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# 40 killed, 100 injured in explosion at Switzerland bar on New Year's Eve

**At least 40 people were killed in an explosion at a luxury bar in the Swiss ski resort town of Crans-Montana as hundreds gathered for celebrations on New Year's Eve.**

**New Delhi .(Agency)**

At least 40 people were killed and 100 others were injured after a blast tore through a luxury bar in Switzerland and triggered a massive fire during New Year's Eve celebrations, the Italian Foreign Ministry said, citing Swiss police. However, the police said the toll would not be more specific than "tens". Swiss authorities said the blast, which happened at the basement of the Le Constellation Bar and Lounge in the ski resort town of Crans-Montana, was being considered a fire and not



a terror attack. More than 150 people were in the bar at the time of the explosion. The incident comes as Switzerland has been grappling with forest fires amid an unusual period of drought.

Swiss media suggested that the blast could have been caused by fireworks during a concert, but police say the cause is unknown. A doctor said hospitals in Crans-Montana were overwhelmed with burn victims.

Videos circulating on social media show huge plumes of smoke billowing out from the bar following the incident.

"There has been an explosion of unknown origin. There are several injured and several dead," Gaetan Lathion, a police spokesman, told AFP.

Police said a helpline for families of

those affected has been set up. A no-fly zone has also been imposed over Crans-Montana.

Beatrice Pilloud, the prosecutor-general of Switzerland's Valais canton, said authorities have launched an investigation to determine the circumstances that led to the "dramatic situation", BBC reported.

Pilloud said investigators are currently working on the assumption that the incident was caused by a fire, stressing that there is no indication at this stage of any attack.

Out of respect for the bereaved families, she said she could not

share further details for now. Pilloud added that efforts are underway to identify the victims and ensure that their bodies are returned to their families as swiftly as possible. Pilloud stated that the process involves extensive forensic and investigative work, which will require the temporary closure of the district.

Crans-Montana, located in the heart of the picturesque Swiss Alps, is a hugely popular tourist hotspot and attracts global visitors for activities such as skiing, snowboarding and golf. The ski resort is approximately two hours from the Swiss capital of Bern.

## Congress Likens Rahul Gandhi To Lord Ram, BJP's "Sycophancy Pro Max" Jab

**Nana Patole, while responding to a question about Gandhi not visiting the newly constructed Ram Temple in Ayodhya so far, said that the senior Congress leader is "doing the work of Lord Ram".**

**New Delhi .(Agency)**

Congress leader Nana Patole has sparked a political row after he compared Rahul Gandhi to Lord Ram, with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) calling it "sycophancy pro max". Patole, while responding to a question about Gandhi not visiting the newly constructed Ram Temple in Ayodhya so far, said that the senior Congress leader is "doing the work of Lord Ram".

"Because Lord Ram's work was to ensure justice for harassed and deprived - Rahul Gandhi is doing the same. He likes to do this service instead of doing a photo session at the Ram Temple," he said while taking an indirect dig at Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The Congress leader also recalled that it was Rajiv Gandhi behind the opening of the lock at the Ram Temple.

The BJP has been hitting out at Gandhi for not visiting the temple since its inauguration. BJP leaders hit out at Patole, saying the party is "insulting Hindu faith".

"Once again, the Congress Party has



shown sycophancy pro max. The Congress Party says that Rahul Gandhi is like Lord Ram.

Just recently, they said Sonia Gandhi was the reason why Christmas can be celebrated. What kind of sycophancy? And then you are insulting the Hindu

faith? This is the same Congress Party that says Ram Mandir should not be built. This is the same Congress Party that says Ram Mandir Prana Prathishtha is 'naach gaana'. They keep attacking and insulting the Hindu faith," BJP leader Shehzad Poonawalla said.

BJP Spokesperson CR Kesavan questioned Patole if he would dare ask Rahul Gandhi why he "mocked" the 'Praan Pratishtha' as 'naach gaana' or why he has not visited the Ram Temple yet.

Calling the Congress leader's remark an "unforgivable, grievous insult to the faith and sentiments of the crores of Hindu devotees", Kesavan said, "Nana Patole had earlier disgracefully asked for the Shuddikaran of the Ayodhya Ram Mandir after our

President Droupadi Murmu had visited the Ram Temple and prayed for the welfare of our country. Nana Parole's disgraceful remarks and devious mindset are indefensible and most condemnable."

## State-level campaign "Sade Buzurg Sada Maan" to commence from January 16: Dr Baljit Kaur

**The Sikh Times**

Chandigarh, January 1: The Punjab Government, led by Chief Minister S. Bhagwant Singh Mann, is working with continuous sensitivity and commitment to ensure the welfare, security and dignified life of senior citizens. In this regard, Punjab's Minister for Social Security, Women and Child Development, Dr Baljit Kaur, announced during a press conference held at Punjab Bhawan, Chandigarh today that the state-level campaign "Sade Buzurg Sada Maan" will be launched from January 16, 2026, starting from District SAS Nagar (Mohali). Dr Baljit Kaur said that International Day of Older Persons is observed every year on October 1, and in this context, the Punjab Government has been implementing the "Sade Buzurg Sada Maan" campaign since 2023. During the camps organised in 2023, a total of 20,110 registrations were recorded, under which facilities such as eye check-ups, ENT check-ups, cataract surgery screening, distribution of spectacles, pension forms, Senior Citizen Cards and Ayushman Cards were provided. She further stated that continuing this initiative, the campaign will again be organised across the

state in 2026 through district-wise camps. These camps will provide senior citizens with free health services, cataract surgeries, geri-

be spent by the Punjab Government on senior citizens' welfare, including healthcare services, Old Age Homes, Day



atric check-ups, ENT check-ups, yoga sessions, legal awareness and other essential services. Dr Baljit Kaur informed that under the State Action Plan for Senior Citizens for the financial year 2025-26, an amount of Rs 786.83 lakh will be spent. The plan includes free medical camps, NCD and dementia screening, training of geriatric caregivers, and state-level media and awareness campaigns. In addition, a toll-free helpline number 14567 is being operated to address issues faced by senior citizens. She clarified that nearly Rs 24 crore will

Care Centres, awareness campaigns and other related activities, reflecting the strong commitment of the Mann Government towards the well-being of the elderly. Dr Baljit Kaur stated that under the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007, legal provisions have been made to protect the rights of senior citizens, and thousands of cases have been resolved so far through Maintenance Tribunals and Appellate Tribunals.

Contd.....page-3

## Good luck, Vijay! Chidambaram claps back after star's DMK vs TVK fight remark

**Chennai .(Agency)**

Senior Congress leader P Chidambaram on Thursday said that while he wished actor-politician Vijay well, his political efforts would not succeed, asserting that the INDIA alliance would emerge victorious. Responding to Vijay's claim that the electoral contest would be only between TVK and DMK, Chidambaram said, "My wishes to Vijay but his attempts will not succeed." He expressed strong confidence in the opposition bloc, saying, "Only INDI Alliance will win and there is no doubt about it in my heart."

Chidambaram said the alliance's strength lay in its experience. "This is because INDI Alliance



is very strong, faced several elections and knows how to conduct election campaigns," he said, adding that electoral contests depend on individual constituencies, but reiterated his belief that the alliance would prevail. On seat-sharing, Chidambaram declined to specify numbers and said decisions would be taken through discussions. When asked how many seats the Congress was planning to seek, he replied, "How many seats do you think we can ask?" Reacting to speculation that the Congress might seek 40 seats, he said it was routine for journalists to raise such questions and that the matter would be settled through talks. "In the end, the seats will be decided by the DMK leader and the Congress leader. Anyone can express their opinion, but the decision is taken by the two leaders," he said.

## Regional Leaders may take the centrestage

**New Delhi .(Agency)**

They may be rooted in their states, yet their voices always shape debate. With 2026 bringing elections, some of them have moved from edges to the centre. Mamata Banerjee, M K Stalin, Akhilesh Yadav, and Pinarayi Vijayan draw particular notice by taking positions beyond state borders. On the other hand, Priyanka Gandhi Vadra is redefining her role on the national stage, while the likes of Shashi Tharoor, and K C Venugopal have stepped into focus.

Priyanka entered Parliament after contesting the Wayanad by-election in 2024, following Rahul Gandhi's decision to retain Raebareilly. She described the move as support for her brother, but her role has expanded. Her speeches in Parliament and public meetings

added momentum to the Congress narrative. Without seeking to rival Rahul Gandhi, she has signalled scope for a wider role. Her interaction with the prime minister during the winter session drew notice, yet her test in 2026 will be turning reach into results.

In Tamil Nadu, M K Stalin has pushed questions of federal balance. His government has challenged the governor's role, sought changes in tax sharing, argued for control over education, and moved court on the SIR. As the state prepares for elections, his record will face scrutiny, with effects beyond the state.

Kerala's Pinarayi Vijayan enters the next election cycle after losses in local body polls. He has led protests against central policies on citizenship, voter revision, and fiscal



matters. His tenure has included responses to floods and the pandemic. Welfare schemes helped the Left secure a second term, but fatigue and a Congress-led challenge may affect hopes for a third.

In West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee remains

pivot of the Trinamool Congress campaign. Despite attacks over corruption claims and minority politics, she has relied on ground mobilisation and attacks on the BJP. While keeping distance from the INDIA bloc, voices within the opposition project her as a national face. Any erosion of the party's base would test her hold. Shashi Tharoor draws attention through comments that question Congress positions and at times acknowledge government actions. Though speculation of a switch persists, he maintains loyalty to the party and is seen as a possible chief ministerial choice in Kerala. For him, 2026 may clarify direction.

As Congress prepares for contests, K.C. Venugopal oversees organisation and alliances.

## India belongs to everyone: RSS chief's unity pitch after racial attack on student

**Raipur .(Agency)**

Amid growing concern over attacks on migrants and the recent death of a Tripura student after an alleged racial attack in Dehradun, RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat called for unity and social harmony, stressing that India belongs to everyone and people must not be judged by caste, wealth, language or region. On Wednesday, addressing a gathering in Sonpairi village, Chhattisgarh, Bhagwat said, "Do not judge people by caste, wealth, language or region. Treat everyone as your own. The entire India is mine."

Anjel Chakma, a final-year MBA student, died on December 26 after being hospitalised for 17 days after the attack at a roadside canteen in Dehradun. His father has alleged that Anjel was assaulted while defending his younger brother, who was

allegedly targeted with racial slurs and called "Chinese". The attackers reportedly used sharp and blunt objects after Anjel asserted his Indian identity.

The RSS chief reiterated that the first step toward harmony is to eliminate feelings of separation and discrimination, urging all to see each other as equals. "The first step towards harmony is removing feelings of separation and discrimination from one's mind and treating everyone as one's own. The entire country belongs to everyone and this spirit is true social harmony," the RSS chief added.

Bhagwat also advocated for open access to public facilities and religious spaces, urging that these should be available to all



without distinction. He described such measures as acts of unity rather than sources of conflict, signalling the importance of equal opportunity in public life. His appeal was a reminder of the constitutional principles of equality and non-discrimination. Referring to rising crimes against minorities in Bangladesh,

Bhagwat called for introspection and constructive solutions. "We are Hindus and wherever we see issues, whether related to our personal life or national. Discussions over it never reap any good. We must always ponder about the solutions."

"If we are stable then no crisis can touch us. Hindu samaj has such intellect. No Hindu should discriminate within themselves." His remarks encouraged stability and internal solidarity as responses to external challenges.

Addressing the issue of religious conversions, Bhagwat attributed the trend to a loss of trust within society. He suggested that reconnecting with people at the grassroots level is essential to reversing this trend, pointing to the need for renewed social bonds and engagement.

News box

## Man feared drowned in drain in Gurgaon, his kin allege foul play

Gurgaon.(Agency)

Search is underway for a 40-year-old man, who was feared drowned after falling into an open drain in Daulatabad village on Tuesday night. The family of Arjun, a resident of Firoz Gandhi Colony, has raised doubts over the sequence of events narrated by one of his friends, Rupesh, who is being questioned, police said.

According to police, Arjun went to Daulatabad on Tuesday evening to meet his friends. The group consumed alcohol near the village bus stop. Rupesh told the police that Arjun, who became heavily intoxicated by 9pm, was unable to return home. He booked a Rapido bike to send Arjun back, but when the latter failed to move, he was made to lie down at the bus stop while Rupesh returned home. Later in the night, after Arjun's father called, Rupesh went back to the bus stop to take him home on his bike. He told police that before sitting on the bike, Arjun stood near the bus stop to relieve himself. During this time, he allegedly lost his balance and fell into an open drain running alongside the road. Rupesh claimed that he immediately jumped into the drain in an attempt to rescue Arjun, but could not find him.

## 4 Nepalese among 5 held in WhatsApp stock scam in Gurgaon

Gurgaon.(Agency)

Five people, including four Nepalese nationals who cheated people through WhatsApp groups and fake trading apps by luring them with promises of high returns in the stock market and IPO investments, were arrested on Tuesday. Sher Bahadur Karki, Milan Thapa, Yanjay Ray and Manish, all residents of Nepal, and Virendra Pal Singh, a resident of Patiala in Punjab, were arrested from Gurgaon's Rajendra Park by a team of Cyber Crime (south) police, who seized seven mobile phones, 20 ATM cards, 18 cheque books and four bank passbooks. Police said a case was registered on Nov 1 after a complaint received from a victim, who was duped through WhatsApp groups and fraudulent mobile applications offering assured profits.

Police spokesperson Sandeep Kumar said, "Around Rs 2 lakh from the cheated amount was routed into a bank account of a firm named Tara Logistics Private Limited. The account was fraudulently opened in the firm's name by Milan and Sher and later sold to Manish for Rs 5,000. Manish then sold the account to Virendra for a 5% commission on the money transferred to it. Virendra further passed it on to another person for a 2% commission."

## Gang that stole bikes in Noida busted, three arrested



Noida.(Agency)

Police have busted a two-wheeler theft gang on Wednesday and arrested three accused, recovering nine stolen motorcycles and several vehicle parts.

Those arrested include the gang leader Phool Singh alias Monu (22) of Sambhal district, and his associates Rajendra alias Chhote and Rajpal alias Bhola, both around 20 years old and residents of Badaun district.

DCP Yamuna Prasad said multiple complaints of motorcycle theft had been received from the Sector 113 area in recent days, following which a special team led by additional DCP Shavya Goyal was formed. Acting on a tip-off, the team intercepted the accused when they returned to the area to commit another theft.

During interrogation, the accused revealed that they conducted reconnaissance during the day in markets, housing societies and sector roads to identify unattended motorcycles. After assessing the vehicle's condition, the gang leader would finalise the target and call the others to the spot. Using specialised tools, they could break a bike lock within two minutes. One accused would flee with the stolen motorcycle, while the others left separately. Police said the gang had links with scrap dealers in Delhi, where stolen motorcycles were dismantled and sold in parts at inflated prices.

The proceeds were shared among the members, with Monu taking a 40% share and the remaining two splitting the rest. Investigations also revealed that the gang carried out thefts on demand.

## Bread with no tags seized from outlet in Noida

Noida.(Agency)

Over 42 kg of Italian white bread loaves without a mandatory expiry or 'use by' date were seized from a leading fast food chain outlet, renowned for its sandwiches in Sector 121, Noida, after the food safety department intensified inspections across GB Nagar ahead of New Year celebrations.

The assistant commissioner (food), Sarvesh Kumar, said, "The absence of expiry details amounts to a serious violation of food safety norms. A show-cause notice has been issued to the manufacturing unit supplying the bread." He added that food items without proper labelling or expiry details pose a direct risk to consumers and clear information on shelf life is mandatory under the Food Safety and Standards Act. Umar said the action was part of a coordinated enforcement drive underway ahead of New Year celebrations in the city. Multiple teams from the food safety department inspected and collected samples from restaurants, cafes and fast-food chains across Noida, Greater Noida and the Jewar area.

