

6 WORLD Dozens presumed dead, about 100 injured in fire at Swiss Alps
8 NATION 'Fixed match' of LDF, UDF to end, says PM
TN ushers in 2026 with night of revelry, early morning temple visits

Rail Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw announces ticket fares, other details of the milestone train

Guwahati-Kolkata Vande Bharat sleeper train to be flagged of this month

NEW DELHI, Jan 1: Prime Minister Narendra Modi will flag off the much-awaited Vande Bharat sleeper train between Guwahati and Kolkata later this month, Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw said on Thursday.

He added that the 16-coach train, with a passenger capacity of 823, has a design speed of 180 kilometres per hour. However, it will operate at a speed of 120-130 kmph between the two cities, covering prominent districts of Assam and West Bengal.



stone for the country, Vaishnaw said the ticket fares of the Vande Bharat sleeper train will be substantially lower compared to air travel.

Travel costs around ₹ 6,000 to ₹ 8,000. Talking about per-kilometre fares, he said these would be ₹ 3.8 per km for 1st AC, ₹ 3.1 per km for 2nd AC and ₹ 2.4 for 3rd AC.

Other features include ergonomically-designed berths with improved cushioning, automatic doors with vestibules for smooth movement, enhanced ride comfort through superior suspension and noise reduction, an automatic train protection system (Kavach), an emergency talk-back system and disinfectant technology to maintain high sanitation standards, among others. (CONTD. ON PAGE-2)

Identity, development to be focus of polls: CM

'We are committed to push back the illegal foreigners to protect the identity of indigenous people'

GUWAHATI, Jan 1: Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Thursday said identity and development will be the focus of the forthcoming assembly polls due in a few months.



Convicted Foreign Nationals (CFN) and fresh illegal migrants were sent back during the last five years, and 1,043 fresh migrants of them were returned since May last year.

'Assam first state to constitute 8th Pay Commission'

GUWAHATI, Jan 1: Assam will become the first state in the country to constitute the 8th Pay Commission for revision of the pay structure of its employees after the central government, Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said on Thursday.

Zubeen case: HC to be moved for setting up of fast-track court

State govt to hand over ₹ 32 cr GST collected from 'Roi Roi Binale' to 'Kalaguru Foundation'
GUWAHATI, Jan 1: The Assam government will transfer ₹ 2.90 crore, the share of the state GST earned from Zubeen Garg's last film 'Roi Roi Binale' to a foundation set up by the late singer by Friday, Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said here.

'RBI data points to Assam as fastest growing state economy'

GUWAHATI, Jan 1: Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Thursday said that the Reserve Bank of India has recognised it as the fastest growing state economy in the country with a 45 per cent growth during the last five years.

due in a few months. "This is not a political slogan but data from the RBI. The recognition as the fastest growing economy will be felt in all areas, and competing with states like Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Maharashtra will give a boost to the people of the state," he said.

Tezpur University VC sent on leave amid ongoing protests, probe panel set up

NEW DELHI, Jan 1: Nearly three months after students and teachers launched protests demanding the removal of Tezpur University Vice Chancellor (VC) Shambhu Nath Singh, the Ministry of Education (MoE) asked him to proceed on leave and ordered the setting up of an enquiry panel to probe into the allegations against him, according to officials.

Corridor, to be constructed at a cost of ₹6,957 crore in Golaghat district

'PM to lay foundation stone of Kaziranga elevated corridor, underwater tunnel this month'

GUWAHATI, Jan 1: Prime Minister Narendra Modi is likely to lay the foundation stone of the 32-km Kaziranga Elevated Corridor project on January 17 or 18, Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said on Thursday.



project and Cabinet nod is expected soon, he said. The PM is also scheduled to lay the foundation stone of a new railway line between Kokrajhar and Gelephu in Bhutan, the CM said.

Advertisement for the book 'Desh-Desh-Desh-Desh' by Anshu Kishore Bhaichandhuri. Includes a portrait of the author and text in Assamese.

# Stock market ends first trading session of 2026 on flat note

## ITC biggest drag

**MUMBAI, Jan 1:** Equity benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty ended almost flat on the first trading session of 2026, as massive selling in ITC stock and foreign fund outflows amid thin investor participation diminished the initial enthusiasm.

A selective buying trend on some counters supported the equity market, but a weak rupee against the dollar impacted sentiments, traders said.

In a see-saw trade, the 30-share BSE Sensex dipped 32 points or 0.04 per cent to settle at 85,188.60 on Thursday due to fog-end selling. During the day, it hit a high of 85,451.70 and a low of 85,101.52, fluctuating 350.18 points.

The 50-share NSE Nifty went up marginally by 16.95 points or 0.06 per cent to end at 26,146.55.

"This was the smallest daily trading range recorded since September 17, 2025, reflecting a phase of indecision and limited participation from both buyers and sellers," Sudeep Shah, Head - Technical and Derivatives Research at SBI Securities, said.

From the 30-Sensex firms, ITC tanked 9.69 per cent, following Bajaj Finance, Asian Paints, Bharat Electronics and ICICI Bank.

In contrast, NTPC, Eternal,



Mahindra & Mahindra, Larsen & Toubro and Power Grid were among the gainers.

"Sectorally, auto stocks gained on strong December sales, while value buying supported IT stocks.

"However, overall advances were capped as FMCG stocks declined following the newly imposed excise duty on cigarettes," Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Investments Limited, said.

Shares of cigarette and tobacco product makers tumbled after the government notified February 1 as the date from which additional excise duty on

tobacco products, and a health cess on pan masala will be levied.

Godfrey Phillips India plummeted 17.09 per cent.

"Indian equity markets started the first trading session of 2026 on a mixed and cautious note, with indices largely consolidating at higher levels amid selective buying and profit-booking. The Nifty-50 closed marginally higher at 26,146, up nearly 17 points, managing to sustain above the important 26,100 zone despite muted global cues and holiday-thinned volumes," Aakash Shah, Research Analyst, Choice Broking, said.

The BSE midcap gauge climbed 0.27 per cent, while the smallcap index dipped 0.02 per cent.

Among sectoral indices, BSE FMCG tanked 2.96 per cent. Consumer Durables and oil & gas were also the laggards.

Telecommunication jumped 1.69 per cent, utilities (1.51 per cent), power (1.14 per cent), auto (0.95 per cent), realty (0.84 per cent) and metal (0.82 per cent).

Asian and European markets were closed on Thursday for the New Year's Day holiday.

US markets ended lower on Wednesday. The rupee depreciated 10 paise to close at 89.98 (provisional) against the US dollar on Thursday.

Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth ₹ 3,597.38 crore on Wednesday, while Domestic Institutional Investors (DIIs) bought stocks worth ₹ 6,759.64 crore, according to exchange data.

On Wednesday, the Sensex jumped 545.52 points, or 0.64 per cent, to settle at 85,220.60. The Nifty soared 190.75 points or 0.74 per cent to end at 26,129.60. In the entire 2025, Sensex rallied 7,081.59 points or 9 per cent, and Nifty zoomed 2,484.8 points or 10.50 per cent. (PTI)

## GST collections rise 6 pc to over ₹ 1.74 lakh cr in December 2025

**NEW DELHI, Jan 1:** Gross GST collections rose 6.1 per cent to over ₹ 1.74 lakh crore in December 2025, on slow growth in revenues from domestic sales following the sweeping tax cuts, according to government data released on Thursday. Gross Goods and Services Tax (GST) revenue in December 2024 was over ₹ 1.64 lakh crore.

Gross revenue from domestic

transactions rose 1.2 per cent to over ₹ 1.22 lakh crore, while revenues from imported goods were up 19.7 per cent at ₹ 51,977 crore during December, 2025.

Refunds were up 31 per cent to ₹ 28,980 crore in December.

Net GST revenues (after adjusting refunds) stood at over ₹ 1.45 lakh crore, up 2.2 per cent year-on-year. Cess collection last month

dipped to ₹ 4,238 crore, as against ₹ 12,003 crore collected in December 2024. Effective September 22, 2025, GST rates on about 375 items were slashed, making goods cheaper. Also, a compensation cess levy is levied only on tobacco and related products, as against luxury, sin and demerit goods earlier. The lowering of GST rates has impacted revenue collections. (PTI)

## Gold kicks off 2026 on a firm note; silver slides after record rally

**NEW DELHI, Jan 1:** Gold prices started the new year on a firm note on Thursday, rising by ₹ 640 to ₹ 1,38,340 per 10 grams in the national capital, according to the All India Sarafa Association. The yellow metal of 99.9 per cent purity had closed at ₹ 1,37,700 per 10 grams on Wednesday.

However, silver prices extended losses for the second consecutive day, depreciating ₹ 1,600 to ₹ 2,37,400 per kilogram (inclusive of all taxes) from the previous close of ₹ 2,39,000 per kg.

The rally in both gold and silver during 2025 was spectacular. The yellow metal delivered returns of 73.45 per cent. Meanwhile, silver outperformed gold with a surge of about 164 per cent. In the international markets, spot gold slipped by USD 28, or 0.65 per cent, to close at USD 4,310.89 per ounce on Wednesday. "On the last trading day of the year 2025, spot gold closed with a loss at USD 4,310 per ounce as US yields rebounded," Praveen Singh, Head of Commodities, Mirae Asset ShareKhan, said.

He added that the international gold prices are expected to be range-bound in the short term. On the outlook, Rahul Kalantri, Vice-President of Commodities at Mehta Equities, told PTI that "in 2026, the key drivers for gold and silver prices will be a mix of macroeconomic, monetary, and geopolitical factors such as expectations around US Federal Reserve interest rates, the strength or weakness of the dollar. (PTI)

## ATF price cut by steep 7 pc, commercial LPG rate up ₹ 111 per cylinder

**NEW DELHI, Jan 1:** Price of aviation turbine fuel (ATF), or jet fuel, was reduced by 7.3 per cent on Thursday, while commercial LPG rate was raised by ₹ 111 per cylinder, as state-owned oil marketing companies implemented their monthly price revisions aligned with global fuel benchmarks. ATF price in Delhi was cut by ₹ 7,353.75 per kilolitre, or 7.3 per cent, to ₹ 92,323.02 per kl, according to state-owned fuel retailers.

The reduction comes after three rounds of monthly price hikes. The rate was last raised by ₹ 5,133.75 per kl, or 5.4 per cent, on December 1. Prior to that prices had risen by about 1 per cent on November 1 and by 3.3 per cent on October 1. The cut announced Thursday neutralises more than two-thirds of the price increase that happened since October 1. The latest reduction is expected to ease pressure on airlines, for which fuel accounts for nearly 40 per cent of operating costs.

No immediate comments could be obtained from the airlines on the impact

of the price change. In Mumbai, ATF price was revised to ₹ 86,352.19 per kl, while prices in Chennai and Kolkata were cut to ₹ 95,770 and ₹ 95,378.02 per kl, respectively. Fuel prices vary across cities due to local taxes. Alongside, the price of a 19-kg commercial LPG cylinder used by hotels and restaurants was hiked by a steep ₹ 111 to ₹ 1,691.50 in Delhi.

The price increase comes on the back of two rounds of monthly reduction. Prices were last cut by ₹ 15.50 per 19-kg cylinder on December 1. Prior to that the rate was reduced by ₹ 5 per cylinder. Commercial LPG prices are now at their highest level since June last year. Prices of domestic LPG, used in household kitchens for cooking, remained unchanged at ₹ 853 per 14.2-kg cylinder, following a ₹ 50 hike in April 2025.

Indian Oil Corporation, Bharat Petroleum and Hindustan Petroleum revise ATF and LPG prices on the first day of every month based on international benchmarks and the exchange rate. (PTI)

## EXCISE DUTY ON TOBACCO

### Manufacturers to install CCTV, preserve footage for 24 months from Feb 1

**NEW DELHI, Jan 1:** Manufacturers of chewing tobacco, gutkha and similar products will have to install a functional CCTV system from February 1, covering all packing machines and preserve the footage for at least 24 months, according to a government notification.

Such manufacturers will also have to disclose to excise authorities the number of machines and their capacities, and can also claim abatement in excise duty in case a machine is non-functional for a minimum of 15 consecutive days, according to the Chewing Tobacco, Jarid Scented Tobacco and Gutkha Packing Machines (Capacity Determination and Collection of Duty) Rules notified by the Finance Ministry.

The Rules will apply to manufacturers who pack such goods in pouches.

"Those manufacturing in other forms (such as tins) have to pay the applicable duty on assessable value," an FAQ released by the Ministry said.

The Ministry, on December 31, 2025, notified the additional excise duties that would be levied on chewing tobacco and related products, in addition to the 40 per cent Goods and Services Tax (GST) rate, from February 1.

Chewing and jarid scented to-

bacco, and gutkha will attract an excise duty of 82 per cent, and 91 per cent respectively.

The FAQ further said that every manufacturer operating a packing machine is required to install a functional CCTV system covering all packing machine areas and to preserve the footage for a minimum period of 24 months.

Manufacturers of such tobacco products packed in pouches will have to disclose the number of machines, the specifications of the machines, such as maximum rated capacity and gearbox ratios, and the details of retail sale prices to the excise tax authorities.

The jurisdictional Deputy Commissioner of Central Excise or the Assistant Commissioner of Central Excise, as the case may be, will determine the annual production capacity after conducting a physical inspection of the factory and verifying the technical specifications of the machines.

The annual production capacity shall be determined by multiplying the quantity of notified goods deemed to be produced in a month by 12, the FAQ said.

A fresh determination will be done only if there is a change in the relevant factors of production affecting the annual capacity of production,

i.e., the number of packing machines and the maximum rated capacity of production of machines, it added.

The manufacturer has to pay the full duty for the entire month in which the machines were installed.

The Rules provide that a manufacturer can claim abatement for the non-operation of any machine for a continuous period of 15 days, regardless of whether this period falls within the same calendar month.

To claim abatement, the manufacturer must notify the department at least three working days in advance, and the excise department must seal the machine.

For de-sealing the machine, the manufacturer must inform the jurisdictional Deputy Commissioner or Assistant Commissioner of Central Excise at least 3 working days before the date from which the operations are intended to be resumed.

The machines will be de-sealed in the presence of the jurisdictional Superintendent of Central Excise, the FAQ said.

For removal of machines from the factory for sale or disposal, the manufacturer has to inform the jurisdictional Deputy Commissioner or Assistant Commissioner of Central Excise at least 3 working days in advance from the date so intended for un-

## RBI expresses concern over high-cost distribution strategies of insurers

**MUMBAI, Jan 1:** The Reserve Bank has flagged structural pressures in the insurance sector, saying premium growth is being increasingly driven by high-cost distribution-led strategies of insurance companies rather than operating efficiency.

While posing no near-term systemic risks, the surface-level stability masks emerging structural pressures that could weigh on medium-term sustainability and coverage expansion, RBI said in its latest financial stability report.

"A primary pressure is the persistence of a high expense structure, particularly the acquisition costs. Premium growth has been increasingly driven by high-cost distribution-led strategies rather than operating efficiency," the report said.

It further said that while in the life insurance sector, frontloaded acquisition costs limited the extent to which scale efficiencies are passed on to policyholders.

Furthermore, expected benefits from digitisation remain unrealised.

"From a financial stability perspective, continuously elevated expenses could weaken profitability buffers and amplify cyclical vulnerabilities," it said.

A reorientation towards cost rationalisation, align-

ing intermediary incentives with persistency and value to policyholders, and wider adoption of technology-enabled low-cost distribution models is essential, it said.

Supported by regulatory initiatives like risk-based capital framework, enhanced disclosures, and strengthened market conduct standards, a sustained moderation in expense intensity would improve consumer value, reinforce the sector's long-term resilience, and facilitate transition from the current 'high-cost, low-inclusion' to 'affordable-cost, broad inclusion and high quality' equilibrium, it added.

Total premium income grew to Rs 11.9 lakh crore in 2024-25 from Rs 8.3 lakh crore in 2020-21, reflecting consistent market expansion and stable financial intermediation capacity.

"However, total insurance premium masks a significant growth moderation, as the growth rates for both life and non-life sectors have slowed sharply," the RBI said.

At a sectoral level, the report said the life (protection and savings) sector exhibits a high concentration risk, while the non-life sector has undergone a structural shift, with health emerging as the leading segment. (PTI)

Contd. from Page 1...

## Guwahati-Kolkata Vande

"The disinfectant technology will kill 99.9 per cent of germs. The same technology is being used on the Vande Bharat chair-car version," Vaishnav said.

According to the minister, production is being ramped up and eight more trains will be ready for operation in six months. "By this year, 12 trains will be ready. From next year onwards, production will ramp up rapidly as the entire supply chain will be in place by then," he added. On catering facilities, Vaishnav said trains originating from Guwahati will serve Assamese cuisine, while those starting from Kolkata will offer Bengali food. (PTI)

## Identity, development to

men to lure Hindu women into religious conversion through marriage.

It is, therefore, important that both indigenous Hindu and Muslim communities unite and address the concerns created by the infiltrators which will give "confidence to the Hindus", he added.

The chief minister further said that he has a clear ideological stand on the issue and people "must come to Assam and see for themselves about what we are doing for the poor and downtrodden".

"Our policies on banning polygamy, child marriage and empowerment have brought happiness to many Muslim women and they openly praise us," Sarma said.

He said that he has no problem about what people think about his stand on infiltrators and "it is not my job to change anyone's perception".

Sarma said his New Year's resolution was to ensure the BJP's return to power in the state for a third consecutive term. "BJP is winning the elections... We stay among the people and we know their pulse," he added. (PTI)

## 'Assam first state

Commission are scheduled to come into effect from January 1, 2026. (PTI)

## Zubeen case: HC

three months but now "we want justice to be delivered", Sarma said.

The trial of the seven accused in the Zubeen Garg death case began last month at Kamrup (Metro) District and Sessions Court.

The accused persons -- North East India Festival (NEIF) chief organiser Shyamkanu Mahanta, the singer's secretary Siddhartha Sharma, the singer's cousin Sandipan Garg, and his two Personal Security Officers (PSOs) -- appeared from the Baksa Jail while musician Shekharjyoti Goswami and singer Amritprava Mahanta were present online from Haflong Jail.

The SIT had charged Mahanta, Sharma, Goswami and Amritprava with murder in the charge sheet filed before the CJM on December 12.

Garg's cousin and suspended Assam Police officer Sandipan Garg has been charged with culpable homicide not amounting to murder, while the singer's two PSOs have been accused of criminal conspiracy and criminal breach of trust by misappropriating funds or property entrusted to them. (PTI)

## 'RBI data points

improvement when compared to 2020-21, when the utilisation rate stood significantly lower at 65 per cent," the CM said. The state has significantly ramped up its investment in infrastructure and asset creation, with capital expenditure rising from Rs 20,230 crore in 2021-22 to Rs 26,409 crore in 2024-25.

The per capita income (at current prices) in the state has also seen a significant increase, rising by 54 per cent from Rs 1,03,371 in 2020-21 to Rs 1,59,185 in 2024-25, Sarma said.

The CM claimed that the state has experienced a growth in infrastructure construction at an unprecedented pace over the past five years. "From construction of roads, bridges, waterway terminals, power infrastructure, telecommunication, hospitals, educational institutions and digital infrastructure, the state has laid the bedrock for growth and development," he said.

Currently, four major bridge projects are underway in the state -- Jorhat-Majuli bridge, Palasbari-Sualkuchi bridge, Guwahati-North Guwahati bridge and the country's longest river bridge, connecting Dhubri with Phulbari, Sarma said. The CM claimed that during the last five years, the state government has adopted a proactive investment promotion strategy aimed at attracting private capital and generating employment opportunities.

"The state has become an attractive investment destination in the region and the Advantage Assam 2.0-Investment and Infrastructure Summit witnessed an investment commitment of Rs 5.18 lakh crore," he said.

The chief minister said that the highest recognition for the state has come from the Centre's decision to include it in the delegation to the World Economic Forum (WEF) at Davos along with advanced states like Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh.

"This will give us an opportunity to talk about Assam with leading industrialists", he said.

An investment regarding the setting up of a mobile phone production unit in the state was also likely soon, he added. "I cannot mention the company's name now but discussions are at an advanced state", he said.

The Rs 27,000 crore Tata Semiconductor Assembly and Test Project, Rs 28,026 crore Numaligarh Refinery Limited's expansion project, Rs 10,601 crore Brownfield Ammonia-Urea complex at Namrup are among some of the major industrial investments in the state, he added.

The state government has laid equal importance to the development of agriculture with the procurement of paddy increasing to 8.50 metric tonnes from 2 lakh metric tonnes.

"Our focus is on promoting both industrial and agricultural development to ensure that there is stability and consistent progress in the state's economy," Sarma said.

He claimed that the state has entered a new era of development with the "focus in the last five years being to convince people that Assam can march ahead and compete with advanced states, while in the next five years we plan to forge ahead with world-class infrastructure in place". (PTI)

## Tezpur University VC

Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan urging him to appoint a Pro Vice Chancellor immediately to restore academic stability at the campus.

Tezpur University, one of the two central universities in Assam established in 1994 under the 1985 Assam Accord, has been witnessing turmoil since September 27 last year and calls for the VC's removal have intensified.

The situation in Tezpur University had been tense with students accusing the VC and varsity authorities of not showing due respect to cultural icon Zubeen Garg, even as the state was mourning his death.

Apart from fiscal irregularities, the varsity community is also protesting the alleged deforestation and ecological destruction at the picturesque campus carried out under Singh's administration.

The VC abstained from the campus after the university witnessed heated scenes and an exchange of words between Singh and students on September 22. It led to a situation where he had to nearly flee from the spot.

At least 11 faculty members and senior officials have either resigned from their posts or left the university since the protests began in September. (PTI)

## 'PM to lay foundation

from Gohpur in Biswanath district to Numaligarh in Golaghat, Sarma said while interacting with journalists during a programme titled "Natun Diner Alap" (Conversations of a new day).

The tunnel project was initially planned as a four-lane road, but the prime minister later proposed integrating a railway line into the project, he said.

"When the project came before the Union cabinet, the PM directed that a railway line should also be included in it. The project cost has now increased from Rs 12,000 crore to nearly Rs 20,000 crore," Sarma said.

The 15.60 km four-lane twin tube underwater tunnel under the Brahmaputra will reduce the distance from Gohpur to Numaligarh from 240 km to 34 km and reduce travel time from six hours to 20 minutes.

The Union finance ministry has already approved the project and Cabinet nod is expected soon, he said.

The PM is also scheduled to lay the foundation stone of a new railway line between Kokrajhar and Gelephu in Bhutan, the CM said.

The Centre will also establish a facility at Bansbari in Kokrajhar for wagon manufacturing, overhauling and repairs, he said.

In Guwahati, an elevated corridor from Guwahati airport to Jalukbari was also expected to get the Centre's approval soon.

Sarma said an aerocity will come up near the airport, which will include hotels, convention centre, facilities to promote concert facilities and several other integrated amenities. (PTI)

### ACHIEVEMENT



Jyotirekha Keot, Assistant Professor, Department of Assamese, Samaguri College, has been awarded the PhD degree from Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardev University, Nagaon, for her research work titled "Trailokya Bhattacharya's Stories: An Analytical Study". She completed her research under the guidance of Dr Archana Pujari, Professor, Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardev University. Dr. Jyotirekha Keot is the daughter of late Mahendra Nath Keot and Anandya Lata Keot, residing at Lanang Nagar, Nagaon. She is married to Pradip Chandra Bora, resident of Kasarigaon, Puranigudam.

### AFFIDAVIT

I, Pollobi Konwar, Date of Birth 20-12-1996, D/O-Jaharlal Konwar, W/O- Bijoy Patar, R/O-Vill.- P.O.- Baribandha, P.S.- Laharighat, Dist- Morigaon, Assam have corrected my name from Pallabi Patar to Pollobi Konwar through a notary public at Morigaon court on 31.12.2025. Pollobi Konwar and Pallabi Patar is the same and one person.

### PROVISION OF REST ROOM AT MALIGAON

**E-Tender Notice No. 55 of 2025**  
**Date:** 30-12-2025. E-Tenders are invited by the undersigned for the following works: **SN.1. Tender No. DENGHY-63-2025. Name of work & Location:** At Pandu (West): Provision of Rest room in connection with track machine office staff at TMD/Pandu. **Tender Value:** ₹ 1,94,953.92/- **Earnest Money:** ₹ 1,43,900/- **SN.2. Tender No. DENGHY-64-2025. Name of work & Location:** Guwahati-Kamakhyia-Construction of 23 bay parcel shed at all platforms of Guwahati & Kamakhyia station. **Tender Value:** ₹ 5,17,41,754.14/- **Earnest Money:** ₹ 4,08,700/- **SN.3. Tender No. DENGHY-65-2025. Name of work & Location:** At Guwahati-Extension of Running Room. **Tender Value:** ₹ 2,95,74,973.79/- **Earnest Money:** ₹ 2,97,900/- **SN.4. Tender No. DENGHY-66-2025. Name of work & Location:** Desilting and removal of desilted materials from drains and culverts including repairs to colony and Yard drains under the jurisdiction of SSEW/Guwahati (For one year). **Tender Value:** ₹ 1,78,56,224.99/- **Earnest Money:** ₹ 2,39,300/- **Date & Time of closing/opening of tender:** 13:00 hrs. on 21-01-2026. The complete information of above e-tender will be available in website [www.ireps.gov.in](http://www.ireps.gov.in)  
 Divisional Engineer/Guwahati  
 NORTHEAST FRONTIER RAILWAY  
 Serving Customers With A Smile

## Awareness rally and campaign to focus on reducing accidents and saving lives National Road Safety Month launched

**HT Correspondent**

**MANGALDAI, Jan 1:** The National Road Safety Month was officially launched in Darrang district on Thursday with a public event at Bhebarghat public station.

