

**Mumbai** : Benchmark stock indices Sensex and Nifty rebounded by nearly 2 per cent on Tuesday, tracking a rally in Asian peers after US President Donald Trump announced a temporary halt on strikes targeting Iranian energy infrastructure.

The 30-share BSE Sensex jumped 1,372.06 points or 1.89 per cent to settle at 74,068.45. During the day, it soared 1,793 points or 2.46 per cent to 74,489.39.

The 50-share NSE Nifty surged 399.75 points or 1.78 per cent to end at 22,912.40.

From the 30-Sensex firms, Larsen & Toubro, Interglobe Aviation, Eternal, Asian Paints, Bajaj Finance and UltraTech Cement were the biggest winners.

Power Grid and State Bank of India were the only laggards from the pack. Trump said on social media that he has extended the deadline for Iran

to reopen the Strait of Hormuz, the strategically located shipping lane between the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, and that he will hold off strikes against Iranian energy sites for five days.

Indian equity markets witnessed a constructive rebound, closing on a positive note after a sharp sell-off in the previous trading session. The recovery brought some relief to investors who had been unsettled by heightened global uncertainties.

According to Hariprasad K, Research Analyst and Founder of Livelong Wealth, the rebound was largely driven by a moderation in risk perception across global markets.

He noted that early signs of potential de-escalation in tensions between the United States and Iran played a key role in restoring investor confidence.

The easing concerns



around geopolitical risks helped investors return to equities after the previous session's steep decline, which had been largely sentiment-driven.

However, Hariprasad cautioned that the rally should be viewed in the right context and not be mistaken for a sustained trend reversal.

"After a sharp, sentiment-driven correction, such rebounds are not uncommon and

often reflect a combination of short covering and value buying," he explained.

He added that investors typically use such market dislocations as opportunities to accumulate quality stocks at relatively attractive valuations.

This kind of buying activity is often tactical in nature and does not necessarily indicate a structural shift in market

direction. Asian markets also reflected improved sentiment, with key indices across the region closing higher during the session.

Benchmarks such as Kospi, Nikkei 225, SSE Composite, and Hang Seng ended with notable gains.

In contrast, most European markets were trading lower, indicating that global sentiment remains mixed despite pockets of recovery.

Meanwhile, markets in the United States had ended on a positive note in the previous session, offering some support to global equities.

Vinod Nair, Head of Research at Geojit Investments Limited, described the domestic rally as a relief bounce.

He attributed this to a temporary pause in attacks on Iran's energy infrastructure, which raised hopes of easing tensions in West Asia.

Such developments are crucial as they directly impact global energy markets and investor sentiment, especially in emerging economies like India.

However, Nair emphasised that caution still prevails among investors due to uncertainties surrounding the Strait of Hormuz.

The Strait remains a critical chokepoint for global oil supply, and any escalation in the region could trigger volatility in energy prices and financial markets.

Reflecting these concerns, Brent crude prices surged 1.96 per cent to USD 101.9 per barrel, indicating continued sensitivity to geopolitical developments.

On the institutional front, Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) remained net sellers, offloading equities worth Rs 10,414.23 crore during the session.

## Cheap chinese imports leave 57pc of India's uPVC capacity idle; industry urges urgent anti-dumping action

**Chennai** : Nearly 57pc of the India's Unplasticized Polyvinyl Chloride (uPVC) profile/frames production capacity remaining idle the Indian government should act fast to curb the dumping from China, urged a top official of All India uPVC Manufacturers Association (AIUPMA).

"The Indian government should take multi-pronged steps like levying anti-dumping duty, making BIS norms mandatory for domestic sales, harmonising the duty structure and others," said Eniyam Shivam, President.

The imported cheap uPVC profiles from China have captured nearly 51pc of the Indian Rs18,000 crore market and if this is allowed to continue then there will be no Make-in-India but only Sale-in-India

in this sector, Shivam said.

Out of total industry's installed production capacity of 28,985 ton per month, domestic production is only about 12,500 ton.