# Gurgaon—Faridabad road horror: Woman gang-raped after leaving home post-argument with mother; thrown from van at 90 kmph

Noida.(Agency)

A 25-year-old woman, who left her home after a heated argument with her mother over a personal matter and had informed her sister that she was going to a friend's place, was allegedly gang-raped and brutally assaulted inside a moving van before being thrown out on the Gurgaon—Faridabad road. The attack left her with severe facial injuries, requiring 12 stitches. She left the house on Monday night at around 8:30 pm. According to police, the woman had initially planned to return home within a few hours but got delayed. By midnight, with no public transport available, she accepted a lift in a van occupied by two men. Instead of taking her home, the vehicle was allegedly driven towards isolated stretches on the Gurgaon—Faridabad road, beyond the Hanuman temple, as dense fog covered the area. The woman was held captive inside the van for nearly three hours, police said. Despite her



repeated cries for help, the sparse traffic and the cold, foggy conditions meant that no one came to her aid. The victim's

family alleged that the two men took turns raping her during the ordeal. Around 3 am on Tuesday, she was

reportedly pushed out of the moving van near Mula Hotel at Raja Chowk in SGM Nagar. The woman managed to call her sister, who reached the spot and took her to Badshah Khan Civil Hospital. Given the seriousness of her injuries, the doctors advised that the woman be taken to Delhi, but the family admitted her to a private hospital in Faridabad. Police said the woman was driven around through the night and was thrown out of the vehicle, which was moving at a speed of over 90 kmph, near Raja Chowk at around 3 am, according to a PTI report. Following a complaint filed by the woman's family at Kotwali police station, authorities registered an FIR. Police have also arrested two men in connection with the alleged gang rape, and the van used in the crime, a Maruti Suzuki Eeco, has been seized.

Police confirmed that the woman had been held against her will as the van traversed deserted stretches of Faridabad.

## Gurgaon civic body bars payments to contractors for sewer overflow

Gurgaon.(Agency)

In a bid to curb recurring sewer overflows, MCG announced on Wednesday that no payments will be allowed for repeat sewer cleaning caused by contractors' negligence, and the full cost of such works will be recovered from contractors or, in cases of supervisory lapses, from the concerned executive engineers.

The directive, issued by additional commissioner Yash Jaluka, follows repeated instances where temporary blockages placed to stop sewage flow during desilting operations were not removed after work was completed. Officials said such negligence led to clogged sewer lines, overflows, and severe inconvenience to residents, forcing the civic body to undertake repeat cleaning at public expense.

Under the new instructions, if a contractor fails to remove temporary blockages after desilting, the full cost of clearing the sewer line will be recovered from the contractor, and no separate payment will be allowed for rectifying problems arising from their own negligence. The order also directs officers not to entertain or process any bills related to repeat sewer cleaning caused by such lapses. "In future, if it is found that a contractor fails to remove any temporary blockage after completion of sewer desilting work, the entire cost of clearing the sewer line shall be recovered from the concerned contractor. No separate payment shall be made to the contractor for clearing such blockages arising due to their own negligence," read the order issued by Jaluka on Wednesday. Responsibility has also been assigned to the engineering hierarchy. Executive engineers will be personally accountable for ensuring that temporary blockages are removed immediately after work is completed. If bills are cleared for repeat sewer cleaning due to a contractor's negligence, the expenditure will be recovered from the executive engineer concerned.

# Cops reunite mute child with family in one day in Gurgaon

Gurgaon.(Agency)

On Dec 26, parents of an 11-year-old boy, both daily-wage labourers, approached the police in panic. The mute child had gone missing while they were away at work. Thanks to inspiring policing that involved civilians, who "helped increase reach and speed", the boy was reunited with his parents within 24 hours, police said. He is healthy and safe. However, the challenge was severe — while the boy could not speak and was unable to communicate his address, identity, or even his parents' names, the family didn't own a mobile phone and had no clear photograph of the child. The only visual clue available to the police was a small, unclear group photograph. Despite these limitations, an FIR was immediately registered and a search operation was launched without delay. The successful

rescue, carried out by Sector 9A police station, highlighted how quick action and community involvement can make a crucial difference in cases involving vulnerable children.

Speaking about the "unusual approach" taken during the search, sub-inspector of Sector 9A Rajesh Pahal said, "People often question what the police really do on the ground. I called four to five of my friends who are civilians and told them — today you will see our work. I asked them to join the operation and help us search for the child." "They know the local lanes, tea stalls and movement of people better. Their support helped us cover more areas quickly and spread the message faster," Pahal added. Under the supervision of the SHO, police teams began patrolling the area using auto-rickshaws fitted with loudspeakers, making announcements

across Sector 9A and nearby localities. The child's photograph was enlarged from the group image and simple posters were printed and pasted on electricity poles, public transport and shops. Teams also visited slum clusters, markets and transit points to gather local inputs. The breakthrough came on Dec 27, when a resident informed the police about a child matching the description in the Gadoli area near Sector 37D. Police immediately reached the spot and found the boy sitting safely at a tea stall. The stall owner noticed the child was alone and unable to speak. He offered him tea and biscuits and kept him there, ensuring the child remained safe until police arrived.

After completing legal formalities, the boy was reunited with his parents. The parents thanked the police team emotionally for their swift action.

# Dust to waste burning: Gurgaon breathes worst December air in 8 years, records no 'moderate' days

Noida.(Agency)

The city's air quality in Dec was the worst in at least eight years, with the average AQI for the month touching 298. This was higher than 2021's average of 295.9 — the previous peak in the 2018–2025 dataset — and a sharp jump from 236 of Dec 2024.

The data shows the city recorded no 'moderate' air days this Dec. Most days stayed in the 'poor' or 'very poor' categories, with at least 13 days registering AQI levels of 300 or above. The worst phase came between Dec 18 and 22, when the AQI ranged from 322 to 364. Dec averages over the years underline the scale of the spike. The city recorded 202.9 in 2018, 263.7 in 2019, 280.5 in 2020, 295.9 in 2021, 276.6 in 2022, 259.9 in 2023 and 236 in 2024, before rising again this winter to 298. According to experts, the increase reflects a combination of winter meteorology and local emission sources



that remain largely unchanged through the year. Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air (CREA) analyst Manoj Kumar said, "Gurgaon emerged among the worst-polluted cities in the NCR in 2025, with its annual average PM2.5 concentration hovering close to 80 micrograms per cubic metre (µg/m³), an analysis of CPCB data shows. That's almost double the national safe limit of 40 µg/m³ under India's air quality standards and many times higher

than the WHO guideline of 5 µg/m³." "Winters in north India trap pollutants close to the surface because of low mixing height, weak winds and frequent fog. When this combines with steady local emissions from vehicles, industries, waste burning and dust, the baseline air quality worsens. What we are seeing is a higher concentration build-up than last year," he added.

On many days, all four monitoring stations in the city reported 'poor' to 'very poor' air, with spikes linked to calmer wind conditions. The AQI touched 353 on Dec 28, 318 on Dec 29 and 326 on Dec 31. Earlier in the month, Dec 22 recorded 364, one of the highest readings this winter. Officials said Gurgaon's winter air remains a concern, especially with dust and vehicular emissions acting as major contributors.

# Traffic curbs after Noida Sector 18 sees heavy footfall on NYE, Mall of India hits parking capacity early

Gurgaon.(Agency)

Several commuters were left stranded due to barricades and restrictions on vehicle entry and exit in Sector 18 and DLF Mall of India due to heavy footfall on New Year's Eve. The heavy congestion in and around the area led to inconvenience for commuters. DLP parking was also found full by 4pm, and staff directed visitors to use the multilevel parking facility in Sector 18.

Suresh Kumar, a goods truck driver, said he was scheduled to deliver goods in Sector 18 but was stopped by the police and denied entry. "My employer will question me for not delivering the goods, but the fact is that the cops are not allowing entry," he said. Sunita, a resident of Noida's Sector 44, said she had visited Sector 18 in the afternoon and was returning home in the evening when she found all entry and exit points blocked. "The cops have blocked all the entry and exit points and I am stuck. I am



feeling unwell and I need to exit," she said.

Following her request, the police temporarily removed the barricades to allow her to leave before reinstalling them, a move that triggered a heated argument between the police and visitors at the spot. A traffic constable stationed at the barricade near the Gurudwara said he had been instructed to restrict both entry and exit. "I am just following orders," he said. Barricades had also been placed at the

entry gate near the Sector 18 metro station.

SK Jain, president of the Sector 18 market association, said that in previous years the traffic police used to hold meetings with the market association to discuss the implementation of restrictions during such occasions. "This year there was no meeting. The barricades will create confusion among commuters and should be placed temporarily only when required. People exiting the

market should not be stopped," he said.

Meanwhile, parking staff at DLF Mall were also deployed outside to guide visitors. Pravin Ranjan Singh, deputy commissioner of police (traffic), said the police had issued an advisory anticipating traffic pressure on New Year's Eve.

"Accordingly, we have placed barricades to restrict the movement of vehicles at some locations. Traffic police personnel have been deployed near Sector 18, DLF Mall and other areas to manage traffic, and teams have been directed to ensure proper traffic management," he said. The traffic pressure also led to jams under the Film City Flyover and at the GIP Mall and Gardens Galleria mall in the evening. Meanwhile, explaining the traffic situation in Greater Noida, Amarjeet Rathore, a resident of Gaur City, said that there was traffic pressure on Gaur Chowk in the

evening. "There are a number of shopping malls and markets nearby, and people visit them for shopping and parties.

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## NEWS BOX

## Cities around the world welcome 2026 with thunderous fireworks and heightened security

**WORLD. (Agency)**

From Sydney to Paris to New York City, crowds rang in the new year with exuberant celebrations filled with thunderous fireworks or light shows, while others took a more subdued approach. As the clock struck midnight in Japan, temple bells rang and some climbed mountains to see the year's first sunrise, while a light show with somersaulting jet skis twinkled in Dubai. The countdown to 2026 was projected onto the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, while in Moscow people celebrated in the snow.

In New York City's Times Square, revelers braved frigid temperatures to celebrate with the famed New Year's Eve ball drop. In Rio de Janeiro, revelers packed more than 4 kilometers (2 1/2 miles) of the city's Copacabana Beach for concerts and a 12-minute fireworks show, despite high tides that had both organizers and tourists worried and large waves that rocked barges carrying fireworks. Other events were more subdued. Hong Kong held limited celebrations following a recent fire at an apartment complex that killed 161 people. Australia saluted the new year with defiance less than a month after its worst mass shooting in almost 30 years.

### Ball drop in New York City

Crowds bundled up against the chilly temperatures cheered and embraced as the New Year's Eve ball covered in more than 5,000 crystals descended down a pole in Times Square. Revelers wearing tall celebratory hats and light-up necklaces had waited for hours to see the 12,350-pound (5,602-kilograms) ball drop. The festivities also included Tones and I performing John Lennon's "Imagine."

## India Surpasses Japan. When It May Overtake Germany As 3rd Largest Economy

**world. (Agency)**

Before 2025 ended, India overtook Japan to become the world's fourth-biggest economy, with officials hoping to pass Germany within the next three years, according to the government's end-of-year economic review. Data shows that India's nominal gross domestic product (GDP) has reached \$4.18 trillion, placing it in the fourth spot behind the United States, China and Germany. The official confirmation, however, depends on data due in 2026 when final annual GDP figures are released, with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) figures indicating that India will cross over Japan this year. IMF projections for 2026 put India's economy at \$4.51 trillion, compared with Japan's \$4.46 trillion.

"India is among the world's fastest-growing major economies and is well-positioned to sustain this momentum... With GDP valued at \$4.18 trillion, India has surpassed Japan to become the world's fourth-largest economy and is poised to displace Germany from the third rank in the next two-and-a-half to three years, with a projected GDP of \$7.3 trillion by 2030," the government's recently released report, titled "2025: A Defining Year for India's Growth", said. India's upbeat assessment comes despite economic worries after Washington in August hit New Delhi with huge tariffs over its purchases of Russian oil. The government asserted that India's continued growth reflects its "resilience amid persistent global trade uncertainties."

India became the world's fifth-largest economy in 2022, when its GDP overtook that of former colonial ruler Britain, according to IMF figures.

## Bangladesh students party NCP hit by resignations over Jamaat tie-up

**world. (Agency)**

Multiple senior leaders of Bangladesh's newly formed National Citizen Party (NCP) have resigned over the past week, deepening an internal crisis triggered by the party's decision to forge an electoral alliance with the Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami ahead of the February 2026 general elections. At least eight prominent NCP leaders have formally stepped down so far, party sources and social media announcements show. Those who resigned include Tasnim Jara (senior joint member secretary), Arif Sohel and Mir Arshadul Haque (joint member secretaries), Azad Khan Bhasani (chief coordinator of the Farmers Wing), Mohammad Abul Kashem (Feni-3 nomination aspirant), Khaled Saifullah (joint convener), and Khan Muhammad Mursalin, who served as joint chief coordinator and secretary of the party's Election Steering Sub-Committee.

The resignations come amid mounting dissent within the student-led party over its tie-up with Jamaat, which was announced as part of a broader 10-party alliance for the 13th general elections. While only a handful have formally quit, nearly 30 NCP leaders, including several women leaders, have publicly opposed the alliance, warning that it contradicts the party's founding principles and the spirit of the July 2024 uprising that led to the fall of former prime minister Sheikh Hasina.

Khan Muhammad Mursalin, who announced his resignation on social media, described the Jamaat alliance as a betrayal of the movement that gave birth to the NCP. He said the party had failed to uphold the purpose of the July uprising, arguing that its "core force" was sidelined and the July Charter diluted. "The charter was compromised, weakening the uprising and forcing concessions to old political stakeholders," he wrote, calling the decision a major setback for Bangladesh's Gen Z political front.

# Eight dead in US strikes on alleged drug boats: US military

## Taipei, which slammed the two-day war games as "highly provocative and reckless," said the manoeuvre failed to impose a blockade on the island.

**WASHINGTON. (Agency)**

The US military said Wednesday that eight people were killed in multiple new strikes on alleged drug boats, bringing the death toll in Washington's campaign against what it says are narcotics traffickers to at least 115. US Southern Command, which is responsible for American forces operating in Central and South America, announced two sets of strikes, which were carried out on Tuesday and Wednesday.

On Tuesday, "three narco-trafficking vessels traveling as a convoy" were targeted in



"international waters," it said in a statement on X. "Three narco-terrorists aboard the first vessel were killed in the first engagement. The remaining narco-terrorists abandoned the other two vessels, jumping overboard and distancing themselves before follow-on engagements sank their respective vessels," it said. Accompanying the statement, posted

on X, was a video showing the vessels traveling together at sea and then hit by a series of explosions.

The exact location of the strikes was not immediately made clear. Previous strikes have taken place in the Caribbean or the eastern Pacific. The military said it had notified the Coast Guard to "activate the Search and Rescue system," without

offering more details about the fate of those aboard the other boats. Hours later, it issued a second statement about strikes on two more vessels conducted on Wednesday, killing five people. Again, it was not clear where the strikes took place.

Since September, the US military has carried out more than 30 such strikes on what it says are boats used to smuggle drugs to the United States, without providing any concrete evidence that the targeted boats are involved in trafficking. International law experts and rights groups say the strikes likely amount to extrajudicial killings as they have apparently targeted civilians who do not pose an immediate threat to the United States.

In recent months, US President Donald Trump has waged a pressure campaign against Venezuela's leftist President Nicolas Maduro, accusing him of running a drug cartel. Maduro denies the allegation and has accused Washington of seeking regime change to gain access to the Latin American country's massive oil reserves.

## Taiwan's president pledges to defend island's sovereignty after China's military drills

**TAIPEI. (Agency)**

Taiwanese President Lai Ching-te on Thursday vowed to defend the self-ruled island's sovereignty in the face of China's "expansionist ambitions," days after Beijing wrapped up live-fire military drills around the island. "In the face of China's rising expansionist ambitions, the international community is watching to see whether the Taiwanese people have the resolve to defend themselves," Lai said in his New Year's address. "As president, my stance has always been clear: to firmly safeguard national sovereignty, strengthen national defense and the resilience of the whole society, and comprehensively construct an effective deterrence and democratic defense mechanism," he added.

Lai's comments came days after China wrapped up live-fire drills around

Taiwan featuring rocket launches, aircraft and warships. Beijing had expressed anger at a planned U.S. arms sales to Taiwan, as well as at Japan's



new leader's comments that Tokyo could intervene in the event of a Chinese attack on Taiwan. The planned arms sale, valued at more than \$11 billion, is the U.S.'s largest so far to Taiwan. It includes missiles, drones, artillery systems and military software.

The United States is obligated by its own laws to provide Taiwan with the means to defend itself. China claims the self-ruled island as its own territory and threatens to annex it, by force if necessary. China's leader Xi Jinping on Wednesday reiterated those threats in his own televised New Year's address, calling an eventual annexation "unstoppable." Taiwan last year announced a special \$40 billion budget for arms purchases, including to build an air defense system with high-level detection and interception capabilities called the Taiwan Dome.

The budget will be allocated over eight years, from 2026 to 2033, and comes after Lai already pledged to raise defense spending to 5% of the island's GDP, as part of his strategy amid China's threats of invasion. "Facing China's serious military ambitions, Taiwan has no time to wait," Lai said.

