

# Aryan Age

PRGI No.- MHENG/25/A0943 | VOL - 1 | ISSUE 279 | 8 PAGES | ₹ 3.00



**BMC Diverts ₹90 Crore from River Projects to Flyover**  
PG.3



**Taapsee Pannu on turning producer: "I want to back stories I truly believe in"**  
PG.6



**Cummins committed to Tests but warns of 'tension point'**  
PG.7



**DPIIT signs MoU with KRAFTON to accelerate innovation among startups**  
PG.8

## Opposition alleges organised corruption network in RTO

**Mumbai :** Leader of the Congress Legislative Party Vijay Wadettiwar on Thursday levelled serious allegations of large-scale corruption within Maharashtra's transport department, claiming that a well-organised racket involving transfers and illegal monetary collections is actively operating within the Regional Transport Office (RTO) system. Wadettiwar stated that honest officers are allegedly being targeted and pressured through fabricated cases, while the system is said to be functioning with the support of retired officials. He claimed that these former officers

continue to play a significant role in sustaining unlawful practices within the department. According to him, a retired officer identified as Bajrang Kharmate is allegedly at the centre of this network and is said to have established a separate mechanism for collecting money. Wadettiwar further alleged that out of every 100 rupees collected through such means, nearly 90 rupees are purportedly retained by Kharmate himself. He also referred to the Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB) action against Motor Vehicle Inspector Pawan Potdukhe in Chandrapur

district, describing it as a pre-planned conspiracy. Wadettiwar claimed that discrepancies in the complainant's travel and toll records indicate that the case may have been concocted to target



vulnerable individuals rather than address genuine corruption. Raising further concerns, he said that 64 individuals were brought into the RTO system from Vidarbha, but their appointments allegedly did not receive proper approvals from certain officers. As a result, obstacles are now reportedly being created in their career progression. He further alleged that officers who refuse to participate in illegal collections are threatened with transfers or being trapped in ACB cases. Wadettiwar has written to Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis and the state Transport

Minister, urging a thorough investigation into the entire matter. He also cited the Ashok Kharat case and alleged misuse of official residences by ministers, claiming that some elements are adopting improper methods for personal gain. He further alleged that the government is taking action only against lower-level individuals while shielding those at higher levels of responsibility. He remarked that signs of internal discord and factionalism within the ruling establishment are also becoming increasingly visible.

## Fuel shortage rumours trigger panic in Navi Mumbai; Long queues seen at petrol pumps



**Mumbai :** A sudden wave of panic buying was witnessed in Navi Mumbai, particularly at a petrol pump in Vashi, where long queues of residents formed as rumours of a fuel shortage began circulating. People were seen lining up with their two-wheelers to fill petrol, fearing a disruption in supply linked to the ongoing conflict in West Asia.

to reassure the public. Bharat Petroleum Corporation Limited (BPCL) categorically stated that reports of fuel shortage are completely false, adding that sufficient fuel is available across the country and that supply operations are running smoothly. The company emphasised that uninterrupted supply is being maintained at all locations and appealed to people not to engage in unnecessary purchases. Similarly, Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Limited (HPCL) confirmed that there is no shortage of petrol, diesel or LPG anywhere in the country. The company reiterated its commitment to ensuring continuous and seamless fuel supply through its extensive distribution network. Indian Oil Corporation also issued a statement, assuring that its fuel outlets are fully stocked and operational. It advised citizens to rely only on verified information and refrain from panic buying, stressing that responsible behaviour will help maintain smooth functioning of the supply system for everyone.

The tension arising from the international situation has already sparked concerns about a possible shortage of LPG, and this has now extended to rumours about petrol and diesel availability. As a result, several citizens rushed to fuel stations, leading to visible crowding and anxiety at key outlets in the city. Amid the growing concern, the Chief Minister's Office (CMO) of Maharashtra issued a clarification on social media, stating that there is adequate stock of petrol and diesel in the state and that supply remains normal. The CMO urged citizens not to believe in rumours and to avoid panic-driven actions. Major public sector oil companies also stepped in

## No Fuel Shortage in Maharashtra Petrol, Diesel, LPG Supply Stable

**Mumbai:** There is no shortage of fuel in the state, and there is enough stock of petrol, diesel, and LPG. Fuel distribution across the state is running smoothly through public sector oil companies such as Hindustan Petroleum (HPCL), Bharat Petroleum (BPCL), and Indian Oil (IOCL), according to the Food, Civil Supplies and Consumer Protection Department. Daily LPG production at refineries has been increased, and all companies are operating at full capacity. This ensures a steady supply of petroleum products, with no disruption in the supply chain. There is sufficient and regular stock of petrol and diesel in the state, and no shortage has been reported. The fuel distribution system is working effectively, and authorities are closely monitoring the situation. Private companies also have fuel stocks, which further strengthens the overall supply. Citizens are advised not to

believe rumors, unverified social media messages, or false information. They should not panic or try to store fuel unnecessarily or buy large quantities at once. Unnecessary crowding at petrol pumps should be avoided to prevent traffic issues or law and order problems. The government and companies have taken all necessary steps to maintain smooth fuel supply, and people are urged to trust the system. For any information, citizens should rely only on official government sources. Both central and state governments are fully in control of the situation and managing it effectively. People are requested to stay calm and cooperate with authorities. Fuel Stock Update: As of March 25, 2026, the state has adequate fuel reserves, including 205,232 kilolitres of petrol, 467,603 kilolitres of diesel, and 30,767 metric tonnes of LPG, which is sufficient to meet the state's needs.

## No fertiliser shortage in Maharashtra; panic buying behind sales surge: Fadnavis

**Nagpur :** Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis on Thursday said that the recent increase in fertiliser sales suggests panic buying by farmers and cautioned against hoarding. Speaking to a section of the media in Nagpur, Fadnavis assured that there is no shortage of fertilisers in the state and adequate stock is available. Panic buying of fuels and fertilisers has been seen in many parts of the country amid the war in West Asia. Fadnavis warned

that strict action will be taken against those involved in hoarding or black marketing of fertilisers. He appealed to farmers not to panic and to purchase fertilisers only as per their actual requirement. The CM also directed officials to keep a close watch on the supply and distribution system to ensure smooth availability and prevent any irregularities.



## Storm Alert: Thunder, Rain Likely Across Maharashtra on March 30-31

including parts of Marathwada, central Maharashtra, and border areas of Vidarbha. On March 30, cloudy weather may develop in some regions, especially in the afternoon, bringing thunderstorms, rain, and strong winds. According to the forecast, this may affect Khandesh, Marathwada, western Vidarbha, and parts of central Maharashtra. Other parts of Vidarbha may also see weather changes. During this time, lightning, strong winds, rain, and even hail in some

places cannot be ruled out. Similar conditions may continue in some areas on March 31 as well. Farmers are advised to keep checking updated weather forecasts and plan their work accordingly. As rabi crop harvesting is currently underway, farmers should store harvested crops safely or cover them properly. They should also take necessary precautions to protect crops from damage due to strong winds, rain, and possible hail, according to the agriculture department.

## PM to Inaugurate Noida Airport on March 28

**New Delhi:** Prime Minister Narendra Modi will visit Jewar on March 28 to inaugurate Phase I of the Noida International Airport. Developed for ₹11,200 crore, the facility aims to become a global aviation hub, complementing Delhi's

IGI Airport. Phase I will initially handle 12 million passengers annually, scaling up to 70 million. The airport features a 3,900-metre runway, a massive cargo ecosystem, and a dedicated MRO hub. Designed as a net-zero

emissions facility, its architecture blends modern infrastructure with Indian heritage motifs. It is strategically linked to the Yamuna Expressway to ensure seamless multi-modal connectivity across the NCR.



## ED Attaches Properties in Ayushman Bharat Fraud

**New Delhi:** The Enforcement Directorate (ED) has attached assets worth ₹55.33 lakh belonging to Mobzzil Hussain Barbhuiya, owner of the non-existent Shifa Hospital in Assam. Investigations revealed the hospital fraudulently claimed ₹64.10 lakh under the AB-PMJAY scheme by staging

photos of "patients" on beds for ₹300. The Atal Amrit Abhiyan Society credited ₹57.96 lakh into the hospital's account, which the accused siphoned off via cash and UPI. The ED established that Barbhuiya used these "proceeds of crime" to purchase five land parcels and construct two buildings. The provisional attachment includes six immovable properties as the money-laundering probe continues.



## ECI Seizes ₹400 Crore Ahead of Assembly Polls

**New Delhi:** The Election Commission of India has seized illicit inducements exceeding ₹400 crore ahead of the April 9 elections in five states, including West Bengal and Tamil Nadu. Since February 26, enforcement agencies have confiscated ₹167 crore in drugs, ₹37 crore in liquor, and ₹17 crore in cash. To ensure fair polls, 5,173 Flying Squads are active. The ECI reported that 95.8% of over 70,000 complaints received via the C-Vigil app were resolved within 100 minutes. District Grievance Committees are also operational to ensure enforcement actions do not harass ordinary citizens during the Model Code of Conduct period.

## Modernization of 13 Delhi Railway Stations Underway

**New Delhi:** Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnav informed the Lok Sabha that 13 major stations in Delhi, including New Delhi, Old Delhi, and Hazrat Nizamuddin, are undergoing modernization under the Amrit Bharat Scheme. Significant progress has been made at New Delhi's Ajmeri Gate side, while work on the Paharganj side continues with basement and elevated road foundations. Safdarjung's new building is nearing completion, and

structural work at Bijwasan and Delhi Cantt is finished. Upgrades include wider foot-overbridges, air concourses, "One Station One Product" kiosks, and improved accessibility for persons with disabilities to enhance overall passenger convenience and city integration.

## Congress Slams Centre Over Pakistan's Mediation Role

**New Delhi:** Senior Congress leader Jairam Ramesh criticized the Centre's foreign policy following reports that Pakistan is mediating in the West Asia conflict. Ramesh described Pakistan's involvement as "atrocious" and a "damning indictment" of Prime Minister Modi's diplomacy, citing Pakistan's history of sponsoring terrorism

and nuclear proliferation. He alleged setback, losing the international isolation of Pakistan achieved under former PM Manmohan Singh. Ramesh claimed that despite the External Affairs Minister's assertion that India is not a "broker country," the government's "colossal failures" have allowed a "broken country" like Pakistan to gain global diplomatic relevance.



## Trump Announces May Summit with Xi Jinping

**New Delhi:** US President Donald Trump announced he will travel to Beijing on May 14-15 for a monumental summit with Chinese President Xi Jinping. The meeting, originally set for March but delayed by military operations in Iran, aims to stabilize bilateral ties and address the Middle East crisis. Trump also confirmed that President Xi and Madame Peng Liyuan will pay a reciprocal visit to Washington later in 2026.



Discussions will cover tariffs, Taiwan, computer chips, and regional security. Trump specifically seeks China's support in securing the Strait of Hormuz amid global energy disruptions caused by the ongoing conflict.

## Iran allows India and Russia to transit Strait of Hormuz, confirms FM Araghchi

**Tehran :** Iran has allowed vessels from a group of "friendly nations", including India and Russia, to transit the Strait of Hormuz, Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi said. In a post cited by Iran's consulate in Mumbai, Araghchi listed India, China, Russia, Iraq, and Pakistan among those countries whose vessels would be permitted safe passage through the chokepoint, identifying them as "friendly states." The strait - a critical artery for global energy trade - controls the

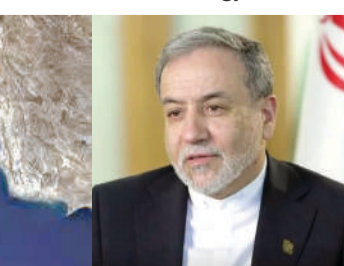
transit of around a fifth of the world's total oil and gas supplies, with its blockade by Iran severely disrupting global maritime trade, and resulting in massive increase in prices across the energy sector, while some countries heavily dependent on energy imports have issued national energy emergency. Tehran has said passage remains conditional, open only to "non hostile" states, with its mission to the UN confirming that only those vessels could transit the strait who have neither participated in nor supported actions against

Iran and complied with security protocols coordinated with Iranian authorities.



This comes as tensions have further increased in the Gulf,

leading to greater disruptions in shipping, with traffic significantly curtailed, and energy markets



reeling under increasing pressure. India, which relies heavily on

imported energy, said two of its flagged tankers had successfully navigated the strait during the conflict.

New Delhi imports about 85% of its oil and nearly half of its natural gas, with roughly half of its oil supplies and more than half of its liquefied natural gas shipments passing through Hormuz. Indian authorities last week rejected reports that Tehran had sought the release of three seized oil tankers as part of discussions over safe passage.

## Iran 'crossed all red lines' GCC calls for diplomacy

**Abu Dhabi:** The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has accused Iran of crossing "all red lines," warning that its actions threaten global stability. Secretary-General Jassem Mohamed Al-Budaiwi condemned "brutal aggression" on energy facilities in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, noting that debris from intercepted Iranian missiles recently killed two people in Abu Dhabi. Al-Budaiwi alleged Iran is imposing illegal fees in the Strait of Hormuz, violating maritime law. While seeking a diplomatic solution rather than Iran's



destruction, the GCC urged international partners to send a unified message to Tehran to halt attacks that have disrupted trade and spiked oil prices to \$107.

## BJP spending billions of rupees to tarnish someone's image: Akhilesh Yadav

**Lucknow:** Samajwadi Party President Akhilesh Yadav has strongly objected on a poster of Film Dhurandhar 2 in which his photo has been put up in Lucknow.

During a press conference held at the party headquarters on Thursday, and commenting on the "Lyari" gang poster of the film Dhurandhar 2 featuring Akhilesh Yadav's photo, he said that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is spending billions of rupees to tarnish someone's image.

"When the filmmaker himself says it's fictional, how can it be considered true?"

Akhilesh Yadav said he's heard that under the film policy, after Mirzapur, a film Ganja Ganj is going to be made on mafia.

He said who is a bigger mafia than the one who takes withdraws his own cases. Currently, all the mafias belong to the Bharatiya Janata Party he added. He claimed that he is more Dhurandhar than anyone.

A poster has been put in Lucknow of Dhurandhar-2 in which photo of Akhilesh Yadav has been put on.

Regarding the LPG shortage in the state, he said, "What has the BJP done except make people stand in lines? Now I see people lining up for petrol as well. Earlier, farmers lined up for fertilizer."

He said, "The government made no preparations for the LPG crisis. Now, even a 14-kg cylinder is being decreased to 10 kg. In Uttar Pradesh, LPG means missing gas."

Akhilesh Yadav said that due to the lack of gas, people are forced to resort to gas stoves and cooking stoves.

He said that people no longer rely on gas for a kachori or a samosa. He said that tea and roti are better cooked on coal. Many people prefer smoked food. We had asked them from the beginning to arrange for cow dung cakes and wood. We have



even ordered two stoves.

He said that since PM Modi mentioned COVID-19 in Parliament, he must have the information. Neighboring countries have begun taking steps to conserve energy.

As long as the BJP remains in power, it will not allow the country to become self-reliant.

He also commented on the UP government's statement that there is no gas shortage, saying, "Don't be fooled by Yogi's words; this is his time for scheming. He is not a Yogi. He has insulted Shankaracharya; beware of him."

Akhilesh Yadav said that the state government makes tall claims about investment. The Chief Minister's tweet came out in English early this morning.

A few days ago, his secret was revealed regarding an MoU. He was discussed nationwide. We all demand an investigation into the MoU. The company that signed the MoU has no financial background. The BJP's rule is based on events.

He said that during Hitler's rule, there was a Propaganda Minister, but in the BJP government, all central and state ministers are Pro-

paganda Ministers.

Everyone considers themselves the Prime Minister. Navratri is coming to an end, but the BJP is still unsure about whom to appoint as minister.

