





# leisure

## FORTUNE FORECAST



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FOR ASTROLOGY DIAL 55181\*



**ARIES**

You will experience a profound connection with the cosmos today. And you will be very grateful to the almighty for showering his grace on you. Your love for your kith and kin deepens today, says Ganesha, and you will spend extravagantly on them.

**TAURUS**

this is not one of those easy and carefree days. You are in for a lot of mental anguish. The mental pressure you feel, you will realise, is of your own making. Unless you make radical changes in your basis outlook, mental tensions are likely to become an everyday affair. You need to face and accept things as they are.

**GEMINI**

Your desire to go travelling with your family members will receive an impetus today and you will set out to schedule your itinerary. It is a good time for travel and you will be able to more than satisfactorily execute your travel plans within your budget, says Ganesha.

**CANCER**

You think you are smart. You will be most certainly savouring the positive aspects of your life. Sometimes, it is quite possible that you find yourself at the end of your wits. You had better sit together with your spouse and thrash out personality clashes and private quarrels, suggests Ganesha.

**LEO**

Today may not be the best time to mess with you, considering the aura of invincibility that you possess. Be it a game, a competition, or an argument, you will have the edge over others in every sphere, says Ganesha. Also, you may come across people with whom you will have personal differences, and those who will try to change your fortunes.

**VIRGO**

Appreciate the things that people do and try your best to inspire them to achieve greater success, says Ganesha. Put on your thinking cap and contemplate seriously. Simply criticising others will only hurt you. Be as level-headed as you can and keep pegging on towards your targets.

**LIBRA**

Today is an important day for you, and you will learn a lot from your life partner. Even on the work front, business partners will extend their best possible cooperation to you. Your chances of winning in cut-throat competitions are very bright today, predicts Ganesha.

**SCORPIO**

Focus is the buzzword for you; your eyes should be set on the things you aim, advises Ganesha. You may even indulge into some kind of research work. Today, you may bump into an old pal with whom you relive those good old school days and rejuvenate yourself.

**SAGITTARIUS**

You will be your usual self today, frank and precise. You are all ears for what your life partner has to say. This will make them feel special! According to Ganesha, be patient and carry out your work gracefully.

**CAPRICORN**

Your grand orchestration may not come to fruition, and even your best-laid plans may go awry, says Ganesha. Squabbles with people over petty issues will add to your growing vexation; keep calm and you'll handle all of it just fine.

**AQUARIUS**

Today, you will want to expand your horizon of knowledge. You will give a tough fight to your opponents and come out triumphant, feels Ganesha. Troubles will not be able trouble you as you will be able to turn them into your advantage. You are clever, talented and have all that it takes to fly high.

**PISCES**

Financial bearings will be at the fore front of your attention today, feels Ganesha. Bank accounts, stocks, loans and other such things will dominate your thoughts and words. Earning money will be your primary goal and you will focus on those methods that will be most profitable to you, today.



## 'BOYFRIEND BREAKFAST' BY GWYNETH PALTROW

Hollywood actress Gwyneth Paltrow loves her kitchen throughout the year. The *Marty Supreme* star shared the latest iteration of her “Boyfriend Breakfast”. In the cooking clip, the actress bakes a gluten-free quiche. She wrote in the caption, “Valentine’s #boyfriendbreakfast, gluten-free broccoli, onion, and sausage quiche. Extra love”.

## CARMEN ELECTRA'S RELATIONSHIP IDEALS

Hollywood actress Carmen Electra has opened up on her potential next date. The actress has shared that she wants to date an artiste. The 53-year-old is currently single but believes the key to a successful relationship is to enjoy being around a partner.



## Alia joins 79th BAFTA as presenter

**London:** The British Academy Tuesday announced the full list of presenters at the upcoming BAFTA (British Academy of Film and Television Arts) Awards 2026. While Alan Cumming will host the ceremony on Sunday, Alia Bhatt has been announced as one of the presenters, alongside Cillian Murphy and Kate Hudson.

Other names includes Aaron Pierre, Aimee Lou Wood, Alicia Vikander, Bryan Cranston, David Jonsson, Delroy Lindo, Emily Watson, Erin Doherty, Ethan Hawke, Gillian Anderson, Glenn Close, Maggie Gyllenhaal, Mia McKenna-Bruce, Michael B. Jordan, Miles Caton, Monica Bellucci, Noah Jupe, Olivia Cooke, Patrick Dempsey, Regé-Jean Page, Riz Ahmed, Sadie Sink, Stellan Skargård, Stormzy and Warwick Davis.

Emma Baehr, Executive Director of Awards and Content, said, “It’s especially exciting to have such an impressive line-up of presenters joining us on the night, representing the very best of film and the wider creative industries.”

The Academy also announced a long list of nominees, including Jacob Elordi, Leonardo DiCaprio, Timothee Chalamet, Chloé Zhao, Teyana Taylor, Emma Stone, Jesse Plemons, Paul Thomas Anderson, and Rose Byrne.

AGENCIES

## Mrunal on love's digital dilemma

**Mumbai:** Actress Mrunal Thakur, who is gearing up for the release of her upcoming film *Do Deewane Sehar Mein*, has said that love in modern times faces the biggest challenge of communication.

The actress said that the age of the Internet has led to exhaustion because of the endless options.

“The only problem today is communication. And as an actor, it gets even more difficult because sometimes if I am playing an actor who requires me to be in a mental state of mind, which is not really on a positive side, it might reflect on how I am with my partner or in that case, be my family and friends. But as an actor, I speak for myself, I try

not to bring my characters home,” the actress said.

*Do Deewane Sehar Mein* stars Siddhant Chaturvedi, Sandeepa Dhar, and Ayesha Raza. The film, produced by Zee Studios, Bhansali Productions, Sanjay Leela Bhansali, Prerna Singh, Umesh Kumar Bansal and Bharat Kumar Ranga

in association with Ravi Udayawar Films. The film is set to release on February 20, 2026.



## Regena's bitter experience

**Mumbai:** Actor Regena Cassandrara had more than a decade of experience working in Tamil and Telugu before she ventured into Bollywood with the 2019 film *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga*.

However, the actor says that multiple times she has been made to feel foreign in the industry, just because she's from the South. “A lot of people treated me in a derogatory manner, not just with words, but with actions. It's sort of a derogatory outlook towards me. And, I mean, anyone would be able to tell that I was being put down in a certain way. I did feel it. So I did have some inhibitions in the North. But, having said that, it's not always the case, right?” she adds.

Given that Regena has done work like *Kesari Chapter 2*, *Rocket Boys*, *Farzi*, and *Jaat* over the years, how did she tackle this one? “I'm a very nurturing person, so when I'm around people, I feel like they see that side of me. Irrespective of the industry I'm in, I somehow make it feel like home,” she explains.

AGENCIES



## 'I'm a serial monogamist'

**Mumbai:** Fatima Sana Shaikh was recently seen getting candid about her approach to relationships and the realities of dating in the public eye. In a recent conversation with *Cosmopolitan India*, the actor described herself as a “serial monogamist,” revealing that she has largely been in long-term relationships.

I'm a serial monogamist (I've mostly been in very long-term relationships),” she said, offering a glimpse into her personal life. However, she also admitted that dating as a celebrity comes with its own set of challenges. Reflecting on her experiences over the past decade in the spotlight, Shaikh noted that fame can often complicate genuine connections. “You either have someone who has preconceived notions of what an actor is like or they are just too intimidated,” she shared. According to the actress, navigating these perceptions has not always been easy.