## What to know about Trump administration freezing federal child care funds

**All 50 states will be impacted by the review, but the Republican administration is focusing most of its ire on the blue state of Minnesota and is calling for an audit of some of its centers.**

**DHAKA. (Agency)**

The Trump administration has said it is freezing child care funds to all states until they provide more verification about the programs in a move fueled by a series of fraud schemes at Minnesota day care centers run by Somali residents. All 50 states will be impacted by the review, but the Republican administration is focusing most of its ire on the blue state of Minnesota and is calling for an audit of some of its centers. Minnesota Democratic Attorney General Keith Ellison said in a statement Wednesday that he was "exploring all our legal options to ensure that critical childcare



services do not get abruptly slashed based on pretext and grandstanding."

It is unclear how much more robust the verification process for states will be than it already has been. Deputy Secretary of Health and Human Services Jim O'Neill called the decision a response to "blatant fraud that appears to be rampant in Minnesota and across the country" in a social media post announcing the change on Tuesday. Here are some things to know about these moves: More verification needed for all states to get child care funds. All 50 states will have to provide additional levels of verification and administrative data before they receive

more funding from the Child Care and Development Fund, according to a U.S. Department of Health and Human Services spokesperson. However, Minnesota will have to provide even more verification for child care centers that are suspected of fraud, such as attendance and licensing records, past enforcement actions and inspection reports. In his social media post on Tuesday, O'Neill said all Administration for Children and Families payments nationwide would require "justification and a receipt or photo evidence" before money is sent, but the HHS spokesperson said Wednesday that the additional verifications only apply to CCDF payments. Walz says Trump is politicizing the issue.

Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz, the 2024 Democratic vice presidential nominee, said in a social media post that fraudsters are a serious issue that the state has spent years cracking down on but that this is a political move that is part of "Trump's long game."

## Trump joins criticism of Clooney's French passport

**world. (Agency)**

US President Donald Trump piled on criticism Wednesday of a decision to grant Hollywood superstar George Clooney French passports after a junior government official in Paris labelled the move a "double standard". An official decree seen by AFP on Monday showed that 64-year-old Oscar winner Clooney, his wife Amal Alamuddin Clooney and their two children had become French citizens. Trump, whose administration has backed anti-immigration parties in Europe, said that Paris was welcome to the "Ocean's Eleven" star, a long-term Democratic supporter, fundraiser and a vocal critic of the president. "Good News! George and Amal Clooney, two of the worst political prognosticators of all time, have officially become citizens of France which is, sadly, in the midst of a major crime problem because of their absolutely horrendous handling of immigration," Trump said on his Truth Social network.

The news of Clooney and his family becoming French comes ahead of language requirements for citizenship being toughened for everyone else under new

immigration rules from January 1. A junior member of President Emmanuel Macron's government had also criticised the decision to award passports despite Clooney speaking poor French.

"Personally, I understand the feeling of some French people of a double standard," Marie-Pierre Vedrenne, a junior interior minister, told the France Info radio station.

"We need to be careful about the message we're sending." Her boss, Interior Minister Laurent Nunez, and the foreign ministry however defended the decision. The civil code states that "French nationality may be conferred by naturalization, upon the proposal of the minister of foreign affairs, to any French-speaking foreigner who applies for it and who contributes through their distinguished service to France's influence and the prosperity of its international economic relations." But Clooney has admitted that his French remains poor despite hundreds of lessons.

Under the new immigration rules from Thursday, applicants will need a certificate

showing they have a level of French that could get them into a French university. They will also have to pass a civic knowledge test. Clooney has a property in southern France and said he has hailed French privacy laws that keep his family

speaks fluent French. Meets the condition

Clooney bought the Domaine du Canadel, a former wine estate, near the Provence town of Brignoles, in 2021. He said it is where his family is "happiest". Nunez, the interior minister, said he was "very happy" with the actor and his family becoming French, saying the country was lucky to have them.

The French foreign ministry said the passport allocation for the Clooneys "meets the conditions set by law" for naturalisation.

The family "followed a rigorous procedure including security investigations, regulatory naturalization interviews at the prefecture, and the payment of tax stamps," the ministry added. It highlighted the Clooneys had a French home and they "contribute through their distinguished service to France's international influence and cultural prestige" through the actor's role in the film industry.



largely protected from international media intrusion. "I love the French culture, your language, even if I'm still bad at it after 400 days of courses," the actor told RTL radio -- in English -- in December.

His wife, an international human rights lawyer and dual UK-Lebanese national,



the fate of peace, the fate of Ukraine and Europe," he added. Zelensky's speech came just hours after US officials, including top envoy Steve Witkoff, held a call with Ukrainian and European security advisers on the next steps to end the nearly four-year conflict. The war, now entering its fifth calendar year, has resulted in a tidal wave of destruction that has displaced millions and left entire Ukrainian cities in ruins. Believe in victory. President Vladimir Putin urged Russians to believe in victory in Ukraine during his annual New Year's Eve address, his fourth since the war began. The Russian leader has consistently told his citizens that the military intends to seize the rest of Ukrainian land and he has proclaimed as Russian by force if talks fail. Addressing soldiers, whom he called "heroes", Putin said in his address: "We believe in you and our victory." The Kremlin said this week it would "toughen" its negotiating position on ending the war, after accusing Ukraine of launching dozens of drones at Putin's lakeside residence in the Novgorod region between Moscow and Saint Petersburg.

## NEWS BOX

## Gujarat government promotes senior IAS, IPS officers in New Year reshuffle



## Ahmedabad. (Agency)

In the new year, the Gujarat government has issued orders to promote a number of IAS and IPS officers in the state. The General Administration Department and Home Department issued notifications in this regard on Thursday. Among those promoted include six senior IAS officers of the 1996 batch who have been promoted to the rank of Additional Chief Secretary.

They include Mona Khandhar, T Natarajan, Rajeev Topno, Mamta Verma and Mukesh Kumar. All of them have been posted as Principal Secretary with various departments of the state, like Food, Civil Supplies and Consumer Affairs, Finance, Health & Family Welfare, Industries & Mines, and Education.

Two other IAS officers of the Gujarat cadre — Arti Kanwar and Vijay Nehra — have also been promoted to the rank of Principal Secretary. Kanwar is posted as Chief Commissioner of State Tax, and Nehra is on central deputation, working as Joint Secretary in the Health and Family Welfare Department of the Central Government.

The state government has also promoted 14 IPS officers with immediate effect. Three senior IPS officers who were serving at the rank of Additional Director General of Police, namely Narasimha Komar, Prafulla Kumar Roushan and Rajkumar Pandian, have been promoted to the rank of Director General of Police.

## Bridge over Kharicut Canal to close from today for demolition and rebuilding

## Ahmedabad. (Agency)

The bridge over the Kharicut canal in the Machhunagar area of Vatva will be closed from today (January 1) for six months after it was declared “structurally unsafe” and will be demolished.

A notification was issued by the Ahmedabad Police Commissioner G S Malik for traffic diversion in the Vatva GIDC area on Tuesday. The existing 23-metre long bridge will be demolished and a new bridge is set to be built by the Gujarat Industrial Development Corporation (GIDC).

As per the police orders, the 200 metre long stretch from Ramol crossroads and Trikampura Patiya will be completely closed for all types of vehicles during these six months when the construction of the new bridge is underway.

The traffic from Vatva GIDC area will be diverted via Ramol Police Chowki, Hathijan Lal Gebi Circle towards Trikampura through alternate roads. While traffic entering Vatva GIDC from outside will be diverted from Trikampura crossroads towards GIDC using alternate internal roads. As per the notification, the bridge will be closed till June 30, 2026 Shahibaug underpass closed for 8 days

## Vadodara Police keep close eye on 2-wheelers, crack down on sale &amp; delivery of intoxicants

## Vadodara. (Agency)

SEVERAL SPECIAL units of the Vadodara City Police have trained its hawk eyes on two-wheelers this New Year's Eve and the extended celebrations are expected to run into the weekend. While it may appear to be an initiative for traffic regulation, the police are especially cracking down on illicit sale and delivery of intoxicants through clandestine means.

The Prevention of Crime Branch (PCB), Special Operations Group (SOG) and the Detection of Crime Branch (DCB) on Wednesday evening fanned out in the city, especially check points to keep an eye on two-wheelers suspected to be used to privately deliver liquor and contraband in the city during New Year celebrations. The initiative is part of the police action plan to intercept those indulging in crimes under the Prohibition Law as well as NDPS.

In the past week alone, the city police have registered two offences involving delivery of liquor on two-wheelers as well as one of delivery of contraband on a two wheeler, earlier in December. The Vadodara SOG had nabbed a man with 459 grams of ganja worth Rs 22,950 on December 6, while attempting to deliver it to a user on a two-wheeler.

On December 28, the PCB lodged a case at Gorwa police station against a person for transporting liquor on a two-wheeler worth Rs 35,120 and a second offence on December 30 at Makarpura police station, in which a suspected two-wheeler driver was intercepted in the Tarsali area and found to be in possession of a bottle of premium rum worth Rs 1,300.

## Mumbai wakes up to surprise rain spells on New Year's Day, AQI at moderate level

**While areas like Mulund, Andheri, Bandra, Dadar, Lower Parel, and the eastern suburbs woke up to drizzle, parts of South and Central Mumbai witnessed heavy showers for nearly 30 minutes.**

## Mumbai. (Agency)

Mumbai ushered in the New Year with drizzles as unseasonal showers swept pockets of the city and its neighbouring districts Thursday morning, bringing respite from the haze and suspended dust particles, as the Air Quality Index (AQI) dipped to 116.

Several pockets of Mumbai, including Mulund, Andheri, Bandra, Dadar, Lower Parel, and the eastern suburbs, woke up to drizzle. Meanwhile, parts of South and Central Mumbai witnessed heavy showers for nearly 30 minutes. In the neighbouring districts, areas like Thane experienced light



rain. Mumbai has been experiencing a cool spell over the past few days, with daytime temperatures on Thursday dipping below 30

degrees Celsius. While the Santacruz observatory recorded maximum temperatures of 29.5 degree Celsius, the Colaba coastal observatory logged 29.4 degree Celsius.

Meteorologists attributed the ongoing dip in temperatures to northerly winds and an anticyclonic system, which brought cool air.

During the same period, the city also experienced reduced visibility due to slow wind speeds, leading to prolonged suspension of dust particles in the air. Until Wednesday, the AQI in Mumbai hovered around 135.

## CBI raids aides of MLA Nagendra in Karnataka's Ballari

**More raids and questioning of individuals connected to the former minister are likely in the coming days as the agency expands the scope of its investigation.**

## BALLARI. (Agency)

The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) on Wednesday conducted searches at the Ballari residences of the associates of Ballari Rural MLA and former Karnataka minister B Nagendra in the multi-crore Valmiki Development Corporation scam.

According to official sources, a four-member CBI team raided the residence of Vishwanath, said to be a trusted aide of the former minister, on Bengaluru Road in Ballari city. However, Vishwanath was reportedly not present at the house during the search operation. In his absence, CBI officials brought his brother Mahesh to the Bruce Pet Police Station, and questioned him for several hours.

Sources said Vishwanath is part of Nagendra's inner circle and is suspected to have played a role in the alleged financial irregularities linked to the corporation. Investigators are scrutinising financial

transactions, communication records and connections among key individuals to trace the



alleged diversion and misappropriation of funds meant for the welfare of Scheduled Tribes. The Valmiki Development Corporation,

a state-run body, was established to implement

welfare schemes for Scheduled Tribe communities. The alleged scam involves misuse of funds allocated for various development projects. Following the search at Vishwanath's residence, the CBI team also raided the house of Maruti, who was previously employed as a cook at Nagendra's residence. Officials reportedly questioned him to determine whether he had any information regarding financial dealings, cash movements, or meetings that could be relevant to the case. Sources said the searches were conducted to gather crucial evidence and identify the money trail. More raids and questioning of individuals

connected to the former minister are likely in the coming days as the agency expands the scope of its investigation.

## She saved her children in a deadly crash — and went missing. Two weeks on, her family struggles for answers

## Lucknow. (Agency)

Govind Kumar has been wracked with anxiety.

For the last two weeks, the 52-year-old labourer from Nauranga in Uttar Pradesh's Hamirpur has been frantically searching for his wife, Parvati Devi (49), who went missing during the deadly 18-vehicle pile-up on the Yamuna Expressway on December 16. Kumar said his wife was heading to Noida on a bus with their two children, Prachi (12) and Sagar

(8), when the accident occurred due to dense fog around 4 am.

In a matter of minutes, 13 vehicles, including eight buses, erupted into flames. Twenty people were killed, several of them charred beyond recognition.

While the children managed to escape, pushed out by Devi, the family has no idea what happened to her. The case has been complicated by the fact that all bodies have been identified — Devi was not among them. Her eldest son, Aakash (22), who works as a labourer in Noida, recounted the harrowing ordeal: “My mother, along with my younger brother and sister, were coming to visit me when the accident occurred... She was injured... Thick smoke had filled the bus, making it hard to breathe. She

managed to get Sagar out first, and then Prachi escaped.” He said his sister was screaming, pleading with several people to help rescue their mother when the bus suddenly caught fire following an explosion. Govind and Aakash have now been criss-crossing police stations and administrative offices in Mathura, trying to convince officials that Devi was among the passengers on the ill-fated bus.

Aakash said police told the family that the matter is under investigation but have shared no concrete updates. “They called us four times and collected blood samples, hair strands, and nail clippings from Prachi and me for DNA testing. We don't know the results of these

tests,” he claimed. “Do haftey key baad bhi hum log latkey huey hai... Gaon waley baatey bana rahey hai. Yeh sab se bachney key liye, sab log Noida mai mere pass reh rahey hai. (It's been two weeks and we have been left hanging... People in the village are spreading rumors. To avoid any kind of public humiliation, my entire family has left the village and is now staying with me in Noida),” he added.



## PMC poll battle sees gangsters, kin of accused enter poll fray

## Pune. (Agency)

Touted as one of the toughest civic contests till now, political parties are leaving no stone unturned to see their numbers higher than their rival parties. This has provided an opportunity to many accused booked for serious crimes to either jump into the election fray themselves or get their close relatives in the electoral contest—all with an aim to get political benefit in countering the allegations being levelled against them. This is also seen as an attempt to retain their hold in their areas, despite being in jail. Though, no political party has so far declared them as their candidate, the situation is likely to become clear in the coming few days.

For political parties, it seems the popularity factors and winning ability matters more than the records of the accused. Here are those with tainted records or their relatives who have jumped into the fray.

**Jayashree Marne: Wife of gangster Gajanan Marne**

Jayashree Marne, wife of dreaded

gangster Gajanan alias Gaja Marne alias Maharaj, has filed her nomination for the PMC polls. Jayashree had won in the 2012 civic elections on a Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) ticket. Jayashree does not have any criminal record. She is contesting from ward number 10.

Gaja Marne was arrested by the Pune



city police in connection with the February 19 attack on IT engineer Devendra Jog—also a supporter of Union Minister Murlidhar Mohol—at a Shiv Jayanti procession at Bhelke Nagar in Kothrud. Police have invoked the stringent Maharashtra Control of Organised Crime Act (MCOCA) against Marne and his gang in the case.

## BMC commences scrutiny of 2,516 nominations filed; BJP candidates in wards 211 and 212 fail to submit papers

**In a major upset for BJP, its candidates from ward number 211 and 212 -- Shakil Ansari and Mandakini Khamkar respectively -- did not submit their nominations papers with the returning officer.**

## Mumbai. (Agency)

With the process of filing nominations for the upcoming civic polls coming to a close on Wednesday, the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation said that 2,516 nomination papers were filed by candidates vying to contest for 227 electoral wards across the city. On Wednesday, the civic body commenced the process for scrutiny of applications.

In a major upset for BJP, its candidates from ward number 211 and 212 — Shakil Ansari and Mandakini Khamkar respectively — did not submit their nominations papers with the returning officer. Confirming the development, an official privy to the nomination processes said, “In Prabhags number 211 and 212, we did not receive any applications of candidates from the BJP.” Data furnished by the BMC showed that



between December 23 and 30 when the nomination filings concluded, 2,516

nominations were submitted by candidates against 11,391 forms distributed by the

officials during the same period. Records showed that the highest number of applications were filed in M/East ward (Deonar) where 182 forms were filed, followed by 133 papers submitted in K/West ward which encompasses Andheri, Lokhandwala among other pockets.

As the civic body commenced its scrutiny on Wednesday, several hopeful candidates found their forms cancelled over lacunae in filing processes. In the high-profile ward 226 of Colaba, forms of Congress and AAP candidates failed to meet the prerequisites, leaving the BJP candidate Makarand Narwekar in a fight against independent party candidates.