District Commissioner Parag Kumar Kakaty inaugurated the month-long programme in the presence of drivers and owners of commercial passenger vehicles, police officials, members of the local traffic police, media personnel and other stakeholders. In his address, DC Kakaty emphasised the urgent need to reduce road accidents, noting the devastating impact they can have on families. He highlighted the responsibility of passenger vehicle drivers in ensur-



ing the safety of the 35-40 passengers they carry and urged strict adherence to road safety norms.

Superintendent of Police, Darrang, Hemanta Kr Das, said that India records nearly 5 lakh road

accidents annually, claiming around 2 lakh lives. He stressed that such incidents not only cause human suffering but also affect the nation's economy, underscoring the importance of efforts to curb

accidents for broader economic progress.

Senior journalist and NGO activist Mayukh Goswami addressed the gathering, highlighting the road safety situation in Darrang district. He revealed that 206 people lost their lives in 568 road accidents in the past two years.

District Transport Officer (in-charge) Dipak Patowary, Enforcement Inspector Om Prakash Upadhyaya and other transport department officials were also present.

The launch was followed by an awareness auto-rickshaw rally through Mangaldai town to spread road safety messages among the public.

## Tinsukia Division of NFR achieves major milestone in track electrification



**HT Bureau**

**GUWAHATI, Jan 1:** Northeast Frontier Railway (NFR) has achieved a significant milestone in its electrification programme with the successful completion of major works in the Tinsukia Division (TSK). On December 30, 2025, Principal Chief Electrical Engineer (PCEE) Yogesh Partaity inspected the completed electrification works over the Tinsukia-Dangari

and Makum-Ledo sections.

With this accomplishment, NFR has electrified 4,170.19 route kilometres (RKM) out of a total 4,324.15 RKM, achieving 96.43% electrification across the zone as of December 31, 2025.

The inspection covered a total of 90.314 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). Following this, the electric locomotive current collection test was successfully conducted at full sectional speed, confirming that the newly electrified sections are ready for commercial operations.

The successful energisation and testing of these sections mark a major milestone for Tinsukia Division, enhancing operational efficiency, reducing dependence on fossil fuels, lowering carbon emissions and enabling seamless electric traction across the division.

NFR reaffirmed its commitment to India's vision of a fully electrified railway network, ensuring faster, greener and more energy-efficient rail transportation. The completion of full electrification in Tinsukia Division is expected to improve train operations, reduce operating costs and contribute to sustainable development in the region.

## Morigaon police recover 52 stolen mobile phones

**HT Correspondent**

**MORIGAON, Jan 1:** In a major breakthrough, Morigaon police recovered 52 stolen mobile phones and formally returned them to their rightful owners on the first day of the New Year at the office of the Senior Superintendent of Police here on Thursday.

The recovery was made following a special search operation launched by the police against stolen mobile phones, based on First Information Reports (FIRs) lodged at various police stations across the district.

During the operation, police tracked and recovered all the stolen mobile phones from different parts of the country, including Madhya Pradesh, Kerala and Meghalaya. After completing the necessary formalities, the recovered phones were handed over to their owners in the presence of police officials.

The successful recovery has been widely appreciated by the public and reflects the sustained efforts of Morigaon police in addressing property-related crimes and strengthening public confidence in law enforcement.

## Asam Sahitya Sabha backs Tezpur University agitation

*Sabha may approach President of India in the interest of the university*



**HT Correspondent**

**TEZPUR, Jan 1:** The Asam Sahitya Sabha, the largest literary organisation of the State, has extended its full support to the ongoing democratic agitation at Tezpur University, which has been continuing for over 100 days. Students, teachers and employees have been demanding the removal of the absconding Vice-Chancellor, Shambhath Singh and a fair probe into alleged corruption.

On the last day of the year, a delegation of the Asam Sahitya Sabha, comprising members and office-bearers from different levels of the organisation and led by its president Dr Basanta Kumar Goswami, visited the protest site on the university campus. Addressing the gathering of agitating students, teachers and staff, Dr Goswami declared that the Sabha would continue to stand firmly in support of what he termed an intellectual and non-violent movement of Tezpur University.

Expressing concern over the present state of affairs, Dr Goswami said that the strong foundation and academic legacy on which the university once stood were no longer reflected in

the current environment marked by hollow slogans of modernity. He said that the head of an educational institution should command universal respect, but instead someone who was driven out elsewhere had been brought and placed in such a position in Assam. Describing it as a grave misfortune for the university, Dr Goswami said that students and teachers, who should have been engaged in academic pursuits, were compelled to take the agitational path for their legitimate rights. He added that the government should have heard the "cry of distress" of Tezpur University and said the issue at least deserved discussion in the State Assembly.

Dr Goswami further stated that the Asam Sahitya Sabha would not confine itself to verbal expressions of solidarity but would also take concrete academic and organisational steps in response to the crisis. If necessary, the Sabha would seek meetings with the Chief Minister of Assam and the Governor to suggest ways to restore a healthy academic atmosphere in the university rooted in its rich legacy. Should the government still remain indifferent, he said, members of

the Sabha from Dhubri to Sadiya would write to the Chief Minister on the issue and efforts would also be made to meet the President of India for a solution.

Earlier, addressing the gathering, Dr Kusum Kumar Bania, president of the Tezpur University Teachers' Association, gave a detailed account of the problems currently facing the university. Brief addresses were also delivered by Dr Sukdev Adhikari, president of the Sonitpur district committee of the Asam Sahitya Sabha and former general secretary Jadab Chandra Sarma. The programme was conducted by Dr Sanjib Pal Deka of the Assamese Department of Tezpur University.

Prior to visiting the protest site, Dr Goswami attended a brief meeting at the Vice-Chancellor's conference hall, where he interacted with a section of university officers and staff, including Registrar in-Charge Dr Chandan Goswami, several deans and senior faculty members. The Acting Vice-Chancellor, Prof Dhruba Kumar Bhattacharyya, formally welcomed Dr Goswami with a traditional gamosa and a set of books published by the university and briefed him on the prevailing issues confronting Tezpur University.

The delegation accompanying the Sabha president included Dulal Nath, Bankim Baruah, Nakul Kurmi, Kamini Baruah, Basudev Sarma, Dulal Goswami, Kanak Bhattacharyya, Ripon Saikia, Manoranjan Bhagawati, Ruby Bora, Bharat Das, Nripen Das, Mohsinur Rahman, Imran Hussain Ahmed, Mobarak Hussain, Pratibha Dhar, Bishnulal Sastry, Satyadev Sarma, Hemen Saikia, Bhuban Chetri, Mohan Upadhyay, among others, with more than 50 members and office-bearers of the Sabha present.

## Bitopan Dutta's poetry collection launched at Guwahati Book Fair

**HT Bureau**

**GUWAHATI, Jan 1:** The poetry collection "Nasi Uthok Bosonto Xomoy" by Bitopan Dutta was formally launched at the Assam Publication Board's Book Fair at Khanapara. Published by 'Purulil Prakashan', the book was unveiled by Devajit Bora, General Secretary of Asom Sahitya Sabha, in the presence of several literary and media personalities.

The launch also marked the debut of 'Purulil Prakashan' as a publishing house. Eminent attendees included Naren Hazarika Editor-in-Chief of Dainandini Barta, Professor Dr Buljit Borgohain of Don Bosco University, Sahitya Akademi Award-winning writer Jugallochan Das, Ratul Goswami, General Secretary of Assam State Primary Teachers' Association, sports journalist Rajdeep Das and writer-journalist Darshana



Barua, along with several other media persons.

Devajit Bora praised Bitopan Dutta for remaining active in creative pursuits despite moving away from journalism. Dr Buljit Borgohain welcomed Purulil Prakashan's entry into Assamese literature, while Naren Hazarika expressed hope that the poetry collection would be well-received by readers.

## Arunoday Divas celebrated at Ramanujan Senior Secondary School

**HT Correspondent**

**NAGAON, Jan 1:** The Nagaon Zila Sahitya Sabha and Ramanujan Senior Higher Secondary School jointly celebrated Arunoday Divas at the school's newly constructed auditorium here on Thursday.

The event marked the century-long legacy of Arunoday magazine, a pioneering publication that played a significant role in the development of the Assamese language and literature.

Delivering the keynote address, Sangeeta Baruah Bora, Vice Principal of Ramanujan Senior Higher Secondary School, highlighted the contributions of Miles Bronson, an American missionary who worked tirelessly to promote the Assamese language and culture. She stressed the importance of preserving and promoting Assamese heritage for future generations.

Dr Sarat Borkatak, president of the Nagaon Zila Sahitya Sabha, in his address lauded the role of writers as the conscience of society, stating that they bear witness to their times and guide future generations through their works.

As part of the programme, 53 journalists were felicitated for their contributions towards the promotion of the Assamese language and culture. The celebration also featured cultural performances by students, adding colour to the occasion, followed by a grand felicitation ceremony for the scribes.

Arunoday magazine, first published in 1846, is regarded as a landmark publication that laid the foundation of modern Assamese literature and language. Its enduring legacy continues to inspire writers, journalists and language enthusiasts across the State.

## Dermee Pegu's book 'Da: eying:' released

**HT Correspondent**

**SIVASAGAR, Jan 1:** "Da: eying:", a book written by Dermee Pegu, Assistant Professor at Dibrugarh University Institute of Technology was released on Thursday at the Sivasagar Seujpur residence of Sahityacharjya Nahendra Padun in the presence of an august gathering.

The book was formally released by Sahityacharjya Nahendra Padun and has been published by the Nahendra Padun Foundation. Speaking on the occasion, Padun said that the book, which is based on Mising folklores, would serve as an important resource for new researchers and scholars.

Dr Jyoti Prasad Shaikia, Vice-Chancellor of Jagannath Barua University, Jorhat, in his address encouraged the author to continue her literary contributions focusing on important aspects of social life.

The meeting was chaired by former president of the Sivasagar Jila Sahitya Sabha, Joga Gogoi. Songs written by Nahendra Padun were presented by radio artists Suruya Kumar Patiri and Dipitirani Pegu. The event was moderated by Santosh Dutta.

## Demow Model Hospital records zero snakebite deaths for 5<sup>th</sup> consecutive year

**HT Correspondent**

**DEMOW, Jan 1:** The Demow Model Hospital cum CHC has achieved a significant public health milestone by recording zero snakebite-related deaths for the fifth consecutive year from 2021 to 2025.

Dr Surajit Giri, Anaesthesia Specialist and Snakebite Specialist at Demow Model Hospital cum CHC, informed that the achievement reflects the sustained commitment, discipline and capacity of the rural healthcare system in managing snakebite envenomation effectively at the peripheral level. Snakebite remains a major public health concern in Assam, disproportionately affecting rural and economically vulnerable populations. Traditionally, snakebite was considered a condition requiring referral to tertiary hospitals with intensive care facilities. However, Demow Model Hospital cum CHC has demonstrated that timely, protocol-based snakebite management is feasible and effective even at rural hospitals.

Snakebite treatment services were initiated at Demow Model Hospital cum CHC in 2018. Prior to this, snakebite patients were routinely referred to tertiary care institutions due to limited local capacity and lack of confidence in managing venomous snakebites. Through systematic training, experience and community engagement, the hospital gradually developed a structured approach to snakebite management.

Based on field experiences and case reviews, the hospital developed a standardised treatment guideline known as the "Demow Protocol". The protocol emphasises early reporting to hospital through community participation, mandatory observation for 24 hours after snakebite, timely administration of anti-snake venom as per clinical indication, uniform treatment irrespective of socio-economic status and clear identification and management of different venom syndromes prevalent in Assam.

With increasing community awareness and trust in medical treatment, reporting of snakebite cases to the hospital improved significantly. As a result, Demow Model Hospital cum CHC managed to achieve zero mortality in snakebite cases from 2021 onwards. Except for one death recorded in 2020, there have been no snakebite-related deaths during 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024 and 2025. Over these five years, more than 3,500 snakebite patients were treated successfully without any mortality. This achievement is considered unprecedented at the rural level, especially in the absence of advanced infrastructure such as ICU facilities.

A total of 3,560 snakebite cases were managed at Demow Model Hospital cum CHC between 2018 and 2025. In 2018, 19 cases were reported, followed by 102 cases in 2019, 166 in 2020, 303 in 2021, 580 in 2022, 645 in 2023, 863 in 2024 and 882 in 2025. Of the total cases, 511 were venomous snakebites, accounting for 14.33 per cent.

The venomous snakebite profile from 2018 to 2025 includes 314 pit viper cases with zero deaths, 96 monocled cobra cases with zero deaths, 82 red-necked keelback cases with zero deaths and 19 krait cases with one death.

In the state-level context, available data shows that Assam reported around 10,650 snakebite cases in 2024 and approximately 11,250 cases in 2025. Snakebite-related deaths in the state have shown a declining trend, with over 150 deaths in 2022, 37 in 2023, 36 in 2024 and 27 in 2025.

The Demow Model Hospital cum CHC has been acknowledged at state, national and international levels. The Indian Council of Medical Research has undertaken scientific evaluation of the model and it has been presented at various platforms involving the Government of Assam, Government of India, international venom associations and academic conferences. Following this model, snakebite treatment services have been strengthened across rural and district hospitals in Assam, reinforcing the role of primary and secondary healthcare institutions in managing snakebite envenomation.

The achievement of Demow Model Hospital cum CHC underscores that with protocol-based care, trained manpower, discipline and community participation, preventable deaths from snakebite can be eliminated even in resource-limited rural settings. The success is a collective outcome of dedicated healthcare workers, community cooperation and sustained public health efforts.

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## ALOK observes 39<sup>th</sup> foundation day at Nagsankar



**HT Correspondent**

**TEZPUR, Jan 1:** The 39th foundation day of ALOK, a socio-cultural, literary and dramatic organisation of the greater Nagsankar area was observed at the historic Sri Sri Nagsankar Devalaya on Thursday with a day-long programme.

The programme began with the hoisting of the institutional flag by Padmeswar Saikia, president of ALOK, followed by smriti tarpan. To mark the occasion, a district-level drawing competition was organised at the Nagsankar temple premises, in which around 100 students from various educational institutions of the undivided Sonitpur district participated.

The open session and prize distribution ceremony were held at the conference hall of the temple with Padmeswar Saikia in the chair. Former president of the organisation, Putul Bora, delivered the welcome address. It was stated that the organisation has entered its 40th year of inception and has decided to observe the year as Padmarag Jayanti with a year-long programme.

The celebration was inaugurated by ZPC member Hitesh Baruah by lighting the ceremonial lamp. Anjan Baskota, recipient of the Yuva Lekhak Sanman 2025, graced the open session as a distinguished speaker. He traced the golden history of the organisation and appealed to all concerned to extend their cooperation to make the year-

long celebration a success.

On the occasion, ALOK felicitated 24 Namghariyas of the greater Nagsankar area with gamosa, cheleng and citations. The organisation also felicitated noted social worker and local sound entrepreneur Tuwa Kanta Bora. Retired teacher Banerwar Bora attended the programme as a distinguished guest, among others.

The drawing competition was judged by Dulu Gogoi, Prakash Baruah and Deben Katakay. The competition was held in three categories. In category A (Class I to V), Riya Devi, Sristina Nath and Nandini Devi won first, second and third prizes respectively. In category B (Class VI to IX), Prekhya Pathak, Mriganki Hazarika and Smita Hazarika secured first, second and third prizes, while in category C (Class X onwards), Biplab Budagohain, Kandarpa Saikia and Lakhyajit Nath bagged first, second and third prizes. Riyanch Deuri won the jury's special award.

Biman Saikia, secretary of the organisation, offered the vote of thanks, while Putul Bora, Palask Gayan and Krishna Bhuyan conducted the proceedings.

Notably, ALOK was founded on January 1, 1987 and has completed 39 years of its existence. The organisation has played a key role in the development of socio-cultural, literary and dramatic activities in the greater Nagsankar area.

*Focus on research, education and extension activities to strengthen Assam's agricultural sector*

## AAU Vice-Chancellor outlines vision to make university a national leader

**HT Correspondent**

**JORHAT, Jan 1:** On the first day of the new year, Vice-Chancellor of Assam Agricultural University (AAU), Dr Bidyut Chandan Deka, expressed optimism about transforming the university into one of the country's leading institutions in agricultural education.

Addressing the AAU fraternity at a programme held at the Madhab Chandra Das Memorial Auditorium on the university campus, Dr Deka said steps are being taken to strengthen the institution through advancements in education, research and extension activities. He highlighted AAU's significant contributions to Assam's economy through agriculture and noted its notable achievements in agricultural research.

Dr Deka said that AAU has made steady progress through systematic education, technological development, creation of new



patents and acquisition of commercial rights. He also acknowledged the vital role played by Krishi Vigyan Kendras (VKVs) and regional research stations in enhancing research and extension outreach.

Referring to academic achievements, the

Vice-Chancellor said that 62 professor-scientists and 22 students from the university have achieved success at the national level. Describing students as the pillars of the university, he noted that AAU students have excelled not only in academics but also in

various other fields, preparing them for future advancement in agriculture and allied sectors.

The programme was anchored by AAU Registrar Tapan Kumar Gohain and attended by senior university officials including Dean of the College of Agriculture Dr Prasanna Kumar Pathak, Director of Research Dr Sanjay Kumar Chetta, Director of Postgraduate Studies Dr Anup Kumar Das, Director of Students' Welfare Dr Binay Kumar Medhi and In-charge Director of Extension Education Dr Ranjit Kumar Saud.

Heads of departments, professor-scientists, research scientists, staff members and students from the Jorhat campus were present at the event. Faculty members, researchers, students and staff from AAU's affiliated colleges outside Jorhat, along with officials from research stations and Krishi Vigyan Kendras, participated through an on-line platform.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

There's no use doing a kindness if you do it a day too late. - Charles Kingsley

Tackling Delhi's winter panic

Each winter, the national capital descends into a toxic haze that blots out landmarks, grounds flights, and turns breathing into a health risk. This year has been no different, except perhaps in scale. Air Quality Index (AQI) readings have surged into the "severe" and "severe plus" categories for days at a stretch, with PM2.5 concentrations reaching levels many times higher than what the World Health Organization considers safe.

Delhi's pollution cocktail is well documented: emissions from millions of vehicles, coal-based power plants in neighbouring states, construction dust, industrial pollution, open waste burning, and seasonal stubble burning by farmers in Punjab and Haryana. Each contributor is known. Each has been studied. Each has been litigated. What has been missing, critics argue, is enforcement with teeth.

Delhi today has more than 12 million registered vehicles, far exceeding its road capacity. Electric vehicle adoption, while improving, remains marginal in the absence of robust charging infrastructure and affordable options for mass transit users.

New Year: New dreams, new hopes

By: Dr Satvavan Saurabh

A new year isn't just a change in the calendar. It marks a pause in our lives—a time where we look back, understand the present, and chart a course for the future. Each new year brings with it new hopes, new resolutions, and new possibilities. It's a moment when we look within ourselves and ask ourselves, "How was the past year, what did we learn, what did we lose, and what do we want to become?"

The past year: A school of learning

Every passing year is like a teacher for us. It brings joys and sorrows; successes and failures. But the real question isn't what happened to us, but what we learned from it. Too often, we judge the past year solely on the events—who we lost, what we gained—and ignore the lessons. The past year may have taught us patience, made us self-reliant, and taught us the importance of relationships.

New dreams: not appearances, but direction

The New Year often begins with lofty resolutions—I will do this, I will become that, I will achieve this. But within a few months, these resolutions begin to fade. This is because our dreams are often influenced by the expectations of others, rather than our true selves.

Meaningful dreams are those that are rooted in our values. They excite us from within, not exhaust us. The New Year gives us a chance to reflect on whether our dreams are merely for show or for direction. Do we want to be what society wants, or what our soul desires? Dreams can be small—like keeping yourself healthy, spending time with your family, or taking some time for yourself.

New expectations: internal, not external

We often place our hopes on others—that someone will change, circumstances will improve, systems will be fixed. But the New Year reminds us that the strongest hope is the one that comes from within. When we believe in ourselves, we can find a way out, no matter the circumstances. Inner hope means believing that we can change, that we can learn, and that we can become better.

Relationship with yourself: The best start to the new year

The first relationship that needs to be mended in the New Year is the one with ourselves. We are quick to notice the mistakes of others, but often shy away from our own shortcomings. The New Year teaches us to balance self-acceptance with self-improvement.

Being honest with ourselves doesn't mean judging ourselves, but rather accepting our true selves. Understanding our limitations, recognizing our strengths, and being compassionate toward ourselves. When we understand ourselves, our expectations of the world become more realistic.

Relationships: Quality, not quantity

The New Year is also a time to reconsider relationships. In today's world, connections are plentiful, but relationships are few. Social media has connected us, but it has also increased the distance between our hearts. The New Year offers an opportunity to reflect on which relationships in our lives energize us and which ones drain us.

It's not necessary to maintain every relationship, but it is important to treat it with honesty. Some relationships require time, some boundaries, and some require a respectful end. Cleaning out relationships in the new year is as important as cleaning out your closet.

A new definition of success

Society has established a fixed definition of success—money, position, and prestige. But the New Year gives us an opportunity to reflect on whether this is success. Is a person who is calm, content, and stands by their values truly a failure?

The new definition of success should also include mental peace, self-esteem, health, and balance. If we can sleep peacefully at the end of the day, feel proud of ourselves, and not do injustice to anyone—that too is success.

Bangladesh after the Begums: From Hasina's fall to Zia's demise

By the end of 2025, Bangladesh finds itself without the two women figures who defined it. With the death of Khaleda Zia at 80 and the exile of Sheikh Hasina after her dramatic fall from power, Bangladesh has entered a political interregnum unlike any it has known since independence.

For more than three decades, the country's fate was shaped—some would say trapped—by the rivalry of two women whose lives were forged in assassination, grief, and inherited power. Now, in a short but turbulent period of just six months, both are gone from the stage. What remains is a nation searching for authority, legitimacy, and direction.

Khaleda Zia's passing on December 30 closed the final chapter of what Bangladeshis long called the era of the "battling Begums." Her rival, Sheikh Hasina, once the most powerful woman in South Asia, now lives in political exile in India, sentenced to death in absentia by a Bangladeshi court following her violent crackdown on student protests in 2024.

Between them lies a vacuum—dangerous, uncertain, but also pregnant with possibility. Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina were not born politicians. They became political symbols because history left them little choice. Khaleda was a shy homemaker until 1981, when her husband, President Zia-ur-Rahman, was assassinated in a failed military coup.

These parallel tragedies did more than define their personal lives; they hardened their politics. Each woman came to see the other not merely as a rival but as an existential threat to her family's legacy—and, by extension, to the nation itself.

In the late 1980s, there was a fleeting moment when that animosity gave way to co-operation. Khaleda and Hasina joined forces to lead a mass uprising against military ruler Hussain Muhammad Ershad. Their alliance helped topple the dictatorship in 1990 and restore parliamentary democracy. It was the last time they would stand together.

From 1991 onward, Bangladesh became a country governed by rotation rather than resolution. Khaleda ruled from 1991 to 1996, lost power, returned triumphantly in 2001, and exited again in 2006. Hasina alternated in between, then dominated politics after returning to office in 2009, ruling uninterrupted until 2024.

Each woman claimed democratic legitimacy; each accused the other of corruption, authoritarianism, and betrayal. Courts became political weapons. Elections turned into zero-sum contests. Parliament hollered out as boycotts became routine. Governance often took second place to survival.

Yet their rule also delivered stability of a kind. Under Hasina, Bangladesh posted strong economic growth, expanded infrastructure, and improved social indicators. Under Khaleda, parliamentary democracy was restored, foreign investment encouraged, and primary education expanded. The problem was not the absence of achievement—but the absence of trust.

That brittle equilibrium finally collapsed in August 2024. Student-led protests against rising authoritarianism, economic inequality, and political repression spread rapidly across the country. Hasina's government responded with force. Dozens were killed. The violence triggered mass outrage, defections within the state, and ultimately her ouster.

Hasina fled the country and eventually



surfaced in India, where she remains in political exile. A Bangladeshi court later sentenced her to death in absentia for her role in the crackdown—a verdict that underscored both the ferocity of her fall and the unresolved nature of Bangladesh's justice system.

An interim government headed by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus took charge, tasked with stabilizing the country and preparing elections. For the first time in decades, neither Begum was in control.

By then, Khaleda Zia was already a shadow of her former self. Years of imprisonment, house arrest, and illness had drained her strength. Released after Hasina's fall and acquitted earlier this year in corruption cases widely viewed as politically motivated, she returned from medical treatment in London frail but symbolically potent.

Her death now removes the last living anchor of the old political order. With her passing, the rivalry that once dominated Bangladesh's streets, headlines, and institutions ends not with reconciliation, but with absence.

Bangladesh today is bereft of towering political figures. Hasina's Awami League is leaderless, fractured, and tainted by its authoritarian excesses. Khaleda's Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) retains popular support but must now prove it can govern without its matriarch. Into this space steps Tarique Rahman.

Long reviled by opponents, tried and convicted in absentia during Hasina's rule, and exiled for nearly 17 years, Rahman returned to Dhaka in December 2025 after being cleared by the Supreme Court of major charges. As the acting chairman of the BNP, he is widely expected to lead the party into the February 2026 general elections.