The government's term is now coming to an end. BJP members are afraid of the PDA, while the SP is moving forward by joining the PDA.

Akhilesh Yadav said that the BJP is talking about women's reservation to divert people's attention. How many women did they give tickets to in the UP Assembly and Lok Sabha elections? How many women candidates did they give tickets to in Bengal and Assam?

Now they are coming up with something new to divert attention so that people can talk about it.

He said, "Our demand is that all castes be counted and receive reservations in the same proportion."

He added that if the SP comes to power, it will launch the Stree Saman Samridhhi Yojana for women. Under this, every woman will be given Rs 40,000 rupees annually.

Regarding the election rally starting from Dadri on March 29, he

said that the Samajwadi Party has elected Rajya Sabha MPs and MLCs from the area where the rally is starting.

This time, the best results are expected from there, so the rally will begin there. Regarding Jewar Airport, he said that his public meeting will be held on March 28, and we have sought permission for March 29.

Akhilesh Yadav said that India lost the opportunity to become a world leader in the war with America, Israel and Iran.

We have done significant trade with both countries. Diplomacy accompanies trade. Had they succeeded in preventing the war, perhaps we could have become a world leader.

A day earlier, when Rukmini Nishad was appointed state president of the women's wing, he said, "We are happy that the Samajwadi Party is receiving a large number of congratulatory videos and party messages on social media. She leads half the population, but her family has seen the suffering and humiliation."

Regarding Pooja Pal's recent statement, he said that Pooja Pal doesn't understand Yogi ji. She is even more cunning than a cunning person. The BJP doesn't have a Pal leader, so they misled our party's MLA.

She became an MLA with Samajwadi Party votes. He said that the real battle there is which assembly constituency she will contest, and wherever she contests, our state president will also work extensively there. Meanwhile, on the birth anniversary of Emperor Ashoka, Akhilesh Yadav said that if the Samajwadi Party comes to power in Uttar Pradesh, they will install a grand statue of Emperor Ashoka on the Gomti River Front and enshrine him on a golden throne.

## Odisha Assembly stalemate continues for ninth day over SCB hospital fire tragedy

**Bhubaneswar:** Proceedings in the Odisha Assembly remained disrupted for the ninth consecutive day on Thursday, as opposition parties BJD and Congress intensified their protests demanding the resignation of Health Minister Mukesh Mahaling over the SCB Hospital fire incident that claimed 13 lives on March 16.

The repeated disruptions forced Speaker Surama Padhy to adjourn the House twice during the pre-lunch session—first from 10:38 AM to 11:30 AM, and again at 12:38 PM. Eventually, the House was adjourned until 10:30 AM on Monday.

As soon as the Assembly convened for Question Hour, opposition members stormed into the well of the House, holding placards and raising slogans, demanding immediate accountability and the resignation of the Health Minister.

Despite multiple appeals from the Speaker to maintain order and allow proceedings to continue, the protests persisted, forcing the Speaker to adjourn the house at 10:38 hours until 11:30 hours.

Following the initial adjournment, opposition legislators marched to the Mahatma Gandhi statue within the Assembly premises, where they held a condolence meeting to mourn the victims of the tragedy.

They symbolically observed the 11th-day rituals for the deceased and offered floral tributes, praying for the peace of their souls.

The opposition squarely blamed Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi and Health Minister Mukesh Mahaling for the incident, holding them morally responsible for the deaths. They reiterated their demand for the Minister's resignation and called for strict action against the hospital superintendent, alleging administrative negligence and inefficiency.

Since the fire broke out in the Trauma Care ICU on the first floor of SCB Hospital, the Assembly has witnessed continuous disruptions, particularly during pre-lunch sessions.

Efforts by the Speaker to break the deadlock, including convening all-party meetings on five occasions, have failed to yield any reso-

lution, as the opposition has remained firm on its demands.

On Wednesday, opposition members escalated their protest by wearing black T-shirts, staging demonstrations inside the well, and attempting to approach the Speaker's podium, though they were restrained by security personnel.

Earlier, they also conducted a symbolic funeral procession both inside and outside the Assembly premises.

The protests on Thursday continued when the House reconvened for Zero Hour, during which opposition members staged a walk-out as Excise Minister Prithviraj Harichandan tabled the new excise policy.

Meanwhile, members of the ruling BJP criticized the opposition for deliberately stalling legislative business and wasting valuable time for political gains.

They also targeted Leader of Opposition Naveen Patnaik, raising questions about the Biju Naveen Inspirational Foundation, registered in New Delhi, and alleging misuse of party funds.

## Telangana CM to deliver virtual keynote at Harvard AI symposium

**Hyderabad:** Telangana Chief Minister Revanth Reddy, an alumnus of the executive education programme, has been invited to deliver the keynote address at a first-of-its-kind Artificial Intelligence (AI) Symposium being organised by the Harvard Kennedy School Executive Education on March 27 in Boston.

The symposium will bring together leaders from government, industry and academia to deliberate on the rapidly evolving global AI landscape.

However, due to the ongoing budget session in Telangana, the Chief Minister will address the gathering virtually instead of travelling to Boston, according to a release from the Chief Minister's office on Thursday.

The symposium will commence with opening remarks by Jeremy Weinstein, dean of the faculty, at the Harvard Kennedy School.

The event is being sup-



ported by the Business & Government Programme on India and China (PIC) and the AI & Tech Policy Caucus, along with several Harvard-based think tanks, and will be held at the HKS campus. The discussions will focus on key themes such as governance, economic competitiveness, geopolitics and human capital in the context of Artificial Intelligence.

Panel discussions will cover topics including 'The race to AGI', 'AI in emerging markets', 'Geopolitics of Compute', and 'The future of work and education'.

The symposium will feature a distinguished lineup of speakers including Anoush Anoush, World Bank representative Illango Pachamuthu, Harvard Center for International Development expert Fatema Z. Sumar, and Brookings Institution senior fellow Landry Signé, among other global experts.

## Odisha unveils three-year excise policy with tighter controls and societal focus

**Bhubaneswar:** The Odisha government has introduced a comprehensive three-year excise policy, marking a shift from the traditional annual framework to a longer-term strategy aimed at improving regulation, transparency and revenue stability.

The new policy, covering the period from April 1, 2026, to March 31, 2029, was tabled in the Odisha Legislative Assembly by Excise Minister Prithviraj Harichandan.

The minister stated that the move

to a three-year policy is intended to ensure consistency in enforcement and governance while enhancing transparency in the excise system.

The policy will remain in effect until its term ends or until a new policy is introduced by the government.

One of the most significant features of the policy is the introduction of a 0.5 percent de-addiction cess on excise duty—a first for the state.

This step formally recognizes liquor as a harmful product, with the revenue generated earmarked for es-

tablishing and operating de-addiction centers across Odisha.

The government has also revised the financial structure of excise licensing. Application fees for various licenses will increase by 10 percent, while license fees will rise annually by 10 to 20 percent. Additionally, excise duty on Indian Made Foreign Liquor (IMFL) and country liquor has been increased. A key structural reform replaces the Minimum Guaranteed Quantity (MGQ) system with the Minimum Guaranteed Excise

Revenue (MGER) system. This change is expected to safeguard government revenue while reducing pressure on traders to push sales volumes, thereby curbing unethical practices such as forced or "sham" selling. The policy imposes strict restrictions on the expansion of liquor outlets. No new OFF, CL or OS shops will be permitted across the state. Similarly, no new ON shops will be allowed in rural areas, with limited exemptions for industrial zones and registered clubs.

## Panic grips UP amid rumors of Petrol-Diesel shortage; Govt assures—no scarcity

**Lucknow:** Rumors circulating on social media regarding a shortage of petrol and diesel in several districts of Uttar Pradesh have suddenly created an atmosphere of panic and chaos.

Long queues were witnessed at petrol pumps in Ayodhya, Lucknow, Ambedkarnagar, Balrampur, and Deoria; in many locations, "Out of Stock" boards were put up, and fuel sales were restricted to limited quantities.

However, the administration and oil companies have clarified that there is no actual shortage of petrol or

diesel in the state, and supplies remain completely normal. According to officials, misleading reports spreading on social media prompted people to start stocking up on petrol and diesel beyond their immediate needs, creating temporary pressure on supplies at certain pumps. In several places, lines of motorists began forming as early as 5:00 AM, and some individuals were forced to return empty-handed.

Meanwhile, petrol pump operators reported that oil companies have recently discontinued the credit system and implemented an advance

payment mechanism. Dealers are now required to make payments upfront before they can procure fuel stocks. Previously, they could lift stock and settle payments later, a practice that ensured higher reserve levels at the pumps. Oil companies maintain that this measure is financially imperative given the rising prices of crude oil in the international market. In light of the situation, local administrations have deployed police personnel at sensitive petrol pumps and implemented crowd control measures. To prevent the hoarding of petrol and diesel,

an immediate ban has been imposed on selling fuel in cans or containers. The public has been urged to disregard rumors and purchase fuel strictly according to their actual requirements. According to the District Supply Officer of Ayodhya, approximately 1.6 million liters of diesel and 1 million liters of petrol were available in the district as of Thursday morning; however, the sudden surge in demand led to the depletion of stocks at several pumps. Under normal circumstances, it takes 8 to 10 hours to restore supply to a normal level.

## Karnataka HC defers DIGIPUB plea on content blocking rules

**Bengaluru:** The Karnataka High Court on Thursday declined to issue notice on a petition filed by the DIGIPUB News India Foundation and journalist Abhinandan Sekhri challenging rules related to online content blocking.

The court indicated that the matter would instead be taken up at a later stage along with a similar petition already pending before it. A bench comprising Chief Justice Vibhu Bakhru and Justice C Poonacha observed that since a related case is under consideration, it

would not be appropriate to hear the present petition separately at this point. The bench emphasized the need for consistency in judicial proceedings when similar legal questions are involved. The petition filed by DIGIPUB and Sekhri challenges an earlier court interpretation concerning the powers of the government to direct social media platforms to remove content.

The issue revolves around the scope and application of provisions under the Information Technology Act, 2000. Specifically, the

petition questions a ruling that allowed the government to invoke Section 79(3)(b) of the IT Act to order content removal, in addition to the more structured mechanism provided under Section 69A. Petitioners argue that such an interpretation expands executive powers without adequate procedural safeguards. The court clarified during the hearing that the present plea would be tagged with a similar petition filed by X Corp, which raises overlapping legal concerns about content regulation and intermediary liability.

Since the issues in both petitions are closely connected, the bench decided that hearing them together would ensure a more comprehensive and consistent adjudication.

The earlier case involving X Corp has already been scheduled for hearing on June 11. The controversy stems from a September 2025 ruling delivered by Justice M. Nagaprasanna, who had held that authorities are empowered to direct online platforms to remove unlawful content under certain provisions of the IT Act.

## Karnataka HC issues notices to ED, Lokayukta, and CM's wife in MUDA case

**Bengaluru:** The Karnataka High Court on Thursday issued urgent notices to the Enforcement Directorate (ED), the Karnataka Lokayukta, and several individuals, including Chief Minister Siddaramaiah's wife Parvathi Siddaramaiah, in connection with a petition challenging the acceptance of the Lokayukta's 'B-report' in the alleged Mysuru Urban Development Authority (MUDA) site allotment case.

Hearing a plea filed by petitioner Snehajay Krishna, the court took serious note of the challenge to the closure report and directed that notices be served on all respondents at the earliest, signalling the urgency and sensitivity attached to the matter.

The case has been posted for further hearing after the

respondents file their replies. The petitioner has contended that the 'B-report'—which effectively closes the case citing lack of prosecutable evidence—suffers from serious legal and procedural infirmities. It is alleged that key aspects of the case were either overlooked or inadequately examined, raising questions over the fairness and completeness of the probe conducted by the Karnataka Lokayukta. Seeking judicial intervention, the plea has urged the court to set aside the B-report and order a fresh, independent investigation, preferably by an agency such as the Enforcement Directorate or another competent authority, to ensure transparency and accountability. The controversy centres around alleged irregularities in the allotment

of sites by the Mysuru Urban Development Authority (MUDA), a body responsible for urban planning and land distribution in Mysuru. The case has attracted significant political attention due to the alleged links of individuals associated with the ruling establishment. Legal observers note that the High Court's decision to issue notices, particularly to multiple agencies and high-profile individuals, indicates that the matter has crossed the threshold of preliminary scrutiny and warrants detailed judicial examination. With the court stepping in, the developments are expected to intensify the spotlight on the MUDA allotment process, even as the respondents prepare to defend the Lokayukta's findings in the coming hearings.

## Officials must ensure prompt resolution of every public grievance: UP CM

**Gorakhpur:** Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, met people and listened to their problems at the Janata Darshan held at Gorakhnath Temple on Thursday morning. Chief Minister directed officials to ensure prompt resolution of every public grievance. There should be no negligence in addressing complaints with sensitivity and ensuring satisfactory disposal. Assuring the people present at the Janata Darshan, Chief Minister said, do not worry. The government will ensure effective action on every problem. During the Janata Darshan, CM Yogi met around 200 people. Chief Minister himself went up to all the people seated outside the Mahant Dvigvijaynath Smriti Bhavan and

listened to their problems one by one in detail. He took their applications and gave necessary directions to the officials present for resolving the issues. For the resolution of problems related to different matters, he referred the applications to the concerned administrative and police officials and instructed that all issues must be resolved in a time-bound, impartial and satisfactory manner. On complaints related to crime and illegal land encroachment, Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath said that if any influential person forcibly occupies someone's land, strict action must be taken against them. Those who displace the poor must not be spared. The rightful ownership of the poor over their property must be en-

sured. Cases related to family disputes were also brought up during the Janata Darshan. Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on Thursday



once again demonstrated his hands-on approach to governance during the latest Janata Darshan, where he interacted directly with citizens and addressed their grievances. Emphasizing dia-

logue as the first step toward conflict resolution, the Chief Minister directed officials to ensure that disputes between parties are handled sensitively through mutual discussion before resorting to legal action. He underlined that establishing communication between conflicting sides often helps in resolving issues amicably, reducing the need for prolonged legal battles. However, he made it clear that if such efforts fail to yield results, the administration must not hesitate to initiate appropriate legal proceedings in accordance with the law. As seen in previous Janata Darshans, several individuals approached the Chief Minister seeking financial assistance for medical treatment. Taking note of their concerns, he reas-

sured them that the government remains committed to ensuring that no citizen is deprived of medical care due to financial constraints. The Chief Minister categorically stated that access to healthcare is a priority for his administration and that necessary support will be extended to those in need without delay. His assurance brought relief to many families who had gathered with hopes of receiving assistance for critical treatments. He further directed officials to act swiftly in such cases by preparing detailed estimates for advanced medical procedures required by patients. According to his instructions, once the estimates are submitted, the government will expedite the release of funds to ensure timely treatment.

## BMC Diverts ₹90 Crore from River Projects to Flyover

**Mumbai:** The Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) is facing heat for redirecting ₹90 crore intended for Mithi River widening and water body improvements toward the extension of the Ghatkopar-Mankhurd Link Road (GMLR) flyover. While the BMC had allocated ₹150 crore for river works this fiscal year, only ₹10 crore was utilized, prompting the shift to avoid fund lapsing by the March 31 deadline.