This in turn means a whopping 57pc of the domestic production capacity has gone idle.

"Some of my production lines are not running now," declared V. Senthil Murugan, CEO, INTACT uPVC SYSTEMS.

According to the uPVC industry players, their raw material cost is the landed cost of Chinese finished product.

And majority of them come under the micro, small and medium enterprise (MSME) category.

Not only the financial viability of about 340 units and their employees are at risk but the public trust in

the product is also in danger, said Shivam.

According to him, the Chinese construction industry has moved to aluminium window frames owing to the poor durability of uPVC frames and turning yellow soon.

As a result several units in China shut down and the remaining are flooding the Indian and other markets with sub-standard quality uPVC profiles.

"If the Indian consumers also start moving away then the Indian industry will go the Chinese way. Already in the eyes of architects the uPVC makers have come down in their esteem owing to the poor Chinese frames.

If this situation continues, then people will turn to aluminium and others," remarked Shivam.

The Indian government should take immediate corrective action by initiating an anti-dumping duty investigation, implementing safeguard measures on finished uPVC profile imports and strengthening quality enforcement at ports to ensure fair competition and protect legitimate domestic industry, Shivam remarked.

Industry officials also said there is anti-dumping duty levied on imports of raw materials making their production costs higher while the imports of finished goods are charged normal duty rates.

With their unique cost structure and export incentives, the Chinese manufacturers are able to sell their end product at a rate that is equal or even cheaper than the raw material costs of Indian players.

## Centre signs MoU with leading air conditioning company to boost manufacturing

**New Delhi** : In a move aimed at boosting India's manufacturing and innovation ecosystem, the Union Government has signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Blue Star Limited to support startups, innovators, and entrepreneurs.

The agreement has been formalised by the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade under the Ministry of Commerce and Industry.

The collaboration is designed to foster the growth of product startups working in key areas such as HVAC technologies, digital solutions, advanced manufacturing processes, and supply chain innovation.

It aims to create an enabling ecosystem where startups can develop scalable, industry-relevant solutions through structured engagement with established industry players. According to the official statement, the initiative will bridge the gap between innovation and real-world industrial application. Startups participating in the programme will gain access to mentorship from experienced industry experts, helping

them refine their ideas and business strategies.

They will also benefit from infrastructure support, including access to research and development laboratories and advanced testing facilities.

The MoU further provides opportunities for pilot projects, enabling startups to test their solutions in real-world environments. In addition, the partnership will facilitate market linkages, allowing startups to connect with potential customers and industry stakeholders.

A key focus of the initiative is to help startups achieve important milestones such as product validation and Proof-of-Concept (PoC) development.

The programme will also support startups in integrating their innovations into existing industry value chains, enhancing their chances of commercial success. The collaboration includes structured mentorship programmes and periodic engagement sessions to ensure alignment between innovation and industry requirements. Joint Secretary at DPIIT, Sanjiv, said the partnership marks an important step toward promot-

ing industry-driven innovation in the manufacturing sector. He emphasised that such collaborations enable startups to work on real-world problem statements and scale solutions with tangible outcomes. As part of the initiative, DPIIT will work with Blue Star Limited to organise innovation challenges under the Bharat Startup Grand Challenge.

These challenges, along with targeted hackathons, will focus on areas such as HVAC systems, digital technologies, and advanced manufacturing.

Startups will also get opportunities to participate in structured PoC programmes, with selected entities being considered for pilot deployment and further industry engagement.

Notably, the government had earlier provided regulatory relief by allowing Quality Control Order (QCO) exemptions on certain AC compressors until specified deadlines in 2026. Overall, the partnership reflects the government's broader push to strengthen domestic manufacturing, promote innovation-led growth, and build a globally competitive startup ecosystem.