For supporters, Rahman represents continuity without paralysis—a chance to revive democratic competition without reopening the vendettas of the past. For skeptics, he remains an untested figure burdened by dynasty and allegations that once dogged his mother.

Yet the reality is stark: he is the only national leader with both organizational reach and electoral momentum at a time when the Awami League appears destined for defeat. The coming election may be Bangladesh's most consequential since 1991. It will test whether the country can move beyond personality-driven politics toward institutional renewal—or whether it simply replaces one dynasty with another.

International attention is intense. India watches warily, aware that Hasina was a re-

liable partner. The United States and Europe have signalled that electoral credibility, not allegiance, will shape future relations. China, pragmatic as ever, waits.

Inside Bangladesh, the public mood is weary but alert. Years of strikes, street violence, and political repression have exacted a heavy toll. The question is no longer who wins—but whether the system itself can recover.

Khaleda Zia's death and Sheikh Hasina's exile mark the end of Bangladesh's most defining political duel. For a generation, the country lived under the shadow of two women whose personal losses became national fault lines. Their rivalry brought both democratic revival and democratic decay.

Now, with both gone, Bangladesh faces its most profound test: can it fill the vacuum not with another strongman—or strongwoman—but with stronger institutions? History offers no guarantees. But for the first time in decades, Bangladesh's future is no longer hostage to the past. That alone makes the moment extraordinary.

Bangladesh's present uncertainty is not unfolding in isolation. As the old order collapses, three external powers—India, China, and the United States—are quietly recalibrating, each with stakes that run far deeper than public statements suggest.

For India, Sheikh Hasina was more than a neighbour; she was a strategic asset. Under her rule, Dhaka cracked down on anti-India insurgent groups operating along the northeastern frontier, expanded connectivity projects linking India's landlocked states to the Bay of Bengal, and resisted overtures from Islamist forces hostile to New Delhi. Her sudden exile to India has placed the Modi government in an awkward position—host and protector to a fallen leader, yet increasingly aware that her return to power is politically improbable.

New Delhi now faces a dilemma. Open support for Hasina risks alienating a future government in Dhaka, while distancing itself from her could be seen as abandonment of a long-standing ally. Officially, India has emphasized "democratic processes" and "stability." Privately, Indian strategists are hedging—opening channels to the BNP while preparing for a Bangladesh no longer anchored by Hasina's predictable alignment. China, meanwhile, has played the long game. Beijing invested heavily in Bangladesh's infrastructure over the past decade—ports, power plants, bridges—careful to cultivate ties with both major parties while avoiding overt identification with either Begum. Hasina welcomed Chinese capital even as she balanced relations with

India, making Bangladesh a quiet but important node in China's Belt and Road Initiative.

With Hasina gone, China's advantage lies in its transactional flexibility. It is less concerned with who governs than with continuity of contracts and access to the Bay of Bengal. A BNP-led government under Tarique Rahman would likely seek to rebalance foreign ties, reducing overdependence on India while maintaining Chinese investment—an outcome Beijing would find acceptable, even desirable.

It is the United States, however, whose role is most contested—and most suspected. In the months leading up to Hasina's fall, Washington had grown openly critical of her government's democratic backsliding. U.S. sanctions on Bangladeshi officials, visa restrictions tied to election integrity, and repeated public warnings about human rights were interpreted by Hasina's supporters as pressure tactics designed to engineer regime change.

When student protests erupted in August 2024 and the security forces responded brutally, those suspicions hardened into belief. Within the Awami League, and among Hasina loyalists now in exile, a narrative took hold: that Washington had at minimum tolerated—and at maximum quietly encouraged—the unrest that brought her down.

American officials deny any role, insisting that the movement was organic and that U.S. policy merely aligned with democratic norms. Yet in Bangladesh, a country with long memories of Cold War interventions and post-9/11 strategic manipulation, denials carry limited weight.

The interim government led by Muhammad Yunus—globally admired, Western-educated, and deeply respected in Washington—has further fueled speculation, even if no evidence supports the idea of orchestration. Perception, in geopolitics, often matters more than proof.

Against this complex backdrop, Tarique Rahman's return has added another layer of intrigue. Once portrayed by Hasina's government as corrupt and reckless, Rahman now presents himself as a reformer shaped by exile—more cautious, more internationally aware, and keen to restore Bangladesh's credibility abroad.

His challenge, should he win in February, will be diplomatic as much as domestic. He will need to reassure India that Bangladesh will not become strategically hostile, signal to China that existing investments are safe, and convince the United States that democratic restoration—not revenge politics—is his central aim.

Early signs suggest a deliberate balancing act. BNP insiders speak of recalibrated foreign policy—less personal, more institutional; less ideological, more pragmatic. Whether this represents genuine transformation or tactical repositioning remains an open question.

Bangladesh today stands at a crossroads not just of leadership, but of alignment. The disappearance of the two Begums has loosened the rigid certainties that once defined its politics. In their place is a fluid, unsettled landscape—one vulnerable to manipulation, but also open to reinvention.

The danger is that the power vacuum invites overreach: from ambitious generals, populist demagogues, or external patrons eager to shape outcomes. The opportunity is that Bangladesh, freed at last from a rivalry rooted in personal tragedy and dynastic pride, might finally build politics on institutions rather than individuals.

Whether it succeeds will depend on what happens next—at the ballot box, in the barracks, and in the backrooms of diplomacy from New Delhi to Beijing to Washington. (IPA Service)

DEGREE OF THOUGHT

By: T N Ashok

Fugitives' Refuge: India's overcrowded prisons in Court

By: Satyabrata Borah

Imagine a man who built an empire on diamonds, only to watch it crumble under allegations of massive fraud. He flees to a foreign land, seeking refuge in its courts, arguing that returning home would mean facing not just justice, but inhumanity behind bars. This is not just the story of one fugitive, but a recurring narrative that has haunted India's efforts to bring back those accused of serious crimes. For years, individuals wanted in India for economic offenses, terrorism, or other grave acts have found ways to delay or block their return, often pointing to the stark realities of the country's prison system.

The heart of the matter lies in how foreign judges view Indian jails. In countries bound by strict human rights standards, like the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Australia, courts must ensure that sending someone back does not expose them to torture or degrading treatment. Reports of overcrowding, inadequate healthcare, and occasional violence in Indian prisons have become powerful tools in the hands of defense lawyers. A judge in London might pore over accounts from human rights organizations, describing cells meant for a handful of people crammed with dozens, shared toilets overflowing, and medical care that arrives too late, if at all. These images paint a picture that clashes with the principles of dignity enshrined in international conventions.

Take the case of a prominent businessman accused of defrauding banks of billions. His legal team argues passionately that the conditions in a notorious Delhi jail would violate his basic rights. The court listens, weighs evidence from both sides, and sometimes hesitates. In one instance, a British judge noted the endemic risks of violence and poor sanitation, deciding that extradition could not proceed. Similar concerns have arisen in Dutch courts, where fears of mistreatment led to outright refusals. Even in Australia, though less frequently highlighted, human rights considerations play a role in assessing requests.

Yet, these decisions are not made lightly. Foreign courts often demand assurances from India: promises that the in-

dividual will be housed in a specific barrack with better facilities, constant monitoring, and access to doctors. India has responded by offering detailed guarantees, sometimes even inviting inspections of jails like the one in Mumbai or Delhi. In some cases, these pledges tip the balance, allowing extradition to move forward. A match-fixing accused was eventually brought back after years of battles, proving that with strong evidence and commitments, barriers can be overcome. Others, involved in terrorism or arms dealings, have also been returned when assurances addressed the



courts' worries.

But behind these legal triumphs and setbacks is a deeper human story. Prisons in India hold hundreds of thousands, many awaiting trial for years. Families on the outside wait too, torn between wanting accountability and fearing what confinement means. Victims of fraud wonder if justice will ever arrive, while those inside endure conditions that test the limits of endurance. Overcrowding means less space, fewer resources, and heightened tensions. Medical needs go unmet, mental health struggles unnoticed. It is a system stretched thin, reflecting broader challenges in a vast nation grappling with poverty, backlog in courts, and resource constraints.

Critics argue that focusing on a few high-profile fugitives distracts from the everyday realities faced by ordinary inmates. Most people in Indian jails are not wealthy offenders

with international lawyers; they are undertrials from marginalized backgrounds, caught in a slow grind of justice. The emphasis on special cells or enclaves for extradited individuals highlights the inequality: why must some receive better treatment to satisfy foreign courts, while others languish? It prompts an uncomfortable question: if conditions are deemed unacceptable for one, how can they be justified for anyone?

India has taken steps toward change. New guidelines aim to modernize prisons, emphasizing rehabilitation over mere punishment. Technology like video links for court appearances reduces risks, and efforts to decongest jails through faster trials or alternatives to custody are underway. Reports call for more staff, better training, and infrastructure upgrades. Signing international pacts against torture could signal commitment. Yet, progress is slow, hampered by state-level variations and funding gaps. The fugitives' arguments, though self-serving, shine a light on these issues. They force India to confront its prisons not just as places of detention, but as reflections of societal values. Justice demands holding the guilty accountable, but it also requires fairness and humanity in how punishment is administered. When foreign courts block returns, it stings national pride and delays closure for victims. But perhaps it also serves as a catalyst, pushing for reforms that benefit everyone inside those walls.

The story is not merely about numbers: how many requests sent, how many denied. It is about people. The banker who lost savings to fraud, hoping for restitution. The inmate who shares a tiny space with strangers, dreaming of freedom. The family visited through barred windows, clinging to hope. And the fugitive, far away, using the system's flaws to stay put. These threads weave a complex tapestry, reminding us that true justice transcends borders and bars. It requires not just catching the runaway, but ensuring the cage is humane for all.

Reforming prisons would not only ease extraditions but restore faith in the system. It would mean fewer denials abroad and more dignity at home. Until then, the debate continues, a poignant reminder that behind cold statistics lie warm human lives, waiting for a fairer tomorrow.

# When a voice becomes a target

By: Satyabrata Borah

In the quiet corners of Assam, where tea gardens stretch endlessly under misty skies and rivers carve their ancient paths, there lived a voice that belonged to everyone. Zubeen Garg was more than a singer; he was the heartbeat of a people, a man whose melodies wove through weddings and funerals, protests and celebrations, lonely nights and joyful dawn. His songs carried the ache of unrequited love, the fire of rebellion, and the deep, abiding love for the land that shaped him. For millions, he was not just an artist but a companion, a symbol of resilience in a region often overlooked by the rest of the world.

On September 19, 2025, that voice fell silent in a way no one could have imagined. Zubeen was in Singapore, invited as a cultural ambassador for the North East India Festival, a platform meant to showcase the richness of his homeland on an international stage. He had arrived with his team, excited for the performance scheduled the next day. That morning, he joined friends for a leisurely swim off the coast near St. John's Island. What began as a moment of relaxation turned tragic. Witnesses later described how he removed his life jacket after an initial dip, feeling confident in the calm waters. He swam out again, but soon suffered a sudden seizure. Those nearby rushed to help, pulling him from the sea and administering CPR, but by the time he reached Singapore General Hospital, it was too late. He was pronounced dead in the intensive care unit that afternoon. The official cause, as stated in the death certificate from Singapore authorities, was drowning.

The news spread like wildfire across Assam and beyond. Schools closed, markets shut down, and streets filled with stunned silence. Fans gathered in thousands, some weeping openly, others

playing his songs on loop as if the music could somehow bring him back. Prime Minister Narendra Modi issued a condolence message, praising his contributions that touched lives across all walks of society. Even in a state often divided by religious and linguistic tensions, Zubeen's passing momentarily united people. A Muslim truck driver who found solace in his songs during long hauls mourned alongside Hindu devotees who saw him as a modern-day bard. His funeral in Guwahati drew massive crowds, and he was cremated with full state honors, including a gun salute, reflecting the profound respect he commanded.

Yet, in the midst of this collective grief, something darker began to stir. Questions arose almost immediately. Why had he gone swimming without proper precautions? Who was with him, and could more have been done to save him? His wife, Garima Saikia Garg, spoke publicly about his health issues, mentioning that he carried medications for seizures and that those closest to him knew about his condition. She clarified early rumors, insisting it was not a scuba diving accident as some initial reports claimed, but a simple swim that went horribly wrong. Still, whispers of foul play started circulating. Social media amplified every rumor, every unverified detail, turning sorrow into suspicion.

The Assam government, led by Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, responded swiftly to the public's anguish. A second post-mortem was conducted upon the body's repatriation to address demands for transparency. Soon after, a Special Investigation Team was formed under the Criminal Investigation Department to probe the circumstances. What followed was a series of arrests that shocked the state. Zubeen's manager, Siddhartha Sharma; the festival organizer, Shyamkanu Mahanta; band members Shekhar Jyoti Goswami

and Amritprava Mahanta; and even his cousin, a senior police officer named Sandipan Garg, along with two personal security officers, found themselves in custody. Allegations emerged of negligence, conspiracy, and worse. One arrested band member claimed poisoning, though later medical reports ruled it out. The SIT's massive chargesheet, running into thousands of pages, accused four of the individuals of murder, suggesting premeditation and financial motives.

Chief Minister Sarma did not mince words. In the state assembly, he declared it was no accident but a "plain and simple murder," with one person directly responsible and others aiding. He vowed justice, promising the accused would face the full wrath of the law. The investigation involved hundreds of witnesses, forensic analysis of phones, and even trips to Singapore for coordination. Public anger fueled rallies demanding swift action, and artists pressured authorities to leave no stone unturned.

But across the sea in Singapore, a very different picture emerged. The Singapore Police Force conducted its own thorough inquiry under the Coroners Act. Time and again, they stated that no foul play was suspected based on evidence gathered so far. Witnesses were questioned, forensics examined, and a coroner's inquiry was scheduled for early 2026 to formally establish the facts. Their findings pointed consistently to a tragic drowning, possibly triggered by a medical episode. They urged the public to avoid speculation, emphasizing patience while the process unfolded.

This stark contrast between the two investigations ignited a political firestorm back in Assam. Opposition leaders, including Congress MP Gaurav Gogoi, accused the government of using the case for character assassination, suggesting the murder charges

were more about tarnishing Zubeen's legacy than seeking truth. They pointed to the timing, with elections looming in 2026, and questioned why the SIT pursued murder when Singapore authorities found no evidence of crime. Student unions and civil society groups rallied against politicization, pleading for parties to let grief remain pure rather than turning it into a weapon. Some saw the heavy-handed probe as a response to public pressure, while others viewed it as an overreach that risked undermining trust in institutions.

Amid the accusations and counter-accusations, the human cost became painfully clear. Zubeen's family endured not just the loss of a husband and father but the relentless scrutiny of private moments turned into a public spectacle. His wife returned the autopsy report at one point, demanding faster justice without the endless drama. Fans felt betrayed, torn between loyalty to their idol and confusion over conflicting narratives. Social media, that double-edged sword, amplified outrage but also spread misinformation, turning personal tragedy into viral content.

What does it say about us when grief becomes a battleground? Zubeen spent his life bridging divides with his music, singing in Assamese, Bengali, Hindi, and more, touching hearts regardless of background. He questioned power when needed, supported social causes quietly, and refused to bow to shallow trends. His popularity came from authenticity, from years of pouring his soul into every note. Now, in death, his name is invoked in ways he might have despised, dragged into political narratives and sensational headlines.

The emotional toll on ordinary people is immense. Parents who played his lullabies to children, young lovers who found expression in his romantic ballads, protesters who marched to his anthems of resistance—all felt a piece of



themselves die with him. Rumors and allegations only deepened the wound, leaving many in a state of perpetual unrest. Digital platforms rewarded clicks over compassion, algorithms pushing the most inflammatory content to the forefront.

The media too bore responsibility. Responsible journalism demands verification, especially in matters of life and death. Yet, some outlets rushed unconfirmed details, fueling the frenzy. In an era where attention is currency, sensitivity often takes a backseat.

This story reveals a society's struggle with loss in the digital age. We treat emotions as consumable, death as trending topics. When a cultural icon passes, the vacuum he leaves invites all manner of projections—hero worship, conspiracy theories, political opportunism. Assam has long revered its artists as guardians of collective memory. Zubeen stood in that proud lineage, his voice echoing the joys and struggles of the marginalized.

The contrast between what he represented and how his passing has been handled is heartbreaking. He earned adoration through dedication, not con-

trovery. Those seeking relevance through his tragedy reveal their own voids.

Ultimately, justice must prevail, but it should be grounded in facts, not fueled by emotion or ambition. Singapore's measured approach reminds us of the value of impartiality. Whatever the final verdicts—from the coroner's inquiry or Indian courts—may they bring closure without further division.

Zubeen lives on in his music, in the memories of first dances and shared sorrows, in the spirit of a land that refuses to forget. His voice may have stilled, but its echoes demand we honor him better: with empathy over exploitation, truth over spectacle, unity over division. In pausing to reflect, to verify before sharing, to choose compassion over clicks, we affirm not just our love for him, but the humanity he celebrated in every song.

If we can rise to that, perhaps some healing can emerge from this profound loss. Otherwise, the true casualty will not be one man's reputation, but the soul of a society that once found its voice in his.

## Indian diplomacy in 2025: Of National interests and global ambitions

By: Asad Mirza

India's foreign policy in 2025 continued to be anchored in the dual ethos of "Bharat First" and "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam," balancing national interest with global cooperation. Strategic autonomy, non-alignment, and economic diplomacy remained central pillars of its international engagement.

India maintained a multi-aligned posture, strengthening ties across diverse blocs without committing to any single power during the past year. The strategic focus remained on managing relations with the US, China, and Russia, alongside neighbouring countries and major global alliances.

While early 2025 saw optimism with the launch of "Mission 500" to boost bilateral trade to \$500 billion by 2030 and a new 10-year defence framework, tensions escalated later in the year. The US imposed 50% tariffs on Indian exports, citing India's continued oil trade with Russia. India responded firmly, condemning the move and refusing to compromise on its sovereignty.

Meanwhile, India continued to deepen its defence and counterterrorism collaboration with Russia. A high-profile visit by President Putin to India, signalled further expansion of strategic ties.

India and China reached a border patrol agreement in late 2024, restoring patrol routines in contested areas. By mid-2025, direct flights resumed and tourist visas for Chinese citizens were reissued. Defence ministers from both sides reiterated their commitment to de-escalation and trust-building.

India launched its first Africa-India Key Maritime Engagement (AIKEYME) naval exercise in April 2025, co-hosted with Tanzania and involving ten nations. This initiative boosted maritime cooperation and expanded India's outreach in the Indian Ocean region.

The "Neighbourhood First" policy remained a cornerstone of India's regional diplomacy. In 2024-25, India extended credit lines and aid to countries like Sri Lanka and leveraged platforms like the G20 to reinforce its regional leadership. With Gulf nations, India has strengthened energy and investment ties, including a landmark treaty with the UAE.

Foreign Minister Jaishankar emphasised the importance of an "Aatmanirbharta" mindset, i.e. self-reliance—as a strategic tool to navigate global turbulence and realise the vision of a developed India.

India also adopted a firm stance on cross-border terrorism. Its military operations like Operation Sindoor and the deployment of drones and AI-based fencing reflected a shift toward security-driven diplomacy. This marked a departure from earlier idealistic approaches to a more assertive foreign policy.

India also forayed to deepen ties with countries like Germany and Japan to leverage technological and strategic strengths amid shifting global dynamics.

For years though, New Delhi has cultivated the image of being a "Vishwaguru" (world teacher), expertly balancing competing global powers while championing the Global South. The guiding doctrine was "strategic autonomy"—the ability to engage with all sides without being beholden to any.

However, 2025 has brutally exposed the limitations of this approach. What was once hailed as diplomatic dexterity is now increasingly viewed by global capitals as transactional aloofness. The most significant rupture of 2025 has been the rapid cooling of ties with the United States. For years, Washington overlooked New

Delhi's democratic backsliding and protectionist economics, betting on India as a counterweight to China. That bet soured under the new geopolitical realities of 2025.

In 2025, the return of Donald Trump to the White House, after a four-year hiatus laid bare the false bonhomie of diplomatic relations. The Trump administration's imposition of hefty tariffs on Indian goods—in retaliation for India's digital services tax and protectionist barriers—hit the Indian economy hard. Unlike previous administrations that prioritised strategic partnership over trade disputes, the current US approach is strictly transactional. The diplomatic fallout is not just economic; it is strategic. Washington's renewed engagement with Pakistan and its criticism of India's continued purchase of Russian energy signal a loss of India's "exceptional" status in American foreign policy.

Perhaps the most glaring evidence of India's strategic cul-de-sac is the continued embrace of Vladimir Putin. The Russian President's visit to India in December 2025 was projected by Indian media as a triumph of independent foreign policy. In reality, it highlighted India's dwindling options.

While the West tightens the economic noose around Moscow, New Delhi's decision to deepen energy and trade ties with Russia is no longer viewed as "neutrality." It is seen as actively underwriting Russia's war effort in Ukraine. This has alienated India's European partners who were previously willing to cut India some slack. The "bear hug" with Putin does not signal strength; it signals a desperate need for energy



security and defence spares, regardless of the reputational cost. It reinforces the narrative that India is a spoiler in the international rules-based order, interested only in short-term gain.

Meanwhile, in 2025 the diplomatic crisis with Canada aggravated into a permanent sore. What began as allegations regarding the assassination of Hardeep Singh Nijjar snowballed into a broader reputational crisis. A lawsuit by a Canadian border officer, alleging he was framed by Indian disinformation, kept the issue in global headlines. New Delhi's dismissive response—characterising these concerns as mere political pandering by Ottawa—failed to convince Western intelligence communities, who see a pattern of extraterritorial aggression that contradicts India's claims of being a rule-abiding democracy. Closer to home, the "Neighbourhood First" policy lies in tatters. The collapse of the Sheikh Hasina regime in Bangladesh was a catastrophic intelligence and diplomatic failure for New Delhi. By placing all its chips on a single, increasingly unpopular leader, India alienated the Bangladeshi public.

The interim government in Dhaka, led by Muhammad Yunus, has been treated with a cold shoulder by New Delhi, a move that is widely interpreted as petulance rather than prudence. While Indian media amplifies narratives of minority persecution in Bangladesh, New Delhi has shown little appetite for constructive engage-

ment with the new power centres in Dhaka. This void is being rapidly filled by other players, including Pakistan and China, effectively encircling India with indifferent or hostile neighbours.

The Maldives and Sri Lanka, both remained another lost cause, with Male steadily drifting into Beijing's orbit and Colombo not sticking to the Indian script in spite of India's financial and security assistance to the island nation. The recurring theme across South Asia in 2025 was clear, India is seen not as a benevolent big brother, but as a meddlesome hegemon that cannot tolerate political dissent in its backyard.

As far as trade is concerned, India had already sensed it needed to change strategies in an uncertain world of shifting alignments, as evidenced by its efforts to diversify its economic partnerships in 2025. The signing of the India-United Kingdom Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in July and fast-forwarding the negotiations for the India-European Union (EU) FTA as seen through the December dialogue and an FTA with New Zealand in December, indicate that New Delhi recognised the new fault lines that the Trump administration's tariff measures have exposed.

India's self-anointed role as the "Voice of the Global South" faced a credibility crisis. Rhetoric aside, the reality is that New Delhi's capacity to deliver material benefits to developing nations remain limited as compared to China's deep pockets. More damaging, however, is the perception of hypocrisy. On critical issues like the crisis in Gaza, India's alignment tilted visibly toward Israel and the West, putting it at odds with the very Arab and African nations it claims to lead. The Global South expected solidarity, not equivocation. By trying to please everyone, India has ended up pleasing no one. Developing nations are realising that when the chips are down, India's "autonomy" often means looking out for itself, leaving vulnerable partners to fend for themselves.

India's current foreign policy moment is defined by the limits of external balancing and realising the need to develop internal strength. Multi-alignment has proven valuable in securing capital, technology, and diplomatic space, but faltered as a source of reliable support from strategic partners during crises. The downturn in US-India ties illustrate the contradiction of multi-alignment. In such a context, New Delhi is signalling that its future trajectory will be less about picking "trusted partners" and more about ensuring that no partner becomes indispensable.

2025 will be remembered as the year India's diplomatic luck ran out. The transition from "strategic autonomy" to "alooftness" is not just a semantic shift; it represents a fundamental failure to build deep, trust-based alliances. By alienating its neighbours, frustrating its Western partners, and offering little more than words to the Global South, India risks entering 2026 as a lonely power—large, loud, but increasingly ignored.

India will continue to work with the United States, Europe, Japan, Russia, and even China where interests overlap, but on issue-based terms that strengthen its internal capacity. The success of Indian foreign policy will ultimately rest not on alliances or rivalries, but on whether internal balancing can deliver the material foundation for India's great-power aspirations.

In an era of shifting alliances and rising tensions, India's diplomatic strategy must be both adaptive and resolute. In addition, its strategic focus on Three Ds - Destroy, Deter and Deny remains debatable in terms of overall outcome. Next year, well thought and focused approach is needed to get the best outcomes. The nation's ability to maintain its sovereignty while engaging with global powers will define its success on the world stage. (IPA Service)

## Gig workers concluded 2025 with All-India strike will have to do more in 2026

By: Dr Gyan Pathak

Gig workers of India have concluded the year 2025 with an all-India strike action on the last day, December 31, 2025, demanding fair wages and working conditions, which have undergone marked deterioration in the last three months. It happened despite the Union government's repeated claim that they have been doing everything possible for the welfare of the gig workers in the country, including them under the New Labour Codes notified on November 21, 2025. If things continue in this direction, the year 2026 will witness larger and stronger protests and strike action of gig workers.