Recalling a blind date from a few years ago, Shaikh described how the interaction quickly took an unexpected turn. “He was asking a lot of questions and it didn't feel like a conversation. At one point, I could hear myself giving diplomatic answers and that was the end of that date,” she revealed.

The anecdote highlights the fine line public figures often walk between personal authenticity and guarded responses.

AGENCIES

## SUDOKU

To solve the Sudoku puzzle, fill in the boxes in such a manner that every row, column and 3x3 box contains the digits 1 to 9, without repeating any.

|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 7 |   | 9 |   | 5 | 3 |   | 4 |   |
|   |   | 2 | 4 | 8 |   | 7 | 3 |   |
| 3 |   | 1 |   | 2 | 9 |   |   | 5 |
| 1 |   |   |   | 3 | 5 | 8 | 9 |   |
|   |   | 2 |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 9 | 3 |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 6 | 5 | 7 |   |   | 1 |   |   |   |
|   |   |   | 7 |   | 8 |   |   |   |
|   |   |   | 9 |   |   |   | 3 |   |

## SOLUTIONS

|   |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| K | C | I | I | P | O |
| U | N | T | O | L | D |
| E | O | I | N | D | E |
| P | E | C | K | O | V |
| I | T | R | L | N |   |
| O | P | E | N | A | I |
| R | G | A | C | B | S |
| C | O | R | A | L | L |
| L | P | S | A | E |   |
| C | O | M | P | U | T |
| G | L | R | D | M | O |
| B | U | R | E | A | U |
| E | S | M | D | R | N |

|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 5 | 7 | 9 | 6 | 2 | 3 | 8 | 4 | 1 |
| 4 | 2 | 8 | 5 | 1 | 9 | 7 | 6 | 3 |
| 1 | 6 | 3 | 7 | 8 | 4 | 5 | 9 | 2 |
| 3 | 9 | 7 | 1 | 4 | 5 | 2 | 8 | 6 |
| 2 | 8 | 1 | 9 | 3 | 6 | 4 | 5 | 7 |
| 6 | 5 | 4 | 2 | 7 | 8 | 3 | 1 | 9 |
| 8 | 4 | 2 | 3 | 9 | 1 | 6 | 7 | 5 |
| 7 | 1 | 5 | 8 | 6 | 2 | 9 | 3 | 4 |
| 9 | 3 | 6 | 4 | 5 | 7 | 1 | 2 | 8 |

## CROSSWORD

|    |  |    |  |   |  |    |  |    |  |    |  |    |
|----|--|----|--|---|--|----|--|----|--|----|--|----|
| 1  |  | 2  |  | 3 |  | 4  |  | 5  |  | 6  |  | 7  |
|    |  |    |  |   |  |    |  |    |  |    |  |    |
| 8  |  |    |  |   |  |    |  |    |  | 9  |  |    |
|    |  |    |  |   |  |    |  |    |  |    |  |    |
| 10 |  | 11 |  |   |  | 12 |  |    |  |    |  |    |
|    |  |    |  |   |  |    |  |    |  |    |  |    |
| 13 |  |    |  |   |  |    |  | 14 |  | 15 |  |    |
|    |  |    |  |   |  |    |  |    |  |    |  |    |
| 17 |  |    |  |   |  |    |  |    |  |    |  | 20 |
|    |  |    |  |   |  |    |  |    |  |    |  |    |
| 21 |  |    |  |   |  |    |  |    |  |    |  |    |
|    |  |    |  |   |  |    |  |    |  |    |  |    |
| 24 |  |    |  |   |  |    |  | 25 |  |    |  |    |

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### Across

- Some soccer players
- Heroic tales
- He was found in Hamelin (4,5)
- Large snake
- They're found on feet
- Bookstore section
- Motley fool
- Rap session?
- Fool around (4,3)

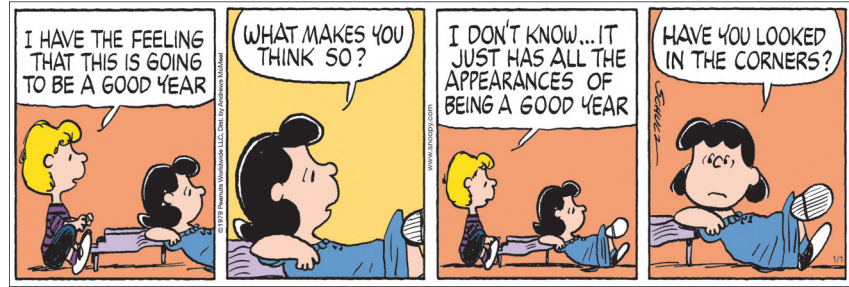
### Down

- Refinement
- French buddy (4,3)
- It's usually overstuffed (4,5)
- Part of an act
- Nappies wearer
- Stares
- Wonderment
- Stalemate
- Top of the line

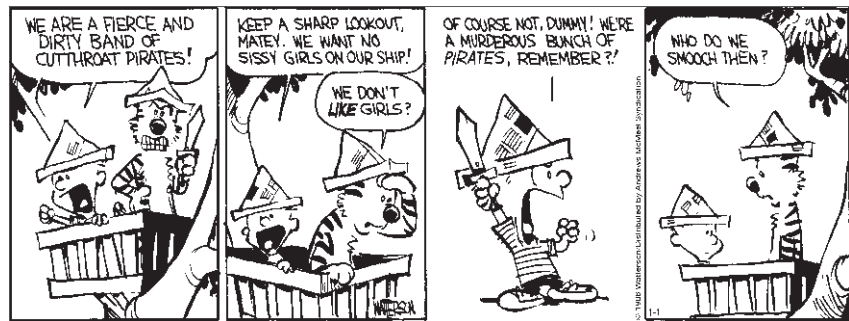
- Take a powder
- Rant and rave (2,7)
- Kind of cat
- Modify an auto, maybe
- Large spotted felines of tropical America
- Tempted
- Kind of printer
- Corpulent plus
- Miscue
- Feel fluish

CHECK FOR SOLUTIONS OF THE PUZZLES TOMORROW

## PEANUTS



## CALVIN AND HOBBS



## BREVITY





**Best of Luck**

# ALL CHSE *Examinees*

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HERE, NOW  
**OrissaPOST**



# ‘Labour codes simplify regulatory structure’

POST NEWS NETWORK

**Bhubaneswar, Feb 17:** Consolidation of multiple central labour laws into four codes simplifies the regulatory structure, enhances worker welfare, and supports ease of doing business and employment growth, said Ministry of Labour and Employment (ML&E) Union Secretary Vandana Gurnani at a two-day regional conference of Labour, Employment and Industry secretaries of states and Union Territories (UTs) here Tuesday.

Setting the context of the conference, Gurnani described the Labour Codes as historic reforms designed to align India’s labour framework with evolving national and global economic dynamics.

The conference was inaugurated by Labour and Employees’ State Insurance Minister of State (I/C) Ganesh Ram Singhkhuntia. Senior officials from participating states and UTs were present at the event.

In his inaugural address, Khuntia welcomed delegates from Odisha, Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and Andaman and Nicobar Islands, noting that the country stands at a crucial juncture with the Labour Codes having been brought into effect. He expressed gratitude to Prime Minister Narendra Modi for ushering in transformative labour reforms aimed at strengthening labour governance.