Opposition leaders have voiced strong concerns over financial indiscipline, demanding a three-year audit of inter-departmental transfers. Critics argue that diverting funds from critical flood-prevention projects like the Mithi River suggests poor planning. The diverted funds will now support the ₹1,051 crore GMLR project, which features a modern steel-composite structure aimed at reducing congestion near the Sion-Panvel Highway. The Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) has stirred a



political and administrative row by deciding to redirect ₹90 crore originally earmarked for the widening and deepening of the Mithi River toward the extension of the Ghatkopar-Mankhurd Link Road (GMLR) flyover. This substantial shift in capital allocation was approved by the civic standing committee, but it has immediately drawn sharp criticism from opposition leaders who question the city's infrastructure priorities and

financial foresight. The funds were part of a larger ₹150 crore budget allocated for the 2025-26 financial year intended for improving Mumbai's vital water bodies and river systems to mitigate monsoon flooding. However, official records revealed that the BMC managed to spend only ₹10 crore of that amount, leaving a massive surplus of over ₹140 crore unutilized. With the March 31 fiscal deadline looming, the adminis-

tration moved to divert ₹90 crore to ensure the money did not lapse and could instead support the ongoing GMLR extension project. Opposition members, led by Congress leader Ashraf Azmi, have slammed the move as a sign of "financial indiscipline" and poor project management. Critics argue that diverting money from the Mithi River—a project critical for flood prevention in Mumbai's suburbs—to a road project suggests that the city's basic climate resilience is being sidelined for transport infrastructure. In response to these concerns, the opposition has formally demanded a comprehensive audit of all inter-departmental fund transfers from the past three years to ensure transparency. Addressing the standing committee, Additional Municipal Commissioner Vipin Sharma explained that the primary reason for the surplus was the clearance of payments only to approved contractors, while those who were black-listed received no funds.

## Honoring the 'Dhurandhars' of the Mumbai Police

**Mumbai:** While cinematic portrayals of "tough cops" often grab headlines, the real legacy of the Mumbai Police is defined by officers who led through the city's darkest chapters.

Figures like the late ATS Chief Hemant Karkare are remembered for their ultimate

sacrifice during the 26/11 attacks, while officers like Sadanand Date, currently the DGP of Maharashtra, represent a history of physical bravery and strategic evolution.

From the underworld crackdowns of the 1990s to modern counter-terrorism

efforts, these real-life 'Dhurandhars' have set the standard for policing in India. The force continues to draw inspiration from leaders who stood firm against organized crime and terror, embodying a spirit of resilience that remains the backbone of the city's security.

## Mumbai's First Mangrove Park Set to Open in Gorai

**Mumbai:** The city is set to welcome its first dedicated mangrove forest park in Gorai this May, providing a massive boost to local eco-tourism. Developed by the Maharashtra Forest Department's Mangrove Cell at a cost of ₹33.43 crore, the 8-hectare park features a 740-metre boardwalk designed to allow visitors to experience the coastal ecosystem without damaging a single tree.

The park includes an 18-metre bird-watching tower, a panoramic viewing deck, and a Nature Interpretation Centre equipped with a library and audio-visual room. Originally delayed by the monsoon, the facility is designed to educate the public on the vital role mangroves play in protecting Mumbai's coastline while offering a unique recreational space complete with a rooftop restaurant.

The city's coastal landscape is set for a significant transformation as Mumbai prepares to open its first dedicated mangrove forest park in Gorai this May. This ambitious project, spearheaded by the Maharashtra Forest Department's Mangrove Cell, represents a ₹33.43 crore investment into eco-tourism and environmental education. Spanning eight hect-



ares, the park is meticulously designed to showcase the beauty of the intertidal ecosystem while ensuring the absolute protection of the existing flora.

The centerpiece of the park is a 740-metre elevated boardwalk, constructed with careful engineering to weave through the thicket without necessitating the removal of a single mangrove tree.

This walkway offers visitors a rare, immersive experience, allowing them to traverse the oxygen-poor, waterlogged soil of the "halophytes" safely. By bringing the public into the heart of the forest, authorities hope to foster a deeper understanding of how these

salt-tolerant trees serve as a natural barrier against coastal erosion and storm surges.

In addition to the boardwalk, the facility boasts several specialized structures aimed at nature enthusiasts and researchers alike. An 18-metre-high bird-watching tower provides a vantage point for observing the diverse avian species that frequent the Mumbai coastline, while a panoramic viewing deck offers sweeping views of the surrounding creek. These features are intended to turn the park into a premier destination for photography and wildlife observation within the city limits.

Education is at the core of the

Gorai Mangrove Park's mission, anchored by a two-storey Nature Interpretation Centre. This hub includes a well-stocked library and a modern audio-visual room dedicated to coastal biodiversity. By providing interactive learning tools, the center aims to teach visitors about the complex life cycles of mangroves and the various marine creatures that depend on them, bridging the gap between urban life and environmental conservation.

The park's opening, originally slated for mid-2025, was rescheduled to May 2026 to ensure all structures were fully resilient against the heavy monsoon season.

To complement the educational experience, the site also includes recreational amenities, most notably a rooftop restaurant where visitors can dine with a view of the green canopy. This blend of leisure and learning is part of a broader strategy by the Maharashtra Government to promote sustainable tourism.

As Mumbai continues to face the challenges of rising sea levels and urban expansion, the Gorai Mangrove Park stands as a vital piece of green infrastructure.

## Police Patrol Vehicle Catches Fire in Sakinaka

**Mumbai:** A newly inducted Scorpio N patrolling vehicle of the Mumbai Police was destroyed by fire in Sakinaka, Andheri West, on Thursday afternoon. The incident occurred when the driver noticed smoke billowing from the bonnet and managed to park and exit the vehicle just before it was engulfed in flames. The driver escaped uninjured, though his personal belongings, including a mobile phone and bag, were lost in the blaze. This vehicle was part of a recent fleet upgrade consisting of

633 new SUVs. While the Sakinaka police have registered an accidental fire case, the exact cause of the mechanical failure is still under investigation. A newly inducted Scorpio N vehicle belonging to the Mumbai Police was destroyed in a sudden fire at Sakinaka, Andheri West, on Thursday afternoon. The incident occurred while the vehicle was on active patrolling duty. The driver, who was the sole occupant at the time, noticed thick smoke emanating from the bonnet and managed to steer

the SUV to the roadside and exit just moments before the vehicle was completely engulfed in a massive blaze. While the officer escaped without physical injury, the intensity of the fire was so great that his personal belongings, including his mobile phone, clothes, and bag, were entirely incinerated. This particular vehicle was part of a major fleet upgrade recently undertaken by the department, which saw the induction of 633 new Scorpio N units to bolster citywide patrolling.

## KEM Hospital Launches Advanced Cardiology Hub

**Mumbai:** Seth G S Medical College & KEM Hospital in Parel has significantly upgraded its cardiac care capabilities through a ₹75 lakh CSR initiative funded by The Indian Hume Pipe Co. Ltd. (IHPCL).

The new facilities include a "Radial Lounge" designed for same-day discharge after angiography, a state-of-the-art educational hub for aspiring cardiologists, and portable diagnostic equipment.

Dean Dr. Sangeeta Ravat highlighted that these upgrades, coinciding with the institu-

tion's centenary year, make KEM a pioneer among government hospitals in Western India.

The addition of a large LED screen for patient awareness and live-streaming capabilities for international medical lectures aims to improve both immediate patient outcomes and long-term medical education for postgraduate students.

Seth G S Medical College and KEM Hospital in Parel has taken a significant leap forward in public healthcare by unveiling a suite of advanced cardiology facilities.

## Editorial

### Hormuz closed, the world standstill!

The conflict between Iran and the United States has now seized the very pulse of the global economy. With the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, oil and gas supplies have been disrupted, and the repercussions are beginning to be felt directly in the lives of ordinary people. This war is no longer confined merely to the borders; it has intruded into the household budgets and lifestyles of every home.

It has now been nearly a month since the attacks launched against Iran by the United States and Israel began. U.S. President Donald Trump's initial plan—to topple the Shia regime in Iran within the first 72 hours, install a puppet government amenable to their interests, and then turn their attention to other targets like Cuba—has failed miserably. Iran has not only mounted a resistance but has also leveraged its strategic geographical position to impose an economic blockade on the world. By closing the 'Strait of Hormuz', the Iranian military has effectively strangled the global supply of oil and gas. The current situation is so dire that approximately 3,500 ships and oil tankers remain stranded both inside and outside this vital strait. Iran has launched drone and missile attacks against 20 vessels that attempted to exit in defiance of its orders, setting them ablaze right there in the open sea. Iran has now begun extorting a ransom of 180 million rupees (2 million dollars) from every ship seeking passage through this route—a demand that applies to Indian vessels as well. The shadow of this war is no longer hovering solely over the borders; it has now penetrated the homes, kitchens, and pockets of every ordinary person across the globe.

The common man often perceives an oil crisis as nothing more than a mere hike in the prices of petrol and diesel. However, in the modern world, human life is so heavily dependent on by-products derived from crude oil that even a minor disruption in the supply chain can bring public life to a complete standstill. It was for this very reason that Prime Minister Narendra Modi, speaking in Parliament yesterday, went so far as to liken this crisis to a 'lockdown.' The most dire consequences of this war have been felt in the gas supply sector. An attack on the Ras Laffan Gas Terminal in Qatar has directly impacted 47 percent of India's total gas supply. The restaurant and ready-to-eat food industries have borne the brunt of this crisis, as gas shortages are making it increasingly impossible to operate hotels. Consequently, fears have arisen that hundreds of thousands of young people working in the food home-delivery sector could face unemployment. In Morbi, Gujarat—the world's second-largest ceramics hub—90 percent of tile production has ground to a halt due to the lack of gas. The livelihoods of approximately 900,000 workers are now at risk, and the lack of tile supplies has also stalled interior construction work within the real estate sector. Furthermore, once glass bottle furnaces are shut down, restarting them is both a costly and time-consuming process; this has created a critical challenge regarding the packaging of medicines and beverages.

This war has effectively severed the supply lines for the pharmaceutical industry. Medicines we use daily—such as Paracetamol, Ibuprofen, or Metformin for diabetes—are more than 90 percent dependent on petrochemicals. With the Strait of Hormuz effectively closed, the supply of 'Naphtha'—a critical raw material for drug manufacturing—has dried up. India is regarded as the "Pharmacy of the World," fulfilling 40 percent of America's pharmaceutical requirements. However, due to the disruption in raw material supplies, a shortage of generic medicines has begun to emerge. Furthermore, institutions like the Serum Institute—which supply 50 percent of the world's vaccines—rely on petrochemicals for specialized-grade plastics, syringes, and vaccine components; consequently, vaccination drives themselves could face a severe setback. Alongside this economic and medical crisis, the issue of food security is also assuming alarming proportions. Arab nations account for a 46 percent share of global urea production. India imports half of its total urea requirements from this very region. With Russia imposing a ban on fertilizer exports and supplies from the Gulf region grinding to a halt, fertilizer prices have skyrocketed. If food production declines due to this fertilizer shortage, the possibility of political instability and violence erupting across Asia and Africa cannot be ruled out.

This war has also dealt a severe blow to global reserves of 'Sulfur' and 'Helium.' The shortage of sulfur has not only driven up fertilizer prices but has also resulted in a scarcity of sulfuric acid—a vital input for the semiconductor and EV battery industries. The most significant impact, however, has been felt in 'Helium' production; with the Ras Laffan complex in Qatar grinding to a halt, 36 percent of the global helium supply has effectively vanished. Helium is not merely used for inflating balloons; it is indispensable in the medical field for cooling the magnets within MRI machines. Furthermore, there is absolutely no substitute for helium in the manufacturing of semiconductors required for modern chips—specifically those smaller than 5 nanometers—and for Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies. Countries like South Korea, which are at the forefront of AI chip development, currently find themselves in a severe crisis. By 2026, the prices of mobile phones, laptops, and military drones could skyrocket, while their production volumes could plummet to half of current levels. This phenomenon is being termed the "Helium Shock," and it threatens to bring the entire digital revolution to a grinding halt.

This looming crisis also casts a shadow over the beverage and packaging industries. 'Alba'—the world's largest aluminum company, based in Bahrain—has been forced to partially suspend operations following an Iranian attack. Consequently, the prices of soft drink cans, pharmaceutical foils, and surgical instruments have surged by up to 40 percent. Although the severe repercussions of these events have not yet fully manifested in India's retail markets, a rise in air travel and cargo transportation costs is inevitable due to the escalating prices of jet fuel. A shortage of plastics will drive up packaging costs for e-commerce companies—a financial burden that will ultimately have to be borne by the consumer. India's tourism, construction, and small-scale industries are the sectors most vulnerable to being crushed within this economic vortex. In essence, if this conflict does not cease soon, we risk being plunged into a global recession where mere financial wealth will prove insufficient; instead, the sheer availability of essential commodities will emerge as the true measure of prosperity. The summary of all these developments is this: the invisible threads of petroleum and natural gas, with which modern human civilization is intricately woven, have now begun to fray and burn. The conflict between Iran and the United States is no longer merely a struggle for political dominance between two nations; it has evolved into an existential battle for the survival of the entire world. Collectivism, prudence, and the extremely frugal use of fuel are now the absolute necessities of the hour. The reason the government is evoking memories of the COVID-19 era is that this crisis could potentially prove to be even more protracted and agonizing than the pandemic itself. If we do not exercise caution immediately, future generations will come to identify this conflict as the 'Era of Global Blockade.' It is not yet too late; however, if prudent decisions are not taken, this conflict could go down in history as the harbinger of a long and agonizing Dark Age.

# Regulatory Surveillance Over Weight Loss Drug (GLP-1) Supply Chain

In order to ensure ethical pharmaceutical practices in the supply chain of Weight Loss Drug (GLP-1), the Drugs Controller of India has intensified its regulatory surveillance against the drug's unauthorized sale and promotion.

With the recent introduction of multiple generic variants of GLP-1-based weight loss drugs in the Indian market, concerns have emerged regarding their on-demand availability through retail pharmacies, online platforms, wholesalers, and wellness clinics. These drugs, when used without proper medical supervision, may lead to serious adverse effects and related health risks.

Taking cognizance of the situation, India's Drugs Controller, in collaboration with State Regulators, has initiated a series of targeted actions to curb possible malpractices across the pharmaceutical supply chain and prevent unauthorized sales and use.

On March 10, 2026, a compre-



hensive advisory was issued to all manufacturers, explicitly prohibiting surrogate advertisements and any form of indirect promotion that could mislead consumers

or encourage off-label usage.

In the recent weeks, enforcement activities were significantly scaled up. Audits and inspections were conducted at 49 entities, in-

cluding: Online pharmacy warehouses, Drug wholesalers, Retailers, Wellness and slimming clinics. These inspections spanned multiple regions across the coun-

try and focused on identifying violations related to unauthorized sale, improper prescription practices, and misleading marketing. Further, notices have also been sent to defaulting entities.

The Regulator emphasizes that patient safety remains paramount.

The misuse of weight loss drugs without clinical oversight can lead to severe health complications. Citizens are advised to use such medications only under the guidance of qualified medical practitioners.

It is important to reiterate here that the drug has been approved in India with condition of prescription by Endocrinologists and Internal Medicine Specialist and for some indications by Cardiologists only. Regulatory surveillance will continue to be intensified in the coming weeks and non-compliances will be dealt strictly with actions including cancellation of licenses, penalties, and prosecution under applicable laws.