The nationwide New Year's Eve strike of the gig workers has special significance, even though it got mixed response from delivery workers, chiefly because the nature of their protest against low wages and lack of security benefits. Coming in the heels of the notification of the new labour codes, which the Centre says, has taken care of the welfare of the gig workers, the strike surprised many, but also received massive solidarity from socially-conscious consumer-citizens. On the other hand, India Inc has flagged several concerns with the New Labour Codes, including separate provisions for gig workers that make the rules confusing according to industry experts, while workers associations and labour law experts have said that despite the provisions of the codes, the gig workers remain confined to the status of a 'non-employee', thus depriving them of job security, stable/fair wages, and their working conditions, especially the 10-minute delivery compulsions, make their very lives constantly endangered.

Nearly 3 lakh gig workers across India were on strike and were logged off from apps from 7 AM to 12 midnight, which affected delivery service, making their New Years Eve celebrations a tad inconvenient. The Indian Federation of App-based Transport Workers (IFAT) had given the call for strike. Their key demands included restoring the per km wage to Rs10 per km, axing the 10-minute delivery option, and payment for cancelled orders too.

According to IFAT, nearly 3 lakh gig workers across India took part in the strike, with roughly 60,000 delivery agents in Karnataka alone, most of them from Bengaluru, Mysuru and Mangaluru. Telangana had a near full participation. However, it was a partial participation in Tamil Nadu. Thousands of food packets remained undelivered in kitchens across the country. In Delhi, only about 10 per cent of the 1.5 lakh gig workers worked, and most of them were Zomato delivery agents. By late evening, IFAT state vice president Om Prakash Raghav claimed, the firms were announcing ₹ 150 per delivery for a 3-km distance, but last-minute the consolation prize had few takers.

What prompted them for strike action was chiefly curtailment of wages. Only three months ago, the IFAT vice president Mohamad Inayat Ali had said, delivery workers were being paid ₹ 10 per km. However, Zomato reduced it to only ₹ 6 per km, and then all companies have followed it.

He said that when the order is cancelled at last-minute, the delivery agent gets nothing. We demand that the same per kilometre rate must be paid to delivery workers to prevent their loss of time and transportation costs. Further, 10-minute delivery option needs to be removed permanently, since delivery agents

have to rush to the destination, making them compromise with their security of life. This option by Zepto, Blinkit and Instamart is dangerous for the life of delivery workers, and many of them have met with accidents.

The gig workers were also demanding natural justice. Presently, the IDs of gig agents or workers get blocked upon customers complaints, without allowing them time to provide their version. IFAT says they had to go on strike because of the long-standing issues of pay cuts, unsafe work conditions, inhuman pressure to deliver within impossible time frames, and arbitrary policies of the delivery app companies.

It should be noted that the gig workers invest in their vehicles, fuels, and phones and many resort to loans to survive as gig workers. The delivery app workers going on strike on a festive day meant heavy income loss to them, but they went ahead with the coordinated all-India action to drive home the point. The gig workers demonstrated that they are now ready to face even punitive actions, such as blocking of their ids, showing resolve that they are bracing for a greater, longer fight to protect their dignity, rights, wages, and safety of their very lives.

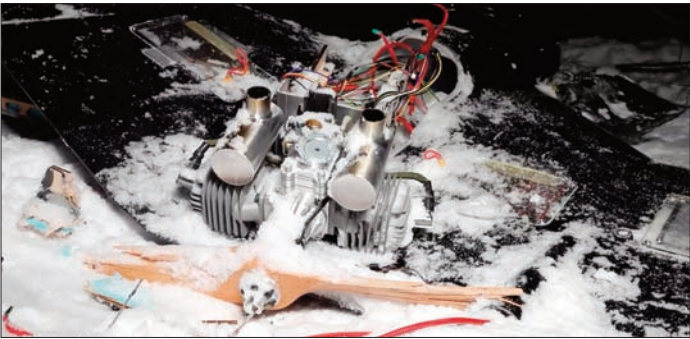
Working conditions of the gig workers in India has been abysmal, to say the least, while the Centre has been very slow in offering partial relief to them. Whatever is given to them is too little, despite the government claims to be working on social security and welfare for gig workers through initiatives like registering them on the e-shram portal, extending health benefits under Ayushman Bharat, introducing clauses in the New Labour Codes to define their status and rights, and potentially mandating platform contributions for their welfare, aiming to provide life or disability cover and better working conditions. However, the all-India strike of gig workers has just exposed just how hollow the government propaganda is in reality.

According to a report of People's Association in Grassroots Action and Movement titled "Prisoners on Wheels", supported by the University of Pennsylvania, over 80 per cent of workers surveyed work over 10 hours a day, while over 30 per cent over 14 hours. Majority of the drivers earn below ₹ 15,000 a month, while the delivery workers under ₹ 10,000. Nearly half of them were not able to take even a single day off in a week. Over 99 per cent reported physical and mental health issues, and about half of them reported violence at work. Majority of them reported arbitrary deactivation of their IDs.

Centre has announced that the notified New Labour Codes will be implemented fully from April 1, 2026, but there is not much to hope for the gig workers of India. They are merely included in the Social Security Code 2020, but will remain non-employees. Moreover, there are as yet no enforceable standards on wages, working hours, data transparency, grievance redressal for the workers or algorithmic accountability of the platforms.

However, with the massive all-India strike on the last day of 2025, the gig and platform workers have ushered 2026 in with a bang, bringing their oft-overlooked grievances to centre-stage, forcing the delivery app companies as well as the central and state governments, to sit up and smell the coffee. Indications are that the workers protests, including those by the gig workers, will have no option but to double down and intensify in 2026. (IPA Service)

## Russia says Ukrainian drone strike kills 24 in occupied Ukraine



**KYIV, Jan 1:** Russian officials on Thursday said a Ukrainian drone strike killed 24 people and wounded at least 50 more as they celebrated the New Year in a Russian-occupied village in Ukraine's Kherson region, as tensions between the two nations continue to spike despite diplomats hailing productive peace talks.

Three drones struck a cafe and hotel in the resort town of Khorly on the Black Sea coast, the region's Moscow-installed leader, Vladimir Saldo, said in a statement on Telegram. He said that one of the drones carried an incendiary mixture, sparking a blaze.

Ukrainian officials did not immediately comment on the claim of a strike. The attack could not be independently verified by The Associated Press.

The attack was condemned by a number of Russian officials. Valentina Matviyenko, the chair of Russia's upper house of parliament, the Federation Council, said that the strike "strengthened" Russia's resolve to quickly achieve its goals in its almost four-year invasion of Ukraine.

The strike "once again demonstrates the validity of our initial demands," Matviyenko said.

The statement follows claims from Moscow that Ukraine launched a long-range drone attack against one of Russian President Vladimir Putin's official residences in northwestern Russia on Tuesday. Kyiv has denounced the claims as a "lie." Russia's Defence Ministry released a video on Wednesday of a downed drone it said was involved in the attack.

The nighttime clip showed a man in camouflage, a helmet and a Kevlar vest standing near a damaged drone lying in snow. The man, his face covered, talks about the drone. Neither the man nor the Defence Ministry provided any location or date.

The video and claims could not

be independently verified.

### Rising tensions

Kyiv has called the allegations of an attack on Putin's residence a ruse to derail ongoing peace negotiations, which have ramped up in recent weeks on both sides of the Atlantic.

In his New Year's address, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said that a peace deal was "90 per cent ready" but warned that the remaining 10 per cent, believed to include key sticking points such as territory, would "determine the fate of peace, the fate of Ukraine and Europe, how people will live."

Trump's special envoy Steve Witkoff said Wednesday that he, Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Trump's son-in-law and adviser Jared Kushner had a "productive call" with the national security advisers of Britain, France, Germany and Ukraine to discuss advancing the next steps in the European peace process.

"We focused on how to move the discussions forward in a practical way on behalf of (Trump's) peace process, including strengthening security guarantees and developing effective deconfliction mechanisms to help end the war and ensure it does not restart," Witkoff said in a post on X. Lead Ukrainian negotiator Rustem Umerov also reaffirmed that European and Ukrainian officials plan to meet on Saturday, while Zelenskyy is due to hold talks next week with European leaders.

### Waves of attacks

Elsewhere in Ukraine, Russia attacked the Odesa region overnight, targeting civilian infrastructure, according to regional head Oleh Kiper. In a post on Telegram, Kiper said a two-story residential building was damaged and that a drone hit an apartment on the 17th floor of a high-rise building without detonating. (AP)

## Volunteer in Iran's Revolutionary Guard reportedly killed during widening protests

**DUBAI, Jan 1:** A volunteer member of Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard was killed in a western province during widening demonstrations sparked by the Islamic Republic's ailing economy, authorities said on Thursday, marking the first fatality among security forces during the protests.

The death Wednesday night of the 21-year-old volunteer in the Guard's Basij force may mark the start of a heavier-handed response by Iran's theocracy over the demonstrations, which have slowed in the capital, Tehran, but expanded to other provinces.

The state-run IRNA news agency reported on the Guard member's death but did not elaborate. An Iranian news agency called the Student News Network, believed to be close to the Basij, directly blamed demonstrators for the Guard member's death, citing comments from Saeed Pourali, a deputy governor in Iran's Lorestan province.

The Guard member "was martyred ... at the hands of rioters during protests in this city in defence of public order," he reportedly said. Another 13 Basij members and police officers suffered injuries, he added.

"The protests that have occurred are due to economic pressures, inflation and currency fluctuations, and are an expression of livelihood concerns," Pourali said. "The voices of citizens must be heard carefully and tactfully, but people must not allow their demands to be strained by profit-seeking individuals."

## Chief Justice says Constitution remains 'firm and unshaken' with major Supreme Court rulings ahead

**WASHINGTON, Jan 1:** Chief Justice John Roberts said Wednesday that the Constitution remains a sturdy pillar for the country, a message that comes after a tumultuous year in the nation's judicial system with pivotal Supreme Court decisions on the horizon.

Roberts said the nation's founding documents remain "firm and unshaken," a reference to a century-old quote from President Calvin Coolidge. "True then; true now," Roberts wrote in his annual letter to the judiciary. The letter comes after a year in which legal scholars and Democrats raised fears of a possible constitutional crisis as Republican President Donald Trump's supporters pushed back against rulings that slowed his far-reaching conservative agenda.

Roberts weighed in at one point, issuing a rare rebuke after Trump called for the impeachment of a

judge who had ruled against him in a case over the deportation of Venezuelan migrants accused of being gang members. The chief justice's Wednesday letter was largely focused on the nation's history, including an early 19th-century case establishing the principle that Congress shouldn't remove judges over contentious rulings.

While the Trump administration faced pushback in the lower courts, it has scored a series of some two dozen wins on the Supreme Court's emergency docket. The court's conservative majority has allowed Trump to move ahead for now with banning transgender people from the military, clawing back billions of dollars of congressionally approved federal spending, moving aggressively on immigration and firing the Senate-confirmed leaders of independent federal agencies. (AP)

## Dozens presumed dead, about 100 injured in fire at Swiss Alps

**CRANS-MONTANA (SWITZERLAND), Jan 1:** Dozens of people are presumed dead and about 100 injured, most of them seriously, following a fire at a bar in a Swiss Alps resort town during a New Year's celebration, police said on Thursday.

"Several tens of people" were killed at the bar, Le Constellation, Valais Canton police commander Frederic Gisler said during a news conference.

Work is underway to identify the victims and inform their families, but "that will take time and for the time being, it is premature to give you a more precise figure," Gisler said, adding that the community is "devastated."

Beatrice Pilloud, Valais Canton attorney general, said it was too early to determine the cause of the fire. Experts have not yet been able to go inside the wreckage.

"At no moment is there a question of any kind of attack," Pilloud said.

### An evening of celebration turns tragic

Officials called the blaze an "embarrassment generalise," a firefighting term describing how a

blaze can trigger the release of combustible gases that can then ignite violently and cause what English-speaking firefighters would call a flashover or a backdraft.

"This evening should have been a moment of celebration and coming together, but it turned into a nightmare," said Mathias Renard, head of the regional government.

The injured were so numerous that the intensive care unit and operating theatre at the regional hospital quickly hit full capacity, Renard said.

Helicopters and ambulances rushed to the scene to assist victims, including some from different countries, officials said.

Swiss President Guy Parmelin said in a social media post that the government's "thoughts go to the victims, to the injured and their relatives, to whom it addresses its sincere condolences."

Thursday was Parmelin's first day in office as president, as the seven members of Switzerland's government take turns holding the presidency for one year. Out of respect for the families of the victims, he delayed a traditional New Year address to the nation meant to

## Rahman thanks Yunus govt functionaries, foreign dignitaries for support during Khaleda Zia's funeral

**DHAKA, Jan 1:** BNP acting chairperson Tarique Rahman on Thursday thanked Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus, government functionaries, dignitaries from South Asian countries and common people for attending his mother and former Bangladesh prime minister Khaleda Zia's funeral.

Rahman also expressed his "profound gratitude" to the civilian and military institutions, law enforcers, public servants and media professionals for their "professionalism, care and dedication" in ensuring a peaceful and dignified final farewell to Zia.

Hundreds of thousands of people on Wednesday bid an emotional farewell to 80-year-old Zia, the chairperson of Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), who was laid to rest with state honours beside her husband Ziaur Rahman's grave near the parliament building amid tight security.

Rahman, who returned to Bangladesh on December 25 after 17 years of self-exile in London, in a statement posted on his social media account, also promised to honour with humility and commitment his mother's legacy of devoting "her life to serving others, day after day, with relentless dedication."

Stating that his heart is "full of sorrow and gratitude," as he laid his mother, his "first teacher in life," Zia to her final rest beside his



father, Rahman said. "The weight of her absence is immeasurable, but your presence, the Bangladeshi people's, has made this profound moment feel less alone." He extended "heartfelt gratitude" to the senior dignitaries of countries from the South Asian region, who attended the funeral personally, and to those countries, diplomats and partners who shared their condolences with the family and the party.

"Your gestures of condolence have touched our hearts profoundly," Rahman said. Thanking the officers and staff of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, he said their "thoughtful efforts" helped ensure that senior dignitaries from abroad were able to personally convey the condolences of their respective countries. "Their presence reflected the deep respect my mother was held in beyond our borders," he added.

### New Year's celebration



be broadcast Thursday afternoon, Swiss broadcasters SRF and RTS reported.

A witness who spoke to French broadcaster BFMTV described people smashing windows to escape the blaze, some gravely injured, and panicked parents rushing to the scene in cars to see whether their children were trapped inside. The young man said he saw about 20 people scrambling to get out of the smoke and flames and likened what he saw to a horror movie as he watched from across the street.

### The resort town sits in the

### heart of the Alps

In a region busy with tourists skiing on the slopes, the authorities have called on the local population to show caution in the coming days to avoid any accidents that could require medical resources that are already overwhelmed.

With high-altitude ski runs at around 3,000 metres (1.86 miles) in the heart of the Swiss Alps, Crans-Montana is one of the winter sports centres of Switzerland's ski-crazed Valais region, also home to Zermatt, Verbier and other resorts nestled in the snowy peaks and pine forests, drawing winter sports

enthusiasts from across the planet. The resort is one of the top race venues on the World Cup circuit in Alpine skiing and will host the next world championships over two weeks in February 2027.

In four weeks' time, the resort will host the best men's and women's downhill racers for their last events before going to the Milan Cortina Olympics, which open Feb. 6.

Crans-Montana is a premium venue in international golf. The Crans-sur-Sierre club stages the European Masters each August on a picturesque course with stunning mountain views. Le Constellation bar is about 250 metres (273 yards) down the street from the golf club.

Crans-Montana is less than 5 kilometres (3 miles) from Sierre, Switzerland, where 28 people, including many children, were killed when a bus from Belgium crashed inside a Swiss tunnel in 2012.

The Swiss blaze on Thursday came 25 years after an inferno in the Dutch fishing town of Volendam on New Year's Eve, which killed 14 people and injured more than 200 as they celebrated in a cafe. (AP)

## Bulgaria becomes 21st eurozone member



**SOFIA (BULGARIA), Jan 1:** Bulgaria officially adopts the euro as of the first day of 2026 and becomes the 21st member of the eurozone. This happened exactly 19 years after the country joined the European Union.

Until the end of January, the lev will remain a legal means of payment alongside the euro, and from February 1, the euro will become the only official currency. Until August 8, 2026, prices will continue to be displayed in both euros and leva.

Throughout January, people will be able to make cash payments in retail outlets using both leva and euro, while retailers will be obliged to give change entirely in only one of the two currencies - euros, or, in case of a temporary lack of availability, in leva. Retailers are free to decide whether to accept mixed payments in two currencies within a single transaction, but this decision must be clearly indicated in a visible place in the store.

After the completion of the technical adjustments, which are scheduled to continue until 1:00 am, cash withdrawals from ATMs will be available only in euros.

Throughout 2026, people will be able to exchange leva for euros at commercial banks across the country, with no fees or commission charged until mid-year. After that date, banks may apply conversion fees.

In 2026, citizens will also be able to exchange leva at branches of Bulgarian Posts, while the Bulgarian National Bank will exchange leva for euros free of charge. (BTA)

## Sri Lanka Navy honours vessels from India, other countries for disaster assistance

**COLOMBO, Jan 1:** Sri Lanka Navy on Thursday said eight foreign vessels, including two from India, have been honoured for providing assistance to the island nation after the Cyclone Ditwah disaster that saw over 600 deaths.

Prime Minister Harini Amarasuriya personally expressed gratitude to a group of diplomatic officials of the countries concerned, Sri Lanka Navy spokesman Commander Sampath said here. Widespread flooding, landslides and severe infrastructure collapse across the island nation severely strained the country's disaster-response capacity in the wake of the Cyclone Ditwah that hit Sri Lanka in November last week.

Aircraft carrier INS Vikrant and another ship INS Udaygiri of the Indian Navy were the first to get involved in the rescue and relief operations.

When Ditwah made a landfall on November 27, eight foreign naval warships had arrived here to take part in the International Fleet Review 2025 to mark the 75th anniversary of the Sri Lanka Navy.

Highlighting the spirit of global and regional cooperation, the Sri Lanka Navy had acknowledged -- in the immediate aftermath of the disaster -- the "invaluable support by foreign warships, extending much-needed humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations, during the recent weather disaster in Sri Lanka," a release said.

"Due to the disaster-situation triggered by severe

weather conditions across the island, foreign warships that arrived for the event were promptly redirected to support humanitarian efforts. Particularly, helicopters deployed from the Indian Navy's aircraft carrier INS Vikrant," it added.

India's relief and assistance mission -- Operation Sagar Bandhu -- commenced on the very day that Cyclone Ditwah made landfall. INS Vikrant and INS Udaygiri delivered relief material. Operation Sagar Bandhu delivered over 1,100 tonnes of relief material, including dry rations, tents, tarpaulins, hygiene kits, essential clothing and water purification kits.

About 14.5 tons of medicines and medical equipment were also provided. Yet another 60 tons of equipment was brought to Sri Lanka to assist the relief operations. Several Mi-17 helicopters of the Indian Air Force were active for a period of more than two weeks in Sri Lanka.

As of January 1, as many as 644 people have died and 175 are still missing since November 16, as landslides, floods and rainfall caused widespread destruction, data from the Disaster Management Centre (DMC) in Colombo showed.

India on December 23 announced a reconstruction package of USD 450 million for Sri Lanka, as External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar met with the island nation's top leaders and assured Delhi's steadfast commitment to Colombo's rebuilding post-cyclone. (PTI)

## Zohran Mamdani sworn-in as New York City's 112th Mayor

**NEW YORK, Jan 1:** Zohran Mamdani was formally sworn in as New York City's 112th Mayor in a private ceremony held just moments into the New Year in an old subway station here.

The 34-year-old Indian-descent Queens state assemblyman became the first South Asian and Muslim elected to helm the largest city in the US.

Mamdani was sworn in at the old City Hall subway station at a private ceremony attended only by his family and close advisers, held around the stroke of midnight as the city ushered in the New Year.

He was sworn in on a Quran as the city's 112th mayor -- and its second-youngest -- by state Attorney General Letitia James on Thursday morning below City Hall Park in a grand, abandoned old subway stop with his wife, artist Rama Duwaji, by his side.

Hours later, a ceremonial inauguration for Mamdani will be held outside City Hall, the seat of New York City government, on Thursday afternoon where Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont will administer the oath of office to the new Mayor.

Indian-descent Mamdani is the son of renowned filmmaker Mira Nair and Columbia University professor Mahmood Mamdani. He was born and raised in Kampala, Uganda and moved to New York City with

his family when he was 7. Mamdani became a naturalised US citizen only recently in 2018. Mamdani had earlier said that his swearing-in marks the "beginning of a new era for the city that puts working New Yorkers front and centre."

On the choice of the old subway station as the venue for his historic swearing-in, the New York Times quoted Mamdani as saying that when the Old City Hall Station first opened in 1904 -- one of New York's 28 original subway stations -- "it was a physical monument to a city that dared to be both beautiful and build great things that would transform working people's lives."

"That ambition need not be a memory confined only to our past, nor must it be isolated only to the tunnels beneath City Hall: it will be the purpose of the administration fortunate enough to serve New Yorkers from the building above."

The New York Public Library announced on Wednesday that Mamdani will use a Quran from the collections of the Schomburg Centre for Research in Black Culture to take the oath of office at the midnight swearing-in ceremony on New Year's Eve.

"This marks a significant moment in our city's history, and we are deeply honoured that Mayor-elect Mamdani has chosen to take the oath of office using one of the Li-

brary's Qurans," said Anthony W. Marx, President and CEO of The New York Public Library.

"This specific Quran, which Arturo Schomburg preserved for the knowledge and enjoyment of all New Yorkers, symbolises a greater story of inclusion, representation, and civic-mindedness."

NYPL termed the selection of the Quran by the incoming administration as highly symbolic, both because of its connection to one of NYC's most groundbreaking scholars and for its simple, functional qualities.

"The black and red ink, as well as the small, portable size, indicate this Quran was intended for an ordinary reader and everyday use. Although neither dated nor signed, the Quran's minute naskh script and its binding, featuring a gilt-stamped medallion filled with a floral composition, suggest it was produced in Ottoman Syria in the 19th century," it said.

Mamdani had registered a decisive and historic win at the polls in November as he defeated Republican nominee Curtis Sliwa and political heavyweight former New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo, who ran as an independent candidate and received US President Donald Trump's endorsement only on the eve of the election.

In a fiery victory speech, Mamdani had



challenged Trump on immigration, heralded the toppling of "political dynasty" and said his election symbolises "hope over tyranny and 'big money'" as he cited former Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru to assert that the city has stepped out from the "old into the new."

Mamdani had invoked Nehru as he spoke about ushering in a new era in New York City politics. "Standing before you, I think of the words of Jawaharlal Nehru: 'A moment comes, but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance'."

"Tonight, we have stepped out from the old into the new. So let us speak now, with clarity and conviction that cannot be misunderstood, about what this new age will deliver, and for whom," he had said. (PTI)

## Manipur 2026

# Manipur Gov urges people to reaffirm commitment to peace, harmony on New Year

**IMPHAL, Jan 1:** Extending New Year greetings, Manipur Governor Ajay Kumar Bhalla called upon people to reaffirm their commitment to peace, harmony, and mutual respect.

Bhalla urged people to work together to foster lasting peace and stability in the state.

"I extend my warm greetings and best wishes to the people of Manipur on the joyous occasion of New Year's Day, 2026. As we step into 2026, let us collectively reaffirm our commitment to peace, harmony, and mutual respect," he said in a statement on New Year's Eve.

"Let this be a year in which we strengthen the bonds of brotherhood among all communities, uphold the values of unity in diversity, and work together to foster lasting peace and stability in the State," he said.

Bhalla said he was hopeful that 2026 would usher in



greater understanding, prosperity, and well-being for all.

"May the spirit of cooperation and compassion guide us towards building a peaceful, inclusive, and prosperous Manipur," he said.

Manipur has been under the President's Rule since February 2025, with BJP leader N Biren Singh resigning as the chief minister amid criticism of his government's handling of

the ethnic clashes that left over 260 people dead and thousands homeless.

Singh also extended New Year greetings, stating that he was confident 2026 would bring new opportunities, renewed trust, and steady progress for Manipur.

"May the coming year bring peace, good health, and prosperity to every household. Let us move forward together with

renewed hope and unity," he said in a post on X.

State Congress president K Meghachandra Singh said he was hopeful that the New Year would bring peace, healing and justice to every family, restore trust and harmony among communities, and renew collective commitment to democracy, humanity and the rule of law.

"As we welcome the New Year, our thoughts are with the people of Manipur, who have endured a year of pain, uncertainty and loss. Yet, even in the darkest times, the spirit of Manipur has remained unbroken, resilient, compassionate and united in hope," he said in a post on X.

"Let this year be one of reconciliation, dignity and lasting peace, where every voice is heard, and every life is valued. Wishing all the people of Manipur a New Year filled with hope, strength and a shared future of peace," he added. (PTI)

# Governor Parnaik extends New Year greetings

*Calls for unity, self-reliance and inclusive growth in 2026*

**HT Correspondent**

**ITANAGAR, Jan 1:** The Governor of Arunachal Pradesh, Lt General KT Parnaik, PVSM, UYSM, YSM (Retd), has extended warm greetings and heartfelt best wishes to the people of the State on the joyous occasion of New Year's Day, wishing everyone a happy, healthy and prosperous New Year 2026.