The scrutiny process is slated to continue until January 2, following which the BMC will release the final list of contesting candidates.

After UGC orders ‘dog-free’ campuses following SC warning, Pune universities say ‘it is really difficult’



## Pune. (Agency)

After the University Grants Commission (UGC) directed all higher education institutions across the country to ensure stray dogs are kept off campuses, several universities in and around Pune said that their large open campuses, staff crunch, and people's affinity towards canines make it challenging to implement the order.

In its notice, UGC also directed, in December last year, that the name of the nodal officer responsible for keeping stray dogs away should be prominently displayed at the campus entrance and notified to the local municipal or jurisdictional body.

“The Hon'ble Supreme Court of India, noting a significant rise in dog-bite incidents in institutional areas, has issued stringent and time-bound directions to all States/UTs and the Union of India to secure educational institutions and other public places from stray dog ingress vide order dated 7th November, 2025...” the UGC notice said.

## Pushback from animal lovers

A senior official at Savitribai Phule Pune University (SPPU), which spans a 400-acre campus on Ganeshkhind Road, said visitors are allowed in freely, and there is regular vehicular traffic on the premises.

“It is an open campus. Barring COVID, it has remained open. Even during COVID, I had a lot of trouble keeping the doors shut. It is a public state university, you cannot stop it as well... This (directive) will not work,” Professor Nitin Karmalkar, who served as the vice-chancellor of SPPU from 2017 to 2022, said.

# Fertile politics, failed debate

On January 5, the Congress party will launch ‘save MGNREGA’ movement. The rural poor need all the help they can get. MGNREGA was enacted in 2005 and has helped millions. Yet, a generation later, why is that part of India not in reasonable shape?I believe the battle over MGNREGA is, by default, political. The Bharatiya Janata Party seeks to claim another mantle of beneficence, while the Congress refuses to relinquish its legacy. Both are indirectly admitting that they have failed in their mission to improve village life substantively.

The scheme guarantees 100 days of unskilled manual work per year to every rural household. Wages vary by state: Haryana pays the highest daily wage (₹374), while Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh pay the lowest (₹234). Wages are funded entirely by the Centre, with material and administrative costs shared with the states.

Crucially, these wages are not equivalent to state-mandated minimum wages, which are higher. In Kerala, for instance, the minimum wage for construction work can exceed ₹1,000 a day. This explains why the Bilaspur Express arrives weekly in Kerala, crammed with aspirants from Chhattisgarh. This migration persists despite the ever-present risk of violence, as witnessed in the recent lynching of migrant labourer Ram Narayan.

The BJP-led government is not formally ‘repealing’ the scheme—though it may consider excising Mahatma Gandhi from its name for political reasons. The Modi administration prefers to build parallel welfare systems, exemplified by the PM-KISAN, which provides direct cash transfers.

The popular narrative, however, suggests a simple swap is imminent—a misreading. The confusion begins with equating MGNREGA’s value with PM-KISAN’s ₹6,000 grant. MGNREGA is a wage programme; its annual potential is the state-specific daily wage multiplied by 100 days.

The work, in theory, involves creating public assets like ponds and roads. In practice, it is often meaningless—how many ponds can one village dig? Are new roads being built gratuitously? Are the old ones finished? Is there reliable audit? A misplaced sense of grandiosity prevents us from categorising necessary tasks like caring for the elderly, clearing waste or planting trees as ‘work’. So perhaps we end up digging the same ponds.

In contrast, PM-KISAN’s ₹6,000, is a fixed annual income supplement for land-owning farmers, not a wage. To mistake it for a substitute is to argue that a jugaad is the real thing.MGNREGA primarily serves rural households demanding manual labour. PM-KISAN supports land-owning farmer families. While their clientele overlaps for small farmers, a critical mass of India’s poorest—the landless labourer—qualifies for MGNREGA but is excluded from PM-KISAN. Presenting cash transfers as a blanket replacement ignores this demographic chasm.Politically, the discourse has been simplified into a partisan clash. The Congress frames the threat as outright abolition. The BJP’s rhetoric dismisses MGNREGA as a monument to Congress-era corruption while touting the ‘efficiency’ of direct bank transfers.

The true confrontation, however, is subtler. The government is not deleting MGNREGA from the statute books—that would be counterproductive. Instead, it is pursuing a strategy of parallel construction and asphyxiation by neglect. Politically, it pays to slowly choke a Congress-credited scheme rather than execute an immediate beheading.Equally importantly, it allows for the erection of a new welfare edifice stamped with the BJP’s lotus symbol—or the face of Narendra Modi. A direct benefit transfer (DBT) means total control over the freebie.This model has administrative elegance: money moves from the treasury directly to a bank account, minimising bureaucratic intermediaries. Simultaneously, MGNREGA is likely to be subjected to budgetary constraints, chronic payment delays, and a narrative that paints it as a wasteful dole. The objective is not repeal but gradual marginalisation—making the DBT model so dominant that the work-based alternative seems anachronistic.



# Look to the Northeast

Growing discontent, if not contained, can become a source of major instability in the region

DOWN the ages, India has been the target of countless invasions. It was an old civilisation with fabled riches, and kingdoms from Central Asia, Iran, Greece, etc. were forever trying to invade and loot India. The Ghoris, the Ghaznavis, the Abdalis, the Mughals... they came through the Northwest, the Khyber Pass or through Iran and present-day Pakistan. They looted, desecrated, massacred and in general laid waste the land that was full of riches but unable to defend itself.The Mughals went a step further and put down their roots here and ruled for centuries. However, our southern states and kingdoms, thanks to their remoteness, did not suffer these invasions, nor did any come from the sea for a long time. They carried on trade with the Near and Far East; what that trade eventually brought with it was a far more deadly invader in the form of the Europeans.

The northeastern kingdoms of old (Ahom, Meitei, Kachari, Tripuri, etc.) were for long in a constant state of conflict and unrest among themselves. These ancient fault lines were accentuated by the British and the classification they imposed. Added to this was the war and conflict with the Burmese kingdom.

It is the Northeast today which I would like to focus on for it is in this relatively remote corner of the Indian sub-continent that discontent grows which, if not contained, will become a source of major instability in the region. Nature abhors a vacuum and it is even more so when it comes to filling one of power and authority. What appears as a bushfire today when fanned by the ‘elements’ can become an uncontrollable blaze that could suck in vast resources and leave us weakened. It was this weakness that brought in invaders for centuries.

Today, the South is still safe except for rampant smuggling across the seas. We have the Coast Guard and the Navy to take care of this problem. The North and the Northwest have the continuing challenge of Pakistan across the Line of Control and China in Ladakh. Here the battle lines are old, and the people and our defence forces are used to the ebb and flow of the troubling tides of the invaders and infiltrators. Not to say that it isn’t a dynamically evolving challenge, but one that perhaps



Pakistan, with the covert help of the Chinese, is with them and providing men, material and moral support. Pakistan’s Field Marshal Asim Munir has no qualms about voicing his ill will towards India and his desire for Kashmir. The minorities are under severe repression in Bangladesh and targeted killings are going on. The persistent looming presence of the Chinese Dragon is a threat which increases by the day.Pentagon reports indicate that Arunachal Pradesh is an area of core interest for China, just like Taiwan. The Chinese have been rapidly expanding their military facilities across the Arunachal border, including forward-area airbases and hangars. Villages have also been set up in the area. Do remember that we are eyeballed with the Chinese in the Ladakh region. China is continuously engaged in the process of locating areas where forward bases can be

established.In the meantime, there have been reports of various ULFA elements moving base from China to Bangladesh and teaming up with other such forces. These elements would also encourage the remnants of such movements in West Bengal, Assam, Mizoram, Manipur and Tripura. We already have internal problems in the states which have aggravated in recent years.

For instance, Manipur has been torn apart due to the historical differences between the Meiteis and the hill tribes — Kukis, Nagas, etc. These hill tribes are also spread out in Mizoram, Meghalaya and Nagaland.

There is incessant violence in Manipur and a huge presence of the Army, paramilitary forces and the police. This problem needs to be resolved, and the forces should be given a clear plan of action. There are refugee camps in Mizoram, Meghalaya and Nagaland, indicating sympathy for the displaced tribes.Adding to the problem is the likelihood of internal insurgencies creeping up again with the active help of Pakistan, Bangladesh, China and Myanmar. It should be remembered that these insurgencies earlier had the support of the people. Normal political activity remained suspended in these areas for a long time, and it took decades of efforts by the military, diplomatic and civil administrations to bring these under control.Political action was made possible due to the joint efforts of these organisations. There are still some retired Army, civilian and police officers who remember many horror stories of those times. Much blood has already flowed over the decades — blood of our security personnel and our people living in these states. Let us now bring all our resources of the polity and civil society to bear on this problem lest we have to again take resort to arms. Let us face the enemy resolutely in whatever way is deemed fit, but let us not allow it to build on its mischievous designs.

The linking of Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar and China is a fact and not a figment of the imagination. If not checked now, this will link up with the rebel forces and the situation will become even worse. Let us also remember that the US today pursues its own strategy — whether our interests align or not is of no consequence to the Americans. The time to act is now. Are we willing to recognise the challenge and meet it four-square? As Shakespeare wrote, “There is a tide in the affairs of men, which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune...”



## Unnao rape: Onus on Supreme Court to ensure justice

**The Tribune Editorial: The Delhi High Court’s order suspending Sengar’s life term and granting conditional bail —till the pendency of his appeal challenging his conviction and sentence in the rape case —has triggered resentment.**

THE Unnao rape survivor has pinned her hopes on the Supreme Court, which is set to hear the CBI’s plea against the suspension of ex-MLA Kuldeep Singh Sengar’s life sentence. This is not merely a procedural battle — it is a test of whether the justice delivery system can convincingly demonstrate that the rule of law applies equally to the powerful and the powerless. The Delhi High Court’s order suspending Sengar’s life term and granting conditional bail — till the pendency of his appeal challenging his conviction and sentence in the rape case — has triggered resentment. The CBI has referred to the SC verdict in the LK Advani case (1997), in which the court ruled that anyone who holds a public office, be it an MP or an MLA, would be deemed a public servant. The probe agency has contended that the high court erred by declaring that Sengar, a sitting legislator



when the crime was committed in 2017, was not a public

servant to be prosecuted under certain provisions of the POCSO (Protection of Children from Sexual Offences) Act.The case is intertwined with allegations of intimidation, custodial death and prolonged harassment of the survivor’s family. In such circumstances, judicial decisions are not only about legal technicalities but also the message they send to society — especially to victims of sexual violence. The CBI’s argument that holders of public office carry heightened responsibility is persuasive, legally as well as morally. A narrow interpretation of the law risks reinforcing the perception that political power can undermine accountability.

Equally troubling is the victim’s unending ordeal. Her allegation that the investigating officer colluded with Sengar cannot be brushed aside. A zero-tolerance approach is the way forward for the judiciary, which must prioritise the need to protect rape survivors and uphold public trust.

# G-Ram-G Act delivers a body blow to federalism

The success of MGNREGA was not in its execution but in its ideals



The new rural employment law was a bone of contention during the recent Winter Session of Parliament. While the NDA government is going all guns blazing to claim that the Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Aajeevika Mission Gramin (VB G-RAM-G) Act is a ‘step up’ from the two-decade-old Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), here’s a breakdown of how the new Act is indeed a ‘step up’ — in terms of uncertainty and delivering a body blow to federalism.Back in 2005, when the Manmohan Singh-led UPA government enacted MGNREGA, it did something that had never happened before in the domain of public policy in India. A welfare promise was made a justiciable right - a rather bold and exemplary move for a developing nation. Employment was not a favour extended by the State, but a legal guarantee that rural citizens could demand whenever they wanted, and the government was mandated to provide it. The VB G-RAM-G Act marks a decisive departure from that philosophy. It is not the citizen but the Centre that decides where, when and how employment will be provided — and to whom.

Among the most vociferous arguments made by the NDA in the new law’s favour is the increase in the number of days for which work will be provided. While MGNREGA guaranteed 100 days of work per rural household, the new law promises 125 workdays, translating into 25 per cent increased financial security at first glance.While on paper this looks like an obvious, glossy upgrade, in reality the new Act is a conditional scheme without the same enforceable right. It is a discretionary law that can be expanded or withdrawn at the convenience of the government in power. So, don't be mistaken — there is no guarantee whatsoever. Hence the increase in the number of workdays becomes irrelevant. The old Act ensured that the Centre bore 100 per cent of the wage cost, as it recognised that a national employment

guarantee could not depend on the fiscal health of individual states. But the new law has conveniently passed the fiscal burden in a 60:40 ratio to the states. Any spending beyond the Centre’s fixed allocation will now be borne entirely by states. So, my simple question is — how does the Centre expect poor states to shell out money from their own pockets to finance wages?If states have to fund a sizeable proportion of the remuneration, the most prudent course for them would be to cut the workforce rather than increase it. States will certainly not think of expanding the programme, they will try to limit it instead.MGNREGA was built as a demand-driven, open-ended programme. If a worker demanded employment, the State was legally bound to provide it

within 15 days or pay an unemployment allowance. But now, as per the new law, employment is no longer triggered by demand but by Central notifications and normative allocations, an unjustified and absolute discretion by virtue of which the rulers in Delhi will decide if a rural household in Jharkhand, Odisha or Tamil Nadu deserves to get employment, and for how long. MGNREGA empowered gram panchayats and gram sabhas as it tasked them with the planning and implementation of works. During the UPA rule, local communities were encouraged to participate and choose what works were relevant in their context, but under the new legislation the entire scheme will be monitored by a national council with very elaborate technological tools

such as GIS (Geographic Information System) mapping, biometrics and AI-assisted audits. While technological advancements will significantly improve transparency, limiting local inputs will cripple grassroots governance.

The risk of implementing this scheme is most acute in Punjab due to the severe fiscal strain it is already under. Punjab’s outstanding public debt has crossed Rs 4 lakh crore, with a debt-to-GSDP ratio of roughly 45 per cent, making it among the most indebted states in India.

Under MGNREGA, Punjab’s ability to provide rural employment was insulated. But now, under the new law, every additional day of work will become a budgetary liability compounding woes for our treasury. When employment generation becomes contingent on a state’s borrowing capacity rather than on citizens’ needs, the constitutional promise of cooperative federalism is diluted. The introduction of mandatory pauses of up to 60 days during the peak agricultural season to be notified season-wise and area-wise further reduces access precisely when rural households need it.

While the intent may be to avoid labour shortage in agriculture, the blanket imposition of such pauses undermines the flexibility that made MGNREGA responsive to local realities.

The success of MGNREGA was not in its execution but in its ideals — that dignity of work is a right, not a discretionary grant; that the Centre must shoulder responsibility for national guarantees; and that local governments must have a meaningful say in planning and implementation. Any ‘upgrade’ or ‘step up’ that undermines such ideals needs careful reconsideration.

A stronger rural employment framework is undoubtedly needed. But strength does not lie in centralisation alone. It lies in trusting states, empowering local institutions and preserving the enforceability of rights. For Punjab, and for India’s federal balance, that distinction will make all the difference.

## BSF nabs Bangladeshi national, hands over to police in Jammu

**Jammu. (Agency)**

Alert troops of Border Security Force (BSF) have nabbed one Bangladeshi national along the international border and headed over to the police in Kanchachak area.

Police here on Thursday said that the BSF handed over a Bangladeshi national to Border Police Post Gajansoo under Polie Station Kanachak, who was apprehended near the International Border (IB) in the Gajansoo area. The individual has been identified as Shariful Islam Bhuiyan, 19, son of Mozibul Haque Bhuiyan, resident of Adra, District Comilla, Bangladesh. "Further questioning is underway," they said.

## Road safety month starts from Thursday in Bilaspur

**Bilaspur. (Agency)**

Deputy Commissioner Bilaspur, Rahul Kumar said that Road Safety Month started on Thursday and will continue till January 31st.

During this period, various activities will be organised to create awareness among people about road safety so that road safety can be ensured in the district. He said that on January 1st, a pledge was administered regarding road safety at the district, sub-divisional, tehsil, block, and Gram Panchayat levels, in which all departments, including urban local bodies and Panchayati Raj institutions, schools, colleges, and other educational institutions participated. Kumar said that on January 2nd and 3rd, programs will be organised regarding compliance with and awareness of the Motor Vehicles Act. Similarly, from January 5th to 7th, meetings of the district-level road safety committee will be organised, in which various points related to road safety will be reviewed.

Under this awareness campaign, programs for the identification and training of road safety volunteers will be organised on January 8th and 9th. Rahul Kumar said that from January 12th to 14th, a special awareness campaign will be conducted in the district regarding speeding, lane indiscipline, and the use of mobile phones while driving.