Highlighting Odisha’s preparedness, he said Odisha has taken proactive steps, including publishing draft rules for timely implementation of the codes. He also spoke about



welfare measures being implemented for construction workers, unorganised workers, and migrant labourers, which have received recognition from the Parliamentary Standing Committee.

Emphasising employment generation and social justice, he expressed hope that the deliberations would further strengthen workers’ welfare.

Speaking on the occasion, Gurnani underlined key worker-centric provisions such as mandatory appointment letters, prohibition of discrimination and exploitation, universalisation of minimum wages, introduction of a statutory floor wage by the Central government, and expanded social security coverage.

She also highlighted compliance reforms, including compounding of offences and IT-enabled systems like single registration, single licence and single return.

Gurnani noted that the VV Giri National Labour Institute (VVGNI) is conducting capacity-building programmes under the codes and encouraged states

and UTs to nominate master trainers to strengthen training at the state level.

She urged states to expedite finalisation of rules, avoid overlap with Shops and Establishments Acts, actively utilise the PMVBRY dashboard, and enhance Centre–state coordination to expand ESIC coverage and medical infrastructure in convergence with state health systems and PMJAY.

She also called upon states to act as model employers by ensuring minimum wages, timely wage payments, and social security benefits to workers engaged in state establishments, including contractual employees.

Marking a significant step towards implementation of four Labour Codes across the country, the regional meet is the fourth in a series of five conferences being organised by the ML&E. It aims to deliberate on key issues relating to the Employees’ State Insurance Corporation (ESIC), the Employees’ Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO), and the Pradhan Mantri Viksit Bharat Rozgar Yojana (PMVBRY).

## Ensure SEBC, OBC reservation in local bodies: Jena to govt

POST NEWS NETWORK

**Bhubaneswar, Feb 17:** Senior Congress leader Srikant Jena has written to Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi, urging the state government to ensure reservation for SEBC and OBC communities in local body elections. The move comes ahead of the elections in newly formed Notified Area Councils (NACs) and municipalities.

In his letter, Jena highlighted that while SC and ST communities already benefit from reservations, SEBC and OBC communities — which sums up 54 per cent of Odisha’s population — remain unrep-



resented in local bodies. He called for the timely introduction and passage of the necessary bill or amendments in the ongoing Assembly session to create a legally sustainable framework for proportionate reservation.

“Timely action in this regard will reaffirm the state’s commitment to social justice and strengthen grassroots democracy by enabling fair and representative participation for all sections of society,” Jena stated.

The leader emphasised that such a legislative move would not only affect the upcoming NAC and municipality elections but also set a precedent for the next cycle of local body polls across the state.

## MISSING MERCHANT NAVY CADET CASE

# Family alleges non-cooperation from company operating vessel

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

**Bhubaneswar, Feb 17:** The family of the merchant navy cadet, Sarthak Mohapatra, Tuesday alleged non-cooperation by officials of the company operating the vessel from which he went missing mid-sea off the Mauritius coast February 3.

Sarthak’s mother Rashmita Mohapatra and uncle Santosh Sahu had travelled to Singapore to oversee efforts by authorities to trace him after the vessel docked at a port there.

Anglo-Eastern, the company that operates the vessel – EA Jersey, denied the allegations and claimed that it had fully cooperated with the family during their visit. Speaking to reporters at the Bhubaneswar airport on their return, Sahu said they were able to board the vessel in Singapore with assistance from the Indian High Commission and the Director General of Shipping (DGS).

“However, officials of the company operating the vessel did not cooperate with us during the visit. Whenever I tried to speak to Sarthak’s colleagues or



other officers on board, company representatives interrupted and prevented me from asking questions,” he alleged.

Around 15 company officials were present on the vessel and closely accompanied the family members during their visit, he claimed.

Sahu further alleged that the family was restricted from accessing most parts of the ship and was allowed to visit only Sarthak’s personal cabin.

“We requested an in-depth search of the vessel, but the company officials had no clear response. Instead, they repeatedly tried to obtain our signa-

tures on certain documents,” he alleged.

Sahu said that when the family met the Indian High Commissioner in Singapore, they were informed that a request for a proper investigation is pending with the Maritime and Port Authority (MPA) of Singapore.

“The MPA is currently investigating the case. If required, they will involve the Singapore Police,” he added.

Responding to PTI’s queries, an Anglo-Eastern spokesperson said, “The cadet’s next of kin, mother and uncle, visited the vessel and were fully supported throughout, in coordination with authorities and the company. Their visit was conducted in accordance with all regulatory, safety, and investigative protocols.”

“Anglo Eastern and the Owners continue to cooperate fully with all authorities and the ongoing independent investigation. We remain committed to supporting the crew and maintaining close contact with the cadet’s family during this difficult time,” the spokesperson said in a statement.

## Kalinga Hosp celebrates Foundation Day in City



POST NEWS NETWORK

**Bhubaneswar, Feb 17:** Kalinga Hospital here celebrated its Foundation Day Tuesday with great enthusiasm and grandeur. Several distinguished guests, doctors, staff members, and well-wishers were present on the occasion.

Centre for Youth and Social Development (CYSD) co-founder and mentor Jagadananda joined as chief guest. Delivering his address, Jagadananda stated that healthcare is not limited to providing medical treatment alone, but is also a significant social responsibility. He appreciated Kalinga Hospital for delivering advanced medical services with a patient-centric approach and strong human values, which are strengthening the healthcare infrastructure of the state. He further urged the institution to organise more awareness programmes and health camps for rural and underprivileged communities. He also praised the hospital’s commitment to quality and socially responsible healthcare services.

On the occasion, winners of

various internal competitions and activities were felicitated. The cultural evening was made vibrant by performances from Padma awardee Odissi dancer Aruna Mohanty and singer Nazia Alam. Doctors and staff members of the hospital also participated enthusiastically. Hospital Chairman Dr Sitakanta Dash said, “Foundation Day is a proud occasion for us. Since our inception, we have remained committed to providing quality, ethical, and compassionate healthcare services. Our primary objective is to ensure accessible and advanced medical care for every section of society. In the coming days, we will expand our services with more specialised care, modern equipment, and a continued focus on human values.”

Hospital CEO Dr S Santosh Kumar Dora stated, “Our success is the result of the collective efforts of our doctors, nurses, and staff members. Through patient-centric services, effective use of technology, and socially responsible initiatives, we are committed to strengthening healthcare delivery. Our goal is not only treatment but also promoting health awareness and preventive care.”

## NAMASTE & GARIMA

## Odisha strengthens sanitation workers’ safety, dignity

POST NEWS NETWORK

**Bhubaneswar, Feb 17:** Odisha government has intensified efforts to strengthen the livelihood, safety and dignity of sanitation workers and waste pickers through implementation of National Action for Mechanised Sanitation Ecosystem (NAMASTE), alongside state’s flagship GARIMA initiative.

Launched in July 2023 by Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, in association with Union Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, NAMASTE seeks to eliminate hazardous sanitation practices and promote safe, mechanised and dignified sanitation work across the country.

In Odisha, the scheme is being aligned with GARIMA, which recognises sanitation workers and waste pickers as essential service providers and ensures their social security and livelihood protection.