In his New Year message, the Governor expressed hope that the year ahead would usher in renewed hope, lasting peace, harmony and tranquillity and open new avenues for all-round development and prosperity across the State.

Reflecting on the passing year, the Governor said that 2025 has been a truly progressive and eventful chapter in Arunachal Pradesh's growth story, marked by significant achievements and forward momentum.

On the national front, he said, guided by the spirit of



Aatma Nirbhar Bharat, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has transformed challenges into opportunities, steering the nation towards self-reliance, strength and success.

The Governor said that the Prime Minister's visionary and pragmatic initiatives, particularly in the areas of foreign policy,

transport and communication, defence, education and agriculture are laying a strong foundation for sustained socio-economic progress.

Closer home, he added, the successful conduct of Panchayat Raj elections and the enthusiastic participation of the people reflect a deepening

democratic consciousness and a shared commitment to grassroots governance.

As the State steps into the New Year, the Governor called upon the people to renew their resolve to move forward with the spirit of Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat, strengthen Arunachal Pradesh's journey towards greater self-reliance and continue contributing meaningfully to the national vision of Viksit Bharat@2047.

Reposing confidence in the people of the State, the Governor said that with active cooperation, unity and dedication of every citizen, Arunachal Pradesh will achieve inclusive growth, lasting development and a brighter future for all.

He once again conveyed his sincere wishes to the people of Arunachal Pradesh for a very happy and prosperous New Year 2026, filled with new opportunities, progress and collective success.

## Arms, large cache of explosives seized in Manipur's Kakching

**IMPHAL, Jan 1:** Six firearms and a large cache of explosives were recovered in Manipur's Kakching district, police said on Thursday.

The recovery was made on Wednesday from the Wabagai Natekhong Turenmei area of the district, they said.

The seized firearms include an M-16 rifle, an SLR, a single-barrel gun, two single-barrel bolt-action rifles and a 7.65 mm pistol, police said.

The explosives and ammunition recovered include 10 grenades, four detonators, two arm rings, an improvised explosive device (IED) weighing about 3 kg, one explosive shell, one 51 mm mortar bomb, six tear smoke shells and 71 live rounds of ammunition, they said.

A quadcopter drone, along with related accessories, was also seized during the operation, they added.

Police said security forces are continuing search and area domination operations in fringe and vulnerable areas across districts. (PTI)

## Northeast students hold candlelight march in Dehradun demanding justice for Anjel Chakma



**DEHRADUN, Jan 1:** Students from the northeast held a candlelight march here to protest the killing of 24-year-old Anjel Chakma from Tripura and demanded justice, raising slogans against alleged racial discrimination.

Under the banner of the 'Unified Tripura Students Association' (UTSA), students from various in-

stitutions in Dehradun gathered outside Gandhi Park on Wednesday (clock tower) with candles in their hands. Some students from other states also joined the protest.

Holding banners with Chakma's picture, the students chanted slogans such as "Stop Racism", "We Are Indians", and "We Want Justice."

Churanta Tripura, general secretary of the UTSA, Dehradun, alleged that police were trying to suppress the case and therefore not treating it as one involving racism.

He also alleged that the police asked them to stop the protest march, citing traffic issues due to New Year celebrations.

Chakma, a final-year MBA student at a private university here, was allegedly attacked and seriously injured with a knife and a brass knuckle by some youths on December 9. He died on December 26 after being hospitalised for 17 days. While Chakma's family and friends have termed the incident a result of racist remarks, the Dehradun police said their investigation so far has not found any evidence of racial discrimination.

Dehradun SSP Ajay Singh said that students from all over the country, including more than 2,000 from the northeast, come to Dehradun to study. He said about 250 students from Tripura alone are studying in the city. (PTI)

## Mizoram celebrates New Year with community feasts, church services

**AIZAWL, Jan 1:** Mizoram on Thursday celebrated New Year with religious and traditional fervour, marking it with community feasts and church services.

Thanksgiving ceremony, worship service, prayers and congregational singing (zaikhawm) were held in churches across the state on Thursday as part of the celebration.

Usually, the New Year is celebrated for two days in the Christian-majority state of Mizoram.

Several churches belonging to different denominations, including the Presbyterian Church of India (PCI) and Baptist Church of Mizoram (BCM), particularly in the villages and some small towns, held community feasts on Thursday, while most churches in Aizawl and other towns will hold the same to mark the closure of the New Year celebration on Friday.

All churches in the state held



midnight services on Wednesday night to bid farewell to 2025 and welcome the new year 2026.

Some indigenous churches in rural areas also held church services and community feasts on Wednesday to bid farewell to the outgoing year (2025).

On Wednesday, the state Tourism department held a tourism event at Sakawrhmtuaitlang (Sakawrhmtuaitlang Hills) near Aizawl to witness and send off the last sunset of 2025.

State Tourism minister Lalnghinglova Hmar, who attended the event, said the government is

making efforts to make Mizoram an appealing tourist destination during winter.

Sometimes, the New Year celebration lasted for more than a week in some local churches.

The government has banned firecrackers, sky lanterns and other pyrotechnic materials to ensure peaceful and pollution-free celebrations.

Bidding the outgoing year and welcoming the new one with a crash-boom-bang celebration has become more or less a tradition for the Mizos to light up moods, though it has no significant relation with the Christian way of celebrating the New Year.

Aizawl Superintendent of Police (SP) Zosangliana told PTI that no person has been arrested for bursting firecrackers.

He said that no law and order problem has been reported in the state during the New Year celebration on Thursday. (PTI)

## Tripura district council provides ₹ 3 Lakh assistance to family of Late Anjel Chakma

**HT Correspondent**

**AGARTALA, Jan 1:** The Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAACDC) on Thursday has extended financial aid of ₹ 3,00,000 to the family of the late Anjel Chakma. The support was provided following a request from Tripura Motha Party founder and royal scion Pradyot Kishore Manikya Debbarma.

Chief Executive Member (CEM) Purna Chandra Jamatia personally handed over the cheque to the bereaved family at their residence, honoring a prior commitment. Sources from TTAADC stated that the financial assistance is part of the council's pledge to support the family after Anjel Chakma's untimely death. The handover signifies the fulfillment of this promise. Expressing condolences, CEM Purna Chandra Jamatia said, "It is our moral duty to stand by the family during this difficult time." He added that the council would continue to provide any necessary assistance in the future. Anjel Chakma, 24, passed away in Dehradun after being violently attacked on December 9. Reports indicate that he and his brother were subjected to racial slurs, including being called 'Chinese,' by intoxicated individuals prior to the attack.

## Tripura govt considering Ekalavya model schools across state to boost tribal education: CM

**AGARTALA, Jan 1:** Tripura Chief Minister Manik Saha on Thursday said the state government is contemplating establishing Ekalavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS) in all the 58 blocks of the northeastern state to expand access to quality education for tribal students.

The EMRS scheme, which is funded by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, aims to provide quality education to Scheduled Tribe (ST) children in remote areas and help them to pursue higher education.

Addressing a programme, the CM said the government is focused on providing quality education to tribal students living in rural areas.

"Before the BJP came to power in the state in 2018, Tripura had only four EMRSs.

The Centre has since sanctioned 21 EMRSs for the state. Currently, 12 EMRSs are functioning, while two more will become operational by March 2026," he said.

Saha said the government wants to establish EMRSs in all the 58 blocks to enable tribal students get quality education.

"During my recent visit to Delhi, I have urged the Centre to give relaxation in guidelines for setting up EMRSs in the state," he said. Under existing norms, a block must have at least 50 per cent tribal population, with a minimum tribal population of 20,000, to qualify for an EMRS.

"I strongly demanded relaxation in the guidelines so that more EMRSs can be set up across the state. I hope a positive decision will be taken," Saha said. (PTI)

## DIG of 21 Sector AR calls on Tripura DGP to strengthen security

**HT Correspondent**

**AGARTALA, Jan 1:** Brigadier Nishant Chandel, Deputy Inspector General (DIG) of 21 Sector, Assam Rifles, met with Anurag, Director General of Police (DGP), Tripura, to discuss the prevailing security scenario in the state.

During the meeting, the senior officers emphasized the importance of close coordination and cooperation between Assam Rifles and Tripura Police to ensure effective security management.

Discussions focused on strategies to maintain law and order, strengthen border security, and address emerging security challenges.

Both officials reiterated their commitment to collaborative efforts aimed at enhancing safety and stability in Tripura.

The meeting reflects ongoing efforts to foster synergy between central armed forces and state police for a robust security framework in the region.

## Tripura SLDC first in NE to receive ISO/IEC certification for cyber security: Power Minister

**HT Correspondent**

**AGARTALA, Jan 1:** Tripura State Load Dispatch Centre (SLDC) is the one and only centre in the North East to have received the ISO/IEC 27001:2022 Certificate, providing better protection against cybercriminal attacks.

Tripura Power Minister Ratan Lal Nath informed this on Thursday while addressing the 2nd Foundation Day of Tripura State Electricity Corporation Limited (TSECL) at Agartala.

The Minister said that this certification is mandatory for all SLDCs in the country as per the rules of the Central Electricity Authority (CEA), which aims to protect critical computerized systems from increasing cyber threats and keep the national power grid safe.

"In this context, a System Surveillance Audit was conducted by STQC at the Tripura State Load Dispatch Centre. After rectification of non-conformities related to Biometric Access Control, Intelligent Threat Dissemination, Smoke Detection (VESDA) System, User Identity Control, Physical Security, etc., the Ministry of IT, Government of India has awarded the ISO/IEC 27001:2022 Certificate," he said.

The Minister informed that although TSECL was formed in 2004, the power sector in Tripura has a his-



tory of 89 years, from 1937 to 2026.

"The first electricity supply ran on a diesel engine during the princely regime. In 1949, Tripura was merged with India, and in 2005 the journey of TSECL started. Many changes have been made. Power consumers were 3.9 lakh when TSECL started in 2005, and now it is 1.57 lakh. If we observe, there were three 132 kV substations, and after our government came to power, nine substations were set up. Initially, there were 33 numbers of 33 kV substations. From 2005 to 2017, 11 numbers of 33 kV substa-

tions were set up, and in the last seven years, 31 numbers of 33 kV substations have been established. There were 89 km of 132 kV lines from 2005 to 2017, and in the last seven years, 501 km have been added," the Minister said.

The Power Minister said that the key to development is power.

"That is why we are thinking anew for power and bringing reforms. Earlier, there was declared load shedding; now it is managed through an online system. Earlier, everything was offline; now it is online. There

was no system of smart meters or transparent billing. Now consumers can sit at home and pay their bills. We have also opened a 24x7 call centre, which was not there earlier. Fault rectification services are available, and we have started digital services. There have been massive changes in TSECL. Our department has taken many steps," he said.

He also said that in 2005, the power demand of Tripura was 220 MW, in 2017-18 it was 306 MW, and in 2025-26 it is 378 MW and in 2031, it will be 650 MW.

"Where will we find power? Gas projects are near completion. However, we are using new technology in Rukhia, but our main target is solar power. We must think and prepare from today. Work on a 120 MW combined cycle plant in Rukhia has started. The Gumti Hydro Electric Plant, which was destroyed by floods, will be restored. We are setting up an 800 MW pump storage project, among other initiatives. We have taken a plan to lay underground cables across the entire Agartala Municipal Corporation area, for which the DPR work has been completed. Work orders for live line maintenance techniques have been issued, and we have approved drone technology to detect faults. We have also covered many hospitals and educational institutions with solar power," the Minister said.



**অসম লোকসেৱা আয়োগ**  
ASSAM PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION  
Jawaharnagar, Khanapara, Guwahati-781022.

No. 68PSC/DR-79/1/2024-25 Dated Guwahati: the 1<sup>st</sup> January, 2026

### NOTIFICATION

In pursuance to APSC's notification No.59PSC/COM/Exam-33/2025-2026 Dated Guwahati the 1<sup>st</sup> January, 2026, the Assam Public Service Commission will hold the interview/viva-voce for the post of Inspector of Schools / District Elementary Education Officer / Deputy Director under Assam Education Service (Adv. No. 07/2025, dated 13/02/2025) at its office in Jawaharnagar, Khanapara, Guwahati-22. The detailed programme for the interview/viva-voce is given below:

Sl No.	Name of the post and Department	Date of Interview/ viva-voce	Reporting Time
1	Inspector of Schools / District Elementary Education Officer / Deputy Director under Assam Education Service	12 <sup>th</sup> January, 2026	9:00 A.M

Kindly note that the candidates appearing for the interview/viva-voce must bring the following testimonials in ORIGINAL along with self attested photocopies in chronological order, thereof for verification/scrutiny on the day of interview:

- i. H.S.L.C/H.S Admit Card/ Mark sheet/Pass Certificate as proof of age.
- ii. H.S.L.C. Mark sheet and Pass Certificate.
- iii. H.S.S.L.C. Mark sheet and Pass Certificate.
- iv. Bachelor Degree mark sheet (all semester) and Pass Certificate.
- v. Masters Degree mark sheet (all semester) and Pass Certificate.
- vi. B.T/B.Ed. mark sheet (all semester) and Pass Certificate.
- vii. CGPA Conversion Formula of the respective institute/university.
- viii. Relevant Experience Certificate(s) as per the advertisement.
- ix. Permanent Resident Certificate/Employment Exchange Registration Certificate.
- x. State Government Employee of Assam must submit No Objection Certificate from their respective employer or Permanent Resident Certificate/Employment Exchange Registration Certificate as domicile proof.
- xi. Caste/ Updated PwBD certificate / Ex-Servicemen Card (if applicable).
- xii. BPL candidates must submit BPL card reflecting the name of candidate (if applicable).
- xiii. Declaration Form A. (May be downloaded from APSC's website)
- xiv. Candidates with documents having inconsistencies in name, father's name etc., must be supported by an affidavit addressing and affirming the correct details. (if applicable)
- xv. Any other documents that may be relevant as per advt.

No intimation letter to the eligible candidates shall be sent separately by post. The intimation letters shall be uploaded on 07-01-2026 in the APSC's website ([www.apsc.nic.in](http://www.apsc.nic.in)). The candidates shall have to download their own intimation letter from the aforesaid website.

Sd/-  
Secretary,  
Assam Public Service Commission,  
Jawaharnagar, Khanapara, Guwahati-22

**DIPR/D/HLT/264/2-Jan-26**

# India, Pakistan exchange list of nuclear installations, civilian prisoners

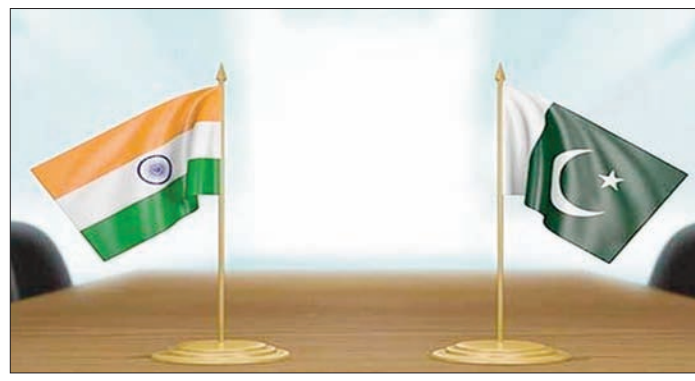
**NEW DELHI, Jan 1:** In continuing an annual practice that began in 1992, India and Pakistan on Thursday exchanged lists of their nuclear installations that cannot be attacked in the event of hostilities.

The exchange of the details of the nuclear installations covered under a bilateral pact came notwithstanding ties between the two countries remained under deep freeze following the May 7-10 military conflict. It was done simultaneously through diplomatic channels in New Delhi and Islamabad.

The two sides also exchanged lists of prisoners in each other's custody, with New Delhi urging Islamabad to expedite the release of

167 Indian fishermen and civilian prisoners as they completed their jail-terms. It also sought immediate consular access to the 35 civilian prisoners and fishermen in Pakistan's custody. The exchange of the list of nuclear installations took place under the provisions of an agreement on the prohibition of attack against nuclear installations and facilities, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said.

"India and Pakistan today exchanged, through diplomatic channels, simultaneously at New Delhi and Islamabad, the list of nuclear installations and facilities, covered under the agreement on the prohibition of attack against nuclear in-



stallations and facilities between India and Pakistan," the MEA said. The agreement was signed on December 31, 1988 and came into

force on January 27, 1991. The pact mandates the two countries to inform each other of nuclear installations and facilities

to be covered under the agreement on the first of January of every calendar year.

"This is the 35th consecutive exchange of such lists between the two countries, the first one having taken place on January 1, 1992," the MEA said in a brief statement.

The ties between India and Pakistan hit rock bottom after India carried out Operation Sindoor in response to the horrific Pahalgam terror attack. Though the military confrontation ended on May 10, the relations remained under deep freeze. The two sides exchange lists of prisoners and fishermen twice a year, on January 1 and July 1, under the provisions of the 2008

Agreement on Consular Access.

India has shared names with details of 391 civilian prisoners and 33 fishermen in its custody, who are Pakistani or believed-to-be-Pakistani. Similarly, Pakistan has shared details of 58 civilian prisoners and 199 fishermen in its custody, who are Indian or believed-to-be-Indian, according to the MEA.

"The government of India has called for early release and repatriation of civilian prisoners, fishermen along with their boats, and missing Indian defence personnel from Pakistan's custody," it said in a statement. "Pakistan has also been urged to expedite the release and repatriation of 167 Indian fisher-

men and civilian prisoners, who have completed their sentence."

New Delhi has specifically asked Pakistan to ensure the safety, security and welfare of all Indian and believed-to-be-Indian civilian prisoners and fishermen, pending their release and repatriation.

"As a result of the sustained efforts by the government of India, 2,661 Indian fishermen and 71 Indian civilian prisoners have been repatriated from Pakistan since 2014," the MEA said.

"This includes 500 Indian fishermen and 13 Indian civilian prisoners who have been repatriated from Pakistan since 2023 till date," it added. (PTI)

## 'Fixed match' of LDF, UDF to end, says PM

GREETINGS CITY MAYOR, PARTY FOR MAIDEN CIVIC POLLS VICTORY

**THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, Jan 1:** Prime Minister Narendra Modi has lashed out at rival Kerala blocs—the LDF and the UDF for playing a "fixed match" in the state and said it was going to come to an end post the BJP's maiden win in the city civic body.

The saffron party emerging victorious in the Thiruvananthapuram Corporation was an "epoch-making" victory, he said in a letter to city Mayor V V Rajesh.

He lauded Rajesh and the BJP leaders for the party coming to power in the state capital in the recently held local body elections.

In the letter dated December 30, the PM said history was made in Thiruvananthapuram after the mayor and Deputy Mayor G S Asha Nath took oath.

He said the party's success in Thiruvananthapuram was an indication that the people of Kerala, especially youngsters and women, were ready for a new dawn.

According to him, the BJP-led NDA is emerging as the people's option, rooted in nationalism without exclusion, development without corruption and governance without appeasement.

"The fixed match of the LDF and the UDF of being friends in Delhi and rivals in Kerala is about to end. Kerala wants to break free from their broken promises," he said about the poll-bound state.

The CPI (M) leads the ruling



Left Democratic Front and the Congress heads the United Democratic Front. While the two parties are rivals in the southern state, they are allies in the INDIA bloc at the national level.

Modi further said BJP workers had to walk on a difficult path in Kerala for decades, a state dominated by the LDF and the UDF, whose poor governance record is there for everyone to see.

"In addition, these fronts have perpetuated a culture of corruption and brutal violence that is against the ethos of Kerala. Yet despite adversity, hostility and violence, our karyakartas have stood firm," he said.

BJP workers raised public issues fearlessly and followed the ideology of "India First" with courage.

urban development in various states, which prompted them to bless the party, he added.

"I thank the people of this city for their warmth."

The Prime Minister said the BJP's victory in the Thiruvananthapuram Corporation had brought immense happiness and pride.

"Powered by the blessings of the people of Thiruvananthapuram, what has happened is epoch-making. It is a milestone written in golden letters," he said.

Modi referred to the teachings of saint-reformer Sree Narayana Guru, saying selfless service would always be blessed by God and that all actions should further the good of others.

He also mentioned Mahatma Ayyankali, noting that he had emphasised on caring for the poor and marginalised, and referred to Mananthu Padmanabhan's teachings on alleviating human suffering and empowering women.

"I am sure you and your team will take inspiration from these noble principles and serve the city to the best of your abilities, furthering ease of living for the people," he told Rajesh.

The BJP won 50 out of 101 seats in the Thiruvananthapuram Corporation, which was earlier ruled by the CPI(M)-led LDF.

Elections to the 140-member state Assembly are likely in March-April this year. (PTI)

## TN ushers in 2026 with night of revelry, early morning temple visits

**CHENNAI, Jan 1:** Tamil Nadu welcomed 2026 with vibrant celebrations at beaches and public spaces and prayers at temples amid tight security by police who deployed over 1.10 lakh personnel statewide to ensure safety.

The Chennai Police said the New Year celebrations went smoothly without accidents and crimes, loss of lives, or any untoward incident.

The year started with rainfall, possibly the heaviest in a long while on the first day of the year, weather enthusiasts said.

Governor RN Ravi and Chief Minister M K Stalin extended New Year greetings to the people. The CM expressed confidence that the state would march towards great victories in 2026 with the courage from past struggles.

The Greater Chennai Police mobilised 19,000 personnel and 1,500 home guards, conducting checks at 425 locations and deploying 30 special teams to curb binge racing in hotspots like Guindy, Adyar and Thoraipakkam.

Celebrations were permitted only till 1 am, with bans on sea bathing at beaches including Marina and Elliot's, firecrackers in public areas, and high-decibel music systems without permission.

According to officials, drone surveillance covered the East Coast Road from Panaiyur to Kovalam, while horse-mounted patrols and help desks were stationed at beaches to take strict action against drunk driving and stunts.

Thousands gathered at Marina Beach, Elliot's Beach, Besant Nagar and other venues for midnight countdowns, prayers and family events blending faith with festivities.

Popular spots hosted DJ nights, live bands and fireworks displays at resorts along ECR, with events like beach parties in select locations drawing crowds.

According to a press release issued by Chennai police on January 1, police officials and constables from

Chennai Metropolitan Police, Law and Order, Crime Branch, Traffic, Armed Reserve, and Special Units performed intensive surveillance on December 31.

"As a result of which the 2026 New Year celebrations in Chennai Metropolitan City were celebrated peacefully, joyfully, without loss of lives, accidents avoided, and without crimes and untoward incidents occurring," stated the release.

Commissioner of Police A Arun thanked the police officials, constables and town protection force personnel for maintaining law and order on New Year's Eve, it added.

As is tradition, despite rain, fans made their way to their beloved stars, prompting police to post personnel in front of their houses to control the crowd. Crowd started surging in front of superstar Rajnikanth's house early morning itself. Among his fans was also an eight-year-old girl who celebrated her birthday on Thursday by cutting cake in front of his house and distributing it to those gathered there.

After wishing his fans, the superstar went to the Raghavendra temple at Triplicane to do his customary New Year pooja later in the day.

Thousands of people also gathered at places of worship. Long queues for 'darshan' were spotted at almost all temples of Tamil Nadu, particularly the famous ones like the Kapaleeswarar temple and Vadappalani Murugan temple in Chennai, Murugan temple in Tiruchendur, Meenakshi temple in Madurai, Arunachaleswara Temple in Tiruvannamalai, Ramanathaswamy Temple in Rameshwaram, Brahadeswarar Temple, Thanjavur and Thillai Nataraja Temple in Chidambaram.

Crowds surged along the shores of Tamil Nadu to witness the first sunrise of the year.

Unfortunately, at Kanyakumari, famous for its sunsets and sunrises, skies stayed cloudy disappointing countless people who made it there specially to witness the first sunrise. (PTI)

## Day after Shah's pep talk, BJP leader Dilip Ghosh meets state chief, says ready for any work



**KOLKATA, Jan 1:** A day after attending a meeting with Union Home Minister Amit Shah and West Bengal BJP leaders, the party's former state president Dilip Ghosh on Thursday met incumbent Samik Bhattacharya and said he was ready to shoulder any responsibility assigned to him.

Ghosh, who lost in the Lok Sabha elections in 2024 after having been shifted to Bardhaman-Durgapur from his winning constituency Medinipur, has largely stayed away from the forefront of the BJP's activities in the state over the past several months.

He met Bhattacharya at the party's Salt Lake office here amid speculations that he would play an important role in the saffron brigade's attempt to win West Bengal in the upcoming assembly elections. Shah on Wednesday chaired an organisational meeting of the BJP at a hotel here with MPs, MLAs, former MPs and former MLAs of the party.

Addressing the media after calling on Bhattacharya, Ghosh said that they discussed the preparations for the coming assembly elections in the state.

"I don't know what responsibility will be given to me, but I have said I am available 24x7," he said.

Ghosh, a former MLA from Kharagpur, said he will contest the upcoming assembly polls if fielded by the party.

He is likely to address a public meeting at Durgapur on January 13 with Bhattacharya.

Ghosh said that the new entrants to the BJP need to adapt to the party's style of functioning.

The former BJP state president said that he has no reservations about sharing stage with Leader of Opposition in West Bengal Assembly Suvendu Adhikari, with whom

it is claimed, he does not share a very cordial relationship.