In this series, from January 15th to 17th, the transport department will provide information to drivers about preventing road accidents. He said that from January 19th to 21st, special camps will be organised for eye check-ups of drivers. The Deputy Commissioner said that from January 22nd to 24th, various educational institutions in the district will organise quizzes, painting competitions, essay writing competitions, road safety walks, and other awareness programs related to road safety. During this period, from January 24th to 26th, the message of road safety will be conveyed through street plays. In this series, from January 29th to 30th, detailed information related to road safety and the Motor Vehicles Act will be provided, and students studying in educational institutions will also be made aware.

## Himachal: Dry spell ends as rain lashes Una

**Una (HP). (Agency)**

After a long dry spell of more than three months, rain started on Thursday morning in Una district of Himachal Pradesh. The rain has brought down the temperature and people have to adorn heavy woollens to remain fit and warm.

Rain was so sharp that the people were taken aback by its sudden arrival and were forced to cover them with plastic sheets and umbrellas to save them from its wrath. A spokesman of the agriculture department said that if it rained in plenty, it would help the sowing cum already sown crops of wheat in the area.

## Two sisters killed after being hit by train while crossing railway track in Moradabad

**Moradabad. (Agency)**

In a tragic incident, two real sisters lost their lives after being hit by a train while crossing a railway track in the Bhojpur police station area of Moradabad district, police said on Thursday. The accident occurred near Bijna-Chakbegampur village on Wednesday evening. The deceased were identified as Kashish (18) and Tanishka (15), daughters of Yashpal Singh, a farmer.

Kashish was an intermediate student, while Tanishka studied in Class 9. According to locals, the sisters had gone to nearby fields to collect bathua greens and were returning home when the incident took place.

Eyewitnesses said that while crossing the Bijna-Chakbegampur railway track, the sisters were talking to each other. One of them lagged slightly behind. At the same time, a train travelling from Moradabad to Ramnagar approached the track at high speed. Seeing this, the sister who was behind ran forward in an attempt to save the other, but both lost balance and were hit by the train.

# India's First Vande Bharat Sleeper Train to Operate Between Guwahati and Kolkata

**The Sikh Times**

Maligaon, 1st January: Union Minister for Railways, Information & Broadcasting, and Electronics & Information Technology, Ashwini Vaishnaw, stated at a meeting held at Rail Bhawan that India's first Vande Bharat Sleeper Train will operate between Kamakhya in Assam and Howrah in West Bengal. He stated that all trials, testing and certification of the train have been successfully completed and informed that the Hon'ble Prime Minister Narendra Modi will flag off the inaugural service in January. The launch of the Vande Bharat Sleeper Train marks a historic milestone for Indian Railways, ushering in a new era of modern, semi-high-speed overnight passenger services. Designed with a maximum speed potential of up to 180 kmph, the train seamlessly blends speed with worldclass sleeper amenities, significantly enhancing comfort, safety and operational efficiency for long-distance night journeys. Highlighting future plans, the Minister stated that 2026 will be a year of major reforms for Indian Railways, with several passenger-centric initiatives in the pipeline. He underlined the train's

ergonomic interior design, enhanced safety features and region-specific onboard catering, affordable and value-driven option for overnight travel. The 16-coach rake has a total passenger capacity of 823, comprising 11 AC 3-Tier coaches, 4 AC 2-Tier coaches and 1 First AC coach.



Passenger-focused features include ergonomically designed cushioned berths, advanced suspension for superior ride comfort, noise reduction systems, automatic doors with vestibules and a modern Passenger Information

System. Special provisions for Divyangjan passengers, contemporary toilets and advanced disinfectant technology further strengthen hygiene, accessibility and onboard comfort. Safety remains a defining feature of the new-generation train. The Vande Bharat Sleeper is equipped with the Kavach safety system, emergency passenger talk-back units and a state-of-the-art driver cab with advanced controls. Its aerodynamic exterior and refined interiors reflect the latest achievements in indigenous rail engineering and design. The introduction of this service will significantly enhance connectivity between Assam and West Bengal. Key beneficiary districts include Kamrup Metropolitan and Bongaigaon in Assam and Coochbehar, Jalpaiguri, Maldah, Murshidabad, Purba Bardhaman, Hooghly and Howrah in West Bengal, supporting regional mobility, trade, tourism and socio-economic development. The commencement of India's first Vande Bharat Sleeper Train reaffirms Indian Railways' steadfast commitment to innovation, passenger-focused services and the vision of a modern, futureready railway network for the nation.

## Schools play crucial role in shaping students' future: HP Vice-Chairman of Tourism Development Board

**Nagrota (Kangra). (Agency)**

Himachal Pradesh Tourism Development Corporation (HPTDC) Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Tourism Development Board (Cabinet Rank), R.S. Bali said that school platforms play a crucial role in building students' confidence and shaping their future direction.

Speaking as the chief guest at the annual prize distribution ceremony of Shaheed Naik Anil Kumar Government Senior Secondary School, Thana Bargran on Tuesday (yesterday), he highlighted the state government's initiatives, saying that 850 institutions are being developed as Centres of Excellence to ensure quality and inclusive education.

He said the government has fulfilled its promise of introducing English-medium education from Class I in government schools and is establishing state-of-the-art Rajiv Gandhi Day Boarding Schools in every Assembly constituency, including one at Kabadi in the Nagrota constituency.

He said these schools would focus on the holistic development of children by promoting academics along with co-curricular activities. Bali also spoke about steps being taken to strengthen primary education and urged students to keep learning new things and stay away from substance abuse.

He congratulated the school on successfully conducting its annual function and remembered martyr Naik Anil Kumar, saying that his life would always remain a source of inspiration and guidance for the youth.

Bali extended New Year 2026 greetings to the people of the entire Assembly constituency.

Among those present were SDM Munish Sharma, Principal Joginder Singh, Gram Panchayat Pradhan Suresh Kumari, Captain Madan Lal, principals of other schools, teachers, parents and students.

## Tinsukia Division of NFR Achieves Major Progress in Track Electrification

**The Sikh Times**

Maligaon, 1st January: Northeast Frontier Railway (NFR) has achieved a significant milestone in its electrification programme with the successful completion of major electrification works in the Tinsukia Division (TSK). On 30th December 2025, the Principal Chief Electrical Engineer (PCEE) Shri Yogesh Partaity inspected the successfully completed electrical works over the Tinsukia-Dangari and Makum-Ledo sections on the TSK division. With this achievement, NFR has completed electrification of 4170.19 Route Kilometres (RKM) out of a total 4324.15 RKM,

achieving 96.43% electrification across the zone as on 31st December 2025. The inspection covered a total of 90.314 Route Kilometres (RKM) and 106.10 Track Kilometres (TKM). During the inspection, the Overhead Equipment (OHE) was successfully energised by extending traction power supply from Dibrugarh Traction Sub-Station (DBRG TSS).

Subsequently, the electric locomotive current collection test was conducted successfully at full sectional speed, confirming the readiness of the newly electrified sections for

commercial operations. With the successful energisation and testing



of these sections, Tinsukia Division has now achieved a major milestone in electrification of its railway tracks. This achievement marks a major step towards enhancing

operational efficiency, reducing dependence on fossil fuels, lowering carbon emissions and enabling seamless electric traction across the division. NFR remains committed towards India's vision of a fully electrified railway network ensuring faster, greener and more energy-efficient rail transportation system for the nation. The completion of full electrification in Tinsukia Division is expected to significantly improve train operations, reduce operating costs and contributing to sustainable development in the region.

## DDMA imparts disaster management training to over 90 college students in Hamirpur

**Hamirpur. (Agency)**

A seven-day training camp organised by the District Disaster Management Authority (DDMA) under the Youth Disaster Friend Scheme concluded on Wednesday at Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose Memorial College, Hamirpur.

A total of 92 students from the host college, as well as

the DDMA has decided to train a large number of such volunteers across the district under the Disaster Friend Scheme who can assist the administration in carrying out rescue and relief operations in any kind of emergency situation.

As part of this initiative, NCC cadets, NSS volunteers, Scouts and Guides, and other students from various educational institutions are being provided with basic and technical knowledge of disaster management.

The ADC urged all the participants to act immediately in case of any emergency in their respective areas and contribute as much as possible to rescue and relief operations, and also to create awareness among others about measures to prevent and mitigate disasters. He also distributed certificates to the participants. Earlier,

Principal Dr. Satish Soni welcomed the ADC and expressed his gratitude to the DDMA for organising the camp. Other college professors and team leaders from various colleges were also present on the occasion.



from Nadaun, Dhaneta, Sujampur, and other institutions, received training related to disaster management during this camp.

Interacting with the participants at the concluding session of the camp, ADC Abhishek Garg said that

## Ideas on a bicycle, A message for society: Dr. Satyendra Pal's one year commitment

**The Sikh Times**

**The Manoj Pal**

Muzaffarnagar. With the objective of spreading awareness about social justice, equality, and constitutional values, the bicycle journey undertaken by Dr. Satyendra Pal, State Vice President of the Teachers' Wing of the Samajwadi Party, from Shahpur to Muzaffarnagar has completed one full year. To mark the occasion, a Great Leaders' Felicitation and Ideological Programme was organized in Muzaffarnagar. For the past year, Dr. Satyendra Pal has continuously undertaken this bicycle journey on the birth anniversaries and death anniversaries of great leaders. Starting from his residence in Shahpur, he would cycle to the Samajwadi Party office in Muzaffarnagar, carrying portraits of eminent personalities and sharing their lives, struggles, and ideas with the public. Speakers at the programme highlighted that the journey continued uninterrupted throughout the year, setting an inspiring example. Addressing the gathering, speak-

ers said that this bicycle journey was not merely symbolic, but a sustained effort to educate people about social justice, the Constitution, and democratic values.



Through regular interaction with different sections of society, especially teachers and youth Dr. Satyendra Pal worked to connect people with the thoughts and ideals of great

leaders. Speaking on the occasion, Dr. Satyendra Pal said that his journey was not about power, but about the rights and dignity of the common man. He described the bicycle as a symbol of ordinary people and said it was through this simple means that messages of equality, brotherhood, and justice were being conveyed. He added that real change comes not just by remembering great leaders, but by adopting their ideas in everyday life. Participants at the programme said that carrying out a bicycle journey for an entire year on the occasions of birth and death anniversaries of great leaders was truly commendable. A large number of teachers, youth, Samajwadi Party workers, and people from various sections of society were present, all describing the initiative as inspiring and meaningful for the younger generation. During this time, former MP Qadir Rana, District President Zia Chaudhary, former District President Pramod Tyagi, Vinay Pal, Deepti Pal, Pooja Ambedkar, and others were present.

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## RLD Appoints Nisha Chaudhary as State In Charge of Rajasthan

**The Sikh Times**

New Delhi : Rashtriya Lok Dal has taken a significant step towards strengthening its organisation in Rajasthan by appointing Nisha Chaudhary as the State In-Charge (Rajasthan). The appointment has been made under the leadership of the party's National President and Union Minister Jayant Chaudhary, along with the National President of the Women's Wing, Indira Kapilavai.

On her appointment, Nisha Chaudhary expressed gratitude to the party's top leadership, stating that the trust reposed in her is both an honour and a major responsibility. She said that the confidence and support shown by the leadership have given her renewed energy, clear direction, and strong motivation. She assured that she would discharge her organisational responsibilities with complete dedication, commitment, and integrity, and would work continuously to strengthen Rashtriya Lok Dal at the grassroots level in Rajasthan. She emphasised that organisational expansion, women's empowerment, and issues concerning the common people would remain her key priorities. Nisha Chaudhary further stated that meeting the expectations of the party leadership would be her top priority, and that she would work in close coordination with the state leadership and party workers to provide renewed strength to the organisation in Rajasthan.



# Indore: 6-month-old dies as water contamination crisis deepens in cleanest city

**The water contamination crisis in Indore's Bhagirathpura has claimed over seven lives and led to nearly 150 hospitalisations. However, locals claim the toll to be far higher.**

## Air India pilot offloaded after smell test just before takeoff in Canada

**An Air India flight from Vancouver to Delhi was delayed on December 23, 2025, after Canadian authorities questioned a pilot's fitness for duty. The airline replaced the pilot and launched an investigation, stating safety is its top priority.**

**New Delhi.(Agency)**  
An Air India pilot was offloaded before take-off in Vancouver on December 23 after Canadian authorities raised concerns over a suspected "smell," prompting further checks. The incident, which took place on December 23, 2025, resulted in a delay for passengers on board flight AI186. According to reports, a staffer at the Vancouver airport allegedly saw the pilot "sipping on wine" or buying liquor, following which the employee to the authorities. In response, a breathalyser test was conducted, in which he failed, leading to his offloading from the flight. Canadian officials specifically cited concerns over the pilot's ability to perform duties safely, following which the individual was taken for further enquiry.  
"In accordance with safety protocols, an alternate pilot was rostered to operate the flight," an airline spokesperson said, adding that process of identifying and assigning a replacement pilot required additional time, contributing to the overall delay of the flight. Despite the inconvenience, the airline reiterated that these steps were necessary to ensure all safety requirements were met before takeoff.  
Air India apologised for the inconvenience and affirmed its cooperation with Canadian officials. "Air India regrets the inconvenience caused to its passengers and is fully cooperating with the local authorities," the spokesperson said.  
Passengers were provided with refreshments and support during the wait, and the airline assured them that their safety and comfort remained a priority throughout the incident.  
Pending the outcome of the ongoing investigation, the pilot has been removed from flying duties, Air India confirmed. "Air India maintains a zero-tolerance policy towards any violation of applicable rules and regulations."

## Cigarette, Beedi, Pan Masala To Be Costlier From Feb 1 With New Tax, Cess

**The new levies on tobacco and pan masala will be over and above the GST rate, and will replace the compensation cess which is currently being levied on such sin goods.**

**New Delhi.(Agency)**  
The government on Wednesday notified February 1 as the date from which additional excise duty will be levied on tobacco products, and a new cess on pan masala. The new levies on tobacco and pan masala will be over and above the GST rate, and will replace the compensation cess which is currently being levied on such sin goods.  
From February 1, pan masala, cigarettes, tobacco and similar products will attract a GST rate of 40 per cent, while biris will attract 18 per cent Goods and Services Tax



(GST), according to a government notification.  
On top of this, a Health and National Security Cess will be levied on pan masala, while tobacco and related products will attract additional excise duty.  
The Finance Ministry on Wednesday also notified the Chewing Tobacco, Jarda Scented Tobacco and Gutkha Packing Machines (Capacity Determination and Collection of Duty) Rules, 2026.  
Parliament had in December approved two Bills allowing levy of the new Health and National Security Cess on pan masala manufacturing and excise duty on tobacco.

**New Delhi.(Agency)**  
India's cleanest city continued to grapple with a contaminated water crisis on New Year's Day after a six-month-old infant died in Madhya Pradesh's Indore. The water contamination crisis in Indore's Bhagirathpura has claimed over seven lives and led to nearly 150 hospitalisations. However, locals claim the toll to be far higher. On Wednesday, Sunil Sahu claimed that his six-month-old son started vomiting and developed symptoms of diarrhoea after consuming milk mixed with contaminated water. Sahu claimed the infant's condition deteriorated, and he died on Thursday despite medical treatment. The incident happened in the Marathi Mohalla. For days, residents have

complained of dirty and foul-smelling water supply. The family said the child was born after nearly 10 years of medical treatment. Sahu said his



wife, Sadhna, was bedridden during the pregnancy period due to gynaecological complications. Speaking to India Today, Sadhna said due to

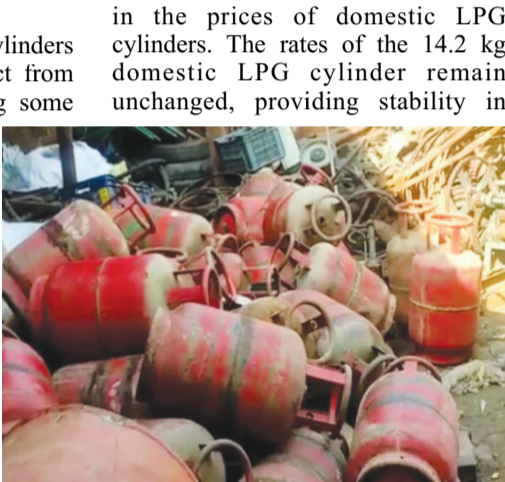
health complications, she was forced to feed the baby packaged milk mixed with water. She claimed that the water was contaminated, which eventually led to the death of her child. The family further alleged that their 10-year-old daughter has also been frequently complaining of stomach pain. "I have lost my child. I don't know how many more children will suffer due to this dirty water," a teary-eyed Sadhna said.  
**SEWER LEAKAGE BEHIND CRISIS?**  
The Madhya Pradesh health department said at least 149 people have fallen ill after consuming contaminated water in the area. Chief Minister Mohan Yadav is scheduled to visit the affected family on Thursday. However, local reports claim more than 1,100 people have been affected in Bhagirathpura. A preliminary probe

suggested that drain water entered the drinking water pipeline due to leakage. Indore draws its water from the River Narmada through pipelines. "Sewer leakages lead to such incidents, will ensure such negligence will be avoided in future," Chief Minister Yadav said. So far, the state has suspended a zonal officer from the civic body and an assistant engineer in Bhagirathpura. On Thursday, Minister Kailash Vijayvargiya announced a compensation of Rs 2 lakh each to the families of those who have died. "The number of patients arriving has decreased since yesterday. Since last night, 60 patients have arrived... This is a settlement of economically weaker sections, so we have ensured that no one has to spend money on treatment," he said. Vijayvargiya said the source of the contaminated water had been identified and urged residents to boil water before consuming.