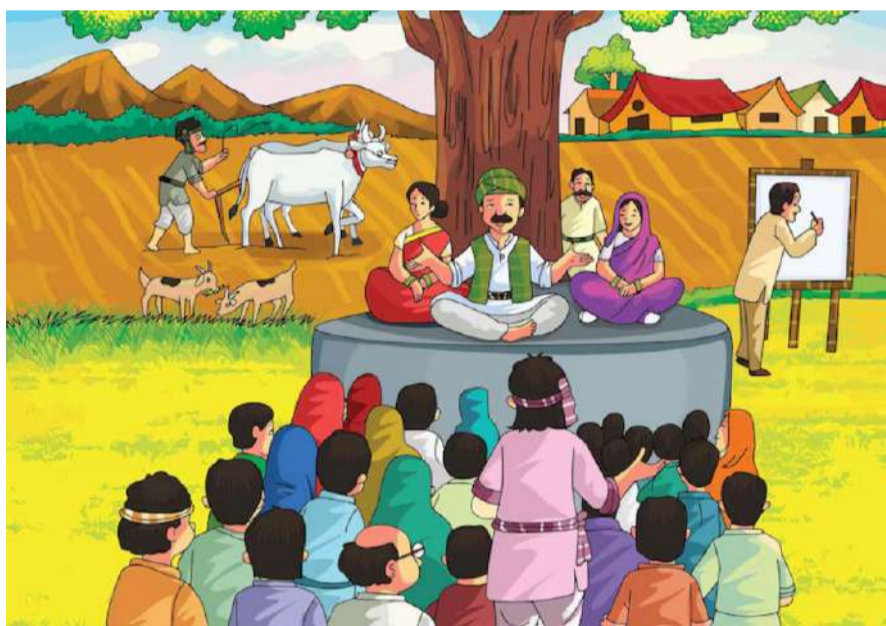
# Panchayati raj institutions

"Panchayat", being "Local Government", is a State subject and part of the State List of the Seventh Schedule of the Constitution of India. Panchayats are set up and operate through the respective State Panchayati Raj Acts, which may vary from State to State, subject to the provisions of the Constitution. The performance and development of the Panchayats depend on the extent of powers and resources devolved to them by the States concerned. Accordingly, all matters relating to Panchayats, including effective functioning of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), strengthening the institutional mechanism to ensure the accountability of PRIs towards people and its performance monitoring and evaluation, comes within the jurisdiction of the State Government.

However, Article 280(3)(b) of the Constitution of India provides the basis for the Central Finance Commissions to recommend grants to augment the Consolidated Fund of a State to supplement the resources of the Panchayats in the State. The Central Finance Commission assesses the adequacy of grants and accordingly recommends allocation of grants for the Panchayati Raj Institutions for the given award period.

Under Fourteenth Finance Commission, Grants to the tune of ₹ 2,00,292.20 crore had been allocated to the Gram Panchayats constituted under Part IX of the Constitution in 26 States for the award period 2015-16 to 2019-20 for delivering basic services including water supply, sanitation including septic management, sewerage and solid waste management, storm water drainage, maintenance of roads, footpaths etc. Out of this total allocation, ₹ 183248.54 crore has been released.

Further, under the Fifteenth Finance Commission, Grants to the tune of ₹ 60,750 crore was allocated for the interim period 2020-21 and ₹ 2,36,805 crore was allocated for the final period 2021-26 to Panchayats in all the three tiers and Traditional Local Bodies and Sixth Schedule areas in 28 States. Out of this total allocation of ₹ 2,97,555 crore, ₹ 2,70,624.83 crore has been released as on 19.03.2026. Fifteenth Finance Commission Grant is further divided into Tied and Basic (Untied) Grants. Untied Grants can be used for felt needs of basic facilities under the 29 subjects enlisted in the 'Eleventh Schedule' of the Constitution of India, except for salaries and other establishment costs. The Tied Grants are to be utilised for basic facilities, specifically, for drinking



water and sanitation. The Sixteenth Finance Commission has emphasised that the primary responsibility of making adequate financial resources available to local bodies rests with the States and has laid special emphasis on the need for local bodies to generate their own resources. It has recommended total grants of Rs. 4,35,236 crores (Rupees Four lakh Thirty Five thousand Two hundred and Thirty Six crores) for the Rural Local Bodies (RLBs) for the award period of 2026-31. The grant allocated for RLBs is further sub-divided into Basic grant (Rs. 3,48,188 crores), RLB performance grant (Rs. 43,524 crores) and State performance grant (Rs. 43,524 crores). The entire performance component is untied. The Basic grant is further divided equally into Tied (Rs. 1,74,094 crores) and Untied (Rs. 1,74,094 crores). The tied component should be directed towards 'Sanitation and Solid Waste Management' and/or 'Water Management', including O&M expenditures for the aforementioned tied items. Fifteenth Finance Commission Grants are released to the States in two installments in every financial year in terms of the Operational Guidelines for implementation of Fifteenth Finance Commission Grants to Rural Local Bodies (RLBs) issued by the Department of Expenditure, Ministry of Finance vide its letter dated 14.07.2021. Ministry of Panchayati Raj (MoPR) and the Department of Drinking Water and Sanitation

(DDWS) are the nodal Ministries for recommending the release of Untied (Basic) Grants and Tied Grants, respectively. Upon receipt of the Grant Transfer Certificate from a State for the last released instalment and fulfilment of the eligibility conditions prescribed in the Operational Guidelines, MoPR recommends the release of the next instalment of Untied Grants to the Ministry of Finance (MoF). Similarly, DDWS recommends the release of the respective instalment of Tied Grants to MoF. Accordingly, the timing of release may slightly vary depending upon the receipt of the GTC for the last instalment released and the fulfilment of the prescribed eligibility conditions by the respective State. In terms of the Operational Guidelines, the State Governments, on receipt of the Fifteenth Finance Commission recommended grants from the Ministry of Finance shall transfer the same to the local bodies concerned within ten working days. Any delay beyond 10 working days will require the State Governments to release the grant with interest for the period of delay as per the average effective rate of interest on market borrowings/State Development Loans (SDLs) for the previous year. No delay has so far been reported in release of Grants if eligibility conditions for the release of Grants as mentioned in the Operational Guidelines have been met. As per Article 243-I of the Constitution of India, the constitution, functioning, and im-

plementation of the recommendations of State Finance Commissions fall within the purview of the respective State Governments. For promotion of e-Governance in the Panchayats, under the Digital India initiative, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj has developed various digital platforms and applications to bring in transparency, accountability and efficiency in local rural governance of the country. This Ministry has launched eGramSwaraj (<https://egramswaraj.gov.in>), a user friendly web-based portal, which aims to bring in better transparency in the decentralized planning, progress reporting, financial management, work-based accounting and details of assets created. The application has been further integrated with Public Fund Management System, Government e-Marketplace, AuditOnline applications for hassle-free payment, transparent procurement, and auditing of Panchayats accounts.

The Government has taken significant steps to enhance the revenue-generating capabilities of Panchayats, enabling them to become self-sufficient and less dependent on external funding. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992, mandates the devolution of powers and responsibilities to Panchayats. The Ministry of Panchayati Raj has been actively advocating for states to fully implement these provisions, emphasising the need for states to empower Panchayats with adequate functions, finances, and functionalities. The Ministry of Panchayati Raj, in collaboration with IIM Ahmedabad, has also developed a training module on Own Source Revenue (OSR) to strengthen the financial self-reliance of Gram Panchayats. In 2025, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj has launched the Atma Nirbhar Panchayat Special Award (ANPSA) to promote Atmanirbharta through the augmentation of Own Source Revenue (OSR) by Panchayats. The Ministry of Panchayati Raj (MoPR) has also undertaken a significant step to digitise the OSR collection of the Panchayats by developing the "SAM-ARTH Panchayat portal", a dedicated digital platform that facilitates the generation of tax & non-tax demands and collection thereof, maintenance of tax registers, and online tracking of revenue. This digital empowerment is designed to bring transparency, efficiency, and scalability to local financial administration. This information was given by Union Minister Shri Rajiv Ranjan Singh alias Lalan Singh in a written reply in Lok Sabha.

# Assessment of own source revenue

The Ministry of Panchayati Raj has highlighted the critical importance of strengthening the financial independence of rural local bodies across India, noting that Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) continue to rely heavily on external funding. In a significant move to assess and improve this situation, the Ministry had constituted an Expert Committee on Own Source Revenue (OSR) of Rural Local Bodies in 2022. The committee was tasked with reviewing the current status of revenue generated by Panchayats and identifying challenges as well as opportunities for improvement.

According to the findings of the committee, Panchayati Raj Institutions across 30 States and Union Territories collectively generated approximately Rs. 25,595 crore as own source revenue during the five-year period from 2017-18 to 2021-22. Despite this figure, the per capita OSR at the national level remained modest, averaging around Rs. 59 annually. This indicates that while some revenue generation mechanisms are in place, the overall financial base of Panchayats remains relatively weak.

The report also revealed significant disparities among States in terms of per capita OSR. For instance, Goa recorded one of the highest figures, with per capita OSR reaching as much as Rs. 1,635 per annum. This stark variation underscores the uneven capacity of Panchayats across the country to mobilize local resources, influenced by differences in governance, economic activity, and administrative efficiency. A number of structural and operational challenges have been identified as barriers to improving OSR collection. One of the major issues is the absence or outdated nature of State-level rules and guidelines governing taxation and revenue collection by Panchayats. In many cases, the legal and procedural frameworks have not kept pace with changing economic realities, limiting the scope for revenue generation. Another key challenge is the inadequate devolution of taxation powers to Panchayats by State Governments. Without sufficient authority to levy and collect taxes, local bodies struggle to mobilize resources independently. This dependence on higher levels

of government continues to constrain their ability to plan and execute development activities effectively. The committee also pointed out a lack of willingness among Panchayats themselves to impose taxes and fees. Political considerations, fear of public backlash, and limited administrative capacity often discourage local bodies from taking necessary but potentially unpopular decisions related to revenue generation. In addition, limited cooperation from citizens further complicates the situation. Many residents are reluctant to pay local taxes and fees, especially when they perceive a lack of tangible benefits or transparency in the use of funds. This issue is compounded by weak enforcement mechanisms, which make it difficult to take action against defaulters. The findings of the Expert Committee are consistent with observations made in other studies on the subject, indicating that these challenges are systemic rather than isolated. Recognizing this, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj has shared the committee's report with all States, urging them to take ap-

propriate steps for implementation and reform. The financial vulnerability of local bodies has also been acknowledged by the Finance Commission. In its report, the Sixteenth Finance Commission observed that the own resources generated by the vast majority of local bodies are minimal. As a result, they remain heavily dependent—if not entirely reliant—on financial transfers from Union and State Governments to fulfill their responsibilities. Furthermore, the Commission emphasized that the primary responsibility for providing fiscal resources to local bodies lies with State Governments. This highlights the need for stronger collaboration between State administrations and Panchayats to ensure sustainable financial empowerment at the grassroots level. In an effort to address these issues, the Ministry has taken a significant step toward digitization of revenue collection. It has developed the "SAM-ARTH Panchayat portal," a dedicated digital platform designed to streamline and modernize the process of OSR collection. This initiative represents a major push to-

wards leveraging technology for better governance. The SAMARTH Panchayat portal enables Panchayats to generate tax and non-tax demands, maintain digital tax registers, facilitate online payments through secure gateways, and track revenue collection in real time. By introducing transparency and efficiency, the platform aims to improve compliance and reduce leakages in the system. The portal has already been pilot tested successfully in Himachal Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, demonstrating its potential to transform local financial administration. Following these encouraging results, all States, including Punjab, have been requested to onboard onto the platform and adopt the system for wider implementation. In addition to digital reforms, the Ministry is also promoting financial self-reliance through incentives. Under the revamped Rashtriya Gram Swaraj Abhiyan (RGSA) scheme, a new initiative called the Atma Nirbhar Panchayat Special Award (ANPSA) was launched in 2025 on the occasion of National Panchayati Raj Day.

## AAP slams Maharashtra government over alleged links to sexual offences

**Mumbai** : The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) has launched a sharp attack on the Devendra Fadnavis-led BJP government in Maharashtra, alleging that the administration is entangled in serious sexual offence-related controversies and calling for a united public response against it.

In a statement shared on social media, AAP's Mumbai unit urged citizens across the state to come together and "dismiss this government," claiming it is "deeply embroiled in sexual offences." The post also featured a video of Mumbai President Preeti Sharma Menon criticising the leadership of CM Fadnavis.

Menon, who is also a member of the party's National Executive, has been vocal in her criticism. Referring to a viral obscene video allegedly linked to Maharashtra Minister Narhari Zirwal, she questioned why Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis had not taken any action. She remarked that despite the circulation of the video, no steps had been initiated, adding that the situation reflected a troubling state of govern-



nance.

The political confrontation has intensified amid the ongoing controversy surrounding self-styled 'godman' Ashok Kharat, also known as "Captain," who was arrested in Nashik on charges of rape and sexual assault. Police have registered at least eight FIRs against him, involving allegations of sexual exploitation of multiple women, extortion, and circulation of objectionable material.

Investigators have stated that Kharat allegedly manipulated victims through claims of divine powers, rituals, and the use of sedatives. The case has sparked a major political storm in Maharashtra, prompting the formation of a Special Investigation Team (SIT) to examine the allegations and probe possible links with government officials and their aides. Chief Minister Fadnavis has stated that strict action will be taken

against anyone found directly or indirectly involved in the case. The controversy also led to the resignation of Rupali Chakankar, Chairperson of the Maharashtra State Women's Commission, after visuals surfaced indicating her association with Kharat. Opposition parties have since intensified their criticism, demanding accountability and drawing comparisons with other high-profile exploitation cases.

AAP leaders, including Menon, have used these developments to accuse the ruling BJP of shielding individuals involved in such offences and failing to ensure the safety of women. They have presented the issue as part of broader governance concerns under the current administration.

The exchange marks the latest in a series of political confrontations in Maharashtra, where opposition parties have frequently targeted the Fadnavis government over law-and-order issues and women's safety. The State government, however, has maintained that it is committed to taking firm action and ensuring thorough investigations in sensitive matters.

Meanwhile, the video statements and remarks made by AAP leaders continue to circulate widely on social media, drawing mixed reactions from the public as the investigation into the Kharat case progresses. At the time of reporting, there was no specific response from the BJP or the Chief Minister's office addressing AAP's latest allegations.

## BEST seeks toll waiver for inter-city buses amid financial strain

**Mumbai** : The Brihanmumbai Electric Supply and Transport (BEST) is facing mounting financial pressure and has formally sought relief from toll charges on buses entering the city. In a recent move, BEST Chairperson Trishna Vishwasrao has written to Deputy Chief Minister Eknath Shinde, requesting a waiver of toll tax for buses operating on inter-city routes.

According to officials, BEST currently runs services on nearly 40 routes connecting Mumbai with neighbouring regions such as Thane, Navi Mumbai and Mira-Bhayander. Around 382 buses are deployed on these routes, catering to a large number of daily commuters.

Officials highlighted that toll payments have become a significant financial burden for the undertaking, especially as it operates under a no-profit, no-loss model while continuing to incur losses. The rising operational costs have made it increasingly difficult for BEST to maintain financial stability.

The undertaking has pointed out that toll charges for private vehicles were waived in the past, raising

concerns over the continued imposition of such fees on public transport buses. Authorities argue that public transport services should be prioritised and supported, given their role in reducing congestion and pollution.

According to BEST, exempting its buses from toll charges could lead to a reduction in operational expenses. This, in turn, may enable the organisation to rationalise fares and make bus travel more affordable for commuters.

Officials also believe that lower fares could encourage more people to shift from private vehicles to public transport, thereby easing traffic congestion and contributing to a more sustainable urban mobility system.

Historically, BEST had incorporated a nominal toll component into ticket fares to offset these costs. However, the scenario changed in 2019 when concessional fares were introduced, and the organisation began absorbing toll expenses internally. With the withdrawal of these concessions in 2025, the financial strain has resurfaced, as BEST continues to bear the burden of toll payments without a corresponding increase in revenue

streams. The issue has prompted discussions within the state administration, with stakeholders examining the feasibility of granting relief while balancing fiscal considerations.

Transport experts note that providing toll exemptions to public bus services could serve as an incentive to strengthen mass transit systems, particularly in densely populated urban regions like Mumbai.

At the same time, authorities are also weighing the long-term sustainability of such measures, considering the revenue implications for infrastructure projects funded through toll collections.