## CLASSIFIED LOST

I Mr. Saroj Kumar Sahu, S/o- Bhaskar Chandra Sahu residing At/ PO-Choramara, PS-Singla, Dist-Balasore, Pin-756086 stated that on 12.01.2026 while my father was travelling to Nuabazar, Jaleswar an original Link Regd. Sale Deed executed between Mr. Golak Bihari Dasmohapatra and Mr. Sanjay Kumar Das having doc no. 10092601342, dated 29.06.2016 has been lost somewhere. If anybody finds the above document, please contact our advocate. Mr. Bimal Kumar Sen Mob:7978375542

## Pact inked to boost AI-driven agri-food innovation

POST NEWS NETWORK

**Bhubaneswar, Feb 17:** In a significant step towards integrating cutting-edge technology with agriculture, Odisha University of Agriculture and Technology (OUAT), Bhubaneswar, signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Odisha State Open University (OSOU) during a two-day workshop on ‘Artificial Intelligence Applications for Transforming Agri-food System’.

The workshop, held at OUAT, brought together academicians, researchers, students, and industry experts to deliberate on the transformative potential of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in strengthening the agri-food ecosystem.

The MoU aims to promote collaborative initiatives in AI, including academic exchange, joint research projects, student engagement programmes, and



the development of AI-based applications tailored to benefit farmers and the broader agri-food sector. The partnership is expected to accelerate innovation in smart farming, data-driven decision-making, and digital advisory services.

Gracing the occasion as chief guest, OSOU VC Shyam Sundar Pattanaik underscored the growing relevance of AI across multiple sectors. He emphasised the need for individuals to acquire knowledge of AI and ensure its responsible and ef-

fective utilisation. From agriculture and education to commerce and technical domains, he noted, AI is playing a pivotal role in societal advancement. He added that AI is bridging the gap between digital intelligence and tangible physical development, enabling inclusive and accessible services for all sections of society.

The MoU marks a new chapter in academic collaboration, positioning both institutions at the forefront of AI-led transformation in Odisha’s agri-food sector.

## INDIA AI IMPACT SUMMIT

# Odisha pavilion showcases AI-to-impact push

*Collaboration with Sarvam AI advances sovereign, Odia-language AI at scale while building next-generation infrastructure and compute capacity, positioning the state as a rising eastern AI hub*

POST NEWS NETWORK

**New Delhi, Feb 17:** The Odisha government is showcasing its growing leadership in Artificial Intelligence (AI) through a dedicated Odisha Pavilion at the India AI Impact Summit 2026, being held February 16 to 20 at Bharat Mandapam in the national capital.

Positioned around the theme ‘Odisha – From AI to Impact’, the pavilion showcases how Odisha is moving beyond pilot initiatives to large-scale, real-world AI deployments — spanning governance, healthcare, agriculture, education, disaster management, and urban infrastructure — with a focus on measurable public impact.



The showcase highlights how Odisha is advancing a structured implementation model, strengthening institutional capacity, and prioritising scalable, measurable outcomes across its AI initiatives.

A key highlight of Odisha’s participation is its strategic collaboration with Sarvam AI, underscoring the state’s push to build sovereign AI capabilities. The partnership is aimed at enabling population-scale Odia-language AI applications while creating the foundation

for advanced AI infrastructure and compute capacity — positioning Odisha as a rising AI hub in eastern India.

The pavilion is hosting over 10 innovation-driven startups and ecosystem partners — spanning applied AI ventures, research institutions, technology collaborators, and government-linked initiatives — showcasing the breadth of Odisha’s innovation ecosystem.

Together, they demonstrate real-world use cases that highlight the state’s growing inno-

vation pipeline and its push to democratise access to AI technologies and resources.

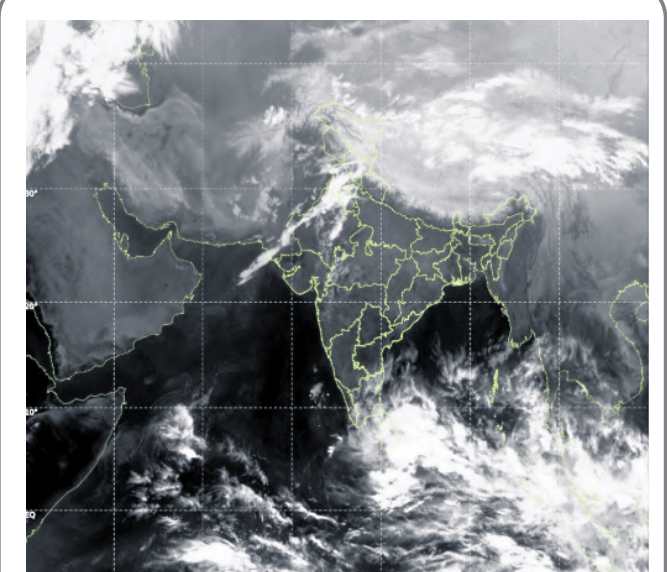
Visitors to Hall No. 5, First Floor at Bharat Mandapam can explore live demonstrations, collaborative models, and scalable AI solutions aligned with the state’s long-term digital transformation roadmap.

The Odisha government is also expected to make a detailed announcement February 18 during pavilion engagements, offering deeper insights into showcased use cases, ecosystem partnerships, and emerging investment opportunities — signalling the next phase of its AI roadmap.

Through its participation at the India AI Impact Summit 2026, the state aims to reinforce its message that strategically deployed AI can move beyond innovation pilots to deliver inclusive, population-scale impact.

Electronics and Information Technology Union Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw said, “Odisha has a good presence in AI Summit. Solutions displayed by them in the exhibition will bring a positive change to the citizens.”

| MARKET WATCH |               |         |                   |             |                  |  |
|--------------|---------------|---------|-------------------|-------------|------------------|---|
| CURRENCY     |               | BOURSES |                   | COMMODITIES |                  |   |
| INDEX        | VARIATION     | INDEX   | VARIATION         | INDEX       | VARIATION        |   |
| DOLLAR       | 90.71 ▼ 0.01  | SENSEX  | 83450.96 ▲ 173.81 | GOLD        | ₹151,804 ▼ ₹2956 |   |
| EURO         | 107.52 ▼ 0.20 | NIFTY   | 25725.40 ▲ 42.65  | SILVER      | ₹230,190 ▼ ₹9701 |   |



| WEATHER  |       |       |                               |
|----------|-------|-------|-------------------------------|
|          | BBSR  | CTC   | FORECAST                      |
| Max Temp | 32.8° | 29.6° | Dry weather likely to prevail |
| Min Temp | 18.4° | 16.2° |                               |
| Humidity | 94%   | 96%   |                               |
| Rainfall | Nil   | Nil   |                               |





ÖIF-R-2400/24415/1725-20/0009 AN EWiSten, Zentrampel





# Hopeless Hong Kong

The last nail into the coffin of whatever freedom is believed to be there in Hong Kong, a unique territory in the Chinese world, was driven, when the judges appointed by authorities loyal to Beijing pronounced an exceptionally harsh sentence of 20 years in prison for pro-democracy activist and former media mogul Jimmy Lai. It was a foregone conclusion during the two years of his trial that he would be convicted. There was not a shadow of doubt that the National Security Law, imposed over five years ago to quell dissent against the harsh Beijing overlordship, would be used to make him an example for the fate that would befall anyone else not toeing China’s line. Lai was one of the first arrested in August 2020, just a month after this new repressive legal order came into force.