## Commercial LPG Cylinder Price Hiked By Rs 111, Domestic Rates Unchanged

**Following the price hike, the retail sale price of a 19 kg commercial LPG cylinder in Delhi now stands at Rs 1,691.50.**

**New Delhi.(Agency)**  
The price of commercial LPG cylinders has been increased with effect from Thursday, January 1, bringing some pressure on costs to hotels, restaurants and other commercial users at the start of the new year. Oil marketing companies have raised the price of the 19 kg commercial LPG gas cylinder by Rs 111 with immediate effect. Following this revision, the retail sale price of a 19 kg commercial LPG cylinder in Delhi now stands at Rs 1,691.50. Along with the increase in commercial LPG rates, the prices of 5 kg Free Trade LPG (FTL) cylinders have also been raised. The cost of the 5 kg FTL cylinder has gone up by Rs 27, effective January 1. However, there is relief for household consumers as there has been no change

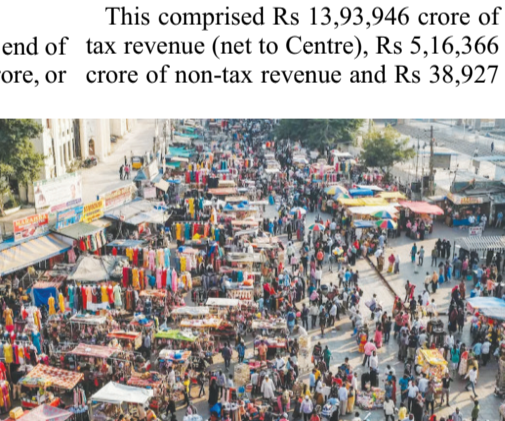


in the prices of domestic LPG cylinders. The rates of the 14.2 kg domestic LPG cylinder remain unchanged, providing stability in cooking gas prices for families. The revision in commercial LPG prices is significant for sectors that rely heavily on such cylinders, including eateries, catering services and small businesses, as fuel forms a major

component of their operating costs. The unchanged domestic LPG prices, meanwhile, ensure that household budgets are not impacted by the latest revision. In August, Union Petroleum Minister Hardeep Singh Puri hailed the Centre's recent decision to pay Rs 30,000 crores to oil companies in 12 parts, which has kept prices of Liquefied Petroleum Gas stable in the country. The Union Cabinet, on August 8, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has approved a compensation of Rs 30,000 crore to be paid in twelve parts to oil companies that have kept LPG prices stable despite global uncertainty. The new rates of commercial cylinder are applicable from January 1 and will remain in force until further revision by oil marketing companies.

## Centre's Fiscal Deficit Crosses 62% Of Full-Year Budget Target In November

**New Delhi.(Agency)**  
The Centre's fiscal deficit at the end of November stood at Rs 9.76 lakh crore, or 62.3 per cent of the annual budget target for 2025-26, compared to 52.5 per cent in the year-ago period, according to government data released on Wednesday. The Centre estimates the fiscal deficit (the gap between expenditure and revenue) during 2025-26 at 4.4 per cent of GDP, or Rs 15.69 lakh crore. According to data released by the Controller and Auditor General of India (CAG), the central government received Rs 19.49 lakh crore (55.7 per cent of the corresponding BE 2025-26 of total receipts) up to November 2025.



This comprised Rs 13,93,946 crore of tax revenue (net to Centre), Rs 5,16,366 crore of non-tax revenue and Rs 38,927 crore of non-debt capital receipts. CGA data showed Rs 9,36,561 crore was transferred to state governments as devolution of share of taxes by the Centre during the period, a rise of Rs 1,24,498 crore year-on-year.

The total expenditure incurred by the Centre was Rs 29.26 lakh crore (57.8 per cent of the corresponding BE 2025-26), out of which Rs 22,67,700 crore was on revenue account and Rs 6,58,210 crore on capital account. Out of the total revenue expenditure, Rs 7,45,765 crore was towards interest payments and Rs 2,88,333 crore on account of major subsidies. Commenting on the data, Aditi Nayar, Chief Economist with Iera, said the rating agency anticipates a shortfall of Rs 1.5 lakh crore in the Centre's gross tax revenues in the current fiscal relative to the FY2025-26 budget estimate (BE). "Overall, we expect the potential miss on the taxes side to be offset by higher-than-budgeted non-tax revenues and sizeable expenditure savings."

## First Vande Bharat sleeper train to run from Guwahati to Kolkata, PM to flag off

**Prime Minister Narendra Modi will soon flag off the first Vande Bharat sleeper train on the Guwahati-Kolkata route, following the train's successful high-speed trial.**

**New Delhi.(Agency)**  
The first Vande Bharat Sleeper train will run on the Guwahati-Kolkata route, Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw announced on Thursday, adding that Prime Minister Narendra Modi will flag off the service in the coming days. The significant launch comes after a series of successful trials and is expected to enhance overnight travel options in the region. Addressing a press conference, Vaishnaw said the new service is anticipated to benefit not only business travellers but also families, students, and tourists seeking a faster and more reliable overnight journey between the two major cities. "The testing and certification of

the Vande Bharat Sleeper train have been completed, and its first proposed route is Guwahati-Kolkata. Prime Minister Modi will flag off the inaugural service on this route in the coming days. This achievement marks a major milestone, as the Vande Bharat Sleeper will offer passengers world-class facilities, enhanced safety, and a modern travel experience for long-distance overnight journeys," he said. The final high-speed trial of the indigenously built Vande Bharat sleeper train was recently completed on the Kota-Nagda section. During the trial, the train reached a speed of 180 kmph. The train will feature a total of 16 coaches, including 11 three-tier AC coaches, 4 two-tier AC



coaches, and 1 first AC coach. The train will have a total passenger capacity of 823 -- 611 in 3AC, 188 in 2AC, and 24 in 1AC. Fares for this service have been announced: the 3AC fare will be approximately Rs 2,300,

including food. The fare for 2AC is expected to be around Rs 3,000, while First AC will cost about Rs 3,600. Passengers will benefit from several upgraded features, such as ergonomically designed berths with improved cushioning, automatic doors with vestibules,

and enhanced ride comfort due to superior suspension and noise reduction measures. The train's design emphasises passenger safety and comfort throughout the journey. Spacious interiors, modern lighting, and user-friendly amenities are expected to set a new benchmark for overnight train travel in India. The Vande Bharat sleeper is also equipped with the Kavach anti-collision system and an emergency talk-back system for added safety. Additionally, the coaches include disinfectant technology to maintain high standards of sanitation, and the driver cab features advanced controls and safety systems. The train also boasts an aerodynamic exterior and automatic exterior passenger doors.

NEWS BOX

Injured Cummins, Hazlewood included as Australia announce squad for T20 World Cup 2026

NEW DELHI. (Agency) Australia have named a 15-member squad for the 2026 T20 World Cup, starting on February 7 in India and Sri Lanka. Injured players like Pat Cummins, Josh Hazlewood and Tim David are included in the preliminary squad for the tournament.Cummins is currently recovering from a back injury and played only the third Ashes Test in Adelaide. The Test and ODI skipper is set to undergo a scan in January that will determine his availability for the T20 World Cup.David sustained a hamstring injury during a Big Bash League match on Boxing Day, while fast bowler Hazlewood missed the five-match Test series against England due to Achilles soreness after a hamstring injury.”Pat Cummins, Josh Hazlewood and Tim David are tracking well and we are confident they will be available for the World Cup. This is a preliminary squad so should changes need to be made they will ahead of the support period," Chair



of selectors George Bailey said.All-rounder Cooper Connolly has also been included in the squad. He didn't play in the series against South Africa, New Zealand or India in 2025 and featured in just six T20Is. But has made a great start in the BBL for Perth Scorchers, scoring 170 runs at a strike-rate of 166.66 and also taking five wickets with an economy of 7.62.Mitchell Owen and Ben Dwarshuis missed out on the selection, while the selectors have also not included a second wicketkeeper option in the squad. Mitchell Marsh will lead the side, while Adam Zampa, Glenn Maxwell, Matthew Short, Matthew Kuhnemann, and Cooper Connolly are the spin bowling options.The Aussies will start their World Cup campaign on February 11 against Ireland, followed by group matches against Zimbabwe, Sri Lanka and Oman in Sri Lanka. They are also scheduled to play three T20I matches in Pakistan in late January as preparation for the World Cup.

Lalremsiami nominated for Arjuna Award

RANCHI. (Agency) Indian women's hockey team forward Lalremsiami is set to become the first sportsperson from Mizoram to receive the Arjuna Award, according to sources. The award is expected to be announced in the coming days. Popularly known as ‘Siami’, she made her senior debut in 2017 during a Test series against Belarus. Since then, she has played 177 international matches and scored 67 goals.A major milestone in her career came at the Tokyo Olympics in 2021, where India reached the semifinals under coach Sjoerd Marijne. Siami's late father had wanted to see her play at the Olympics, but he died in 2019 when she was playing at the Hockey Series Finals in Hiroshima. She continued in the tournament and later went on to make history in Tokyo, becoming the first woman athlete from Mizoram to compete at the Games.She has also represented India at two Commonwealth Games, winning bronze in Birmingham. She has been part of the teams that won a silver and a bronze at the Asian Games and has competed in two World Cups.While she has been more than impressive playing for the senior team, her accolades as a junior player are also



noteworthy. She won a silver at the 3rd Youth Olympic Games in 2018 and was awarded the FIH Rising Star of the year in 2019. However, none of this would have been possible had it not been for the likes of Miss Btei, who trained her at SAI Hockey Centre in Thenzawl, Mizoram. Later, she also trained at the National Hockey Academy in New Delhi.And these days whenever she isn't playing or isn't training in Bengaluru, she tries her best to give back to the community by training the kids in Mizoram.

2026: Sports-heavy year and aspirations

For India, 2026 assumes great significance because two of the most important multi-disciplinary events after the Olympics — Asian and Commonwealth Games — are scheduled in next 10 months. Indraneel Das tries to understand aspirations and expectation from sports federations for 2026...

Liverpool. (Agency) In sports parlance, there is no respite. The year 2026 is going be a sports-heavy mind-boggling year that would give fans hardly any time to resuscitate. The year will begin with the Hockey India League (HIL), India Open badminton, T20 Men's World Cup followed by the ever-popular Indian Premier League until summer. This will be followed by planet's most-watched and followed sport – football World Cup in the US, Canada and Mexico. The Commonwealth Games, Asian Games, badminton world championships,

the regular dose of football leagues, the F1, tennis Grand Slams...The lis goes on (please see our calendar).It's a heady year. For India, the year 2026 also assumes significance because of two of the most important multi-disciplinary events after the Olympics — Asian and Commonwealth Games. The sports ministry in consultation with the Indian Olympic Association has decided to send full-fledged team to the Asian Games because there are non-Olympic sports where India can win more medals.There are other reasons too. The truncated Commonwealth Games in Glasgow from July 23 to August 2 would have been just another Games, had it not for India hosting it in 2030 at Ahmedabad. There will be just 10 disciplines this time because of lack of budget and also time since Glasgow agreed to host after Victoria withdrew and other nations like Malaysia did not show interest. Of the 10 sports — athletics, swimming, basketball (3x3), netball, boxing, gymnastics, lawn bowls, track cycling, weightlifting, and judo (integrated with para-sports) — India are good in select sports. India dominated in weightlifting and won medals in boxing, lawn bowls, athletics and judo. When it comes to Asian Games, India would want to show their continental supremacy in certain sports. Ahead of the Los Angeles

Games in 2028, the stage would be perfect for players to test themselves and move ahead. For National Sports Federations and the Sports Authority of India, the monitoring and funding agency, it will be the best platform to assess and bring in changes as



required.One medal every event at Asiad for shooters Shooting has been on an upwards curve and would be the sport to watch out for this year as well. Going by the National Rifle Association of India (NRAI) High Performance Manager Ronak Pandit, at least one medal in every event India participates would be the goal. In fact, shooting was one sport where the country excelled. Ronak says that it is a reflection of the process that has been in place for a while. For 2026, the bar

has been set a bit higher and he hopes by the end of the year at least four shooters qualify for the Olympics."We have been doing quite well in Asian Games and going by our form in the last year, I would be hoping that India win medals in every event they participate," he tells this daily. He says that the trial process for the Asian Games will start from January and will continue till May. "This is an extremely important year because the Asian Games and the quota competition and World Championships both are in this year (end of the year). But it is very important that in the beginning you have to maintain your form so that you actually qualify to be in the team. First half of the year, you have to be in form to make it to the Asian Games. And second half of the year, you have to actually perform and deliver medals and Olympic quotas."Ronak believes with last year's work, everyone is quite prepared technically. "It's all about trusting whatever you've learnt and stick to a plan and planning is going to be extremely crucial this year," he says. As for his aspiration, he says, "I would like nothing less than a medal in every event in the Asian Games. In most of the Olympic events, we should win two medals in one event, like in the World Cup final and the World Championships also."

Destiny's child: Astrologer's daughter Vaishnavi Sharma has the makings of a star

NEW DELHI. (Agency) Vaishnavi Sharma made her India debut in the first T20I versus Sri Lanka at Visakhapatnam on December 21, but her first real statement in national colours came on Sunday in Thiruvananthapuram. Two wickets for 24 runs in a match that saw 412 runs scored across 40 overs. On a placid surface and with a wet ball in hand, the 20-year-old left-arm spinner from Gwalior quietly carved a niche for herself. Making an impact in her debut series was perhaps written in the stars for the daughter of an astrologer.In a match where the more celebrated Sree Charani struggled to find her rhythm, conceding 1 for 46 in four overs, Vaishnavi, playing her maiden international series, delivered her best performance so far. Her economical bowling and five wickets in the series has seen her emerge as a potential future star post the women team's ODI World Cup triumph last month.For her father, Dr Narendra Sharma, also a PhD in psychology, watching from home in Gwalior, his daughter's journey to the Indian team seems predestined.When Vaishnavi was born, Sharma studied her horoscope closely. What he saw then, he

says, shaped her career path.“When Vaishnavi was born, I made her horoscope. In her horoscope, there were strong indications for sports and also for becoming



a doctor,” he says. “Had she chosen medicine, the whole city would have known her. But had she chosen sports, the whole world would know her,” Sharma toldRelatives and neighbours made a beeline for the Sharma household to watch Vaishnavi play for India in the four T20 Internationals, two in Visakhapatnam and three in Thiruvananthapuram. “Neighbours and relatives were around, the house was full. Everyone was happy,” Sharma said.India captain Harmanpreet Kaur was eager for Vaishnavi to succeed.

“We were all waiting for that (Vaishnavi's) maiden wicket. Even though in the last game there were a few missed chances, today she bowled a very crucial over and picked up two wickets,” Harmanpreet Kaur said this after the win in the second match in Visakhapatnam.After her horoscope showed the way, Sharma decided cricket was the sport for Vaishnavi and her older brother Ashendra.“So when we decided to put her into sports, we chose cricket,” Sharma adds. “From the age of four, her mother, her brother, and I started coaching her ourselves. I used to teach my son so that my daughter would feel motivated,” he says.When the family lived in Gwalior's Sindhi Colony, Sharma took her to nearby grounds daily. That approach continued even when formal training began. Vaishnavi joined the Tansen Cricket Academy in 2021–22, a decision her father says was taken to provide structure and regular access to facilities.

Lovekesh Chaudhary, the coach at the academy, remembers seeing Vaishnavi when she was seven or eight years old, when her father first brought her to him. The early impression remains vivid.