"We will have to cover 294 constituencies across the state, so we also need to address meetings separately to meet the target," he said, pointing out that microphones are not allowed during school board examinations during school board examinations.

Alleging that the Trinamool Congress is perturbed by the ongoing Special Revision of rolls (SIR) of electoral rolls in the state, he said "otherwise their top leader (Abhishek Banerjee) would not have raised his pitch over the issue on Wednesday in front of the Election Commission.

Banerjee had on Wednesday hit out at Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar, saying he failed to address their concerns on the ongoing SIR in West Bengal and was "aggressive" towards them, after a party delegation met the poll panel in New Delhi.

EC officials said that the TMC delegation was told that intimidation of any electoral staff by ground-level political representatives and workers will not be tolerated and that the West Bengal government should immediately release the enhanced honorarium to each BLO.

In a post on X, Ghosh said, "#2026BengalElection is extremely important for Bharat."

"In the last election, the struggle we fought established us in the eyes of the people of Bengal as the principal opposition. Today, people of Bengal are ready for change," he wrote.

Under Ghosh's stewardship, the tally of the BJP West Bengal unit rose from just two seats in 2014 to 18 in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections out of 42 constituencies in the state. (PTI)

## Civic polls: Opposition alleges bias by officials over rejection of nomination papers

**THANE, Jan 1:** The Opposition has accused election officials of showing a partisan attitude during the scrutiny of nomination papers for the upcoming Thane Municipal Corporation elections after the documents of a few candidates were rejected.

Rajan Vichare of Shiv Sena (UBT), Avinash Jadhav of Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) and Jitendra Awadh of NCP (SP) addressed the media on Wednesday night, targeting the returning officer in the Wagle Estate area.

The Opposition leaders alleged that the returning officer showed bias in rejecting the nomination papers of Sena (UBT), MNS, Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi (VBA) and independent candidates contesting from wards 16, 17 and 18.

According to MNS and VBA leaders, the nominations of Shinde Sena candidates Ekta Bhoir and Shilpa Wagh were accepted despite alleged discrepancies.

The Wagle Estate area is considered a stronghold of the ruling Shiv Sena led by Deputy Chief Minister Eknath Shinde.

"These officials have become servants of the ruling party and they work only for them," said Awadh. He, Jadhav and Vichare demanded registration of a criminal offence against the returning officer.

MNS city president Ravi More said his party and the affected candidates would launch a hunger strike on Thursday for wards 16, 17 and 18.

Another controversy surfaced in the Mumbai area,

where Sudhir Bhagat of the NCP objected to the nomination of NCP (SP) candidate Moreshwar Kinne, claiming that the latter had lost his corporator post earlier over unauthorised construction.

Despite submitting documentary evidence, Bhagat claimed his objection was overruled.

The MNS also claimed election officials deliberately rejected opposition nominations to facilitate the unopposed election of the wife of a Shiv Sena leader.

Thane-Palghar MNS chief Avinash Jadhav alleged the nomination paper of his party's Prachi Ghadge was rejected from ward 18 to ensure the win of Sukhadra More, wife of former Thane mayor and Shiv Sena leader Sanjay More.

"Ghadge's form was rejected on the ground that the word 'unqualified' was not mentioned in a column, no nomination of ruling party candidates was rejected, despite blank columns and submission of mandatory documents after the stipulated deadline," he alleged.

The independence of the election machinery exists only on paper, said Jadhav, who along with party workers held a protest in front of the TMC headquarters. Other MNS leaders also said nomination papers required to be displayed on the notice board by 10.30 am were put up only at 3.30 pm, adding the act was captured on CCTV footage.

MNS leaders said Additional Commissioner Prashant Rode and Deputy Commissioner Umesh Biriari have promised an inquiry. (PTI)

## TMC seeks Centre's intervention to stabilise raw jute market

**KOLKATA, Jan 1:** The Trinamool Congress has sought Union textiles ministry's help to stabilise the raw jute market, warning that the sector is facing an economic and social emergency, particularly in West Bengal. In a letter to Union Textiles Minister Giriraj Singh, TMC Rajya Sabha MP Ritabrata Banerjee said raw jute prices had surged to around Rs 12,000 per quintal, more than double the minimum support price (MSP) of Rs 5,650.

He added that the current crisis, marked by acute scarcity of raw jute, sharp price volatility, curtailment of mill operations and loss of employment, was the result of policy shortcomings over the past few years rather than a natural market failure.

He pointed to the absence of a credible raw jute stabilisation or buffer mechanism and irregular demand planning under the Packaging Commodities Supply Order (PCSO) and Gunny Bags Tender (GBT) system as key reasons behind the turmoil.

While minimum support price (MSP) procurement was undertaken during low-price years, including substantial purchases in 2023-24, Banerjee said these were not backed by transparent buffer norms, release triggers or stock rotation policies.

As a result, MSP procurement absorbed distress sales by farmers but failed to prevent the current scarcity and price shock, he added.

The situation was further aggravated by uneven and delayed PCSO demand, which forced mills to cut production and reduce raw jute purchases, adversely affecting farmers, he said.

Subsequent revival of orders in a compressed manner led to panic procurement by mills, pushing prices to unsustainable levels and intensifying volatility.

Highlighting the impact across the jute economy, Banerjee said several mills were curtailing shifts or suspending operations due to unaffordable raw material costs and working capital stress, while thousands of jute workers were losing employment days and wages. (PTI)

## AI a 'big opportunity', essential to ensure its benefits reach all: President Murmu

**NEW DELHI, Jan 1:** Describing Artificial Intelligence as a "big opportunity" for ushering in positive change, President Droupadi Murmu on Thursday said it is essential to ensure that its benefits reach all sections of the society, especially the underprivileged.

Addressing a programme organised by Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, she observed that AI is emerging as a critical growth driver for India's economy and will contribute significantly towards the country's GDP, employment and productivity in the coming decades.

AI should be utilised for reducing societal, economic and technological barriers, said the President.

She pointed out that skills including data science, AI engineering and data analytics will play an influential role in developing the country's AI talent pool.

"Artificial intelligence is emerging as a growth driver for India's economy. India is rapidly progressing towards becoming the world's third largest economy," she said.

In the coming decades, AI will play a significant role in contributing towards the country's GDP, job-creation and overall productivity, Murmu added.

She stated that the government in collaboration with industry partners and academia is ensuring that India not just embraces technology but also shapes a responsible future



through it. The President exhorted the citizens to commit to working towards the goal of Viksit Bharat and transform India into a knowledge superpower and a tech-driven inclusive and prosperous nation through the New Education Policy.

She highlighted that the government is promoting the use of Artificial Intelligence in schools and preparing children for technological leadership.

Through AI labs and AI models, innovative thinking and future ready skills are

being inculcated in children, the President said. She observed that the objective of the Skill India Mission is to ensure that its benefits reach all sections of the society, especially the underprivileged ones, she said in her address. She emphasized that the government is strengthening digital public infrastructure, and the India AI Mission is being implemented to establish country as a global AI leader.

President Murmu was speaking while participating in a special programme under SOAR -- Skilling for AI Readiness, an initiative of the Skill India Mission.

She conferred Artificial Intelligence (AI) certificates upon learners, including students and Members of Parliament, and launched the national awareness campaign #SkillTheNation Challenge, aimed at encouraging more youth participation in future-ready skilling programmes.

The President also virtually inaugurated the IGNOU Regional Centre at Raipur, serving as a key hub for northern Odisha for strengthening employability through skill-oriented programmes and training support.

Artificial Intelligence is transforming the nature of work and skill requirements across sectors. (PTI)

## 'The DRDO has consistently improved its systems, processes, and working methods' DRDO will play crucial role in creation of Sudarshan Chakra: Rajnath

**NEW DELHI, Jan 1:** The weapon systems developed by the DRDO played a decisive role during Operation Sindoor, serving as a testament to the professionalism and commitment of the organisation towards safeguarding national interests, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh said on Thursday.

During his visit to the DRDO headquarters here on its 68th anniversary, he also said the organisation will play a "crucial role" in the creation of Sudarshan Chakra, and exuded confidence that it will "work wholeheartedly to achieve this goal soon".

Mission Sudarshan Chakra was announced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his Independence Day address from the ramparts of the Red Fort in 2025. "Under this initiative, the DRDO is responsible for equipping our vital installations with an air defence system to ensure complete aerial protection over the next decade. We witnessed the importance of air defence in modern warfare during Operation Sindoor. I am confident that DRDO will work wholeheartedly to achieve this goal soon," Singh said during a meeting.

The DRDO was set up in 1958 from the amalgamation of the then already functioning Technical Development Establishments (TDEs) of the Indian Army and the Directorate of Technical Development & Production (DTDP) with the Defence Science Organisation (DSO). It was then a small organisation with 10 establishments or laboratories. Over the years, it has grown multi-directionally in terms of the variety of subject disciplines, number of laboratories, achievements and stature, according to the defence ministry. Singh



called upon the DRDO to continue marching ahead "in sync with the rapidly-evolving technological ecosystem", and keep coming out with products that are relevant to the changing times. He urged the organisation to continue focusing on innovation and identify more areas which can enhance the participation of the private sector.

"The weapon systems developed by the DRDO played a decisive role during Operation Sindoor, which serves as a testament to the professionalism and commitment of the organisation towards safeguarding national interests," the defence minister said. Operation Sindoor was carried out last year in the early hours of May 7 eliminating at least 100 terrorists in response to the horrific Pahalgam terror attack that killed 26 innocent civilians.

Commending the DRDO for bolstering India's indigenous capabilities by equipping the armed forces with state-of-the-art technologies and equipment, Singh said its equipment "worked seamlessly" during the operation, boosting the morale of the soldiers.

He praised the DRDO for becoming trust builders along with technology creators, saying it makes people look towards it with hope, certainty, and belief. Acknowledging the DRDO's collaboration with the private sector, he said the increased engagement with the industry, academia and start-ups has resulted in creation of a synergetic defence ecosystem. "The DRDO has consistently improved its systems, processes, and working methods. From procurement to project management, from industry engagement to collaborating with start-ups and MSMEs, there is a visible effort to make the work easier, faster, and more reliable," he said.

Appreciating the efforts being made by the DRDO towards developing "deep tech and next-generation technologies", he said, headway in this endeavour will not only increase the nation's capabilities, but also strengthen the defence ecosystem.

Emphasising that the present era is not just of science, but of continuous development and constant learning, Singh said technology

scanning, capability assessment, and future readiness are "no longer just words in this changing world".

"The world is changing every day. Technology, innovation, and new warfare domains are rapidly advancing, making yesterday's knowledge obsolete. We must never assume that the learning process has ended. We must continue learning and challenge themselves, paving the way for the new generation," he said.

During the meeting held on his visit to the DRDO headquarters, Singh was briefed by Secretary, Department of Defence R&D and Chairman, DRDO, Samir V Kamat about the ongoing R&D activities, achievements of the organisation in 2025, various initiatives in promoting industry, start-ups and academia and the roadmap for 2026.

Singh was apprised of the major targets set for 2026 and various reports that the DRDO is taking for the betterment of the organisation.

"On DRDO Day, I extend my heartfelt greetings to all @DRDO, India scientists, personnel and their families. Their unwavering commitment, scientific excellence and sense of national duty are vital to strengthening India's defence preparedness and advancing Atmanirbhar Bharat in defence," he also posted on X. "By developing indigenous, future-ready technologies, DRDO is reinforcing our strategic autonomy and the confidence of our armed forces. I wish the entire DRDO family a year of meaningful breakthroughs and continued service to the nation," the defence minister said. Minister of State for Defence Sanjay Seth, various senior DRDO scientists and other senior officials were also present on the occasion. (PTI)

## Will not bow before 'malevolent forces': Mamata on TMC foundation day

**KOLKATA, Jan 1:** Extending greetings on the TMC's foundation day, West Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee on Thursday said the party would continue to fight for the people and would not bow before "malevolent forces".

Banerjee said the core guiding principle of the party's "historic journey" was the honour of the motherland, the development of West Bengal and the protection of democratic rights.

She said the party's journey began on January 1, 1998, with the aim of serving 'Maa Mati Manush' (Mother, land and people).

"Even today, every worker and supporter of our party remains steadfast and committed to this goal," she said in a post on X, paying homage to the "tireless efforts and sacrifices" of party workers.

Maintaining that the party has been "blessed with the grace, love and prayers of countless people", Banerjee said that with public support as its sustenance, the TMC would remain resolute in its fight for every individual in the country.

"We will not bow to any malevolent forces, and disregarding all enmity, our struggle for the common people will continue life-long," she said.

TMC's national general secretary Abhishek Banerjee said the party's strength lay in its grassroots workers and their discipline, sacrifice and faith. "On Trinamool Congress Foundation Day, I bow my head in gratitude to every member of our ever-expanding family," he posted on X.

The Diamond Harbour MP, considered number two in the TMC hierarchy, said what began as a movement for change has evolved into a powerful democratic force.

"My deepest respect is reserved for our grassroots workers. You are



the authors of this story," he said.

He asserted that as long as the TMC remained anchored to 'Maa, Mati, Manush,' "no force, however arrogant or oppressive, can defeat the collective resolve of Bengal".

"Today, we renew our pledge to stand beside the people, to shield their democratic voice, and to ensure that no one in Bengal is harassed, humiliated, or intimidated by the Bangla-Birodhi (anti-Bengal) zamindari powers," he added.

In a separate post on X, the Trinamool Congress described it as a movement "born of conviction, moral clarity, and a tireless resolve to serve people selflessly".

"For us, service to humanity is the truest expression of faith, and public duty the highest form of devotion," it said, calling itself "a movement forged in fire, strengthened in struggle, and sustained by the dignity of ordinary people".

Mamata Banerjee left the Congress and formed the TMC on this day in 1998 to challenge the Left Front's entrenched rule in West Bengal. It came to power in 2011 ending the CPI(M)-led LF's 34-year rule.

The Trinamool Congress steps into its 28th at the threshold of a

decisive election year, with the assembly polls barely three months away.

The TMC said in a social media post that the party's main objectives are to honour the motherland, to protect the interests of Bengal and the democratic rights of people. "We will ensure the downfall of all those who are anti-democratic and anti-people in 2026," it said. It said in the social media message that the TMC's fight for the people and safeguard their civic rights will continue.

"We salute the selfless sacrifices and tireless efforts of every worker of the Trinamool Congress on this day," it said.

The party also expressed its gratitude to all those who showered it "with love and blessings".

Local leadership of the party held programmes at various places across the state to celebrate the party's birthday.

Starting from blood donation camps to sit and draw competitions for children to cultural soirees have been organised to mark the occasion. TMC's West Bengal state secretary Subrata Bakshi and ministers attended some of the programmes. (PTI)

## Former Bihar CM Rabri Devi turns 67



**PATNA, Jan 1:** Former Bihar chief minister Rabri Devi turned 67 on Thursday, with Rashtriya Janata Dal leaders and his well wishers greeting him on the occasion.

Senior party leaders came to her official residence at 10 Circular Road in Patna to convey their best wishes to Rabri Devi, currently the Leader of the Opposition in the Bihar Legislative Council.

RJD state president Mangani Lal Mandal, national principal general secretary Abdul Bari Siddiqui, national general secretary Binu Yadav, state vice-president Ashok Kumar Singh and others were present on the occasion, a party statement said.

Rabri Devi, the wife of RJD president Lalu Prasad, expressed her gratitude to the leaders and well-wishers and offered sweets to them, it said. Talking to reporters elsewhere in Patna, Rabri Devi's elder son Tej Pratap Yadav, who floated a new party ahead of the Bihar assembly polls, also extended good wishes for his mother.

"Today is also the birthday of my mother. I celebrated along with her by cutting a cake," he said.

Rabri Devi became the first woman chief minister of the state in July 1997 and served as the CM for three terms. (PTI)

## Delhi's disposal rate for POCSO cases 2<sup>nd</sup>-highest in country: Report

**NEW DELHI, Jan 1:** Courts in Delhi disposed of significantly more POCSO cases than were registered in 2025, with the city recording second-highest disposal rate in the country at 178 per cent, a report said.

Delhi courts disposed of 1,792 cases under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act in 2025 against 1,006 fresh registrations, thereby clearing a substantial portion of the backlog from previous years, it noted.

The report titled 'Pendency to Protection: Achieving the Tipping Point to Justice for Child Victims of Sexual Abuse' was published by the Centre for Legal Action and Behaviour Change for Children, an initiative of India Child Protection. At the national level, courts disposed of 87,754 POCSO cases while 80,320 cases were filed during the year, resulting in a disposal rate of 109 per cent, the report said.

As many as 24 states and Union Territories recorded disposal rates above 100 per cent.

Delhi recorded the second-highest disposal rate in the country after Chhattisgarh.

The report was based on data drawn from the National Judicial Data Grid, the National Crime

Records Bureau and Lok Sabha questions and answers, as of December 2, 2025.

The report said the findings indicate that India has reached a tipping point where the justice system has begun to reduce pendency instead of merely managing it.

As of 2023, the backlog of POCSO cases in the country stood at 2,62,089.

To eliminate the entire backlog within four years, the report recommended setting up 600 additional e-POCSO courts across the country at an estimated cost of ₹ 1,977 crore and suggested that the Nirbhaya Fund could be utilised for the purpose.

Despite the improvement in disposal rates, the report flagged several concerns, including wide inter-state disparities, fluctuating conviction rates and prolonged pendency of older cases. Nearly half of the pending POCSO cases nationally have remained unresolved for over two years, it said.

In Delhi, the report said, 54 per cent of pending cases have been awaiting disposal for six to 10 years, nine per cent for five years, 10 per cent for four years, 13 per cent for three years and the remaining 14 per cent for two years.

## CBI books South Delhi resident for 'misusing' names of Modi

**NEW DELHI, Jan 1:** The CBI has booked a posh South Delhi colony resident who sent a flurry of emails to senior executives and scientists across government-owned defence firms, research bodies and even a top officer of the US Navy, asserting that he wanted to develop a fighter aircraft engine for India and had the blessings of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Claiming privileged access to the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), Nisheet Kohli, a resident of Vasant Kunj, said he wished to help the government of India develop an indigenous military jet engine. Kohli described himself as a "textile chemistry engineer, a

2002 graduate from TITS (The Technological Institute of Textile and Sciences), Bhiwani" and offered sweeping assurances about his ability to contribute to advanced jet-engine development -- a field that typically demands decades of specialised expertise.

In the mails sent between October and December 2024, he approached Premier Explosives Ltd., the Aeronautical Development Establishment of the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd. (HAL) and the High Energy Materials Research Laboratory

(HEMRL), among others, the CBI FIR alleged. To bolster his pitch, he invoked the name of Principal Secretary to the PM, P K Mishra, and asserted he enjoyed the "blessings and best wishes" of Prime Minister Modi, it alleged.

The CBI started an inquiry on a complaint from the Director in the PMO, A K Sharma, calling it a case of "misuse of the name" of the principal secretary and the prime minister himself for professional purposes. The agency conducted an inquiry that traced a broad email trail originating from Kohli's personal Gmail account, with copies marked to senior officials, lending an air of bureaucratic

legitimacy. In one exchange on November 27, 2024, the then managing director of Premier Explosives, TV Chowdhary, responded to Kohli's queries that day, despite having no prior acquaintance with him, the CBI alleged. This mail was marked to the Director, ADE (Aeronautical Development Establishment), the Chairman (ISRO), and the AS office (ISRO) as well.

He claimed that he had the blessings and best wishes of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to proceed with this project, to be managed through the ADE Director, DRDO, and that his credentials could be validated with P K Mishra at the PMO, New Delhi. (PTI)

## Senior IPS officer Ajay Singhal takes over as Haryana DGP

**PANCHKULA (HRY), Jan 1:** Senior IPS officer Ajay Singhal assumed charge as Haryana's director general of police (DGP) on Thursday and asserted that maintaining peace, public safety and a strong law-and-order system will be his topmost priority.

He was appointed to the post by the state government on Wednesday, following the retirement of O P Singh. A 1992-batch Indian Police Service (IPS) officer, Singhal was accorded a ceremonial guard of honour by an armed police contingent. He formally took charge from the outgoing DGP.

Talking to reporters, the senior officer thanked Chief Minister Nayab Singh Saini for entrusting him with the responsibility and said he would discharge his duties with utmost integrity, dedication and commitment. Singhal said policing is a dynamic and challenging responsibility that continuously evolves with changing crime patterns, technology and public expectations. He said the Haryana Police is fully prepared, alert and committed to dealing with emerging challenges through a planned, phased and goal-oriented strategy aimed at further strengthening law and order across the state. Maintaining peace, public safety and a strong law-and-order system will be his topmost priority, Singhal said, adding that the state police will function as a cohesive and professional team, ensuring accountability, sensitivity and citizen-centric policing.

Highlighting women's safety as a priority area, the DGP said a comprehensive and focussed strategy would be implemented to prevent crimes against women.

Technology-enabled surveillance will be strengthened and crime-prone hotspots will be scientifically identified for targeted interventions. Special emphasis will also be placed on the protection of Dalits, marginalised and vulnerable sections, ensuring swift and strict action in cases of crimes against them. Singhal said the Haryana Police has consistently dealt with all challenges and asserted that strict action is being taken in matters related to threats like cybercrime, narcotics and extortion cases. Operations Track-down and Hotspot have yielded positive results, and the best practices under these initiatives will continue, he said. Singhal said the Special Task Force will be reorganised and steps will be taken to rein in the land mafia.

"We have a strategy for violent crimes, road safety, crimes against women and Dalits, and we will implement it. It is not that we will start doing it (taking action) now... It has already been happening. But we will give it a new shape," he said. Responding to the opposition parties' criticism of law and order in the state, Singhal said if the situation was as bad as claimed, Haryana's GDP (Gross Domestic Product) would not be rising.

"Why are people migrating here? Why are people in Haryana happy? Why are people coming here? People are investing here. I am not giving any political statement, and our work is to control crime and maintain law and order," he said. (PTI)

## Massive pilgrim surge across UP on New Year

**PRAYAGRAJ/AYODHYA, Jan 1:** The New Year began with a massive pilgrim surge across Uttar Pradesh as dense fog and biting cold failed to deter devotees from thronging major religious centres, prompting extensive security, traffic and crowd-control measures state-wide on Thursday.

Thousands of devotees took a holy dip at the Triveni Sangam in Prayagraj, while Kashi Vishwanath temple in Varanasi saw very high pilgrim turnouts and Ram temple management in Ayodhya suspended VIP darshan passes and requested local residents to postpone visits to allow out-of-town pilgrims to have their darshan in view of the unprecedented rush.

Director General of Police Rajeev Krishna has said special security arrangements had been put in place across Uttar Pradesh for December 31 and January 1 in view of the expected surge at temples, markets, malls and picnic spots.

In Prayagraj, loudspeaker announcements guided pilgrims

along the ghats, while police and civil defence personnel remained deployed to ensure safety and regulate crowd movement.

Cold weather affected daily life in Prayagraj, with people seen warming themselves around roadside bonfires.

Shiv Chauhan, waiting for transport to travel out of the city, said the chill forced him to pause his journey. Autorickshaw driver Shivkumar Kushwaha said dense mist reduced visibility, making driving difficult on city roads.

In Mirzapur, heavy crowds were reported at Vindhyachal Dham, where the district administration had anticipated an influx of 1.5 to 2 lakh devotees. Heaters were installed inside the temple, bonfires lit along major routes and night shelters arranged for pilgrims arriving from distant places.

"Queues are being managed systematically so that the crowd remains under control and devotees do not face inconvenience," District Magistrate Pawan Kumar Gangwar said, adding that security

was tightened at the temple complex, Ganga ghats and key roads.

Ayodhya witnessed one of its heaviest pilgrim turnouts in recent times, with massive crowds gathering at the Ram Janmabhoomi and Hanumangarhi temples.

Officials said the surge follows the formal completion of the grand Ram temple in November 2025. The second anniversary of the temple inauguration was held on December 31.

According to authorities, millions of devotees poured into the temple town for New Year prayers and observances linked to the second anniversary of the consecration, overwhelming city resources. Temple authorities managed queues, while security agencies intensified surveillance using drones and CCTV cameras.

SP City C P Tripathi said vehicle entry inside Ayodhya was restricted and 36 parking zones were created on the outskirts. "Holding areas have been identified where devotees can be halted, if required, and sent for darshan in a phased



manner," he said. Tripathi said security was tightened in view of VVIP visits during the occasion of 'Pratishtha Dwadashi'.

Apart from the Ram temple, police deployment was strengthened at Nageshwarnath, Hanumangarhi, Kanak Bhawan, Rampath and the Saryu ghats.

Traffic and crowd-control measures included restricted vehicle

movement, designated parking areas and regulated pedestrian routes to prevent congestion near temple corridors.

In Varanasi, long queues were seen at the Kashi Vishwanath, Sankat Mochan and Kaal Bhairav temples. Officials said the number of pilgrims had been steadily rising over the past six to seven days.

According to the Kashi Vishwanath temple administration,

around 3.5 lakh devotees offered prayers at the shrine till Thursday afternoon. Sub-divisional magistrate Shambhu Sharan said arrangements were strengthened from Saturday, with barricading ensured to manage the heavy footfall. All devotees were allowed only barricaded darshan, while protocol and 'sparsh' darshan had been suspended since Wednesday.

Police Commissioner Mohit Agarwal said 200 additional policemen were deployed along with PAC companies, intensive surveillance, barricading and a streamlined queue system. The stretch from Maidagin to Godowlia was declared a no-vehicle zone, permitting only pedestrian movement, while police vehicles were also restricted.