The request by BEST underscores broader challenges faced by public transport undertakings across India, many of which are struggling to remain financially viable while fulfilling essential public service obligations. As discussions continue, the focus remains on finding a balanced approach that supports commuter convenience, reduces operational stress on BEST, and ensures the continued efficiency of Mumbai's public transport network.

## Kidnapped trader rescued, Five arrested in Pune

**Pune** : In a swift and coordinated operation, the Pune Crime Branch rescued a kidnapped trader within 24 hours and arrested five accused involved in the crime.

The incident took place here when a trader residing in Gultekdi was abducted from the Timber Market area by unidentified individuals. The accused allegedly kidnapped the victim over a financial dispute and demanded a ransom of rupees 1.5 crore for his release, police said on Thursday.

Based on the complaint, a case was registered at Swargate Police Station under relevant sections of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita. Taking the seriousness of the case into account, senior officials directed the Crime Branch to launch an immediate investigation, forming two special teams.

One team laid a trap at Mitra Mandal Chowk in Swargate, where the accused had instructed for the ransom to be delivered. Two suspects arrived at the spot to collect the money and were apprehended by the police. They were identified as Pra-



nav Baban Nivangune (23) and Sahil Shrikant Khutwad (21), both residents of Pune, said senior police inspector Vishwajit Kaingade.

During interrogation, the duo revealed the names of three other accomplices: Saurav Vishwanath Pawar (27), Shirish Jitendra Khopade (26), and Mandar Shridhar Daravatkar (30), all residents of Pune. Acting on this information, police tracked down the remaining accused and rescued the kidnapped trader safely from Khed Shivapur, where he had been held captive.

The accused had used a silver Toyota Etios car (MH-12 JM 2321) to transport the

victim. All five accused have been taken into custody and handed over to Swargate Police Station for further investigation.

Police officials stated that the accused are habitual offenders with prior criminal records in Pune city and rural areas.

The operation was carried out under the guidance of senior police officials, including Commissioner Amitesh Kumar, Joint Commissioner Ranjankumar Sharma, Additional Commissioner Pankaj Deshmukh, and Deputy Commissioner (Crime) Nikhil Pingale, along with other officers and Crime Branch personnel.

## Veteran historian Dr Jaysingrao Pawar passes away; Maharashtra loses pillar of its history

**Mumbai** : Dr Jaysingrao Pawar, one of Maharashtra's most dedicated historians, passed away on Thursday, marking the end of an era in the state's historical scholarship. He devoted over five decades of his life to documenting and preserving the rich legacy of Maratha history. Driven by his firm belief that "history enlightens a nation and its society," Dr Pawar spent nearly 50 years contributing extensively to Maharashtra's historical literature. His work played a crucial role in deepening public understanding of the Maratha past and its enduring cultural significance.

Among his notable contributions was the acclaimed Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj Memorial Volume, which offered valuable insights into the life and legacy of Sambhaji Maharaj. His scholarship was marked by depth, authenticity, and a commitment to historical accuracy. Dr Pawar also conducted detailed research on several lesser-known figures of the Maratha era, including Maharani Tarabai, Rajaram Maharaj, and Santaji Ghor-

pade. Through his writings, he brought many overlooked personalities back into public discourse. One of his most significant achievements was the writing and editing of the Rajarshi Shahu Memorial Volume, centred on the life and contributions of Shahu Maharaj. The work set a benchmark in historical documentation and remains a key reference for scholars. Dr Pawar considered it his life's mission to take the legacy of Shahu Maharaj to a wider audience. He not only authored the work but also ensured its translation into multiple Indian and international languages, making it accessible globally.

Beyond his literary contributions, he played an important role in cultural and academic institutions. He served as Director of the Rajarshi Shahu Memorial Hall and was closely associated with the Shahu Research Centre at Shivaji University, where he promoted research and academic inquiry. As a mentor, Dr Pawar guided countless students and young historians, helping them understand the nuances of historical writing, source

analysis, and research methodologies. His influence extended far beyond his own work, shaping future generations of scholars. He was widely regarded as a guiding force for those committed to presenting an authentic and balanced account of Maratha history. His efforts helped ensure that the contributions of the Maratha-Bahujan society were recognised and documented with integrity. Dr Pawar's lifelong dedication earned him immense respect across academic and cultural circles. Many admirers considered him a true 'Maharashtra Bhushan' in spirit, acknowledging his invaluable service to the state's intellectual heritage. His passing has left a significant void in Maharashtra's historical community. Scholars, students, and admirers alike have expressed deep sorrow, remembering him as a tireless researcher and a passionate storyteller of history. As tributes pour in, Dr Pawar's legacy continues to live on through his extensive body of work, which will remain a guiding light for anyone seeking to understand the depth of

## Maha Guv felicitates 15 young 'Drivers of Change'



**Mumbai** : Maharashtra Governor Jishnu Dev Varma felicitated 15 outstanding young entrepreneurs and innovators at the India Today Group-Mahindra 'Drivers of Change' Awards 2026 in Mumbai, a statement said here on Wednesday. Addressing the gathering, the Governor lauded the awardees each under the age of 40 for transforming innovative ideas into impactful enterprises and contributing to India's rapidly evolving startup ecosystem. Drawing inspiration from India's rich legacy, the Governor cited examples of great personalities such as Sant Janeshwar, Adi Shankaracharya, Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj and Swami Vivekananda, who achieved remarkable

feats at a young age. He said that these examples reinforce the idea that youth is not a limitation but a dynamic force that shapes history. Highlighting India's growing global stature, Governor Jishnu Dev Varma said that the country is today shaping global conversations in areas such as technology, sustainability and entrepreneurship. He noted that despite global challenges posed by the war in the Middle East, India continues to safeguard the interests of its 1.4 billion citizens and move steadily towards the vision of a 'Viksit Bharat'. The Governor emphasised that India currently hosts the world's third-largest startup ecosystem, with over two lakh recognised startups.

## BEST bus mounts divider near Kamala Mills during peak hours, No injuries

**Mumbai** : A bus operated by the Brihanmumbai Electric Supply and Transport (BEST) climbed onto a road divider in Mumbai's Lower Parel area on Thursday, triggering major traffic disruption during peak morning hours.

The incident occurred near the busy Kamala Mills Compound, a prominent commercial hub that sees heavy vehicular and pedestrian movement, especially

during office hours. As a result, commuters faced delays and congestion across adjoining roads.

Visuals circulating widely on social media showed the air-conditioned BEST bus mounted on the divider, drawing attention from passersby and office-goers in the vicinity. The unusual sight led to confusion and added to the already heavy traffic conditions.

Despite the dramatic

nature of the incident, no injuries or casualties were reported. Officials confirmed that a potentially serious accident was narrowly averted, providing relief to both authorities and commuters.

While the exact cause of the incident is yet to be officially determined, preliminary indications suggest that the driver may have briefly lost control of the vehicle, leading it to veer onto the divider.

Following the incident, traffic police personnel and BEST staff quickly reached the spot and initiated efforts to manage the situation. Their immediate priority was to regulate traffic flow and prevent further congestion in the area.

A coordinated operation was carried out to safely remove the stranded bus from the divider. After some time, normal traffic movement was gradually restored, eas-

ing the situation for commuters.

Authorities are expected to conduct a detailed inquiry into the incident to ascertain the precise cause and determine whether any mechanical fault or human error was involved. The episode has once again highlighted the challenges of navigating heavy traffic conditions in Mumbai's densely populated commercial zones, particularly during rush hours.

## Police constable dies by suicide inside commissioner's Office in Amravati

**Amravati (Maharashtra)** : A Quick Response Team (QRT) constable allegedly shot himself inside the Police Commissioner's office premises here on Thursday morning, officials said.

The deceased has been identified as Vijay Nagpure (35), who was on night duty.

According to officials, he was present at the police headquarters ground earlier in the morning and later went to the QRT room around 9:30 am, where he used his service pistol to

shoot himself after other personnel had left the room.

Colleagues rushed to the spot after hearing the gunshot, but he was declared dead on the spot.

Senior officers, including the Police Commissioner, reached the scene immediately after being informed.

The motive behind the extreme step remains unclear. Police said Nagpure's behaviour appeared normal earlier in the day and no immediate cause has been established.

A forensic team and dog

squad were deployed and the weapon has been seized.

The body has been sent for post-mortem at the district general hospital.

Nagpure, a native of Dhamangaon Katpur in Morshi taluka, had joined the police force in 2014 and was residing with his family in Amravati, a major cultural hub in Vidarbha region, named after the Ambadevi shrine.

Further investigation is underway to ascertain the circumstances leading to the incident.

## Maharashtra plans permanent strategy to address recurring onion crisis

**Mumbai** : Highlighting that the onion crisis resurfaces in Maharashtra every year, Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis on Wednesday stressed the urgent need for a lasting solution while ensuring immediate support for onion-growing farmers.

To address the situation, a high-level committee comprising the Additional Chief Secretary of the Agriculture Department, the Additional Chief Secretary of the Finance Department, and the Secretary of the Marketing Department will be constituted. The Chief Minister has directed the panel to recommend urgent measures for farmer relief as well as to design long-term strategies to permanently resolve the issue.

The meeting, held at Vidhan Bhavan, was attended by Deputy Chief Minister Sunetra Ajit Pawar along with senior ministers including Chhagan Bhujbal (Food and Civil Supplies),

Radhakrishna Vikhe Patil (Water Resources), Girish Mahajan (Water Resources), Jayakumar Rawal (Marketing), Dattatray Bharane (Agriculture), Narhari Zirwal (Food and Drug Administration), and Dadaji Bhuse (School Education).

During the discussion, Fadnavis stated that a separate meeting would be convened with union Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal to address matters linked to the Central Government, particularly curbing malpractices in onion trade and improving export mechanisms to stabilise prices. He observed that traders often procure onions from farmers and later sell them to NAFED or other agencies, a practice that leads to losses for cultivators and needs to be permanently stopped.

The proposed panel will take up a detailed assessment of crop diversification in key onion-producing districts



of Nashik, Pune, Ahilyanagar and Solapur, with the aim of reducing over-dependence on onion cultivation and improving farm incomes. The initiative

is expected to begin from the upcoming Kharif season, signalling an immediate push toward restructuring cropping patterns in these regions.

Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis emphasised that diversification should not only involve shifting to alternative crops but also improving practices within onion farming itself. This includes selecting suitable varieties, managing sowing cycles, and maintaining better control over overall production levels to avoid gluts in the market.

He highlighted that farmers need to be encouraged to move toward crops that offer more stable and higher returns. According to him, a planned transition over the next two to three years could help make onion production more economically sustainable while reducing the risks associated with price volatility.

Fadnavis pointed out that the current cycle of excess production and supply chain disruptions often forces the government to step in with financial assistance. However, such interven-

tions, he noted, do not provide a long-term solution and fail to significantly improve farmers' financial conditions.

The proposed committee has been tasked with conducting a comprehensive review of the situation, including production trends, market linkages, storage capacity, and export dynamics. The goal is to identify both structural and policy-level gaps affecting the onion sector.

In addition to long-term planning, the Chief Minister has directed the panel to submit immediate short-term recommendations to address urgent challenges faced by farmers. These could include measures related to procurement, pricing support, and improved logistics.

The committee is also expected to finalise a roadmap for long-term reforms within the next two to three months.

## Bhavna Talwar's Valmiki Ramayana first look and release date out

**Mumbai**: The much-anticipated film Valmiki Ramayana was officially announced on the auspicious occasion of Ram Navami, with the unveiling of its first-look poster. The project promises a theatrical retelling of the ancient Indian epic Ramayana, bringing together a distinguished team of artists across multiple creative departments.

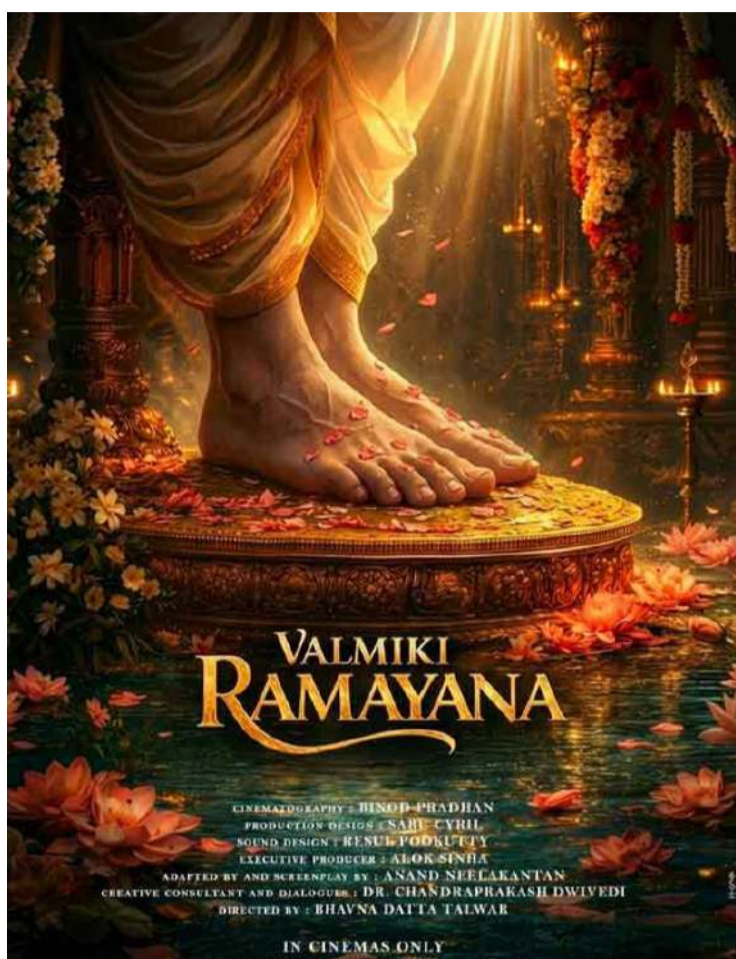
Directed by Bhavna Talwar, the film marks her return to the big screen with a culturally rich and ambitious subject. Known for her thoughtful storytelling, Talwar appears to be approaching the epic with a focus on depth, devotion, and authenticity.

The project boasts an accomplished technical team, including cinematographer Binod Pradhan, whose visual style has enhanced several acclaimed films, and production designer Sabu Cyril, known for crafting grand cinematic worlds.

Adding further strength to the team is Academy Award-winning sound designer Resul Pookutty, whose expertise is expected to elevate the film's auditory experience and immersive quality.

The writing team features Anand Neelkantan and Chandraprakash Dwivedi, the latter widely recognised for his work on the iconic television series Chanakya. Their involvement suggests a strong narrative foundation rooted in both scholarship and storytelling.

The first-look poster adopts a minimalist yet deeply devotional tone, featuring the feet of Lord Rama. This symbolic imagery reflects humility, faith, and reverence, hinting at a grounded and spiritual interpretation rather than a purely specta-



cle-driven retelling.

By focusing on such subtle symbolism, the makers appear to be positioning the film as an emotionally resonant experience. The creative choice indicates an intention to connect with audiences on a spiritual lev-

el, especially those familiar with the epic's deeper philosophical themes.

This project marks Talwar's fourth directorial venture, following films like Dharm, Heidi: Queen Of The Mountain, and Happi. With "Valmiki Ramayana," she returns with a

subject that carries immense cultural and religious significance.

The film aims to present the timeless story of the Ramayana through a cinematic lens, blending traditional storytelling with modern filmmaking techniques. This combination is expected to appeal to both younger audiences and those deeply rooted in the epic's legacy.

Industry observers believe that the involvement of experienced technicians and writers will ensure authenticity and narrative depth, which are crucial when adapting such a revered text for the screen.

Unlike many large-scale mythological films that emphasise visual spectacle, "Valmiki Ramayana" appears to prioritise a devotional and artistic approach. This is evident in the simplicity and symbolism of its first promotional material.