Major sports events in 2026: FIFA World Cup, T20 World Cups, Commonwealth Games and more



Dubai. (Agency) he year 2026 promises to be a blockbuster for sports fans across the world as several

marquee events are lined up across different disciplines. From cricket, football, to athletics, the 2026 sports

calendar will be packed with action and thrilling matches throughout the year. Several global tournaments, multi-sport events and high-stakes matches are scheduled across the calendar. 2026 is going to be a landmark year in international sport. Popular sporting events like the FIFA World Cup, Commonwealth Games and the ICC T20 World Cup will take place this year.The men's T20 World Cup will begin on February 7 in India and Sri Lanka, while the women's T20 World Cup will start on June 12 in England and Wales. The 2026 FIFA World Cup is scheduled to start on 12 June in the USA, Mexico, and Canada. All four tennis Grand Slams are taking place in 2026, and the hockey World Cup is scheduled to be played in the Netherlands and Belgium from August 15.



against Manchester City on December 19, but played for 90 minutes in the next three games leading up to Christmas. Earlier this month, he equalled Cristiano Ronaldo's club record with his 59th goal in the calendar year. Real Madrid confirm Mbappe's injury The club also released a statement, confirming that Mbappe suffered a sprain in his left knee and his progress will be monitored.Following tests carried out today by the Real Madrid Medical Services on our player Kylian Mbappé, he has been diagnosed with a sprain in his left knee. His progress will be monitored,” the club said in a brief statement on its official website.Mbappe's injury is a massive setback for the Los Blancos as they are currently trailing LaLiga table toppers Barcelona by four points. Madrid have 42 points in 18 matches, while Barcelona have 46 points in 18 LaLiga Games.

Looking ahead to 2026: Can the big stars, from India's cricket teams to Lionel Messi and D Gukesh, defend their crowns

In this three-part series, The Indian Express team outlines what they look forward to in 2026

NEW DELHI. (Agency) n the last three men's ICC events, India have been head and shoulders above the chasing pack. While they won two tournaments, staying unbeaten, their only loss in the 2023 home World Cup came in the final. In a month, they will gear up for another World Cup at home, this one in the T20 format. No team has ever before defended the title. While it speaks about the magnitude of the challenge, India also has a chance to do what no Indian side has done before. For a team that is spoken about as the best, they haven't won two successive World Cups. With a

dominant squad on paper, India have a golden opportunity in their hands to match what West Indies did in the 1970s, and Australia did in the 2000s. Getting to do it at home would make it all the more special.

Building on history Even in the immediate aftermath of India finally breaking the barrier to win the ICC Women's World Cup, Harmanpreet Kaur's perspective didn't leave her. She said this should just be the start, not a one-off: India must make this a habit now. The 2026 ICC Women's T20 World Cup starting in England from 12 June, would be the first opportunity to show the world if India can convert the magical triumph in Navi Mumbai into the foundation of a cricketing dynasty. It gives India the perfect chance, in conditions where they actually have fared well recently, to go from strength to strength. But mind you, after being dethroned from both their thrones in white-ball cricket. Australia would be gunning for it just as hard, if not more.

Messi-Ronaldo's big-stage showdown

Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo have cast football in their image this century, enriching and embellishing the sport. Their World Cup journey would conclude next year. Ronaldo



is 40, Messi is 38. There wouldn't be the mind and legs of another campaign. The Argentine has already realised his dream of lifting the World Cup in Qatar. The dream has remained elusive for Ronaldo. The 2026 edition would be his last shot. Their intertwined destinies could twine for one last time. Portugal and Argentina could potentially meet in the quarterfinals in

Kansas, provided they top their group and win the knockouts. One of the two great careers could end in tears. It would be both cruel and fitting, but an irresistible watch. Djokovic puts hopes on modern science If you don't want Novak Djokovic to win his record 25th Slam in 2026, you can't be a true tennis fan. But can the 38-year-old break the Sinner-Alcaraz duopoly? If you doubt the Serb you can't be a true tennis fan. After a Slam-less year, Djokovic is re-constructing his team to further push his already stretched aging body.Joining it is Dr. Mark Kovacs, a new-age holistic sports coach whose website calls him a "performance expert in the area of optimising human performance through the application of cutting edge, evidence-based information". Djokovic's biggest challenge is to play 7 best-of-five Slam matches. So if modern science can help his body last the distance, the mind can do the rest. The Serb has hinted that the Australian Open could be his last Slam. If you are a true fan, you know those are just mind games.

Sensex opens 180 points higher, Nifty above 26,150; ITC down 2%

**New Delhi.(Agency)**  
Benchmark stock market indices opened higher on Wednesday, starting 2026 in green as auto and metal stocks gained in early trade but FMCG and pharma shares declined, limiting the gains.The S&P BSE Sensex was up 104.21 points to 85,324.81, while the NSE Nifty50 gained 28.60 points to 26,158.20 as of 9:25 am.Among the top five gainers, in early trade, IndiGo rose 2.09%, followed by Mahindra and Mahindra up 1.22%, Reliance Industries gaining 1.12%, Eternal adding 1.01%, and Larsen and Toubro rising 0.68%.ITC was the worst performer, falling 4.03%, followed by Bharat Electronics down 0.49%, Bajaj Finance slipping 0.40%, Sun Pharmaceutical Industries declining 0.29%, and Trent easing 0.27%.

Elior Group appoints Ashwani Vohra as Managing Director of Elior India

**New Delhi.(Agency)**  
Elior Group, a global leader in contract catering and multiservices for business and industry, has appointed Ashwani Vohra as Managing Director of Elior India.  
With more than 25 years of experience in food services, retail, hospitality, and large-scale operations management, Vohra will be responsible for driving Elior’s growth strategy in India and strengthening operational excellence across the business.  
A recognised business leader in the Indian market, Vohra has previously held senior leadership positions across several organisations, driving strong year-on-year profitable growth.  
He is known for his ability to transform and industrialise operations, build client- and consumer-centric teams, and drive transformative growth through innovative and bespoke offerings, with nutrition, wellness, and sustainability at the core.  
“We are delighted to welcome Ashwani Vohra to Elior India as Managing Director. His deep knowledge of the Indian market, his strategic vision, and his proven ability to grow and transform complex operations are major assets to support Elior’s ambition in the region. His arrival marks an important milestone in strengthening our presence in India,” said Daniel Derichebourg, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of Elior Group.

Tarun Garg takes charge as Hyundai Motor India's first Indian MD & CEO

**New Delhi.(Agency)**  
Hyundai Motor India Ltd on Thursday said Tarun Garg has officially assumed charge as its Managing Director & Chief Executive Officer (MD & CEO) from January 1, 2026.This is the first time an Indian national is heading Hyundai Motor India Ltd (HMIL), the Indian arm of South Korean auto major Hyundai Motor Company, since its inception 29 years ago.He succeeds Unsoo Kim, who is returning to a strategic role at Hyundai Motor Company (HMC), South Korea.  
It is a testament to Hyundai Motor Group's confidence in India's leadership and India's growing strategic importance in the global automotive landscape, HMIL said in a statement.This leadership transition underscores Hyundai Motor Group's confidence in India's growth story and its strategic importance, setting the stage for a new era of innovation, resilience, and progress, it said.Garg's leadership will focus on four key pillars of future-ready strategy; people and market focus; customer-centric approach and 'Make in India, Made for the World' impetus."With over three decades of automotive experience, Garg brings in the right expertise to lead HMIL's second phase of growth in India," the company added.Commenting on his new role, Garg said,"My vision is to build on our strong foundation while accelerating HMIL's transformation towards sustainable growth, technological leadership, and unmatched customer delight." He further said,"Aligned with Hyundai's global vision of 'Progress for Humanity,' we will strengthen Hyundai's legacy and create meaningful mobility solutions that not only empower people but also connect communities and enrich lives."  
Last year in October, HMIL board approved the elevation of Garg, who was its Chief Operating Officer, as Managing Director and CEO from January 1, 2026, as part of its succession planning.

New GST rates for sin goods from Feb 1! Tobacco & pan masala to attract 40% tax - check details

**New Delhi.(Agency)**  
Tobacco products and pan masala products are set to face a new tax structure from February 1. This comes as the Centre rolls out additional excise duty and a health cess, above the current GST rates. The new structure will replace the compensation cess which is applied on 'sin goods'.Tobacco and allied products will now attract an additional excise duty while pan masala will have a Health and National Security Cess.As per a government notification, pan masala, cigarettes, tobacco and similar products will be taxed at 40% under the Goods and Services Tax (GST) regime. Meanwhile, biris will attract an 18% GST rate. These GST rates will continue, but new levies will now be imposed separately.The finance ministry also notified the Chewing Tobacco, Jarda Scented Tobacco and Gutkha Packing Machines (Capacity Determination and Collection of Duty) Rules, 2026. The rules lay down the framework for determining production capacity and collecting duty from manufacturers of chewing tobacco and related products.The move follows Parliament’s approval in December of two Bills that cleared the way for the new cess on pan masala manufacturing and the excise duty on tobacco products.

FIEO welcomes Centre’s MAS intervention to boost global market access for exporters

**New Delhi.(Agency)**  
The Federation of Indian Export Organisations (FIEO) on Wednesday welcomed the Government of India’s launch of the Market Access Support (MAS) Intervention under the Export Promotion Mission (EPM).  
The FIEO stated that the move will strengthen India’s export competitiveness by improving structured access to global markets, particularly for MSMEs and first-time exporters.  
Approved by the union Cabinet on November 12, the MAS Intervention provides targeted financial and institutional support for buyer-seller meets, international trade fairs and exhibitions, reverse buyer-seller meets in India, and trade delegations to priority and emerging markets.The scheme is being implemented under the NIRYAT DISHA sub-scheme of the Export Promotion Mission.  
In a statement, FIEO President S C Ralhan said the initiative marks a shift towards predictable and outcome-oriented export



promotion, addressing long-standing market access challenges faced by smaller exporters.  
He noted that the provision of a three-to-five-year advance calendar of international events will improve planning certainty for exporters and trade bodies, while mandatory MSME participation will help broaden India's export base.  
Under the framework, the government has rationalised financial support ceilings and

cost-sharing ratios, with preferential treatment for priority sectors and markets.  
Exporters with overseas shipments of up to ₹75 lakh in the previous year will also be eligible for partial airfare support, aimed at encouraging participation of new and small exporters in overseas trade events.  
The scheme is fully digitised through the trade.gov.in portal, enabling online approvals, feedback, lead tracking and outcome measurement.  
Industry bodies said this is expected to improve transparency, reduce transaction time and align export promotion activities with measurable business outcomes.FIEO also welcomed the introduction of proof-of-concept and product demonstration support for technology-driven sectors, stating that the MAS Intervention could play a key role in enhancing buyer engagement, market diversification and integration of Indian exporters into global value chains.

Extra excise duty on tobacco products, cess on pan masala to take effect February 1

The new levies on tobacco and pan masala will be imposed over and above the applicable GST rates. These measures will replace the GST compensation cess, which is currently charged at varying rates on sin products.

**New Delhi.(Agency)**  
India will levy higher taxes on tobacco products and pan masala from February 1, 2026, as the government, on late Wednesday, notified a new excise duty and cess to replace the GST compensation cess, according to news agency .According to the notification, the new levies on tobacco and pan masala will be imposed over and above the applicable GST rates. These measures will replace the GST compensation cess, which is currently charged at varying rates on sin products.From February 1, pan masala, cigarettes, tobacco and similar products will attract a GST rate of 40

per cent, while biris will be taxed at 18 per cent under the GST framework.In addition to GST, a Health and National Security Cess will be levied on pan masala. Tobacco and tobacco-related products will attract an additional



excise duty, as notified by the Finance Ministry.The Finance Ministry on Wednesday also notified the Chewing Tobacco, Jarda Scented Tobacco and Gutkha Packing Machines (Capacity Determination and Collection of Duty) Rules, 2026. These rules lay down the mechanism for assessing production capacity and collecting duty from manufacturers of chewing tobacco, scented tobacco and gutkha.  
PARLIAMENTARY APPROVAL IN

DECEMBER  
The government’s move follows parliamentary approval in December of two Bills that allow the levy of the new Health and National Security Cess on pan masala manufacturing and an additional excise duty on tobacco products.With Parliament clearing the legislation, the Centre was required to notify the date from which the new tax regime would take effect. The government on Wednesday formally notified February 1, 2026, as the implementation date.  
GST COMPENSATION CESS TO END  
As part of the overhaul, the existing GST compensation cess on tobacco and pan masala will cease to apply from February 1. The compensation cess was originally introduced to offset revenue losses suffered by states after the rollout of GST.By replacing it with a combination of cess and excise duty, the Centre is reshaping the taxation framework for tobacco and pan masala, while continuing to impose a high tax burden on products it classifies as harmful to public health.

Cigarette Excise Duty Hike: ITC Stock Declines To 21-Month Low On Block Deal, Tariff Rise

**New Delhi.(Agency)**  
Shares of ITC Ltd slipped to their lowest level in nearly two years on Thursday, January 1, weighed down by the government’s notification of higher taxation on cigarettes and tobacco products, along with a large block deal in the counter.The decline followed a notification by the Finance Ministry that cigarettes, tobacco and bids will attract an effective 40% GST from February 1, 2026. This includes the standard 28% GST rate, with excise duty and National Calamity Contingent Duty (NCCD) being subsumed into the new structure. Market participants are now assessing whether the move results in any additional cess or duty and what the overall tax burden on cigarettes will look like once the changes come into force.Sentiment was further hit by a sizeable block deal executed earlier in the session, where more than 4 crore shares of ITC

changed hands. The transaction represented around 0.3% of the company’s outstanding equity. Shares were traded at an average price of about Rs 400 apiece, taking the total deal



value to Rs 1,614.5 crore.Cigarettes remain a key profit driver for ITC. In the September quarter, the segment accounted for nearly 48% of the company’s total revenue. Cigarette business revenue rose 6.7% year-on-year to Rs 8,722 crore, while volumes

increased 6%, broadly in line with market expectations, which had pegged volume growth in the 5-6% range.The stock was trading 7.95% lower at Rs 370.06 as of 11:05 am on Thursday, January 1, 2026. ITC shares have fallen about 12% in 2025, marking their first year of negative returns since 2020. Thursday’s decline pushed the stock back to levels last seen in March 2024 and marked its sharpest single-day fall in more than eight months.Shares of Godfrey Phillips India on Thursday also tumbled nearly 10% to trade at Rs 2,488 apiece on the NSE, as of 10:55 am. Godfrey Phillips India shares fell around 12 percent in the past five days, and around 16 percent in the past six months. The stock however jumped 48 percent in 2025. Its P/E ratio stands at 43.45, and market capitalisation at Rs 38,864 crore.

LPG Price Hike: Gas Cylinder Goes Up Rs 111 In New Year Shocker | Check New City-Wise Rates

Following the revision, a 19-kg commercial LPG cylinder in Delhi now costs Rs 1,691.50, up from Rs 1,580.50. Check the gas cylinder in other cities

**New Delhi.(Agency)**  
The new year has begun with a spike in fuel costs, as the government on Wednesday increased the price of 19-kg commercial LPG cylinders by Rs 111, effective January 1. The hike is expected to push up operating costs for hotels, restaurants and small businesses across the country.  
Following the revision, a 19-kg commercial LPG cylinder in Delhi now costs Rs 1,691.50, up from Rs 1,580.50. Prices have risen to Rs 1,795 in Kolkata from Rs 1,684, while in Mumbai, the rate has gone up to Rs 1,642.50 from Rs 1,531.No Change In Domestic LPG Cylinder Prices  
There has been no change in the price of 14-kg domestic LPG cylinders, offering some



relief to household consumers. Domestic cooking gas prices remain unchanged across cities, ranging between Rs 850 and Rs 960.Currently, a domestic LPG cylinder costs Rs 853 in Delhi, Rs 852.50 in Mumbai, Rs 890.50 in Lucknow, Rs 860 in Ahmedabad, Rs 905 in Hyderabad,

Rs 916.50 in Varanasi, and Rs 951 in Patna.  
Revised Commercial LPG Rates In Other Cities  
According to Indian Oil’s website, the price of a 19-kg commercial LPG cylinder now stands at Rs 1,953.50 in Patna, Rs 1,691 in

Noida, Rs 1,814 in Lucknow, Rs 1,696 in Bhopal, and Rs 1,708.50 in Gurugram.  
LPG prices are influenced by multiple factors, including the Import Parity Price (IPP), global fuel rates, the rupee-dollar exchange rate, freight costs, insurance and local taxes. Variations in state-level taxes and logistics costs lead to differences in prices across regions.  
Relief For Households: PNG Prices Reduced  
Even as commercial LPG prices rise, households have received some relief. Indraprastha Gas Limited (IGL) has announced a reduction in domestic piped natural gas (PNG) prices in Delhi and the National Capital Region.Under the revised rates, domestic PNG will cost Rs 47.89 per SCM in Delhi. In Gurugram, the price has been lowered to Rs 46.70 per SCM, while consumers in Noida, Greater Noida and Ghaziabad will pay Rs 47.76 per SCM.  
The revised PNG prices came into effect at the start of 2026 and are expected to ease the burden on household consumers.



annulled.Accordingly, IHCL's nominee directors have stepped down from the board of Taj GVK Hotels & Resorts Ltd, effective December 30, 2025. Taj GVK Hotels & Resorts Ltd will now take necessary steps to change its corporate name by dropping the name 'Taj' from its corporate name in accordance with the termination agreement and adopt a new identity.IHCL clarified that it will continue operating the existing hotels under the current hotel operating agreements already in place.Following the stake sale, IHCL, Shalini Bhupal, members of the GVK promoter family and the company signed a termination agreement. Under this agreement, two key arrangements have been cancelled, the shareholders' agreement signed in 2011 and the name and trademark license agreement signed in 2007.Earlier in December 2025, Tata Group-owned IHCL had announced that it would convert its joint venture with the GVK-Bhupal family into a long-term management model.The GVK-Bhupal family, which holds a 74.99% stake, will continue as the promoter of the company.