He said crowd management, security and traffic arrangements similar to those used during the Maha Kumbh were implemented in anticipation of additional rush during the New Year and the upcoming Magh Mela. Separate parking facilities for heavy vehi-

cles were identified near Sampurnanand Sanskrit University.

Strict restrictions were imposed on overloading of boats at the Ganga ghats, and life jackets were made mandatory for all passengers. Bomb disposal squads conducted intensive checks at sensitive locations, Agarwal added.

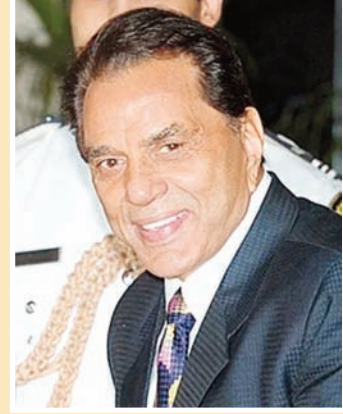
Meanwhile, Varanasi Junction braced for a surge in passengers ahead of the Magh Mela, which begins on Saturday and will continue till February 15. Station Manager Arpit Gupta said a holding area has been created, more police personnel have been deployed and medical facilities have been enhanced.

Surveillance was strengthened at the station and five special trains will operate from Varanasi Junction during the Magh Mela period, he said. Heavy pilgrim movement was also reported from Mathura and Vrindavan, where devotees thronged the Banke Bihari and Radha Rani temples despite the cold. (PTI)

# IN MEMORIAM: CINEMA STARS WE LOST IN 2025

**D**harmendra, Asrani, Manoj Kumar, Kamini Kaushal... 2025 was the year that Indian cinema lost some of its brightest and best, those who have passed away but will live on through their work in the movies that mirror the concerns of an evolving India. Here are some who we said goodbye to:

**Dharmendra:** One of the most



loved stars with a filmography that featured classics such as "Sholay", "Anupama" and "Chupke Chupke". Dharmendra's death just days before his 90th birthday marked the end of an era in Hindi cinema.

Dharmendra died on November 24 after being in and out of hospital for over a month. Fans of Dharmendra, who is still considered one of the most good looking stars that the Hindi cinema ever produced, will get to see his last performance in Sriram Raghavan's "Ikkis". The film releases on January 1, 2026.

**Manoj Kumar:** A close friend of Dharmendra from his days of



struggle and a star who redefined patriotic movies in Hindi cinema with films such as "Upkar", "Purab Aur Paschim" and "Krantī", Manoj Kumar died on April 4 this year after prolonged illness. He was 87. Both Dharmendra and Manoj Kumar shared a close bond and Dharmendra once revealed that he had almost abandoned his acting dreams but Manoj Kumar convinced him to stay back in Mumbai.

**Govardhan Asrani:** In the year that "Sholay" completed 50 glorious years of its release, the industry lost two of its most famous stars in the death of Dharmendra and Asrani.



Asrani, who memorably played the jailor with a colonial hangover in the early part of the movie, was 84. Not just "Sholay", Asrani left an indelible mark as a character artist in a series of movies, most memorably in "Chupke Chupke", "Abhimaan" and "Baton Baton Mein". He had a long innings of over 300 films in Hindi cinema.

**Kamini Kaushal:** One of Hindi cinema's most educated and earli-



est female stars, Kamini Kaushal died on November 14 at the age of 98. Kaushal, who worked with all the top stars of her era but most prominently with Dilip Kumar in "Shaheed", "Nadiya Ke Paar" and "Shabnam", began her career with 1946 film "Neecha Nagar". Other than movies, Kaushal was also an avid puppeteer and a writer.

**Zubeen Garg:** Singer and Assam's cultural icon Zubeen Garg's death at the age of 52



brought an unprecedented outpouring of grief from public in the state with lakhs attending his last rites. Garg, who had travelled to Singapore to attend the North East India Festival, died while swimming in the sea on September 19.

**Satish Shah:** The "Jaane Bhi Do Yaaron" actor, who was loved for his roles in movies as well as TV



shows, died due to kidney failure on October 25. He was 74. The actor memorably played Indravardhan opposite Ratna Pathak Shah in "Sarabhai vs Sarabhai" and professor Rasai in Shah Rukh Khan's

"Main Hoon Na".

**B. Saroja Devi:** Legendary



South Indian actor whose work spanned Tamil, Telugu and Kannada movies, B Saroja Devi was known for her strong presence on the screen.

She featured in movies such as "Paasamalar", "Kalyana Parisu", "Enga Veettu Pillai", "Palum Pazhamum", "Mahakavi Kalidasa", "Kittur Chenamma", "Jagadeka Veeruni Katha". She acted opposite MGR in over 20 films.

**Sandhya Shantaram:** A popular



star of yesteryear Hindi and Marathi cinema, Sandhya Shantaram died at the age of 94 in October. Her most noted films are "Jhanak Jhanak Payal Baaje", "Do Aankhen Barah Haath", "Navrang" and "Pinjra" -- all directed by popular filmmaker and husband V Shantaram.

**Shefali Jariwala:** Popular TV actor Shefali Jariwala shot to fame with her breakout appearance in the remix track "Kaanta Laga", and also appeared on several reality shows like "Bigg Boss", "Nach Baliye". Her untimely death at the



age of 42 shocked fans.

**Pankaj Dheer:** Television star Pankaj Dheer, known for playing



Karna in B R Chopra's "Mahabharat" and king Shivdutt in fantasy drama "Chandrakanta", died on October 15 following a battle with cancer. He was 68.

**Sulakshana Pandit:** Renowned singer and actress from Hindi cinema Sulakshana Pandit, known for her voice and roles in films of 1970s, passed away at 71 in November. She was the sister of actor Vijayta Pandit and famous music composer duo Jatin-Lalit. (PTI)



## 'BORDER 2' PRODUCER NIDHI DUTTA: EVERYONE WAITING TO RELIVE THE NOSTALGIA THROUGH THE FILM

**“**Border 2' producer Nidhi Dutta says she is overwhelmed by all the love and excitement surrounding the war drama ahead of the song launch "Ghar Kab Aaoge" and she is confident that fans will get to relive the nostalgia that the new film evokes about the 1997 hit.

The makers are set to launch "Ghar Kab Aaoge", which brings together an extraordinary lineup of voices—Sontu Nigam, Arijit Singh, Vishal Mishra, and Diljit Dosanjh, making it one of the most significant musical collaborations in recent times. With music by Anu Malik, reimagined by Mithoon, and additional lyrics by Manoj Muntashir Shukla, who builds upon the original lyrics by Javed Akhtar, the song carries forward the legacy of the ever-green original.

The teaser of the song has garnered over 7 million views across platforms, reflecting the immense nostalgia and emotional connect audiences feel with the franchise. "Border", directed by Dutta's father JP Dutta in 1997, was a blockbuster.

"Border 2' is not just a film, it's an emotion that belongs to every Indian, here and across the world. The response from Indians, not just in our country but overseas, has been deeply moving. Everyone is waiting for the film and to relive the nostalgia they felt with my father's film. Messages like these remind me why we made this film.

"The love and anticipation around the song launch 'Ghar Kab Aaoge' has only heightened that emotion. It reassures my father and me that Border 2 is awaited not just with excitement, but with nostalgia waiting to be relived and sentiments that are deeply personal to every Indian worldwide," Dutta said in a statement.

Directed by Anurag Singh, "Border 2" features a powerful ensemble cast including Sunny Deol, Varun Dhawan, Diljit Dosanjh, Ahan Shetty, Mona Singh, Medha Rana, Sonam Bajwa, and Anya Singh.

The film is presented by Gulshan Kumar & T-Series, in association with J.P. Dutta's J.P. Films, and is backed by producers Bhushan Kumar, Krishan Kumar, J.P. Dutta, and Nidhi Dutta.

"Border 2" is all set to release in cinemas worldwide on January 23, 2026. (PTI)

## Netflix crashes as 'Stranger Things' finale premieres

**S**ome users found it difficult to log in on Netflix on Wednesday (January 1, 2026) night to watch the finale of Stranger Things, the series that debuted in 2016 and became an instant hit with viewers with its band of adventure-loving kids, nostalgic 80s setting and the Upside Down. Some users found it difficult to log in on Netflix on Wednesday (January 1, 2026) night to watch the finale of Stranger Things, the series that debuted in 2016 and became an instant hit with viewers with its band of adventure-loving kids, nostalgic 80s setting and the Upside Down.

The streamer faced a similar technical issue during the season 5 premiere of the show on November 26. The crash on Wednesday (Janu-

ary 1) lasted for about a minute and was fixed after a few refreshes. Users encountering the error were met with an image from "Nailed It!" with the caption: "Something went wrong. Sorry, we're having trouble with your request. You'll find lots to explore on the home page", reported Variety.

During the November 26 crash, Netflix was down for about five minutes when the first four episodes of Season 5 released.

Season 5 of Stranger Things was the most-watched title worldwide thanks to the three new episodes. Between December 22-28, the fifth and final season received 34.5 million views. That marked the season's second-best weekly total after its debut with 59.6 million

views in November, which was Netflix's best-ever opening week for an English-language title, according to the website.

The series, created by Matt and Ross Duffer, revolves around the residents of a fictional small town of Hawkins, Indiana. A group of young friends witness supernatural forces and befriend a young girl with psychokinetic abilities, named Eleven. She opens a gateway between Earth and a hostile alternate dimension known as the Upside Down at a nearby human experimentation facility.

Winona Ryder, David Harbour, Finn Wolfhard, Millie Bobby Brown, Gaten Matarazzo, Caleb McLaughlin, Natalia Dyer, Charlie Heaton, Cara Buono, Matthew Mo-

dine, Noah Schnapp, Sadie Sink, Joe Keery, Dacre Montgomery, Sean Astin, Maya Hawke, Priah Ferguson, Brett Gelman, Jamie Campbell Bower and Linda Hamilton star in the series. Just hours before the premiere of the finale, Ross Duffer wrote a moving Instagram post to recall their 10-year journey.

"Watched the finale with the cast who were in NYC for press a few weeks ago. It was an emotional and cathartic experience for all of us. Hanging out afterwards, I looked around at all these incredible artists—laughing, crying, supporting one another—and felt so lucky that we remain so close, bonded by these ten years. While we're finished telling this story, we are family now, forever. (PTI)



## MISSED OUT ON A LOT OF WORK, TRYING TO MAKE BETTER CHOICES: CHITRANGDA SINGH

**Y**ou live and learn, says actor Chitrangda Singh while looking back at missed opportunities early in her career that led to some introspection and the determination to make better choices.

Singh made her directorial debut in 2005 with Sudhir Mishra's political drama "Hazaaron Khwaishein Aisi" and grabbed attention with her commanding presence in the movie, also starring Shiney Ahuja and Kay Kay Menon.

Singh said she was offered a slew of interesting films like "Gangster", "Tanu Weds Manu", and "Mangal Pandey" but she didn't take them up for various reasons.

"I've missed out on a lot of work and that has been very painful. This happens with every actor. It is also my fault that I refused some projects, which I shouldn't have. In

the beginning, you end up listening to other people. Sometimes you are not sure, you don't have the vision to understand how it will translate on screen.

It was just one of those things that you live and learn," Singh told PTI in an interview.

The actor, who currently stars in the Honey Trehan-directed movie "Raat Akeli Hai: The Bansal Murders", said she had to take long breaks, especially in the couple of years because of her personal life.

"But if I reach there again, I think I'll still end up doing this (break) because there were certain situations in my life at that point, (like) my family. I just wouldn't have been able to leave all that. I'm very happy where I am. I think it's so much better because I'm emotionally more complete. I feel like I have got myself, that's better. It's far more important to take care of that," the actor added.

The "Khel Khel Mein" actor said she em-

braced the lull phase in her career as an opportunity to grow.

"...Whatever you go through in life, it adds to your emotional experience, you become emotionally a little more intelligent. It makes you well-rounded so you end up making better choices. It definitely makes a huge difference. Instead of everything being good all the time and not taking any breaks, and living life, I don't know how well that works.

"But I feel that whatever happened to me, whatever I lived through, whatever breaks I took, all that pain and ups and downs, the rollercoaster has really added to (who I am)."

Singh expressed gratitude to directors like Mishra and Trehan for significantly influencing her craft.

She collaborated with Mishra on three films "Hazaaron Khwaishein Aisi", "Yeh Saali Zindagi", and "Inkaar", and with Trehan on their recently released film, "Raat Akeli Hai: The Bansal Murders".

"He (Mishra) taught me how to work

with silences. It's important for a director to make an actor aware of their strengths. Sometimes you don't know what you have. You try to cover up by doing too much. He always said that less is more," she said.

"What I learnt from Honey is that sometimes for technical reasons you have to go beyond things and redo it (scenes). So, to get bored with a certain emotion and still make it work, that's what he taught me. I learnt a lot in 'Gaslight', which I did with director Pavan Kirpalani," the actor said.

Up next for Singh is "Battle of Galwan" with Salman Khan. She is also looking forward to producing a biopic.

"I'm really looking forward to 'Battle of Galwan', it'll be very special. There is something that I'm going to produce and it's finally coming together. I'm hoping we start next year. Then there is a conversation for another film, a smaller film but it's an important film. And there might be some international collaboration," the actor said. (PTI)



**A**fter "Animal", Sandeep Reddy Vanga is back with "Spirit", starring Prabhas and Triptii Dimri.

The first look poster of the two actors was released on New Year and shows a battered, shirtless Prabhas who has bandages tied on his shoulder, back, and hands, and leading lady Triptii Dimri is seen lighting Prabhas's cigarette. "Let's welcome the new year with the first poster high on #Spirit," production banner T-Series wrote on social media, alongside the poster.

"Kicking off the New Year with the first poster of #Spirit," Dimri wrote.

"Spirit" will also feature veteran actor Prakash Raj and Vivek Oberoi in pivotal roles.

Vanga, best known for blockbusters "Arjun Reddy", "Kabir Singh" and "Animal", is also producing the project through his banner Bhadrakali Pictures.

"Spirit" was in news last year over reports of a falling out between Deepika Padukone and Vanga. The actor reportedly left the project due to differences over a fixed shift. (PTI)

# National Sports Governance Act comes into effect partially

**NEW DELHI, Jan 1:** The National Sports Governance Act partially came into effect on Thursday with provisions that will set the ball rolling for the institution of an all-powerful National Sports Board (NSB) and a Tribunal to handle sporting disputes notified as enforced by the central government.

The Act was notified on August 18 last year and has been described as the single biggest sporting reform in the country by Sports Minister Mansukh Mandaviya.

The provisions being brought into effect relate to the establishment and governance framework of National Sports Bodies, including the National Olympic Committee, National Paralympic Committee, National Sports Federations (NSFs) and Regional Sports Federations.

"...the provisions of sections 1 to 3, sub-sections (1), (2) and (4) of section 4, sub-sections (1) and (2) of section 5, sub-section (5) of section 8, sub-section (1) of section 11, sections 14 and 15, sub-sections (1) to (7) and (10) of section 17, sections 30 and 31, and sections 33 to 38 of the said Act shall come into force," stated a late night press release from the Sports Ministry on Wednesday.

After elections under the provisions of the Act, all these bodies will be required to have Executive



Committees of no more than 15 members with at least two Sportspersons of Merit (SOMs) in them.

The constitution of the National Sports Board (NSB) and the National Sports Tribunal (NST) will also get underway with the partial implementation.

The NSB will feature a Chairperson and members appointed by the Central Government from among "persons of ability, integrity

and standing who possesses special knowledge or practical experience in the field of public administration, sports governance, sports law and other related fields."

The appointments will be done on the basis of the recommendations of a search-cum-selection committee, which is yet to be finalised.

"The phased commencement of the Act is aimed at ensuring a smooth transition to the statutory

sports governance framework," the ministry said.

The ministry has already allowed NSFs, which have elections due in the next few months, to postpone the process till December for the full-scale implementation of the Act. This means that elections of the All India Football Federation will be held quite late in the year.

"With effect from 1st January, 2026, the institutional mechanisms envisaged under the notified provisions of the Act shall become operational," it stated.

The NSB, which is proposed to be a three-member body, will have the power to not just grant affiliation to the National Sports Federations (NSFs) but also monitor their financial operations and penalise them for any wrongdoing once the Act becomes fully operational.

It would be mandatory for the NSFs to take NSB affiliation to be eligible for government funding. The age cap for all members of the NSB has been fixed at 65 and all members will be eligible for re-appointment for one more term subject to the age limit.

The members of the National Sports Tribunal will hold office for four years with an age cap of 67 years as per the rules of implementation that the ministry posted for public feedback in October.

A National Sports Election Panel (NSEP) is also due to be constituted to manage elections of NSFs and other sports bodies.

## Criteria for SOM

The rules of implementation which were made public by the ministry, lay down a tiered criteria for athletes, who are being encouraged to take up administrative roles as per the provisions of the act.

The interested athletes should be retired from their sport at least one year before applying for the position in administration and only those who have won an Olympic medal or participated in at least one Olympics would be eligible for inclusion in the National Olympic Committee.

The criteria is slightly relaxed for inclusion in the federations with a National Sports Award or medals in the World Championship of the concerned discipline being enough for entry.

Tier one athletes will be the ones who have won at least a medal in the Olympics or Winter Olympics, while tier two would comprise applicants who have participated in two or more editions of the Olympic or Winter Olympic Games.

There are 10 tiers in descending order of achievements in different sporting events. (PTI)

## Comeback wins for Ivory Coast, Cameroon at Africa Cup

Sudan advances despite defeat and war at home



**CASABLANCA (MOROCCO), Jan 1:** Bazoumana Touré scored in

stoppage time as defending champion Ivory Coast recovered from a two-goal deficit to beat Gabon 3-2 on Wednesday in the Africa Cup of Nations, which now enters the knockout stage.

Christopher Opéri crossed for Touré to head in the winner as Les Éléphants staged a dramatic comeback to finish top of Group F, just ahead of Cameroon, by virtue of scoring a goal more than the Indomitable Lions.

Opéri had also set up fellow substitute Evann Guessand for the equalizer in the 84th minute.

Five-time winner Cameroon also came from behind to beat Mozambique 2-1 in the other group game.

Both Ivory Coast and Cameroon finished with seven points each, with a goal difference of plus 2, but Ivory Coast scored five goals, compared to Cameroon's four.

Mozambique also progressed to the last 16 as one of the four best third-place finishers.

Gabon was already eliminated after starting with two defeats.

Last 16 games Ivory Coast stays in Marrakech after winning the group and will next face Burkina Faso in the last 16 on Tuesday.

Cameroon was dealt a tough encounter against South Africa in Rabat on Sunday, and Mozambique will face Nigeria the next day in Fez.

## Down but not out

Despite a 2-0 loss to Burkina Faso in its final group game, Sudan can look forward to the knockout stage after qualifying as one of the best third-place finishers.

Both teams were already assured of advancing before their Group E match Wednesday. Sudan pro-

gressed despite the complication of playing all its qualification games away from home as the country contends with a brutal war and humanitarian crisis.

"This is good for all Sudanese," said Sudan coach James Appiah, whose team next faces 2021 champion Senegal in the last 16 in Tangier on Saturday.

Burkina Faso made a better start and the Stallions duly took the lead through Lassina Traoré in the 16th.

Sudan had a great opportunity to level when Burkinabe keeper Hervé Koffi bundled over Al Gozoli Nookh in the penalty area, but Nookh missed the resulting spot kick.

The Sudanese fans, who were in a majority at the Stade Mohammed V stadium, tried rallying the team. Yasir Mozamil was just wide, and Amar Abdallah missed another good chance for Sudan.

Arsène Kouassi sealed the Stallions win with a late goal as Burkina Faso finished second in the group.

## Algeria wins

Algeria, already assured of topping the group, signed off before its last-16 meeting with Congo with a 3-1 win over Equatorial Guinea, which finished with three defeats.

Zineddine Belaid, Fares Chaïbi and Ibrahim Maza scored in the first half for Algeria.

Veteran forward Emilio Nsue — playing for the first time legally in the Africa Cup — scored a brilliant consolation for the National Thunder in the second half. The 35-year-old Nsue was the top scorer at the last edition, but FIFA in 2024 ruled he was never eligible over his 11 years playing for Equatorial Guinea. He was finally cleared to play in March this year. (AP)

## Australia names a spin-heavy squad for T20 World Cup



**MELBOURNE (AUSTRALIA), Jan 1:** Australian selectors have named a spin-heavy squad for the defending champions for the forthcoming Twenty20 World Cup in Sri Lanka and India. The 2021 tournament winners decided Thursday not to pick a left-arm paceman in the absence of the T20-retired Mitchell Starc. Cooper Connolly, who has not played in any of the Australians' past 12 T20 Internationals, was the surprise inclusion.

Starc has missed just one of the past six ICC's T20 events but retired from the format at the international level late last year.

Australia opens the tournament on Feb. 11 against Ireland in Colombo then plays Zimbabwe in Colombo on Feb. 13, followed by matches in Kandy against Sri Lanka on Feb. 16 and Oman on Feb. 20. A scan on Pat Cummins' back later this month will determine whether he will play in the tournament. Josh Hazlewood and Tim David are both on the comeback trail from hamstring injuries.

ICC rules permit squad changes until Jan. 31.

Australia will play a three-match T20 series against Pakistan beginning later this month. Australia's group-stage matches are all being played in Sri Lanka but the team will travel to India for at least some of their Super Eight games if they qualify.

**Australia squad:** Mitchell Marsh (captain), Xavier Bartlett, Cooper Connolly, Pat Cummins, Tim David, Cameron Green, Nathan Ellis, Josh Hazlewood, Travis Head, Josh Inglis, Matthew Kuhnemann, Glenn Maxwell, Matthew Short, Marcus Stoinis, Adam Zampa. (AP)

## Prize money volleyball tournament held at Margherita

**HT Correspondent MARGHERITA, Jan 1:** The Samannay Social Welfare Youth Organization, Margherita Regional Committee, in collaboration with St James School, Margherita, recently organised an invited day-night prize money volleyball tournament at Margherita.

The programme began with a tribute to Assam's music icon Zubeen Garg and was inaugurated with the lighting of lamps by Sushil Kalita, Nareshwar Hazarika, Dr Ranjit Dutta, Ram Prasad Ambedkar and other distinguished persons of the area.

The playground was inaugurated by noted litterateur, writer and poet of Margherita, Dr Ranjit Dutta, while the volleyball competition was formally inaugurated by Pappu Dutta, president of the Satra Mukti Sangram Samity Central Executive Committee. A total of twelve volleyball teams from the Margherita Co-District participated in the competition.

The programme was moderated by Hirkhoyoti Neog, general secretary of the Samannay Social Wel-



fare Youth Organization Central Committee.

Several distinguished personalities attended the inaugural ceremony, including social worker Nareshwar Hazarika, Kailash Kumar Gupta, president of the All Assam Bhojpuri Parishad Central Executive Committee, local singer

Nirmali Kalita Mahow, Ram Prasad Ambedkar, president of the Margherita Journalists' Association, and others.

Patkai Volleyball Team emerged as the champion and was awarded a certificate, trophy and a cash prize of ₹10,001, presented by Sushil Kalita, proprietor of St

James School, Margherita. The runner-up, Lekhapani Volleyball Team, received a certificate, trophy and ₹5,001.

The best player award went to Sujit Gogoi, who was presented with a certificate, trophy and ₹1,001 by social worker and businessman Prem Tamang (Manjhi).

## Roberto Carlos says he's 'recovering well' after undergoing heart procedure in Brazil

**SAO PAULO (BRAZIL), Jan 1:** Former Brazil and Real Madrid great Roberto Carlos posted a picture of himself smiling in hospital and said he was "recovering well" after confirming Wednesday he had undergone a heart procedure.

"I did not suffer a heart attack. I am recovering well, and looking forward to returning to full fitness and resuming my professional and personal commitments soon," the 52-year-old former defender said on social media. Earlier Wednesday, Spanish media reported he had undergone surgery in Brazil.

Hospital Vila Nova Star in Sao Paulo said in a separate statement that Roberto Carlos, who is now a Real Madrid ambassador, had a heart obstruction detected on Monday and was advised to have a coronary angioplasty on the same day. The procedure is minimally invasive and widens blocked or narrowed heart arteries.

"I recently underwent a preventative medical procedure, planned in advance with my medical team," the World Cup and three-time Champions League winner said. "The procedure was successful, and I am well."

The hospital said Roberto Carlos is stable and will remain under observation in an intensive care unit due to medical protocols.

One of the most attack-minded left backs of all time, Roberto Carlos won 125 Brazil caps and played for 11 years at Madrid.

He was a member of Brazil's World Cup teams which reached the final in 1998 and won in 2002. He also helped Brazil win the Copa America in 1997 and 1999. (AP)

## Pretoria Capitals crush MI Cape Town by 85 runs; Miller fires Paarl Royals to win in SA20

**CAPE TOWN, Jan 1:** Pretoria Capitals handed a huge 85-run defeat to MI Cape Town to record their first win in the competition with a bonus point, while the David Miller-led Paarl Royals beat Sunrisers Eastern Cape by five wickets in their SA20 contest.

The pair of Dewald Brevis (36 not out off 13 balls; 1 four, 4 sixes) and Sherfane Rutherford (47 not out off 15 balls; 6 sixes) hit six sixes in a row to power the Pretoria Capitals to a formidable 220 for five, putting on 86 runs unbeaten for the sixth wicket from a mere 27 balls.