Lai became a symbol of resistance to Chinese autocratic rule. He never sought to apologize for his criticism of the regime or for his contacts with Taiwanese democrats and American officials standing by Taiwan. But his 20-year sentence, at the age of 78, is the bitterest pill for the citizens of Hong Kong who find the space of their political freedom shrinking by the day. Its press has already declined in quality, its most independent bookstores have closed and university professors are reportedly in a fix about what they can say in the classroom. The national security law has completely transformed life in Hong Kong, an international financial hub that was promised its civil liberties would be preserved for 50 years after the 1997 handover of the former British colony to China. Most of the city’s pro-democracy figures have either been imprisoned or left politics, while some of them, who are lucky enough, have moved out abroad. Last year, Hong Kong ranked 140th out of 180 countries and territories in Reporters Without Borders’ World Press Freedom Index. This is a massive and alarming fall as it had been placed 18th in 2002.

The sentence on Lai, which effectively consigns him to prison for life, shows how ruthless and devoid of humanism Chinese rule could be, however much the authorities in Hong Kong claim or pretend that mainland China was not involved. The record says it all. Human rights lawyer Xu Zhiyong was sentenced to 14 years in prison in 2023, Uyghur intellectual Ilham Tohti to life imprisonment in 2014 and citizen journalist Zhang Zhan, who dared to publish videos from Wuhan at the start of the CoVID-19 pandemic, to two consecutive four-year terms. Since Chinese President Xi Jinping imposed the National Security Law, critics have either fled to London or Taiwan fearing reprisals from Beijing.

Both the UK and the US are so busy with their respective geopolitical calculations centering round China that they appear to have forsaken Lai at this critical juncture. British Prime Minister Keir Starmer, who had travelled to Beijing and Shanghai at the end of January, only sheepishly told the media he had raised the issue before Xi. US President Donald Trump is scheduled to visit China in April and his Secretary of State Marco Rubio mouthed the pious platitude that Lai’s sentence “shows the world that Beijing will go to extraordinary lengths” to silence its critics. Trying to be diplomatically correct he urged the authorities to grant Lai humanitarian parole.

China today is the most sought after global power after Trump’s mindless trade war directed against both his friends and foes. As such no accusing finger can be raised against Beijing for its design on Hong Kong and the superpowers seem to have decided to merrily go on consolidating and annexing, wherever possible, their respective spheres of influence.

FOCUS

POLITICS

# THE FAR-RIGHT BRAND



**Just as Brexit ultimately strengthened support for the EU, Trump’s America may serve as a cautionary example, weakening the appeal of authoritarianism in other democracies**

authoritarianism stem from the core of its promise: the replacement of a social order grounded in equality and justice with one that embraces hierarchy and domination as the natural basis of political power. In recent decades, that vision has appeared attractive to a startling number of voters. It promised a simpler world, where traditional social structures would be restored, and groups that agitated for equal rights, from immigrants and minorities to women and LGBTQ communities, would be stifled.

In practice, however, people living under such systems are discovering that hierarchical societies are far less appealing than advertised. Right-wing voters underestimated how often ordinary citizens depend on liberal rights and institutions for protection. Rather than guaranteeing dominance, hierarchy usually means finding oneself among the dominated.

Britain offered an early warning. In 2016, the radical right persuaded a narrow majority of voters to support the country’s withdrawal from the European Union. But Brexit resulted in economic stagnation, weakened public services, and heightened social tensions, while none of the promised benefits materialized. The negative consequences were so profound that most radical right-wing parties

across the continent no longer advocate leaving the EU.

While Brexit has come under intense scrutiny, the broader right-wing authoritarian project has not received as much attention. Western commentators frequently dismissed Russia, Hungary, Turkey, and other long-standing illiberal regimes as peripheral or culturally exceptional. But the US under Trump’s second administration has changed everything. With its unparalleled global visibility, America offers an unavoidable case study of radical right-wing governance in action.

Even conservatives in smaller and midsize countries must now confront the fact that in a world stripped of liberal, rules-based constraints, they are quite literally “on the menu.” This realization likely contributed to the electoral success and booming popularity of the Liberal Party under Mark Carney in Canada. It also helps explain why far-right leaders in Britain and France criticized Trump’s Greenland rhetoric – and why even Moscow showed little enthusiasm for the gravest NATO crisis since the alliance’s founding. Putin, like other autocrats, has long been a free rider on the international system, undermining it while assuming that others would continue to play by the rules. That is no

longer possible if the law of the jungle is the norm.

Voters around the world must also consider whether the far right truly offers dignity to the forgotten and neglected people it claims to champion. It has become conventional wisdom that liberal condescension fueled the resurgence of right-wing populism. Yet it is difficult to recall any liberal leader who denigrated the ultimate sacrifice of allied veterans – a core conservative constituency across the West – by falsely suggesting, as Trump recently did, that those who fought in Afghanistan had remained safely behind the front lines. The far right’s relentless pursuit of dominance offers not dignity, but symbolic humiliation of a kind that no liberal elite ever inflicted.

Domestically, the spectacle of American governance under Trump is proving equally sobering. Observers across the West will inevitably ask whether this chaos is truly preferable to the liberal status quo, with all its imperfections and frustrations. In the US itself, many Trump voters are finding that they got a raw deal: farmers hurt by tariffs, rural residents cut off from health insurance, and Latinos affected by immigration crackdowns.

This may not be enough to save US democracy. Comparative experience suggests grim prospects for a free and fair presidential election in 2028 or a peaceful transfer of power. But if liberal politicians and media outlets amplify the reality of life under Trump, they can generate a powerful “Trump effect” abroad. Just as Brexit ultimately strengthened support for the EU, Trump’s America may serve as a cautionary example, weakening the appeal of authoritarianism in other democracies.

**Maciej Kisilowski is Associate Professor of Law and Strategy at Central European University. Anna Wojciuk is Associate Professor of International Relations at University of Warsaw.**

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## WISDOM CORNER

- “Once conform, once do what other people do because they do it, and a lethargy steals over all the finer nerves and faculties of the soul. She becomes all outer show and inward emptiness; dull, callous, and indifferent.”

VIRGINIA WOOLF
- “Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul - and sings the tunes without the words - and never stops at all.”

EMILY DICKINSON
- “Achievement of your happiness is the only moral purpose of your life, and that happiness, not pain or mindless self-indulgence, is the proof of your moral integrity, since it is the proof and the result of your loyalty to the achievement of your values.”

AYN RAND

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

- **1943:** The Gestapo arrests German resistance fighter Sophie Scholl and other White Rose activists. 21-year-old student Scholl and her fellow campaigners were executed for having distributed flyers criticizing the Nazi regime.
- **1836:** Hindu religious leader Ramakrishna Paramahansa, who founded a school of thought that united diverse mystical traditions into a single belief system, was born in Hooghly, Bengal state, India.
- **1848:** Louis Comfort Tiffany—an American designer internationally recognized as one of the greatest proponents of Art Nouveau, particularly in the art of glassmaking—was born.
- **1930:** Pluto discovered by Clyde Tombaugh. Using a 13-inch (33-cm) telescope at the Lowell Observatory in Flagstaff, Arizona, Clyde W. Tombaugh, a 24-year-old American with no formal training in astronomy, discovered the dwarf planet Pluto this day in 1930.
- **1977:** The Space Shuttle takes off on its maiden flight. The “Enterprise” was mounted on a Boeing 747 Shuttle Carrier Aircraft; the first free flight took place on August 12, 1977.
- **1978:** Hawaii hosts the first Ironman Triathlon. Contestants have to swim 2.4 miles (3.86 km), bike 112 miles (180.25 km) and complete a marathon run measuring 26.2 miles (42.2 km).