# Triptii Dimri

## Hopes People Are Kinder In 2026, Says 'Bas Preet Hi Saath Reh Jaati Hai'

As 2025 is almost over, actress Triptii Dimri decided to reflect on the year gone by with a special social media post. Dropping a video compilation of some precious memories of 2025, Triptii revealed that all the ups and downs she faced this year helped her grow as a person and provided her with a little more clarity. The Dhadak 2 actress expressed her gratitude for all the new experiences that came her way and also for all the people she met. For 2026, Triptii hopes for people to be a little kinder and choose things that actually matter, such as empathy, peace, and joy.

The Bulbul actress penned a note on her IG that read, "Ending the year with a full heart... So many lessons... so many ups and downs... but also clarity... growth... and gratitude... Thankful for the new experiences... the people I met and worked with... the places I saw... and the memories I made with the ones I love... Manifesting double the joy in the year ahead... and hoping we can all be kinder and more loving towards one another, choosing empathy... peace... a n d j o y Always...(sic)"

She decided to conclude the post on a profound note. "After all... bas preet hi saath reh jaati hai," Triptii added. Work-wise, 2026 seems to be an extremely promising year for Triptii with an exciting lineup, including Sandeep Reddy Vanga's Spirit, where she will be seen sharing the screen space with Prabhas. Produced jointly by Bhushan Kumar, Sandeep Reddy Vanga, and Pranay Reddy Vanga, Spirit will also feature Prakash

Raj and Vivek Oberoi in pivotal roles, along with others. Refreshing your memory, the makers had initially considered Deepika Padukone for the female lead in the drama. However, due to disagreements over pay and working hours, the role eventually went to Triptii. Over and above this, she also has Vishal Bhardwaj's O Romeo, alongside Shahid Kapoor, in her kitty.



# Hina Khan

## Says 'Physical Intimacy Takes A Backseat In Relationships': 'More Than 13 Years With Rocky...'

Television superstar Hina Khan has stated what intimacy means to her and has expressed her immense love and gratitude for her husband, Rocky Jaiswal, who never fails to make her feel special, even after 13 years of togetherness. The couple, who are on a vacation to



the Maldives, have been sharing a lot of pictures and videos straight from their luxurious trip. In one video especially uploaded by Hina, you can see a romantic note written by Rocky for his lady love. The actress, who was overwhelmed by his gesture, took to her social media account to share how Rocky has been making sure to make her feel loved and special for the past 13 years of their relationship.

"This is one of his ways to express his love for me; it has been his love language for more than a decade now. He will leave such love notes for me wherever we travel in the world. Blessed," wrote

Hina. She added, "It feels so nice when your husband acknowledges your efforts, loves you with the same intensity even after 13-plus years of togetherness, and, in fact, loves you more with each passing day."

The actress mentioned how she feels physical intimacy, after a long-term relationship period, takes a backseat, and then it is all the small and romantic gestures that make the relationship bloom. "In my experience, physical intimacy takes a backseat in a relationship from time to time for multiple reasons: stress, workload, long distance, health, hormonal changes, responsibilities, and, in fact, sometimes a rough patch in a relationship... I'm not saying it's not important; it's equally important, but it does take a backseat many times in a relationship... especially if you have spent more than a decade with each other and weathered storms together," she wrote.

The actress further wrote, "What keeps a relationship going is emotional intimacy, choosing each other again and again and again... The urge to STAY no matter what... and it's always a two-way street... You will get what you give... It's that simple. It's been more than 13 years with @rockyj1. We have seen the best and the worst times together. Been through so much. But one thing never changed. Love and respect for each other."

## Tu Meri Main Tera Main Tera Tu Meri Day 6: Kartik Aaryan's Film Sees Dip, Earns Rs 1.7 Crore



Kartik Aaryan and Ananya Panday's romantic film Tu Meri Main Tera Main Tera Tu Meri (TMMTMTM) struggled to retain momentum at the box office in its first week. The picture, which debuted over the holiday weekend, faced heavy competition from Aditya Dhar's action-packed Dhurandhar and James Cameron's Hollywood sci-fi epic Avatar: Fire and Ash, both of which drew significant audiences. According to preliminary estimates from industry tracker Sacnilk, TMMTMTM collected Rs 1.75 crore on Tuesday, a considerable decrease from its opening day collection of Rs 7.75 crore. The film's total box office revenue is at Rs 27 crore.

The occupancy rate in Hindi circuits was a modest 20.04 per cent, with night shows generating the largest footfall at 28.13 per cent. Evening shows had a 22.35 per cent occupancy rate, afternoon shows 21.73 per cent, and morning shows only 7.96 per cent. The film's performance exemplifies the difficulties romantic dramas face in today's market, particularly when competing with high-profile movies.

### Tu Meri Main Tera Main Tera Tu Meri – Plot and Cast

Tu Meri Main Tera Main Tera Tu Meri is produced by Karan Johar under Dharma Productions, with Adar Poonawalla, Apoorva Mehta, Bhumika Tewari and Namah Pictures' Shareen Mantri Kedia and Kishor Arora. The film is directed by Sameer Vidwans, who previously worked on Satyaprem Ki Katha (2023). It made its international theatrical debut on Christmas 2025. Tu Meri Main Tera Main Tera Tu Meri is Kartik Aaryan's first venture with Dharma Productions and his second with Namah Pictures and director Sameer Vidwans after Satyaprem Ki Katha. On December 15, the filmmakers submitted a reworked version of their film to the Central Board of Film Certification. According to reports, the picture has an approved runtime of 145 minutes and 41 seconds.

## Who Is Jiya Shankar? Actress Rumoured To Marry Fukra Insaan Aka Abhishek Malhan



Jiya Shankar is back in the news. This time, she is rumoured to be getting married to Fukra Insaan aka Abhishek Malhan. On Tuesday, it was reported that the two have been dating each other and are planning to tie the knot soon. While Jiya has now dismissed all speculations, do you know who she is and why she is being linked to Abhishek Malhan? Let's find out.

### Who Is Jiya Shankar?

Jiya Shankar has worked across mediums – television, films and web series. She began her acting career in 2013 with the Telugu film Entha Andanga Unnave. She then made her Tamil debut in 2017 with Kanavu Variyam. She also appeared in the Telugu romantic comedy Hyderabad Love Story (2018). In 2022, Jiya marked her Marathi film debut with Ved, which also starred Riteish Deshmukh and Genelia D'souza.

As far as her journey on Hindi television is concerned, Jiya's breakthrough came with the comedy-drama Meri Hanikarak Biwi, where she played Dr Ira Pandey. She later starred as Susheela (also called Sattu) in Kaatelal & Sons.

The show gained popularity for its gender-role themes. Later, Jiya also appeared in the supernatural drama Pishachini. She also participated in Bigg Boss OTT 2, where she was evicted just before the finale. Interestingly, Abhishek Malhan was also a part of the show.

### Why Is Jiya Shankar Being Linked To Abhishek Malhan?

Jiya and Abhishek participated in Bigg Boss OTT 2 together. They even did a music video together, which further sparked their relationship buzz. However, in 2024, Jiya clarified that they had never been more than just friends.

"Saying this for ONE LAST TIME to whoever it concerns! I've got nothing to do with Fukra Insaan or these meme pages. We shared nothing but friendship, & even that no longer exists. I don't even follow any of these meme pages or have any knowledge of how this works.

I always assumed them making this sort of stuff for views, or I've no idea if someone pays for this s\*\*\*, but if the blame comes on me with nasty comments on my character & family, then hear it, panda gang, I'M SELF MADE, LOUD & PROUD! I'm because of ME and not because of anyone else. Way above these CHEAP STUNTS! So stay in your lane & keep my mother's & my name out of your filthy mouths," she had written.

# 4 experiences

that will make you see

# Agra

with new

# Eyes

**Everybody goes to Agra to see the Taj Mahal, and its cluster of Mughal forts, palaces and gardens. However, these five experiences will give you a new perspective on the city's most famous attractions.**



#### Taj Mahal by night

The Taj Mahal is considered by many, to possess architectural beauty unsurpassed by any other structure in the world. Constructed over a period of 22 years, employing twenty thousand workers, it was completed in 1648 C.E. and cost a whopping 32 million Rupees. Built entirely of white marble, it almost seems to glow in the moonlight, with the shimmering Jamuna river situated just across. The Muslim emperor Shah Jahan built this monument in the memory of his wife Mumtaz, whose grave is housed within the premises at the lower chamber. The grave of Shah Jahan was added to it later. The Taj stands tall and regal on a raised, square platform, forming an unequal octagon with its four truncated corners. The architecture uses the interlocking arabesque concept, where each element is singular in its entirety, but integrates seamlessly with the whole. The central dome spans 58 feet in diameter and soars to a height of 213 feet. It is flanked on four sides by smaller domed chambers, and four slender minarets rising to a lower height of 162.5 feet. The entire mausoleum is decorated with an inlaid design of flowers and calligraphy using precious gems like agate and jasper, and the main archways are carved with passages from the Holy Qur'an.

#### Balloon safari

Take a balloon ride for an all-encompassing, bird's eye view of the Taj Mahal, and the surrounding Mughal-era buildings. The tethered helium balloon

safaris operate from sunrise to 8.30 pm, but the best time to take a ride is at sunrise, sunset or in moonlight. The balloons travel to a maximum height of 250 feet and can carry up to 16 passengers.

#### Taj Nature Walk

This nature walk is a great way to explore the lesser-known side of the city. The tour takes visitors through a green belt located on the right bank of the Yamuna River, around 500 metres away from Taj Mahal's east gate. The nine kilometre trail has grass mounds, watch towers and other viewing points to admire the Taj Mahal. This area is also rich in flora and fauna, and has over 46 varieties of flowers. You can also spot local birds, butterflies and mammals such as jackals, blue bulls, hares, parakeets, kingfishers and hoopoes.

#### Taj Mahotsav

Started in 1992, this annual festival is both a craft mela and a cultural extravaganza that attracts artisans from all over the country. In the past, the festival has had displays of silk and zari work from Varanasi, paper mache from Kashmir, marble and zardozi from Agra and brassware from Moradabad. The programme also includes classical and folk music and dances performances by artists from across India. There's also a food festival and a fun fair for children.

**Amidst a sea of azure blue, away from the main Indonesian islands, Bali floats peacefully with an exciting culture, wonderful landscapes and amicable people. Bali is also well known for its beautiful temples with exquisite architecture and carvings. With stepped paddy fields, expansive beaches, swaying coconut trees and volcanic hills, Bali is truly a landscape lover's delight. Kuta and Ubud are the major tourist attractions; the former for its nightlife and beach, and the latter for its paintings and art galleries. Being an island, there is no dearth of beaches and the numerous vast white sands are one of the most sought after places on this island. Apart from Kuta, the popular beaches are Sanur, Jimbaran and Nusa Dua. Captivating sunsets, various water sports activities and delectable seafood along with numerous accommodation options, make these beaches a traveller's favourite.**

## Bali—off the beaten track

#### Celuk and Mas

Ubud is often referred to as the cultural capital of Bali and this is due to the numerous shops and art galleries here that sell a plethora of wood works, stone arts, silverware and paintings. Both Balinese and Batuan paintings are quite popular. Most of the art works are of Buddha or characters from Ramayana. There are art workshops where visitors can see the making of these on guided tours. Celuk and Mas are the popular places in Ubud where one can witness the artisans in work. Celuk is well known for its silver wares and there are numerous shops which sell them. Also, one can take guided tours where they would be educated about the making of the same. The shops have a huge collection of silverware with very beautiful creations. Mas is a nice little town in Ubud which has numerous shops that sell wood works made by the local artisans. There are also guided tours to the workshops where one can see the artisans in work and also buy the souvenirs.

#### Kecak and fire dance

This unique Balinese dance performance is quite an interesting watch with absolutely

no music instruments but a huge orchestra of seventy people who create music with their vocals. The vigorous dancers remain in a trance and make communications with ancestors and deities throughout the play. Trance dance is also referred to as 'Sanghyang' dance. The dancer's performance is riveting one and definitely packs a punch. Fire is an integral part and is used extensively during the latter part of the play. The play has five acts in total and the story depicts a portion from the epic, Ramayana. The enactment shows Rama, Lakshmana and Sita in the forest, Ravana kidnapping Sita, Ravana's fight with Garuda, Rama and Lakshman meeting Hanuman and finally Hanuman flying to Lanka to meet Sita. With an expansive background, as the evening progresses, the lights and fire make the play a gorgeous affair. The dance is played daily evening near Uluwatu Temple, which is also well known for its enchanting sunsets. Make sure to grab your seats early as it gets a huge number of spectators.

#### Barong and Keris dance

This captivating dance is a form of a play which represents an eternal fight between the good spirit and the evil spirit. Barong (a mythological

animal) represents the good spirit, while Rangda (a mythological monster) represents the evil spirit. The dance has music tones in the background and consists of five different acts which sum up the whole play. The orchestra is huge and has numerous types of instruments being played. The play has reference to mythological Hindu stories, gods, and characters, and has an enthralling performance by the actors. The unique attire and the colourful masks they use are one of a kind. The play has actors dressed as tigers, monkeys, gods and is quite an enactment which keeps the viewers engrossed. One can watch this wonderful dance performance at Jambudaya in Batubulan. The play is enacted on a stage inside an auditorium and runs for more than an hour. Viewers are also allowed to go on stage and take photographs with the performers after the play.

#### Kintamani

Though Bali is known for its ever popular beaches, Kintamani is one of the few hills stations that the island possesses. The warm weather turns cold as the road winds its way to Kintamani past the orange orchards and souvenir shops. From the beaches and paddy fields that Bali is synonymous with, Kintamani in northern Bali is a pleasant surprise with beautiful vistas and cool climate. Mount Batur and Lake Batur are the most popular attractions here. Mount Batur last erupted in 1968 and marks of the overflown black lava are still evident all over the mountain. An ideal way to explore would be to go on an early morning trek to the top of this still active volcanic mountain.

Lake Batur lies adjacent to the mountain and looks breathtakingly beautiful with the azure waters. The mountain and the lake make a beautiful landscape frame and is a delight for photographers. There are numerous restaurants with the mountain and lake view which offer authentic Balinese cuisine. Kintamani is an ideal place in Bali where one can take a stroll enjoying the vistas, cuisines and climate.

#### Tegalalang

The famed terraced paddy fields of Tegalalang are well known for its beautiful vistas. It is located a short drive away from Ubud town, winding roads take you to this beautiful terraced landscape. Along with Pejeng and Campuhan, it forms the paddy field region of Ubud. There are coffee shops, which overlook these fields and visitors can enjoy some Balinese coffee alongside. The landscape is enchanting and is a favourite with photographers and painters. One can opt for organised village tours and walk up the paddy fields or cycle around the fields, which is quite the preferred choice. Tegalalang is an ideal place where one can explore the village life and get to know more about the local farmers and their cultivation. Don't be surprised if any of the farmers invite you home as Balinese people are very warm, hospitable and friendly. There are also numerous souvenir shops in the vicinity which sell a wide range of artifacts and paintings made by local artisans. Evenings and early mornings are the ideal time to visit the terraced paddy fields of Tegalalang.