As many as 72 runs came off the last three overs for the Capitals.

In reply, MI Cape Town were shot out for a mere 135 in 14.2 overs with Rutherford returning 3-0-24-4 and South Africa spinner Keshav Maharaj producing a fine

spell of 4-0-28-3.

Tymal Mills, Lizaad Williams and Bryce Parsons claimed one wicket each for the winning side, for whom Wihan Lubbe smacked a 36-ball 60 with seven fours and two sixes earlier in the innings.

Shai Hope also chipped in with the bat scoring 45 off 30 balls with three fours and two sixes.

South Africa and MI Cape Town pacer Kagiso Rabada was expensive in his comeback game after a long injury layoff as he gave away 48 runs for two wickets in his four overs.

For MI Cape Town, each of their top four batters Rassie van der Dussen (28), Ryan Rickelton (33), Reeza Hendricks (18) and Nicholas Pooran (25 off 6 balls; 4 sixes) got starts but failed to convert.

In other match, skipper David

Miller struck a 38-ball 71 not out as Paarl Royals won by five wickets with two balls to spare against two-time winners Sunrisers Eastern Cape. Batting first at their home ground in Gqeberha, the Sunrisers Eastern Cape were bowled out for 149 in 20 overs with Ngobani Mokoena (4/34) and Otneil Baartman (3/36) producing fine spells.

Quinton de Kock was dismissed for a mere seven but Jordan Hermann (47) waged a lone battle of sorts for the home side, for whom Jonny Bairstow (33) also made a useful contribution at the top.

Both Marco Jansen (2/25) and Anrich Nortje (2/21) struck twice early on as Paarl Royals had slipped to 35 for four in their chase after seven overs but Miller counter-attacked with a stroke-filled innings, hitting four fours and five sixes. (PTI)

## Real Madrid star Kylian Mbappé sidelined with knee injury



**PARIS, Jan 1:** Real Madrid forward Kylian Mbappé has injured his left knee, the Spanish club said on Wednesday.

Madrid said in a brief statement the France superstar had been diagnosed with a sprain but did not provide a timeline for his recovery. French sports daily newspaper L'Equipe said Mbappé would be unavailable for at least three weeks, without quoting a source.

L'Equipe added that Mbappé had been suffering for several weeks from an issue with the lateral ligament in his knee, and an MRI carried out on Wednesday morning revealed a lesion that requires treatment and rest.

The striker has been in great form. Earlier this month, Mbappé scored his 59th goal for Madrid in 2025, tying the club record for the most in a year held by Cristiano Ronaldo.

The former Paris Saint-Germain player, who joined Madrid in the summer of 2024, has scored 29 times for Madrid this season, including a league-leading 18.

Mbappé was at Africa Cup of Nations games between host Morocco and Mali on Friday and Cameroon vs. Ivory Coast on Sunday.

Madrid's next game is on Sunday against Real Betis in La Liga. (AP)

## Set to go: Two weeks of tennis mania Down Under ahead of the Australian Open

**BRISBANE (AUSTRALIA), Jan 1:** If it's a new year, it must be serious tennis time Down Under.

Just over six weeks since the ATP and WTA held their respective 2025 Finals, players on the men's and women's tours are arriving in Australia and New Zealand for a crammed two-week schedule of tournaments ahead of the Australian Open, the year's first Grand Slam event starting Jan. 18 in Melbourne.

Leading the way is the United Cup, a mixed teams event which will be played in Perth and Sydney beginning Friday and finishing Jan. 11. The tournament will feature four of the world's top 10 men and women including Coco Gauff, Taylor Fritz, Alex de Minaur, Iga Swiatek, Alexander Zverev, Jasmine Paolini and Felix Auger-Aliassime.

Also during the first full week of 2026, the Brisbane International will be headlined by defending champion Aryna Sabalenka, fresh off the Battle of the Sexes exhibition against Nick Kyrgios in Dubai. But missing from the pre-Australian

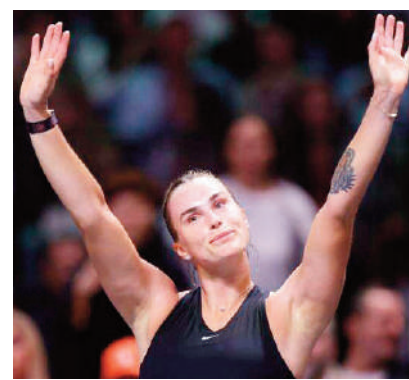
Open tournaments are the two biggest names in men's tennis: No. 1 Carlos Alcaraz and second-ranked Jannik Sinner.

Alcaraz and Sinner — who have won nine of the last 10 Grand Slam singles titles, with Sinner winning the 2025 Australian Open — have decided to play an exhibition at Incheon, South Korea on Jan. 10. After the exhibition, it's expected they'll fly to Australia to begin their preparations at Melbourne Park.

Alcaraz will be playing his first major in seven years without coach Juan Carlos Ferrero — the Spanish player recently announced their split. Alcaraz has not announced a replacement.

Other players at the United Cup, which begins Friday with Greece taking on Japan in Perth, include Emma Raducanu, Naomi Osaka, Stefanos Tsitsipas and Stan Wawrinka, who has said 2026 will be his last year on tour.

The 40-year-old, three-time major winner Wawrinka says he hopes to improve on his current ranking of 157 and move back into the top 100 before he retires. His high-



est ranking was No. 3, achieved when he won the Australian Open in 2014.

"I'm happy with the decision (to retire) and feeling at peace with that," Wawrinka said when he arrived earlier this week in Perth.

Joining Sabalenka at the 500-level Brisbane International will be two-time major finalist Amanda Anisimova, WTA Finals champion Elena Rybakina, reigning Australian Open champion Madison Keys, Jes-

sica Pegula and Mirra Andreeva.

The 18-year-old Andreeva is tipped to be the next big thing in women's tennis and she could renew her rivalry with Sabalenka in Brisbane. Sabalenka leads 4-2 in the head-to-head matches but world No. 9 Andreeva had a three-set win in the Indian Wells final in 2025.

The Russian also made it to the quarter-finals at last year's French Open and Wimbledon along with the semis at Roland Garros in 2024 when at 17 she became the youngest to reach the final four in a major since Martina Hingis at the 1997 U.S. Open.

"Maybe the rivalry (with Sabalenka) is a little bit there but she is leading ... unfortunately ... for now," Andreeva told Australian Associated Press this week.

Andreeva lost to Sabalenka in the semi-finals in Brisbane in 2025 and again in the fourth round at the Australian Open before her victory at Indian Wells where she was the youngest winner since Serena Williams.

"That gave me a lot of confidence. Win-

ning Indian Wells is a milestone of my career so far," she said.

In the second week of the warm-up events, the joint ATP-WTA Adelaide International featuring 24-time Grand Slam singles champion Novak Djokovic will run from Jan. 12-17 as well as a WTA 250 tournament at Hobart, Australia.

Auckland, New Zealand will host a WTA tournament from Jan. 5-11 before the ATP plays at the same venue from Jan. 12-17. Kyrgios and Frances Tiafoe are scheduled to play in an exhibition tournament at Kooyong in Melbourne several days before the Australian Open begins.

And in the only warm-up tournament being played outside Australia or New Zealand, Hong Kong will host an ATP event from Jan. 5-11.

The ATP events will come under a new rule for 2026 to address extreme heat during men's matches that will allow for 10-minute breaks during best-of-three-sets singles matches and is similar to what was put in place on the WTA more than 30 years ago. (AP)

IN 2025, PANT DIDN'T PLAY A SINGLE ODI ALTHOUGH HE WAS PART OF THE CHAMPIONS TROPHY SQUAD

# NZ ODIs: Will selectors drop Pant without even playing him once?

**NEW DELHI, Jan 1:** Rishabh Pant's form in the ongoing Vijay Hazare Trophy has been patchy with just one half-century in four matches but if he is dropped for the upcoming New Zealand series without being given even one ODI game in the last 18 months, it could be deemed as slightly harsh from the Ajit Agarkar-led committee.

The Indian selectors will be announcing the team for the three-match ODI series against the Black Caps, starting January 11 in Vadodara and there have been speculations about whether Pant can hold on to his place in the squad.

It is an open secret that at least one member in the Indian team management doesn't exactly like Pant's high-risk high-reward batting template and would like him to employ a more traditional way of batting.

But dropping a second choice glovesman without giving him a fair go could obviously lead to more questions being asked without tangible answers being provided.

In 2025, Pant didn't play a single ODI although he was part of the Champions Trophy squad as well as in the series against South Africa last month.

While Rituraj Gaikwad, a specialist opener was tried at No. 4, Pant was left cooling his heels during all the three games.

Pant has played only 31 ODIs since his debut in 2018. Call it bad luck coupled with his batting philosophy, he got consistent chances in two separate phases.

He played 11 games between June 30, 2019 to Jan 14, 2020 be-



fore COVID-19 intervened. His best phase came in the post COVID-19 times when he played 15 ODIs between March 26, 2021 to Nov 30, 2022, before he met with a horrific car accident.

Incidentally in this phase, he scored a ton, had two scores of 75-plus and one 85 in the 15 innings.

But since his return in 2024, post accident, he has just played a solitary ODI in Colombo, which incidentally was head coach Gautam Gambhir's first assignment.

It didn't help that Pant has only one significant score -- 70 -- in four Vijay Hazare Trophy games while flavour of the season, Ishan Kishan hit 14 sixes in Jharkhand's opening game against Karnataka, batting in the middle-order.

The other significant name that could come up for discussion is Devdutt Padikkal, who has an unbelievable average of 92-plus across 37 games and has already scored three centuries in four games in the ongoing National Championship.

However, with skipper Shubman Gill coming back, veteran Rohit Sharma at the other end and last ODI's centurion Yashasvi Jaiswal waiting for a longer rope, it will be very difficult for the selectors to accommodate someone like Padikkal at the top of the order.

One mustn't forget that Gaikwad, a specialist opener is playing at No. 4, a slot that belonged to regular vice-captain Shreyas Iyer before he got injured.

Padikkal hasn't done much wrong but there is simply no place in the top four right now after Gaikwad's century and it will be difficult to slot him unless an extra specialist top-batter is added to the squad.

**Bowling combinations**  
While Jasprit Bumrah and all-rounder Hardik Pandya are set to be rested from the ODIs looking at the T20 World Cup, Harshit Rana and Arshdeep Singh, who are also part of the shortest format, could once again get a look-in.

There is a buzz about veteran Mohammed Shami making a comeback after Champions Trophy but whether the selection committee wants to turn the clock back is the big question.

The spin department, with Ravindra Jadeja, Washington Sundar and Kuldeep Yadav, looks more or less sorted. (PTI)

# I am not sure about future of ODIs after 2027 World Cup: Ravichandran Ashwin



**CHENNAI, Jan 1:** The One-Day International format will struggle for survival and relevance after the 2027 World Cup once its bonafide greats Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma decide to call time, says former India off-spinner Ravichandran Ashwin.

While Kohli and Rohit's participation in the Vijay Hazare Trophy has created a lot of buzz, Ashwin believes with the expansion of T20 leagues and Test cricket already having its own currency, the space for 50-overs format is gradually shrinking.

"I am not sure about future of ODI after 2027 World Cup. I am a little worried about it. Of course, I am following Vijay Hazare Trophy but the manner in which I followed SMAT, I am finding slightly difficult to follow," Ashwin said on his Hindi YouTube channel 'Ash Ki Baat'.

"Also, we need to know what audience wants to watch. I feel Test cricket still has space but ODI cricket, I truly feel (it) doesn't have the space," Ashwin, India's most astute cricket pundit currently, was categorical in his assessment.

India's second highest wicket-taker across formats with 765 scalps, Ashwin voiced his concern over the future of the format once Kohli and Rohit, with a combined total of 86 ODI tons, walk away.

"Look, Rohit and Virat came back to Vijay Hazare Trophy and people started watching it. We have known that sport is always bigger than individuals but at times these players (Ro-Ko) need to come back to make the game relevant," he observed.

"Vijay Hazare Trophy (national one-dayers), of course, is a domestic competition that not a lot of people follow, but they did (so now) because Virat and Rohit were playing. Even then, what happens when they stop playing ODIs?" he wondered.

**Changing template of ODI batting due to T20 influence**

Ashwin spoke about how 50-over was once an "amazing format" that produced a player like Mahendra Singh Dhoni, who knew how to control innings.

"One-day cricket, once upon a time, was an amazing format because it gave a player like MS Dhoni who (would) take singles for 10-15 overs before he went berserk at the end.

"You don't have players like that (Dhoni) anymore and there isn't any requirement to play like that, as you are playing with two new balls and five fielders inside circle," said Ashwin, terming modern ODIs is played in two gears --- either a 'BashaThon' or on a slightly difficult wicket means teams are getting out for 120.

**ICC having too many World Cups**

As one of the leading voices of the game, Ashwin also urged the ICC to relook at its calendar while accepting that revenue generation is very important for the global health of the game.

"The ODI format has become redundant and to top it, ICC needs to see how they are conducting these World Cups. Every year, there is an ICC tournament for revenue generation pattern, but then look at how FIFA is doing it.

"There are leagues (EPL, La Liga, Serie A, Bundesliga) happening and they do their World Cup once in every four years. The World Cup is having value as its a marquee tournament. Too many bilaterals, too many formats, too many World Cups, so it's little bit of an overkill," he feels.

Ashwin also said that matches in the upcoming T20 World Cup such as India versus USA and India versus Namibia, at one level, would drive the audiences away.

**Solution for ODI cricket's survival? Just have World Cup**

While many like the legendary Sachin Tendulkar have suggested a split-innings format for one-dayers, Ashwin feels that one can explore having just one 50-overs event, that is the World Cup in every four years.

"If you really want to make ODI cricket relevant, then just play these (T20s) leagues and play ODI World Cup once in four years, so when people turn up for events, there will be sense of expectation. I feel it is going towards slow death." (PTI)

## Chess wars: Defiant Kramnik sues FIDE for defamation in Swiss civil court



**NEW DELHI, Jan 1:** Russian chess great Vladimir Kramnik has sued world chess governing body FIDE for defamation in a Swiss civil court after he became the subject of an inquiry for allegedly harassing players with "unsubstantiated" cheating claims following the death of American Grandmaster Daniel Naroditsky.

Kramnik posted on 'X' that he has been forced to take the legal route after being relentlessly attacked by fellow players and FIDE, whose CEO Emil Sutovsky described Kramnik's allegations of cheating against Naroditsky as "appalling and outright shameful".

The exact cause of 29-year-old Naroditsky's death is not known but in his last livestream, he talked about being under immense mental stress over the allegations levelled by Kramnik.

Czech Grandmaster David Navara has also claimed to have felt distressed and suicidal due to Kramnik's online cheating charge against him. The defiant Russian has, however, maintained that he has not spoken without basis.

"I have initiated formal legal proceedings against FIDE in accordance with Swiss law in the Court of Lausanne. Under the applicable Swiss procedural rules, an obligatory preliminary procedure must first take place. This phase typically lasts 2-3 months," the former world champion said.

"The specific legal provisions of the Swiss Code on which the claim is based, as well as the exact amount of financial compensation sought from FIDE, will be finalized and specified by my legal team immediately prior to filing the main claim.

"Additionally, a formal request for the preservation of evidence has been personally delivered to the FIDE headquarters today," he added.

Kramnik said a request has been submitted to ensure that all documents, correspondence, electronic records, and any other evidence relevant to the ongoing legal proceedings against FIDE are "properly preserved and not altered, deleted, destroyed, or otherwise made unavailable.

"I will provide further details in due course as the proceedings advance," he said. (PTI)

## Dope-tainted Reetika dropped; compound archers enter TOPS core group

**NEW DELHI, Jan 1:** Dope-tainted wrestler Reetika Hooda was dropped, compound archers like Parneet Kaur and Abhishek Verma were promoted to the core group while decathlete Tejaswin Shanker found a place in the developmental list of the updated directory of athletes supported by the Sports Ministry's flagship Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS).

The list was drastically pruned from 179 to 94 last year, marking the end of the 2024 Paris Olympics cycle. But it has been redrawn to reflect the performances of the past one year.

The number of core group athletes has now gone up marginally to 118, comprising 57 able-bodied and 61 para-athletes.

Hooda, an Asian Championships medallist who competed in Paris, failed a dope test during a selection trial in July last year. She was a part of the TOPS core group released in February last year.

"She has been dropped now," a Sports Authority of India (SAI) source told PTI when asked about Hooda's status.

However, World Para Athletics Championship gold-winning sprinter Simran, whose guide Umar Saifi flunked a dope test in October last, has been retained in the core group.

"We won't take a knee jerk decision in her case. She is there and her case will come up in the next Mission Olympic Cell meeting," the source said.

Simran, who was born with a



visual impairment, is also a Paris Paralympics bronze winner in the 200m event.

The latest list offers a major upgrade to compound archers, who would be strong medal contenders in the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics after the discipline was included in the Games roster.

Eight compound archers, including Parneet, Abhishek, and Jyoti Surekha, have made the core group alongside the three recurve stars in Deepika Kumari, Dhiraj Bommadevara and Anika Bhakat.

Aditi Gopichand Swami, Ojas Pravin Deotale, Priyansh, Prathmesh Samadhan Jawkar and Rishabh Yadav were the other compound names in the updated list.

In athletics, javelin ace Neeraj Chopra has been joined by Sachin Yadav, who outperformed him in last year's World Championships by finishing fourth.

Chopra, hampered by fitness issues, stunningly ended eighth in

the global showpiece.

The other names from track and field in the list are steeplechaser Avinash Sable, long jumper M Sreeshanker and new addition Sarvesh Kushare, the high jumper who won a silver in the Asian Championships and finished a credible sixth in the World Championships.

Three-time para-world championships medal-winning club thrower Ekta Bhyan has also been placed in the core group.

The core group continues to be without names from tennis, golf and swimming.

In the developmental group, fast-rising sprinter Animesh Kujur (200m), who holds the current 100m and 200m national record, and Tejaswin, a silver-winner at the Asian Championships, are among the new names added to the athletics list.

The men's 4x400m relay team of Vishal T K, Jay Kumar, Rajesh Ramesh, Amoj Jacob, Muhammad

Ajmal V and Santhosh Kumar has also been included in the developmental group, joining their female counterparts.

Rising Table Tennis players Manush Shah, Manav Thakkar and Diya Chitale have been placed in the developmental group as well.

**Golf, Surfing in TAGG**

The Target Asian Games Group (TAGG), which is designed to support athletes for this year's Asiad in Japan, has 48 names with golfers Shubhankar Sharma and Diksha Dagar among the prominent ones alongside tennis players Sumit Nagal, Yuki Bhambri and the rapidly-rising Maya Rajeswaran.

Also finding a place in this list were equestrians Fouaad Mirza and Anush Agarwalla, fencer Bhavani Devi, and gymnast Pranati Nayak among others.

TOPS athletes, including Core and Development group, are paid Rs 50,000 and Rs 25,000 paid respectively as Out of Pocket Allowance.

They are also given USD 25 per day during the period of training and competition overseas in addition to this.

Last year, the MOC also approved an additional 60 days of domestic and international training for TOPS athletes beyond the Annual Calendar for Training and Competition (ACTC) proposed by National Sports Federations (NSFs).

The performances of the athletes are evaluated every 12 months to update the list. (PTI)

## WTT Youth Contender: 334 players from 10 countries, Feeder Series in Vadodara

**VADODARA, Jan 1:** Around 334 players from 10 countries will vie for honours at the WTT Youth Contender and the WTT Feeder Series, scheduled to begin at the Sama Indoor Sports Complex here on Friday.

The second edition of the WTT Youth Contender, featuring U-11 to U-19 categories, will be held from January 2 to 5, followed by the WTT Feeder Series from January 7 to 11. The Youth Contender will see participation from 226 players representing four countries, while the Feeder Series will feature 108 players from 10 nations.

The Youth Contender will begin with the U-13 and U-17 singles events on Friday, with competitions in the U-11, U-15 and U-19 categories scheduled for January 4 and 5. India had dominated the WTT Youth Contenders last year, with Ankur Bhattacharjee and Syndreela Das clinching the U-19 boys' and girls' singles titles respectively. Divyanshi Bhowmick won both the U-15 and U-17 girls' singles crowns.

Divyanshi will compete in the U-17 and U-19 categories this year, while Syndreela will aim to defend her U-19 girls' singles title.

"When you want to qualify for major international events like the Olympics and Commonwealth Games, you need a good ranking. Players often have to spend heavily travelling abroad to earn ranking points," Table Tennis Federation of India Secretary General Kamlesh Mehta said in a release.

"By conducting such events in India, more players get the opportunity to compete at a far lower cost and also exploit home advantage," he added. Syndreela and Divyanshi will also be in action in the WTT Feeder Series, along with Korea Republic's Park Gahyeon (world No. 75) and Yoo Yreim (world No. 78).

The Indian challenge in the women's singles will also be led by the experienced Sathira Mukherjee and Ayhika Mukherjee, along with world No. 85 Yashaswini Ghorpade, who has been awarded a wild card.

In the men's singles, Manush Shah, who along with Diya Chitale became the first Indian mixed doubles pair to qualify for the season-ending WTT Finals, will spearhead the home challenge alongside Harmeet Desai, Snehit S and Ankur Bhattacharjee.

**Wild cards for WTT Feeder Series:**

Men's singles (main draw): Pratham Madhani (India), Sanil Shetty (India), Ali Alkhadrawi (Saudi Arabia), Abdulaziz Bu Shulaybi (Saudi Arabia), Abdulrahman Al Taher (Saudi Arabia)

Women's singles (main draw): Yang Ha Eun (Korea Republic), Yashaswini Ghorpade (India), Debolina Das (India), Maria Rony (India) Women's singles (qualifying): Tanishka Kalbhairav (India) (PTI)

## Thought I would never play again but happy to just bowl: Chetan Sakariya



**BENGALURU, Jan 1:** Chetan Sakariya was among India's pool of Next-Gen pacers until three years back. But the heady days are a speck in the mirror after a long rehabilitation period has left him fighting to regain relevance.

But now, Sakariya has taken a small step

in his comeback trail, appearing for Saurashtra in the on-going domestic season, a first for him since February 2024.

"When I got injured, I thought I would never come back. Now, I am feeling very good after playing in this domestic season, feel so good after bowling for Saurashtra," Sakariya told PTI here after Saurashtra's Vijay Hazare Trophy match against Andhra.

An injury to his bowling (left) wrist in early 2024 temporarily halted his career, and Sakariya said it was a mentally draining phase.

"It was very mentally challenging for me. I didn't believe that I would be able to play cricket again. Some doctors told me that I might not be able to grip the ball again. It was a very difficult time for me as I was not able to believe in myself," he said.

But Sakariya is no stranger to turmoil, having seen the death of his father and younger brother in 2021 due to separate tragedies.

The 27-year-old said that turbulent period has taught him how to deal with setbacks in life and career.

"This situation that I faced in my life was unexpected. I was very young at that age. You know, the whole support system of your family runs together. When it disappears one sudden day, you don't understand what you will do next.

"So at that time, if I hadn't been a cricketer, I don't think I would have been able to come back to life. Now, I feel that if any tough situation comes in my life again, I am prepared for it. I know what I have to do," he explained.

However, Sakariya had a very supportive eco-system around him when the injury threw his career into a blender.

"Gradually, my family and friends supported me (when he was injured). They told me to play again, believe in myself. So, I started working again. I did rehab under the guidance of Saurashtra Cricket Association. Gradually, I started seeing the difference and the motivation to pick up a ball came back to me," he added.

Soon, he started playing in local tournaments in Saurashtra and Mumbai to get a feel of competitive cricket.

As fortune would have it, Sakariya received a call from Kolkata Knight Riders

during IPL 2025 to replace an injured Umanr Malik.

"I think it was the biggest thing for me in 2025. I did not play in the domestic season (2024-25). But the KKR management, especially

Chandu sir (former KKR head coach Chandrakant Pandit) trusted me, and provided me with everything I needed for rehab and training."

The biggest blessing for Sakariya was the presence of former India bowling coach Bharat Arun in KKR staff during that season. Arun has moved to Lucknow Super Giants for the upcoming season.

"Bharat sir has worked with me throughout the season. As soon as I left cricket for two years, I needed a lot of corrections. If you do not play cricket for a long time, you lose your tactical awareness. It takes time to recover.

"He helped me work on my rhythm and skills. He told me how to advance in modern cricket. After working with Bharat sir for two and a half months, I have improved a lot in my knowledge of bowling," he detailed.

But Sakariya understands that he needs

to do a lot more to add to the one ODI and two T20Is that he has played for India in 2021.

"I still feel that I need to work. I am lagging a little as I will have to work on my technique to get back into the groove. But I am improving day by day and that is a positive thing. If I get more time, I will get back into the groove," he noted.

The left-arm pacer has set realistic short-term goals in front of him, and is not overly perturbed by not getting an IPL contract this time, a far cry from the day when Delhi Capitals picked him up for Rs 4.2 crore ahead of IPL 2022.

"I was not very disappointed. I knew that if I did something exceptional in the domestic season, I would be picked in the IPL. This was a mini auction and all the slots were already filled. So, I did not expect that I would be selected in the IPL.

"But right now, I have set small goals, like becoming the highest wicket taker for Saurashtra, like I did in 2022-23 (when Saurashtra lifted the Ranji Trophy), then I want to play in the IPL. It has always been like that. I have set small goals in my life," he signed off. (PTI)