## LOL

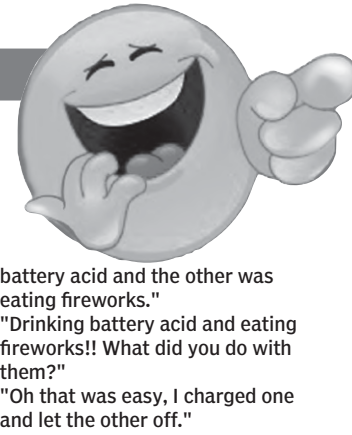
### DEALING WITH CRIMINALS

A local policeman had just finished this shift one cold November evening and was at home with his wife.

"You just won't believe what happened this evening, in all my years on the force I've never seen anything like it."

"Oh yes dear, what happened?"

"I came across two guys down by the canal, one of them was drinking



## IN JEST THIS

# Too many fights breaking out on flights

I do not fly often, but next time I take a flight with my family, I’m going to carry a pair of boxing gloves with me — just in case a fight breaks out.

I believe in non-violence, but if punches are being thrown aboard a plane, I’ll grab the boxing gloves from my carry-on bag, put them on my wife’s hands and say, “Protect the family please!”

In case you think that it’s a man’s duty to protect his family, let me remind you that two-thirds of India’s Olympic boxing medals have been won by women.

But the main point I’m trying to make is that it’s important to protect ourselves when we’re flying. That’s because the chances of someone getting a punch on a plane are greater than the chances of someone getting lunch on a plane.

I don’t know the actual statistics, but in recent years, I’ve come across more stories about fights on planes than about fights on buses and trains.

The latest brawl occurred on a Jet2 flight from Antalya, Tur-



## THE CHANCES OF SOMEONE GETTING A PUNCH ON A PLANE ARE GREATER THAN THE CHANCES OF SOMEONE GETTING LUNCH ON A PLANE

key, to Manchester, England. A video shared widely on social media shows men and women of all ages pushing, shoving and punching each other. One man has another man in a headlock, having watched one too many mixed martial arts (MMA) fights.

The fight, which occurred about three hours into the five-hour flight, caused the pilot to divert the flight to Brussels, Belgium, whereupon police boarded the plane to remove two unruly passengers.

“They were both offloaded by police in Brussels and the flight continued to Manchester,” the British budget airline said in the statement.

“We can confirm that the two disruptive passengers will be banned from flying with us for life, and we will also vigorously pursue them to recover the costs that we incurred as a result of this diversion.”

Instead of diverting the plane, it would have been far less costly and less disruptive to simply eject the two unruly passengers in midair. (Give them a parachute, of course. Let them fight over it on the

way down.)

One eyewitness, speaking to the Sun newspaper, blamed the fight on a passenger who had been drinking on the plane and was making racist comments about the Pakistani passengers around him. He was also upset that he couldn’t buy cigarettes on the plane. The only reasonable solution would have been to move this passenger to the back of the plane, preferably into a seat equipped with an ejection system.

This is hardly the first time that a fight has broken out on a Jet2 flight. Back in 2022, the airline asked a pair of brothers to pay more than £50,000 after their “aggressive and violent behaviour” caused a flight to be diverted. Five years earlier, a couple going on a holiday turned on each other, using abusive language and throwing punches. The brothers and the couple were banned for life, joining more than 100 other passengers who have received lifetime bans from Jet2 and are now probably flying on Jet3.

In 2025, the Federal Avia-

tion Administration in the United States received 1,621 reports of unruly passengers. The figure is probably much higher worldwide. Not all unruly behaviour results in punches being thrown. Sometimes it’s curse words being thrown around, other times it’s food. Indeed, just last month, an unruly man on a Southwest Airlines flight in the US threw a container of food at another passenger who was recording him on a cellphone. The unruly man had lost his cool after suspecting that another man was flirting with his wife. (Flirting on planes is never a good idea. If you must flirt, do it at the airport, just in case you need to run away.)


When people are in close quarters, it’s not surprising that they sometimes get on each other’s nerves. It doesn’t help that some passengers have been drinking. Perhaps Jet2 and other airlines should consider limiting the amount of alcohol they serve. No one ever blamed a fight on a passenger who had been drinking too much Fanta.

L

etters

TO THE EDITOR

Readers of Orissa Post are most welcome to contribute letters (100 words), articles and columns (between 600-1000 words). Contributors are requested to send their contact numbers and full postal address/email ID. They may also send in their valuable comments, opinion and suggestions, preferably by email, to: [edit@orissapost.com](mailto:edit@orissapost.com)



OrissaPOST

B-15, Rasulgari Industrial Estate, Bhubaneswar-751010

### Fragile ecosystem

Sir, The National Green Tribunal has cleared the Great Nicobar infrastructure project with stringent environmental safeguards, reflecting the government's strategic and developmental priorities. The Centre aims to transform Great Nicobar Island into a key maritime and logistics hub through a trans-shipment port, airport, power plant and township. Situated near the busy Malacca Strait, the project is intended to strengthen India's presence in the eastern Indian Ocean, counter growing Chinese influence, and enhance trade connectivity under the Indo-Pacific vision. However, the island's fragile ecosystem, dense forests, seismic vulnerability, and protection of indigenous tribes raise environmental and humanitarian concerns. Balancing strategic ambitions with ecological sustainability will determine the project's long-term success.

**RS Narula, PATIALA**

### Demographic distress

Sir, The news report, "Unemployment rate rises to 5%," is deeply disquieting. Behind this sterile percentage lies a silent emergency. A five percent rate in a youthful nation is not a statistic; it is a verdict on policy paralysis. While governments celebrate growth narratives, jobless graduates wander with fading hope. Skill missions without industry linkage, investment without labour absorption, and rhetoric without reform have worsened the malaise. Employment must become the central metric of governance. Otherwise, demographic dividend may degenerate into demographic distress.

**Sidhartha Kar Mohapatra, BARIPADA**

### Growing burden

Sir, The rising incidence of cancer worldwide has become a major public health concern, with nearly 20 million new cases and about 10 million deaths reported every year. Experts warn that if present trends continue, the annual number of cases could exceed 35 million by 2050, driven largely by population growth and ageing. A significant proportion of cancers are linked to preventable lifestyle and environmental factors. In India, cancer poses a serious challenge, with over 1.5 million new cases diagnosed annually. Strengthening preventive measures, promoting healthy lifestyles, expanding screening programmes, and ensuring equitable access to healthcare are essential.

**Krishna Kumar Vepakomma, HYDERABAD**





# BJP gears up for West Bengal ‘Paribartan Yatra’



BJP seeks to sharpen anti-incumbency pitch against TMC

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

**Kolkata, Feb 17:** With Assembly elections just two months away, the West Bengal BJP is gearing up to launch its Paribartan Yatra, a statewide mobilisation campaign aimed at consolidating anti-incumbency sentiment against the TMC and rebuilding the momentum it had generated before the 2021 polls but failed to translate into power.

Addressing a press conference, state BJP chief Samik Bhattacharya termed the initiative as the next phase of the party’s political struggle against what he described as the declining relevance of the TMC government.

Drawing a line from the end of Left Front rule to the present, Bhattacharya argued that voters who once backed the TMC to end cadre-based politics now find themselves disappointed amid allegations of corruption and shrinking democratic space.

“After 34 years of Left rule, people wanted democracy and development. Fifteen years later, there is a growing demand to reassess what was actually delivered,” he said, claiming that rural voters and marginalised communities were increasingly dissatisfied.