Given the enduring cultural importance of the Ramayana across India and beyond, the film is expected to attract a wide spectrum of viewers—from devotees seeking a faithful retelling to cinema enthusiasts interested in meaningful storytelling.

The film is scheduled for a theatrical release on October 2, 2026, coinciding with Gandhi Jayanti. This strategic release date adds symbolic significance, aligning the film with a day associated with reflection and national values.

As anticipation builds, "Valmiki Ramayana" is shaping up to be one of the most notable mythological releases of the coming year, with its strong creative backing and spiritually resonant theme promising a cinematic experience that is both visually engaging and emotionally profound.

## Kunal Kamra flays Ranveer Allahabadi over comedy fraternity downfall

**Mumbai**: A sharp exchange unfolded on social media on Wednesday between podcaster and entrepreneur Ranveer Allahabadi and stand-up comedian Kunal Kamra, highlighting tensions within India's digital content and comedy ecosystem. What began as a reflective post by Allahabadi about his professional journey quickly escalated into a pointed critique from Kamra, who accused him of indirectly harming the comedy community.

Allahabadi, known for his platforms BeerBiceps and The Ranveer Show, shared a contemplative message about the challenges he has faced in recent times. He noted that building his brand had taken nearly a decade of sustained effort, involving consistent content creation, audience engagement, and team collaboration.

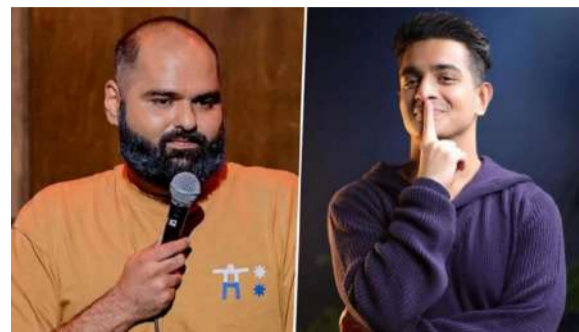
In his post on X, Allahabadi wrote that a single incident had significantly disrupted the stability his team had worked hard to achieve. While he did not elaborate on the specifics of the incident, his tone suggested a period of professional uncertainty and introspection.

Seeking to frame his experience philosophically, Allahabadi referenced a doha by the 15th-century mystic poet Sant Kabir. The verse emphasises patience and the inevitability of time in achieving results, drawing a

parallel between nurturing a plant and rebuilding one's career.

He interpreted the doha as a reminder that growth and recovery cannot be rushed. According to Allahabadi,

fallout extended beyond individual inconvenience, affecting the broader comedy fraternity. He argued that the repercussions had disrupted livelihoods and created an atmosphere of caution and un-



even consistent effort does not guarantee immediate outcomes, and resilience is required to endure setbacks and rebuild gradually.

However, Kamra responded with a strongly worded rebuttal that shifted the conversation from personal reflection to collective consequences. He accused Allahabadi of being responsible for difficulties faced by comedians following a controversy linked to a platform referred to as "Latent."

Kamra claimed that around 30 artists, including himself, were summoned by authorities in connection with the issue. This, he said, had a chilling effect on the comedy circuit, leading to cancellations of shows and withdrawal of venue support.

According to Kamra, the

certainty among performers.

In his criticism, Kamra alleged that Allahabadi failed to acknowledge or understand the impact of the situation on comedians. He expressed frustration that the podcaster's public messaging did not address the difficulties experienced by others in the industry.

Kamra's remarks also took a personal tone, accusing Allahabadi of presenting himself as a "nice guy" while ignoring the consequences of his actions. He urged him to take responsibility rather than, in his view, deflecting through philosophical reflections.

The comedian further used strong language to criticise what he described as performative behaviour and "clout chasing."

## Sai Pallavi, Junaid Khan's romantic track 'Khwaab Dekhoon' from Ek Din out

**Mumbai**: The makers of Ek Din have unveiled a new romantic track titled Khwaab Dekhoon, offering a tender glimpse into the evolving love story between Sai Pallavi and Junaid Khan. The song adds another layer of emotional depth to the film, which has already generated buzz through its trailer and title track. Backed by Aamir Khan Productions, the film continues to build anticipation with each new reveal. "Khwaab Dekhoon" is set against scenic backdrops, visually capturing the gentle progression of romance between the lead characters, and immersing viewers in the film's soft, heartfelt narrative. Sharing the track, the makers described it as an extension of the film's romantic world, aiming to take audiences deeper into the emotional journey of the protagonists. The visuals and melody together emphasise subtle expressions of love, connection, and companionship.

The song features vocals by Arijit Singh and Taranum Malik Jain, whose voices bring a soothing and emotive quality to the composition. Their rendition complements the film's tone, enhancing the romantic atmosphere.

Music for the track has been composed by Ram



Samath, known for his versatility across genres. The composition leans into a soft, melodic structure, designed to evoke the essence of love and emotional intimacy.

The lyrics, penned by Irshad Kamil, further elevate the track, the makers described it as an extension of the film's romantic world, aiming to take audiences deeper into the emotional journey of the protagonists. The visuals and melody together emphasise subtle expressions of love, connection, and companionship.

The song features vocals by Arijit Singh and Taranum Malik Jain, whose voices bring a soothing and emotive quality to the composition. Their rendition complements the film's tone, enhancing the romantic atmosphere.

classic romance with contemporary storytelling sensibilities. Their earlier films are widely regarded as benchmarks in Hindi romantic cinema. Directed by Sunil Pandey, "Ek Din" is positioned as a gentle and emotionally driven love story. The film's narrative appears to focus on nuanced relationships rather than dramatic conflict, setting it apart from more high-octane offerings. The film is produced by Aamir Khan, Mansoor Khan, and Apama Purohit, bringing together a team with significant experience in storytelling and production. Their combined vision is expected to shape a cohesive and engaging cinematic experience. With its soothing music, picturesque visuals, and strong creative backing, "Ek Din" is steadily building momentum ahead of its release.

## Taapsee Pannu on turning producer: "I want to back stories I truly believe in"

**Mumbai**: Actor Taapsee Pannu is steadily expanding her creative footprint in the film industry, moving beyond acting to focus on producing content-driven cinema. Known for her backing



strong, female-led narratives, Pannu has consistently chosen roles that challenge conventional storytelling, and she is now extending that vision behind the camera.

After making her debut as a producer with the 2022 film *Blurr*, Pannu has been actively exploring new projects that align with her creative sensibilities. The psychological thriller

marked an important milestone in her career, signalling her intent to take greater control over the kind of stories she wants to tell. Speaking about her evolving approach, Pannu said she is carefully evaluating subjects and collaborators who resonate with her perspective. She emphasised that finding directors and scripts that match her creative wavelength remains one of the biggest challenges at this stage of her journey as a producer. "I am now looking at various subjects and directors. I want to produce the films that I believe in," she said, underlining her commitment to meaningful storytelling rather than purely commercial ventures. Her focus, she added, is on projects that carry emotional depth and strong narratives.

Pannu also reflected on the significant shift in responsibility that comes with stepping into a producer's role. Unlike acting, where the primary responsibility lies in performance, producing requires overseeing multiple aspects of filmmaking, from assembling the team to managing execution.

"Because you are the one who's going to put things together, put the team together, choose the right person to do a certain role; and that gives a sense of responsibility. But it's also extremely challenging," she explained, highlighting the com-

plexities of decision-making behind the scenes.

Drawing a clear distinction between the two roles, Pannu noted that an actor's responsibility is often limited to accepting or rejecting a project. In contrast, a producer must ensure alignment among all stakeholders involved in the filmmaking process.

"As an actor, you're only responsible for your yes or no, but when you become a producer, you're responsible for getting a yes from everybody and keeping everybody on the same page, which is far more difficult than being just an actor on set," she added.

Her transition reflects a broader trend in the industry, where actors are increasingly taking on production roles to gain creative control and back stories that might otherwise struggle to find mainstream support. For Pannu, this shift is also about creating space for narratives that are often underrepresented.

Over the years, she has built a reputation for choosing unconventional roles that challenge stereotypes, particularly in female-led films. This consistent approach has helped her carve a niche as an actor willing to take risks and experiment with diverse genres.

By stepping into production, Pannu is now aiming to shape stories right from their inception to execution.

## Abhishek Bachchan speaks about viral creators and critics: "Be unique, stand out from the crowd"

**Mumbai**: At the Critics' Choice Awards 2026, Abhishek Bachchan addressed the ongoing debate surrounding film criticism and the evolving landscape of content creation. Sharing his candid thoughts, the actor spoke about originality, accountability, and how his perception of critics has changed over the years. Highlighting the impact of digital creators and the shifting dynamics of performance, Abhishek said, "We see millions of reels every day where creators perform. They perform our dialogues, our dances, our action, our comedy. Many a time, as good, if not better than the original. They are empowered enough today to think they are as good as their heroes, their idols."



need to do, or be, in order to stand out from the crowd? How to ensure that we are the most deserving candidate to be chosen to act in a film, or to

about criticism itself, the actor emphasised the need to view it constructively. "I think we often misunderstand criticism. We tend to

see it as something negative, but it shouldn't be. I work in a commercial art form, and if I expect people to spend their time and money on my films, then I am answerable to them. I am open to scrutiny, to judgment, and to criticism." Reflecting on his early years in the industry, Abhishek admitted that his outlook wasn't always the same. "Early in my career, I didn't always feel this way. Like most actors, I believed everything would work out perfectly. But when reality hits, it hits hard. I went through phases of denial, where I felt critics didn't understand my work or weren't qualified to judge it," he said. However, with time, his perspective evolved. "Over time, I realised I was looking at it the wrong way. I began to see that critics are not my opponents. They know the way. If I believe I know how to drive, then why not listen, learn, and improve? Their feedback helped me build my journey as an actor. Only a fool would ignore that." Abhishek Bachchan's remarks come at a time when conversations around film criticism, social media influence, and audience engagement continue to gain traction within the entertainment industry.

From intricately designed temples to sprawling palace structures, every aspect of the set reflects attention to detail. The visual recreation is said to be so immersive that it gives the impression of being physically present in the

## S. S. Rajamouli constructs a lavish set in Hyderabad for Mahesh Babu's 'Varanasi'

**Mumbai**: Filmmaker S. S. Rajamouli is once again pushing the boundaries of cinematic scale with his upcoming film *Varanasi*, for which a lavish and expansive set has been constructed in Hyderabad. Known for his larger-than-life storytelling, Rajamouli appears to be recreating the spiritual and architectural grandeur of Varanasi with striking authenticity.

The film features a star-studded cast led by Mahesh Babu, Priyanka Chopra Jonas and Prithviraj Sukumaran, all of whom play pivotal roles in what is being described as an ambitious cinematic spectacle. Their involvement has significantly amplified anticipation around the project.

Currently in production, the film has already generated considerable buzz, particularly for its grand set design. The makers have painstakingly recreated the essence of Varanasi, capturing the city's timeless charm, intricate architecture and spiritual aura within a controlled studio environment.

From intricately designed temples to sprawling palace structures, every aspect of the set reflects attention to detail. The visual recreation is said to be so immersive that it gives the impression of being physically present in the

ancient city, known for its deep cultural and religious significance.

One of the highlights of the set is the detailed recreation of the iconic ghats of Varanasi. These riverfront steps, which are central to the city's identity, have been designed with remarkable precision, reflecting both their scale and spiritual ambience.

The production team has reportedly focused on even the smallest elements, ensuring authenticity in textures, colours and layout. This meticulous approach aligns with Rajamouli's filmmaking style, which emphasises world-building and visual immersion.

Adding to the excitement, the first looks of the lead characters have already been unveiled, creating a strong buzz on social media. Mahesh Babu appears in a powerful avatar as 'Rudra', hinting at a commanding and possibly intense character.

Meanwhile, Prithviraj Sukumaran has drawn attention with his intense look as 'Kumbha', suggesting a layered and potentially formidable role within the narrative. His transformation has been widely discussed among fans.

Priyanka Chopra Jonas, on the other hand, has impressed audiences with

her striking appearance as 'Mandakini'. Her look has been described as both glamorous and impactful, adding another dimension to the film's visual appeal.

These character reveals have significantly heightened expectations, with audiences eager to see how these roles unfold within the story. The combination of strong performances and grand visuals is expected to be a major highlight.

Industry observers note that Rajamouli's films often set new benchmarks in scale and storytelling, and "Varanasi" appears to be no exception. The scale of the set alone indicates a production of epic proportions.

The film's grand release is scheduled for April 7, 2027, positioning it as one of the most anticipated releases in the coming years. With a blend of star power, visual grandeur and detailed world-building, it is expected to attract audiences across the country and beyond. As production progresses, more updates are likely to emerge, but the current buzz already suggests that "Varanasi" could be another landmark project in Rajamouli's illustrious career, continuing his legacy of delivering visually spectacular and emotionally engaging cinema.

# Cummins committed to Tests but warns of 'tension point'

**Sydney:** Pat Cummins admits there is a "tension point" in cricket's current club-versus-country landscape, stressing that although he wants to keep playing Test cricket into the twilight of his career, that may not be the case for coming generations.

Cummins has travelled to India for the start of the IPL, which begins this weekend, but the Sunrisers Hyderabad captain has revealed he will not feature in the tournament until its halfway point at the earliest.

"I'm bowling basically every third day at the moment," Cummins, who has been limited to one match over the past nine months due to a lumbar stress injury, told the Business of Sport podcast.

"We've mapped out a plan to get me right by the middle of the tournament, so hopefully if nothing goes wrong, I'll play the back half plus the finals."

His arrival for cricket's biggest annual event comes as Australian cricket wrestles with the prospect of selling stakes in Big Bash League teams. It is feared the country's best talent may be lost to the growing money available on domestic T20 franchise circuit abroad if the league is not privatised.

Cummins reiterated his desire to keep playing all three formats for Australia even as many of his long-time teammates have given away either ODIs (Steve Smith, Glenn Maxwell, Marcus Stoinis) or T20Is (Mitchell Starc) to prolong their careers.

Australia's Test and ODI skipper suggested he will continue prioritising important series and taking extended two-to-three month "forced rest" blocks to stay fresh for major Test campaigns and World Cups.

It's a model that has served him and Australia well, even allowing for his now long-running battle with his back injury. While he has played only two ODIs since the last 50-over World Cup in 2023 and no T20Is since the 2024 World Cup in that format, Cummins had missed just two of 24 Test matches played between June 2023 and the start of last home



summer. "Still very keen to play all three formats and at the moment I think we can make it work. I love Test cricket," said Cummins. "Hopefully I'm in a cadence where I can keep doing that for three, four, five years and don't have to forgo Test cricket."

But fulfilling his almost A\$4m IPL deal with Sunrisers, coached Australia assistant Dan Vettori, has become a key part of Cummins' calendar. The 32-year-old also expressed his interest at one day playing in the Hundred, while he signed a four-year contract with Major League Cricket side San Francisco Unicorns in 2024.

Asked about the balance between international and franchise cricket contracts, Cummins said, "I think it's at a tension point. It has been for a while, but I think it's only growing."

"As each of these franchise leagues get well capitalised, get more sophisticated - some of these Indian franchise owners are now branching out and owning different leagues."

"What we experience in Australia and in England is Test cricket is very well supported, the Test summer has big crowds and a lot of attention. That's not the same for every other international side. Every country has slightly different challenges."

"As Australian captain, some-

thing we speak about is how do we make sure we've got our best Australian guys to choose from when we're picking a Test side or an ODI side, because there is so much demand for them elsewhere."

"Even the way we contract players and talk about whether we let players go or not has evolved a lot in the last five or so years, because we don't want to lose them, so you've got to give them a little more leash than maybe you did previously."

Cummins used the clash between this August's two-Test series against ninth-ranked Bangladesh in northern Australia and the UK's Hundred tournament as an example of where leading all-format players are leaving money on the table.