## VCK scales down its demand, gets 8 seats, inks seat sharing pact with DMK for Apr 23 TN polls

**Chennai** : After hectic parleys and hard bargaining, the dalit outfit Viduthala Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK) of Lok Sabha MP Thol Thirumavalavan, scaled down from its hardened stand of double digit numbers, and signed the seat sharing agreement with the ruling DMK on Tuesday, accepting eight seats, to contest the April 23 polls to elect the 17th Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly. The VCK was allotted two seats more than what it was given in the 2021 elections in which it had won four of them.

Right from the day when the DMK, heading the formidable multi-party Secular Progressive Alliance (SPA)

that had been winning all the successive elections hands down since 2019, initiated the seat sharing talks with its allies, the VCK had been insisting for allocation of seats in double digits. As the DMK refused to accept it citing the entry of new allies in the SPA and requested it to scale down its demand, the VCK remained unrelenting. Even at an emergency high level meeting with his office-bearers on Monday night, it was resolved to stand firm in its demand of seeking seats in double digits, besides a Rajya Sabha berth in 2028, while remaining firm on its continuance in the Front. However, after last minute negotiations and with a view

to sustain the coalition interests and ensure its victory, Mr Thirumavalavan acceded to the offer of eight seats--six reserved seats and two general seats-- and signed the seat sharing deal with DMK President and Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M K Stalin at the DMK headquarters "Anna Arivalayam" today. The VCK inking the pact comes hours after a "dissatisfied" CPI(M), which too has demanded higher seats and climbed down to allot six seats, the same numbers it contested in 2021 polls, left with no option finally accepted the five seat offer of the DMK and signed the seat sharing pact with the Dravidian major on Monday night.

## Hindustan Power secures PGE block in MP, enters critical minerals sector

**New Delhi** : InterGlobe Aviation, the parent company of IndiGo, on Monday announced the appointment of aviation veteran Alope Singh as its Chief Strategy Officer, signalling a sharper focus on long-term growth and global expansion.

The appointment, approved by the company's Board, comes at a time when IndiGo is accelerating its international ambitions and strengthening its competitive positioning in a rapidly evolving aviation landscape.

In his new role, Singh will lead strategic planning and enterprise-wide transformation initiatives aimed at driving growth, improving operational efficiency, and enhancing customer experience, the airline said in an official release.

He is expected to work closely with the leadership team on cross-functional priorities to ensure sustainable value creation for shareholders.

Singh brings more than three decades of experience in the aviation industry, having held key roles across strategy, operations, and commercial functions.

Most recently, he served as Managing Director and CEO of Air India Express, where he led operational improvements and expansion initiatives.

Welcoming the appointment, IndiGo Managing Director Rahul Bhatia said Singh's expertise



would be instrumental in shaping the airline's next phase of growth.

Bhatia emphasised that Singh's strategic vision and operational experience would help build a more agile and future-ready organisation.

Industry observers see this move as part of IndiGo's broader strategy to transition from a dominant domestic carrier into a stronger global aviation player.

The airline is looking to leverage its scale, cost leadership, and expanding international network to strengthen its presence in overseas markets.

Commenting on his new role, Alope Singh said IndiGo is currently at a pivotal stage in its journey of growth and transformation.

He noted that the airline has already reshaped India's domestic aviation market and is now focused on expanding its global footprint.

IndiGo, currently India's largest airline, operates a fleet of over 400 aircraft, reflecting its

significant scale and operational capacity.

The airline runs more than 2,200 daily flights, connecting over 95 domestic destinations and around 40 international locations.

This extensive network has positioned IndiGo as a key player not just in India, but increasingly in the global aviation sector.

In the calendar year 2025, IndiGo carried approximately 124 million passengers, underscoring its strong market demand and operational efficiency.

This remarkable passenger volume reflects the airline's ability to cater to a wide spectrum of travelers across both domestic and international routes.

The consistent rise in passenger traffic also highlights IndiGo's dominance in India's aviation sector and its growing appeal in global markets.

Over the years, the airline has built a reputation for reliability, punctuality, and cost efficiency, which has contributed significantly to its expanding customer base.

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