According to the BJP’s road-map, nine Paribartan Yatras will begin March 1 and 2 from politically significant locations including Cooch Behar, Krishnanagar, Garbeta, Raydighi, Kulti, Islampur, Sandeshkhali, and Amta.

The programme will pause briefly during Dol Yatra before resuming March 5, covering more than 5,000 km across all Assembly constituencies.

The campaign is designed as a rolling political exercise

featuring tableaux, roadside meetings and local outreach events, culminating in a major rally at Kolkata’s Brigade Parade Ground later in March, which the party hopes will be addressed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Senior national leaders, including Union ministers Amit Shah, Rajnath Singh, and JP Nadda, are expected to participate in different phases, signalling the importance the party’s central leadership is attaching to Bengal.

Even as internal discussions reportedly touched upon convoy-style campaign vehicles, state leaders stressed that the initiative should not be interpreted as a Rath Yatra, a format that has historically triggered legal and political controversy in Bengal. Bhattacharya said the Paribartan Yatra was distinct from traditional Rath Yatras, even as the term inevitably evokes memories of earlier BJP mobilisations, particularly LK Advani’s 1990 Rath Yatra, widely regarded as a turning point in national politics, and subsequent state-level journeys that helped the party expand its organisational footprint across India.

The timing of the campaign reflects a wider churn in Bengal’s political landscape. The BJP believes that controversies surrounding corruption cases, rural grievances and migration issues have created fresh openings, while the TMC continues to rely on welfare schemes and grassroots networks to retain its dominance.

The BJP’s narrative also seeks to counter the TMC’s charge that its outreach among minorities and migrant workers is selective or politically motivated.

The TMC, however, has dismissed the yatra plans as election-time optics, arguing that the BJP remains overly dependent on central leaders rather than local faces.

# Bengal’s Yuva Sathi scheme turns welfare drive into pre-poll theatre

Announced in the interim Budget earlier this month, the scheme promises ₹1,500 per month to unemployed youths aged between 21 and 40 for up to five years or until they secure employment

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

**Kolkata, Feb 17:** Even before enrolment camps opened, queues were seen outside school gates and community halls across West Bengal, with men and women clutching certificates and bank details as the state rolled out the Yuva Sathi cash allowance scheme for unemployed youth.

As the government began implementing the scheme, the state has witnessed a striking political image: educated job seekers lining up for ₹1,500 a month under a welfare programme rapidly emerging as a key plank in the run-up to the 2026 Assembly elections likely to be held in the next two months.

From Master’s degree holders in physics and mathematics, engineering graduates and students of computer science and chemistry to class 10 passouts, thousands of unemployed youths queued up across the state this week to register for the scheme.

Announced in the interim Budget earlier this month, the scheme promises ₹1,500 per month to unemployed youths aged between 21 and 40 for up to five years or until they secure employment.

Though initially slated to begin in August, Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee advanced the rollout to April 1, a move widely viewed as politically significant as election season approaches.

With camps set up across all 294 Assembly constituencies and online applications now open, the initiative has triggered a statewide rush, turning local community halls and school grounds into centres of both aspiration and debate.

At a camp on the southern fringes of Kolkata, 28-year-old Subir Mitra, a commerce graduate preparing for competitive exams, said the allowance would not transform his life but might ease daily anxieties.



CASH, QUEUES, CAMPAIGN WINDS

“It won’t solve everything, but at least I won’t have to depend on my parents for every small expense while preparing for jobs,” he said.

Nearby stood Ritika Halder, a postgraduate in chemistry who has remained unemployed for nearly three years. She said the monthly assistance could help cover examination fees and travel costs for interviews.

“People assume educated youths won’t stand in line for this amount. But when there’s no steady income, every bit counts,” she said.

At a camp in coastal Kakdwip, a young mother, Mousumi Jana, waited with her toddler in tow. Married soon after school, Jana said she had resumed studies recently.

“This will help me buy books and continue studying without adding pressure on my family,” she said.

Officials across districts described the turnout as unprecedented, with lakhs registering within the first days of the drive.

For the ruling camp, the lines reflect public trust and outreach. For the opposition, they reveal a deepening employment crisis.

The TMC argues the cash support is a safety net for youths navigating a sluggish job market, while the opposition BJP has labelled it an election-time “dole.”

Leader of Opposition Suwendu Adhikari questioned

the need for physical camps instead of a fully digital application process, alleging that the “exercise was geared more towards political mobilisation than helping the unemployed youths.”

“It also reflects that the TMC government despite being in power for the last 15 years, has failed to generate employment,” he said.

The state government rejected the charge.

Finance Minister Chandrima Bhattacharya said welfare schemes would continue despite fiscal constraints and accused the Centre of withholding dues.

Political observers noted that the camps have also acted as organisational exercises for the ruling party’s grassroots network.

Local councillors and booth-level workers were visible at several sites assisting applicants, a reminder of how welfare delivery and electoral mobilisation often overlap in Bengal’s political culture.

Political analyst Biswanath Chakraborty said the optics were significant.

“In Bengal, welfare programmes carry political messaging. The government is signalling empathy with unemployed youth while demonstrating administrative reach ahead of polls,” he said.

Not everyone standing in line was convinced.

At a camp in North 24 Parganas, Sabyasachi Dey, a B.Ed

graduate, said he registered reluctantly.

“What can ₹1,500 do today? We want jobs, not token support. But when opportunities are scarce, you take whatever help you can get,” he said.

An elderly woman collecting forms for her son, who now works outside the state, echoed a common sentiment.

“Any support helps, but every parent still wants their child to come home with a real job,” she said, reflecting the deeper social reality of persistent unemployment among educated youths.

The ₹5,000-crore allocation for Yuva Sathi adds to a portfolio of welfare schemes that has defined the Banerjee government’s governance model, from women-focused cash transfers to farmer assistance programmes. The expansion of direct benefit transfers has helped the ruling party build strong voter linkages, particularly among economically vulnerable sections.

Critics, however, argue that recurring cash transfers risk obscuring structural concerns such as industrial stagnation and migration of skilled workers.

For many youths themselves, politics feels secondary.

As 24-year-old aspirant Debayan Sarkar said while adjusting his folder of documents, “People can call this politics or welfare. For us, it simply means a little support until work finally comes.”

## Civic body signs pact with TCS for smart lighting solutions

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

**Kolkata, Feb 17:** The Kolkata Municipal Corporation has signed an agreement with an IT services major TCS for the modernisation and upgradation of the city’s public lighting infrastructure, a KMC official said Tuesday.

Under the agreement, the civic body will collaborate with the Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) for the installation of energy-efficient LED streetlights and the implementation of smart lighting solutions across different boroughs of the city.

“The project with Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) will help in cutting down power costs and ensure better maintenance through technology-driven monitoring systems,” the official said.

The project would involve phased replacement of conventional streetlights with LED fixtures and the introduction of a centralised control and monitoring system for real-time tracking of faults and energy usage.

The KMC official said the project is expected to be rolled out in phases, covering major thoroughfares, residential areas and other public spaces.



The civic body believes the initiative will significantly reduce carbon emissions and operational costs in the long run, the official said.

As of now a pilot project will be rolled out in Kalighat and Alipore areas of the city.

Further details regarding the financial outlay and timeline of execution of the entire project will be announced after the completion of initial surveys, the official said.

“The system will involve automated scheduling of switching off and switching on of street lights, dimming and brightening of lights based on sensors, and a centralised control through intelligent urban an exchange platform,” KMC MIC (Electrical) Sandip Ranjan Bakshi.