Australian white-ball players Tim David (who has a A\$658,000 deal with Trent Rockets), Mitch Marsh (\$376,000 with Sunrisers Leeds) and Adam Zampa (\$357,000 with London Spirit) appear free to play in the month-long tournament.

Marsh and Zampa were both CA-contracted for 2025-26 and are certain to be again in '26-27.

David was upgraded to a national deal in '25-26, and could again meet the minimum threshold of international games played to get upgraded again in '26-27.

Test players like Cummins, Travis Head, Mitchell Starc and Josh Hazlewood would likely have commanded similar money in the Hun-

dered.

"The interesting point is, big Ashes series, all the main guys want to play that series," said Cummins. "(But), for example, during the Hundred this season we've got two Test matches against Bangladesh."

"All our guys that will play in that Test (series) have opted out of going into the Hundred auction - but that's not going to be the case forever."

"Some of our guys are saying no to a half a million pounds for 20 days' work to go and play those two Test matches against Bangladesh - so I think it is a tension point."

"This is the essence: our guys are so keen to play for Australia that they're happy to forgo that, but

I don't think we can just accept that's always going to be the case forever."

Cummins qualified his comments by acknowledging: "If you're playing all three formats in Australia you're very well compensated."

Cricket Australia's chief executive Todd Greenberg, who was the Australian Cricketers' Association boss when the existing Memorandum of Understanding was signed in 2023, has conceded that pay deal will likely be renegotiated before the end of its lifespan in 2027.

"I remember saying to (former CA CEO) Nick Hockley at the time when we did it, I'm not sure if this will see its life," Greenberg told reporters in December. "I probably stand by that. I don't know if this MOU will get to the end."

But Cummins' warning, which comes ahead of what will be a generational shift in the Test side over the coming years, is clear.

"You probably could, almost certainly, if you played every other league you'd probably be better off in the short term," Cummins said.

"But our guys love playing Test cricket at the moment. But I don't think that's going to be the case forever. Someone else might have different priorities, so we've got to make sure that we adapt to that."

"We are starting to talk about longer-term deals to lock in the top-tier talent to Aussie cricket."

## Fixtures unveiled for Team India's international home season 2026-27

**Mumbai:** The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) on Thursday unveiled the fixtures for Team India (Senior Men) international home season 2026-27.

The upcoming home season promises an exciting and action-packed calendar, featuring four visiting teams - West Indies, Sri Lanka, Zimbabwe and Australia - in a multi-format schedule.

The season will comprise 22 international matches in 17 cities, offering fans across the country the opportunity to witness top-quality international cricket.

The season will commence with the West Indies

tour of India, starting on September 27, 2026. The tour will feature a three-match ODI series followed by a five-match T20I series.

The ODIs will be played in Trivandrum, Guwahati and New Chandigarh, before the action shifts to the T20Is, which will be hosted across Lucknow, Ranchi, Indore, Hyderabad and Bengaluru.

India will then host Sri Lanka in December 2026 for a white-ball series comprising three ODIs and as many T20Is. The ODI leg will be played in Delhi, Bengaluru and Ahmedabad, while Rajkot, Cuttack and Pune will host the T20Is.

At the start of the new year, Zimbabwe will tour India for a three-match ODI series in January 2027. The matches will be held in Kolkata, Hyderabad and Mumbai.

The season will culminate with the prestigious and much-anticipated Border-Gavaskar Trophy, featuring a five-match Test series against Australia, beginning on January 21, 2027, in Nagpur.

The contest will then move to Chennai, Guwahati, Ranchi and Ahmedabad, promising a compelling battle between two of the premier sides in world cricket.

## Chinnaswamy enters final sprint under safety lens

**Bengaluru:** Just days before the opening match of the Indian Premier League (IPL) 2026 season, the M Chinnaswamy Stadium continues to resemble a high-pressure construction zone, with authorities pushing on a war footing to meet the March 28 deadline amid intense scrutiny over safety and preparedness.

From the main entrance to the outer periphery, the scale of ongoing work is unmistakable. Plywood sheets mask unfinished sections, temporary walkways snake through developing courtyards, and several walls and gates are yet to receive final finishing touches. Along the stretch abutting Cubbon Road, newly carved fan movement corridors remain partially complete, even as workers move briskly between tasks.

The constant hum of drilling, welding and hammering fills the air through the day and well into the night. Masons, carpenters,

contractors and vendors are operating in coordinated shifts, many with little rest. The original March 15 completion target has already been overshoot, leaving officials with a narrow window to ensure match readiness.

The urgency is rooted in last year's June 4 stampede outside the stadium, which claimed 11 lives and exposed serious gaps in crowd management. The tragedy has since driven a comprehensive overhaul of infrastructure and systems, transforming the current exercise into not just a logistical challenge but a test of credibility.

In response, authorities have introduced a series of measures aimed at preventing overcrowding and streamlining access. These include QR-coded tickets enabling staggered entry and integration of match-day travel with the Namma Metro, designed to disperse fan movement more efficiently.

Early signs around the venue suggest a more con-

trolled build-up compared to previous seasons, with fewer crowds gathering near ticket counters.

Yet, amid the rush to modernise and complete pending work, reminders of the past remain firmly in place. Near the players' entrance, a memorial plaque now stands in honour of the 11 victims. In a symbolic gesture, officials have also committed to permanently leaving 11 seats vacant during matches, ensuring the tragedy is not forgotten.

Inside the stadium, activity continues long after sunset, with special police permission allowing construction to proceed overnight. Officials of Royal Challengers Bengaluru and the Karnataka State Cricket Association have placed logistics and safety at the centre of preparations, a shift reflected even in public interactions where operational readiness has taken precedence over on-field narratives.

## Carey holds SA hopes as Vics strike before rain in Sheffield Shield final

**Melbourne:** South Australia's hopes of securing back-to-back Sheffield Shield titles may hinge on a crucial innings from Alex Carey after their campaign suffered an early setback against Victoria in the final. The defending champions found themselves under pressure from a disciplined bowling attack on a challenging opening day.

Rain in Melbourne disrupted proceedings significantly, allowing only a single session of play at Junction Oval. Dark clouds rolled in shortly after lunch, forcing players off the field and eventually leading to stumps being called early in the afternoon.

Before the weather interruption, Victoria's seamers made full use of the conditions to trouble South Australia's batting lineup. The pitch, with a noticeable green tinge, offered movement and bounce, making life difficult for the visiting batters.

South Australia were reduced to 3-55 by lunch, a position that reflected the dominance of Victoria's pace attack. The early breakthroughs energized the home side and their supporters,



with around a thousand fans turning up before the rain halted play.

Captain Nathan McClellan stood firm amid the collapse, remaining unbeaten on 25 and looking the most composed among the batters. His resilience provided some stability after a shaky start.

At the other end, Carey remained not out on 11, and his role is expected to be pivotal going forward. Having enjoyed an impressive summer, he now carries the responsibility of steering his side to a competitive total.

Carey's recent form includes being one of Australia's top performers in the Ashes, where he emerged as the team's second-leading run scorer. His experience and temperament could prove decisive in the

high-stakes final.

Leading the charge for Victoria was Scott Boland, whose disciplined spell yielded figures of 1-19 from nine overs. Known for his accuracy and ability to exploit helpful conditions, Boland once again proved a formidable opponent.

His contest with Carey is shaping up to be one of the defining battles of the match. With both players in strong form, their duel on day two could significantly influence the outcome of the final.

The match carries added intrigue due to the Sheffield Shield's bonus points system. First-innings performance is critical, with teams earning fractional points for runs and wickets in the initial 100 overs, which could ultimately decide the champion in case of a draw.

Weather forecasts, however, continue to loom large over the contest. Predictions of further rain across the next two days raise the possibility of a stalemate, making every run and wicket even more valuable. Victoria captain Will Sutherland opted to bowl first after winning the toss, a decision influenced by the grassy surface. The pitch appeared livelier than the one used in the teams' previous encounter, promising assistance for seamers. The early overs saw some uncharacteristic inaccuracy from Boland, including deliveries down the leg side that resulted in byes. However, he quickly adjusted his line and length, returning to his typically disciplined approach. Mackenzie Harvey once again fell victim to Boland, continuing a pattern from earlier matches. The pacer induced an edge that was safely taken, underlining his dominance over the left-hander. Fergus O'Neill also found his rhythm after an inconsistent start, combining with Boland to tighten the screws. His persistence paid off when Henry Hunt edged an outswinger to slip, further denting South Australia's innings.

## India begin SAFF U20 campaign against rivals Pakistan

**Male (Maldives):** The India U20 men's team will begin their SAFF U20 Championship campaign with a high-octane clash against Pakistan at the National Football Stadium here on Thursday.

An India-Pakistan encounter always carries added intensity, and with crucial group-stage stakes on the line, the opening fixture promises both drama and significance.

Understandably, the Young Colts arrived in the Maldives capital on Monday and quickly shifted their focus to preparations for the tournament.

Placed in Group B alongside Pakistan and Bangladesh, India face a tight schedule in a three-team group where every point is vital.

India will meet Bangladesh in their second match on March 28. With only two fixtures in the group, a single victory could prove decisive in securing a place in the semi-finals. The stakes were heightened further after Bangladesh defeated Pakistan 2-0 in the first Group B encounter. That result means Pakistan enter Thursday's

match needing a win to keep their knockout hopes alive. India, therefore, can expect a determined opponent, making the contest rather tricky despite their strong credentials.

India U20 coach Mahesh Gawali emphasised on start-



ing the tournament on a positive note. "India versus Pakistan is always a big match, but for us, we are treating it like any other game. Every match is important for us. So the focus is on starting the tournament well and making a positive beginning. At the same time, we need to be cautious and play with composure and discipline," Gawali said ahead of the match.

India, though, come into the tournament as one of the

favourites, carrying an impressive pedigree in the age-group competition. The Blue Colts are four-time champions, having lifted the title in 2019, 2022, 2023 and 2025. That history brings both confidence and expectation, and the current squad will look to

continue the winning tradition.

"We do have some experienced players in the squad, but this is a fresh start for everyone. Football does not go by history. What you do on the day matters. So, we have to stay focused and perform well," said Gawali.

The championship also serves as preparation for the upcoming AFC U20 Asian Cup qualifiers, but the focus within the Indian camp re-

mains firmly on the immediate challenge.

"We want to take it match by match and do our best in this competition," said Gawali.

Pakistan, meanwhile, are known for their physical style of play and will aim to use their strength to disrupt India's rhythm. At the same time, many of their players are only in their second international appearance, which means the side lacks experience at this level.

"Pakistan are a decent side. They gel well and have good young players. But we will try to give our best," said Gawali.

Pakistan coach Shahzad Anwar remains wary about the challenge India will pose on Thursday.

"Our boys will be playing their second international match and India are a tough and experienced team. So, you can understand," Anwar said. With rivalry, qualification stakes, and momentum all in play, Thursday's encounter promises to set the tone for Group B. The match will kick off at 16:15 IST and will be streamed live on the Sportzsworld YouTube channel.

## Australia look to cover Sutherland absence as new ODI era begins

**St Kitts:** Annabel Sutherland's absence from Australia's Caribbean tour is to create competition for a promotion in the one-day side's middle-order, as they enter their new 50-over era under Sophie Molineux.

The three one-day internationals in St Kitts will be Australia's first since Alyssa Healy's retirement, as Molineux and deputies Ashleigh Gardner and Tahlia McGrath take charge of the one-day side.

One of the first selection calls will be to settle on a replacement for Sutherland -

who is sitting out the whirlwind tour to freshen up for the T20 World Cup - at No.5, a position the Victorian has dominated across the past two years.

"We've got an opportunity," Australia coach Shelley Nitschke said in St Kitts on Wednesday.

"We don't have Bels here ... we need to change the order, we need to fill that number five position."

"There's going to be some opportunities there ... what that looks like, we'll need to have a look at the conditions and see

what our best combos are for



that." Gardner looms as the most logical player to shuffle one spot up in the order from

the No.6 position she has thrived in of late, scoring three centuries since the start of 2025.

However the allrounder remains under an injury cloud, having missed the final two T20Is in St Vincent with a hamstring complaint. Gardner returned to training in St Kitts on Wednesday, but Nitschke said a call on her availability would be made closer to the match. "She's tracking pretty well, she was pretty disappointed to miss those matches," Nitschke said of Gardner.

"She's missed a bit of

T20 cricket over the last year or 18 months for Australia ... but hopefully she's on track to return to the team in the ODIs, we'll find out more over the next two days." If Gardner is not available, McGrath would likely gain the benefit of a boost up the order, while Nicola Carey, who is a key middle-order batter for Tasmania, could also be given a look. If further injury concerns were to befall Australia's batters, NSW wicket-keeper Tahlia Wilson has now joined the squad following the WNCL final and offers a back-up option.

## Barcelona thrash Real Madrid 6-2 in Women's Champions League quarterfinal first leg

**Madrid:** FC Barcelona Femení once again showcased its supremacy in Spanish women's football with a commanding 6-2 victory over Real Madrid Femenino in the first leg of their UEFA Women's Champions League quarterfinal clash. The emphatic away win puts Barcelona firmly in control ahead of the return leg.

The match began at a blistering pace, with Barcelona asserting dominance almost immediately. In just the sixth minute, Ewa Pajor opened the scoring with a simple tap-in after a slick passing move orchestrated by Alexia Putellas carved open the Madrid defense.

Barcelona doubled their lead within minutes as Esmee Brugts capitalized on a defensive lapse. A precise cross from Vicky Lopez found Brugts at the far post, and a costly error from goalkeeper Misa Rodríguez allowed the ball to slip through for the second goal.

Despite the early setback, Madrid responded through Linda Caicedo, who briefly reignited hope for the home side. Timing her run perfectly to beat the offside trap, she rounded goalkeeper Cata Coll and calmly slotted the ball into the net.

However, Barcelona restored their two-goal cushion almost immediately. De-

fender Irene Paredes rose highest from a corner to power in a header, reaffirming Barcelona's control of the match. In the second half, Pajor struck again to make it 4-1, demonstrating sharp movement and composure as she slipped between defenders and beat Rodríguez. Her brace further widened the gap and dented Madrid's hopes of a comeback. Barcelona continued their relentless attack, with Vicky Lopez adding a fifth goal just minutes later. The move was set up by Caroline Graham Hansen, whose pace and creativity on the right flank created space before delivering a precise cut-back.

## Allianz Jio Re starts India operations after IRDAI nod

**Chennai:** Allianz Jio Reinsurance Limited on Thursday announced the commencement of its operations to underwrite reinsurance contracts in India, marking a significant development in the country's insurance sector.

The company is a 50:50 joint venture between Jio Financial Services Limited (JFSL) and Allianz Group, through its wholly owned subsidiary Allianz Europe B.V. The partnership brings together domestic market reach and global insurance expertise.

Allianz Jio Re received its final regulatory approval from the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (IRDAI) on March 12, 2026, enabling it to formally begin operations in the Indian reinsurance market.

Headquartered in Mumbai, the company aims to position itself as a long-term strategic partner for insurers in India. Its primary objective is to strengthen the resilience of the country's insurance ecosystem by enhancing risk-bearing capacity.

The launch comes at a time when structural growth drivers are supporting the expansion of India's insurance

sector. This aligns with the national vision of achieving "Insurance for All" by 2047, a key policy goal aimed at increasing insurance penetration across the country.

The joint venture combines JFSL's strong domestic distribution network and digital infrastructure with Allianz's global expertise in underwriting and reinsurance. This synergy is expected to help insurers better manage risks and scale their operations.

Hitesh Sethia, Managing Director and CEO of JFSL, described the launch as a pivotal milestone in the broader insurance partnership between the two entities. He highlighted that the venture will enhance the industry's capacity to absorb risks.

He added that the company remains committed to strengthening India's financial resilience by supporting insurers with improved risk solutions and contributing to the overall growth of the insurance ecosystem.

Chris Townsend, Member of the Board of Management at Allianz SE, said the joint venture is well positioned to offer innovative and robust risk solutions tailored to the Indian market.

He emphasized that the collaboration combines Alli-

anz's global technical expertise with a deep understanding of India's digital and financial landscape, enabling the creation of a sustainable reinsurance franchise in the country.

The new entity will be led by Sonia Rawal as Chief Executive Officer. She brings over 17 years of experience in risk management and reinsurance across the Asia-Pacific region.

Prior to this role, Rawal was associated with Allianz Reinsurance in Singapore, where she handled responsibilities related to India and ASEAN markets since 2016, giving her strong regional expertise.

Her leadership is expected to play a crucial role in shaping the company's strategy and expanding its footprint in India's evolving reinsurance sector.

In addition to launching reinsurance operations, the two partners have also signed a non-binding agreement to explore opportunities in general and life insurance segments, indicating plans for deeper collaboration. This move signals a broader ambition to build a comprehensive insurance ecosystem in India, leveraging both companies' strengths across multiple verticals.

## DPIIT signs MoU with KRAFTON to accelerate innovation among startups

**New Delhi:** The Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT) has signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with KRAFTON India Pvt Ltd to support startups, innovators and entrepreneurs across the country, according to an official statement released on Thursday.

The collaboration is aimed at boosting the growth of product-based startups operating in emerging sectors such as entertainment, online gaming, esports, interactive media and artificial intelligence-driven technologies. The initiative reflects the government's continued push to strengthen India's digital innovation ecosystem. Speaking on the partnership, Sanjiv said the collaboration marks an important step in advancing India's digital and creative economy. He emphasized that such alliances would enable startups to innovate, scale up operations and develop global competitive solutions in high-growth technology domains. Under the agreement, DPIIT will work closely with KRAFTON India to organise innovation-driven programmes. These include initiatives under the Bharat Startup Grand Challenge, as



well as targeted hackathons, workshops and masterclasses across various domains.

The identified focus areas for these programmes include game design, animation, immersive technologies, esports management and applications of artificial intelligence. These sectors are witnessing rapid growth and offer significant opportunities for Indian startups. The partnership is structured to provide startups with access to mentorship and expert guidance from industry

leaders. It will also facilitate knowledge exchange and create platforms for collaboration between innovators and established players. In addition, participating startups will benefit from curated engagement opportunities, enabling them to connect with potential investors, partners and stakeholders within the ecosystem. This is expected to accelerate their growth trajectory. A key objective of the initiative is to help startups achieve critical development milestones.

These include Proof-of-Concept (PoC) validation, which is essential for transforming ideas into viable products. The collaboration will also support startups in gaining market access, allowing them to test and scale their solutions in real-world environments. Integration into broader industry ecosystems is another major focus area. By bridging the gap between innovation and commercialization, the partnership aims to create a robust pipeline of scalable and

sustainable startups in the digital and creative sectors.

The initiative also aligns with the government's broader vision of promoting entrepreneurship and fostering innovation-led economic growth. Strengthening such ecosystems is seen as vital for enhancing India's global competitiveness. KRAFTON India's involvement brings valuable expertise from the global gaming and interactive media industry. Its experience is expected to help Indian startups better understand international standards and market dynamics. The collaboration is particularly significant for the gaming and esports sectors, which have been expanding rapidly in India, driven by increased smartphone penetration and digital adoption. Experts believe that initiatives like this will not only boost startup growth but also create employment opportunities and encourage skill development in cutting-edge technologies. Overall, the MoU between DPIIT and KRAFTON India represents a strategic effort to nurture innovation, support entrepreneurs and position India as a key player in the global digital and creative economy.

## Middle East conflict to reduce India's fertilisers production by 10-15pc: Crisil

**New Delhi:** The supply chain disruptions due to the ongoing Middle East conflict could reduce India's annual domestic production of urea and complex fertilisers by 10-15 per cent. The disruption in availability of key raw materials is also expected to weigh on capacity utilisation and dent profitability across fertiliser manufacturers, said Crisil Ratings in a report.



The constrained supplies of critical inputs such as natural gas, ammonia and phosphoric acid—most of which are imported—could lead to lower plant utilisation levels. This, in turn, may impact operating efficiencies, particularly for urea producers, where profitability is closely linked to energy consumption norms.

Rising input costs are likely to further strain the sector. Prices of ammonia have already surged about 24 per cent since the onset of the conflict, while higher import costs for fertilisers could

push up working capital requirements for companies. This is also expected to increase the government's fertiliser subsidy burden by Rs 20,000-25,000 crore, Crisil Ratings said.

Despite these pressures, the report highlighted that the sector's credit profile will remain supported by strong liquidity among large fertiliser companies and the government's consistent track record of timely subsidy disbursements.

India's fertiliser consumption remains heavily skewed towards urea, which accounts for around 45 per

cent of total usage. Complex fertilisers such as diammonium phosphate (DAP) and NPK make up about one-third, while single super phosphate (SSP) and muriate of potash (MOP) constitute the remainder.

Import dependence continues to be significant. Around 20 per cent of urea and nearly one-third of complex fertilisers are imported, with the Middle East accounting for nearly 40 per cent of these imports in the first nine months of FY26. The region's importance is even more pronounced for raw materials, supplying

about 60-65 per cent of India's LNG needs and 75-80 per cent of ammonia imports.

Lower capacity utilisation is expected to disproportionately affect urea manufacturers, as suboptimal plant operations reduce energy efficiency. Typically, efficient players consume about 5 per cent less energy than prescribed norms, which boosts margins.

However, reduced utilisation could erode this advantage, impacting operating profits. Companies with multiple plants may partially offset this by optimising gas allocation.

West Asia accounts for 26.2 per cent of India's fertiliser imports, followed by Jordan at 19.2 per cent and Russia at 15.5 per cent. Further, Morocco accounts for 10.4 per cent, China at 5.7 per cent, Egypt at 5.6 per cent, Canada at 3.8 per cent and Togo at 3.6 per cent, while others account for 10 per cent.

## ASMS Partners US Firms to Develop Tech-Driven Aquaculture Ecosystem

**Hyderabad:** Avio Smart Market Stack Limited (ASMS), formerly known as Bartronics India Limited, on Wednesday announced that it has signed a strategic Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with US-based Aquasafra Holdings Inc. and Waterfield Farms Inc. to develop technology-driven aquaculture and fisheries ecosystems.

The collaboration aims to create scalable and commercially viable aquaculture models by combining advanced technologies with sustainable practices. According to the company, the initiative will focus on integrating high-quality tilapia genetics, efficient farming methods, and strong supply chain linkages.

Aquasafra Holdings will contribute its expertise in high-performance tilapia genetics, including hybrid seed stock engineered for faster growth, improved survival rates, and adaptability to diverse farming environments. The company also brings capabilities in hatchery systems, feed optimization, and farm design.

ASMS, on its part, will leverage its extensive rural distribution network, which spans over 5,000 villages, along with its digital ecosystem. This infrastructure will help deploy aquaculture technologies at scale and expand oppor-

tunities in rural and peri-urban regions across India.

The partnership also plans to establish region-specific hatcheries and modern aquaculture systems tailored to local conditions. These initiatives are expected to improve productivity while ensuring sustainability in fish farming practices.

A key focus area will be the development of aquaponics-based models, which combine aquaculture with agriculture to create efficient, climate-resilient farming systems. Such integrated approaches are increasingly seen as vital for addressing environmental challenges and resource constraints.

In addition, the collaboration will explore feed optimization strategies to reduce costs and improve yield efficiency. Lake and reservoir stocking programs are also on the agenda, aimed at enhancing fish production in natural and semi-natural water bodies.

The companies emphasized capacity-building as a critical component of the initiative. Training programs will be designed for farmers, cooperatives, and agri-entrepreneurs to equip them with the skills needed to adopt modern aquaculture techniques. ASMS stated that this partnership aligns with its broader strategy under Project AVIO Agritech,

which seeks to expand the company's presence in high-value sectors such as fisheries and water resource management.

Commenting on the development, Dr. Raja Krishnamurthy M highlighted that the collaboration would help boost rural incomes and diversify agricultural value chains by combining global expertise with local reach. He noted that the integration of advanced aquaculture technologies with ASMS's grassroots network could create new livelihood opportunities and strengthen the resilience of rural economies. The partnership will also explore joint research initiatives focused on improving disease resistance in fish, enhancing climate-resilient production systems, and optimizing water management practices. Such research efforts are expected to play a crucial role in ensuring long-term sustainability and productivity in the fisheries sector, especially in the face of changing climate conditions. Overall, the MoU marks a significant step toward modernizing aquaculture in India by bringing together international expertise and local distribution capabilities.

The collaboration is poised to contribute to the growth of the fisheries sector while supporting sustainable and inclusive rural development.

## Credit flows accelerated sharply in FY26 rising 61pc to Rs 25.1tn: Report

**New Delhi:** A report released by YES Bank on Thursday highlighted a sharp acceleration in credit flows during FY26, signalling strong demand across key sectors of the economy. Credit growth surged 61 per cent year-to-date (YTD) to ₹25.1 trillion, nearly matching deposit mobilisation, which stood at ₹26.1 trillion with a comparatively modest 21 per cent growth.

The report, titled "MSME and Retail-led Credit Pull in FY26", noted that while credit demand has remained robust, deposit growth has lagged behind since 2024. This divergence reflects structural shifts in savings and borrowing patterns within the economy.

According to the findings, sectors such as retail, infrastructure and MSMEs have been the primary drivers of credit demand. These segments have shown resilience despite broader macroeconomic uncertainties, sustaining lending momentum for banks.

One of the key concerns flagged in the report is the slowdown in fresh deposit mobilisation. This has been attributed to lower net financial savings among households, particularly within the housing sector, which has traditionally contributed significantly to bank deposits.

The report pointed out that the Cash-to-Deposit (C/D) ratio has climbed to 82.4 per cent, the highest level since FY15. This indicates tightening liquidity conditions in the banking system, as credit growth begins to outpace deposit inflows.

With liquidity buffers shrinking, banks are increasingly turning to alternative funding sources such as Certificates of Deposit (CDs). This shift has resulted in higher funding costs, partially offsetting the benefits of a relatively accommodative monetary policy environment.

Sectoral data in the report shows that personal loans are leading the credit expansion. The share of personal loans in total credit has risen from 29 per cent to 33 per cent in recent years, reflecting stronger consumer demand and improved household income conditions. Policy measures such as GST rationalisation and tax reliefs have also contributed to this trend by boosting disposable income, thereby encouraging consumption-led borrowing. Within the personal loan category, vehicle loans have emerged as the fastest-growing segment, overtaking housing loans since the third quarter of FY26. This shift indicates

changing consumer preferences and increased demand for mobility.

The MSME sector has also played a significant role in driving credit growth. Micro and small enterprises added ₹2.38 trillion in credit, while medium enterprises contributed ₹630 billion, supported by government initiatives and enhanced definitions for MSMEs.

Budgetary measures, including expanded credit guarantee schemes, have further strengthened lending to this segment, improving access to finance for smaller businesses.

However, the report cautioned that external risks could impact the sustainability of this growth trajectory. Ongoing geopolitical tensions in West Asia, particularly any escalation in conflict, could lead to higher energy prices and economic disruptions.

Elevated oil prices may increase input costs for businesses, potentially driving higher demand for working capital loans. At the same time, weaker domestic economic activity could reduce overall credit demand.

The report also warned that exports to the region could decline if geopolitical instability persists, further affecting domestic growth prospects.

## Adhira & Appa Coffee onboards Shruti Haasan, Murali Sharma as brand ambassadors; Eyes nationwide expansion

**Hyderabad:** Adhira & Appa Coffee, part of the EBG Group, on Thursday announced the onboarding of actors Shruti Haasan and Murali Sharma as brand ambassadors, marking a key step in its ambitious national expansion plans.

The café chain, built on the philosophy of sustainability and authenticity, aims to popularise South Indian filter coffee across India. The company said it seeks to align itself with the evolving quick service restaurant (QSR) and beverage landscape, where demand for speciality and culturally rooted offerings is on the rise.

According to the company, its coffee is crafted using premium beans and processes that significantly reduce carbon emissions compared to conventional methods. In-house sourcing plays a crucial role in reinforcing its sustainability-focused identity.

With strong early momentum, the brand has outlined aggressive expansion plans, targeting 400 outlets across major metropolitan and Tier-2 cities by next year. This scale-up reflects growing consumer interest in artisanal coffee experiences.

Currently, Adhira & Appa Coffee operates in



multiple cities including Kochi, Nagpur, Hyderabad, Pune, Dehradun, Indore, Chandigarh, Nashik and Bengaluru.

The company is now preparing to expand into new markets such as Mumbai, Lucknow, Prayagraj, Raipur and Ludhiana, among others, as part of its next growth phase.

The association with Shruti Haasan and Murali Sharma reflects the brand's vision of blending tradition with modern appeal. The company aims to connect with both younger urban audiences and consumers seeking authentic, culturally rooted experiences.

Speaking about the collaboration, Murali Sharma expressed enthusiasm for being part of a brand that celebrates India's rich coffee heritage while prioritizing sustainability. He noted that

the café would resonate with those looking for genuine South Indian filter coffee.

Shruti Haasan echoed similar sentiments, stating that the brand captures the essence of South Indian filter coffee while adding a contemporary twist. She also highlighted her excitement about promoting authentic flavours alongside eco-conscious practices.

Irfan Khan, Chairman of EBG Group, said the partnership aligns with the group's broader vision of combining cultural roots with quality and sustainability while scaling operations nationwide. Karan Mendon, Chief Operating Officer of the brand, highlighted its curated menu offerings, which include innovative items such as dosa, tacos, medu vada waffles and filter coffee tiramisu, catering to evolving consumer tastes.

## KKL Group Launches First EV Dealership in Hyderabad, Plans Rapid Expansion

**Hyderabad:** KKL Group on Wednesday marked its entry into the Telangana market with the launch of its first electric vehicle (EV) dealership, "DANDU'S Electrical Vehicles," in Hyderabad. The move signals the company's intent to tap into the growing demand for clean mobility solutions in the region.

The dealership was inaugurated by former Director General of Police C N Gopinath Reddy, who currently serves as Chairman of KKL Hitech EV India Pvt Ltd. The event was attended by representatives from industry and government, highlighting the significance of the company's expansion. Speaking at the inauguration, Reddy said the initiative aligns with India's broader push toward sustainable transportation and clean energy adoption.

He emphasized that the company is keen to strengthen its presence in the fast-growing EV segment, especially in the two-wheeler category. KKL Group has outlined an ambitious expansion strategy in Telangana, planning to add around five dealerships per month starting from the financial year 2026-27. The company aims to establish a strong footprint across key urban centers.

Cities targeted for expansion include Warangal, Karimnagar, Nizamabad and Khammam, in addition to Hyderabad. This phased rollout is expected to significantly enhance accessibility to EV products in the state.

In the near term, the company plans to open around 10 dealerships by May 2026. Each dealership is expected to sell approximately 200 units per month, reflecting KKL's confidence in rising consumer demand.

Reddy noted that the EV market in Telangana is still at a nascent stage, with electric vehicles accounting for only about 1 per cent of total vehicle sales. This low penetration, he said, presents substantial growth opportunities for new entrants. KKL currently offers a diverse range of electric vehicles, including scooters, bikes, auto-loaders, and compact mini cars. These vehicles are priced between ₹50,000 and ₹1.5 lakh, making them accessible to a broad segment of consumers. All models are equipped with lithium-ion battery technology, ensuring better efficiency, durability, and performance. The company aims to combine affordability with modern features to attract first-time EV buyers.