# Himachal’s first trout hub to be set up in Kangra’s Boh Valley

Located about 25 kilometres north of Shahpur, the valley renowned for its breathtaking natural beauty is now poised to emerge as a centre for trout production alongside tourism promotion

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

**Dharamshala (HP), Feb 17:** The picturesque Boh Valley in Himachal Pradesh’s Kangra district is set to gain a new identity as the state’s first dedicated trout fish hub is being developed here.

Located about 25 kilometres north of Shahpur, the valley renowned for its breathtaking natural beauty is now poised to emerge as a centre for trout production alongside tourism promotion.

Trout -- a cold water, fresh-water fish -- thrives in the clear, fast-flowing rivers and streams of the Himalayas. In Himachal Pradesh, rainbow and brown trout -- introduced from Europe -- are found in Pabbar, Beas, Tirthan, Uhl and Baspa rivers.

These waters provide the low temperatures and high oxygen levels essential for trout growth and reproduction. The fish is prized for angling, cui-



sine and aquaculture.

Shahpur MLA and Deputy Chief Whip Kewal Singh Pathania Tuesday said the announcement to establish a trout hub in Kangra was made in the first budget of the current Congress government.

An amount of ₹3.03 crore was approved for the project, he said, adding that most of the work has been completed, including the construction of a trout hatchery in Boh.

The trout hub would not only strengthen the local economy but also give a significant boost to tourism in the region, Pathania said.

The residents have been encouraged to adopt trout farming as an eco-friendly enterprise. To support their marketing, five motorcycles equipped with ice boxes have been provided and one more is set to be added shortly. Moreover, two

fish kiosks would be set up in Shahpur and Dharamshala to facilitate better sales.

Rakesh Kumar, Assistant Director, Fisheries Department, Palampur, said the Dharakundi valley holds immense potential for trout cultivation. Currently, 15 to 20 farmers have already established ponds and started trout production.

Out of the total ₹3.03 crore project, works worth ₹2.11 crore have been sanctioned, including 34 trout raceways, six motorcycles with ice boxes and two fish kiosks.

Trout fishing in Himachal Pradesh is regulated, and anglers require licences to fish in designated waters.

The fisheries department has also imposed a four-month ban on trout fishing in rivers and streams from November 1 to February 28 to promote breeding and conserve the resource.

## HP Speaker takes cognisance of officials ignoring MLAs’ calls

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

**Shimla, Feb 17:** Himachal Pradesh Assembly Speaker Kuldeep Singh Pathania Tuesday took cognisance of officials increasingly avoiding the telephone calls of elected representatives.

Terming the behaviour as arbitrary and serious, he asked the MLAs to submit the names of such officials, so that action can be initiated against them under the Assembly rules.

The matter was raised by Congress MLA from Gagret, Rakesh Kalia, during the Question Hour.

Neither do some officials answer MLAs’ calls to enquire about public work, nor do they call back, Kalia said.

The opposition and ruling party legislators alike have raised the issue of officials’ high-handedness and failure to answer calls, he said. The Gagret MLA requested the government to stop telephone allowance given to officials who do not answer calls of elected representatives, and threatened to stir up protests outside the offices of such officials if the government did not curb this practice immediately.

The issue raised by Kalia was backed by both the ruling and opposition MLAs, who thumped their tables in support.

Describing the issue as “extremely serious” and one demanding immediate attention, Speaker Pathania directed Kalia to submit the names of such officials to the Assembly Secretariat so that action could be taken against them.

## SIT to probe ‘Benami’ land purchases: CM

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

**Shimla, Feb 17:** Himachal Pradesh Chief Minister Sukhwinder Singh Sukhu Tuesday announced the constitution of a special investigation team (SIT) to probe into ‘benami’ (anonymous) land deals at Gaggal Airport in Kangra district and Gagret in Una district.

Responding to a query from the Congress MLA from the Gagret assembly seat, Rakesh Kalia, during Question Hour in the assembly, Sukhu said the government will investigate cases of anonymous land purchases and alleged commissions paid during the process at the two locations.

He said if anyone has made ‘benami’ transactions, their land will be confiscated and no compensation will be provided. If any such case comes to light during the investigation, strict action will be taken against those involved, he added.

“The state government is taking strict action against corruption and will also take action against irregularities in the purchase and sale of land at Gaggal Airport and Gagret,” he asserted, adding that an outsider is permitted to purchase land in the state only under Section 118 of Himachal Pradesh Tenancy and Land Reforms Act.

The chief minister asked the Congress legislator for Gagret to provide any documents he possesses regarding these matters to the SIT.

In response to the original query, Sukhu said over ₹1,460 crore has been distributed to 4,649 people so far under the



## The chief minister asked the Congress legislator for Gagret to provide any documents he possesses regarding these matters to the SIT

proposed land acquisition for the expansion of Gaggal Airport in Kangra. This amount has been transferred to affected people’s bank accounts as per the provisions of the Land Acquisition Act.

In a supplementary question, Kalia made allegations against a former Uttarakhand government official, alleging that he was involved in an alleged attempt to overthrow the Himachal Pradesh government last year. The MLA further alleged that the official was exploiting local people and “importing” the culture of Uttar

Pradesh into the state.

A complaint of a ₹8-lakh fraud had been filed against the said persons, but the investigation is stalled, Kalia said.

In response to a question from the BJP MLA from the Barsar assembly seat, Inder Dutt Lakhnpal, Sukhu said underground ducts being constructed in Shimla for electricity and telecom cables and water pipelines are completely safe and will not cause any harm to the city.

He said once these ducts are complete, the problem of overhead wires in the state capital -- a prime tourist destination -- would be resolved, augmenting the beauty of the city as there would be no further digging of roads to lay electric telephone wires and water pipes.

The ducts stretching from Chota Shimla, through Scandal Point, up to Chaura Maidan are being constructed at a cost of ₹150 crore and there would be no compromise on the quality, Sukhu said.



## of the day quote

I was assured by the home minister that these places will be reopened and orders for the same have now been issued. I am thankful to the home minister for that. The local people have borne losses (due to closure). Now, I hope people will visit these beautiful places

OMAR ABDULLAH | J&K CM

Cooperative federalism requires predictability, fairness, and respect for constitutional roles. States must have the fiscal capacity to fulfill the responsibilities entrusted to them, particularly in areas such as health, education, social protection, and infrastructure

PINARAYI VIJAYAN | KERALA CM

Kabir has managed 50 per cent of funding for his mosque in Murshidabad's Beldannga from Bangladeshi donors, forces associated with outfits like Jamaat. He is covertly helping the TMC to counter the anti-Mamata Banerjee wave among minorities

SUVENDU ADHIKARI | BJP LEADER

## SHORT TAKES

### 22 Naxalites surrender

**Sukma:** As many as 22 Naxalites surrendered in Chhattisgarh's Sukma district Tuesday, police said. The cadres, including a woman, turned themselves in before senior police and CRPF officials here under the 'Poona Margem' (New Dawn) rehabilitation scheme of the government, Sukma Superintendent of Police Kiran Chavan said.

### Bihar NEET aspirant's family gets threats

**Jehanabad:** The family of a NEET aspirant in Bihar, whose death after alleged sexual assault is being probed by the CBI, has claimed that they have received a threat that their son would meet the same fate as their deceased daughter, police said Tuesday. The family has alleged in a complaint that a piece of paper was thrown inside their house, on which it was written "you have lost your daughter and if you do not relent you will lose your son as well", said Rahul Kumar, the SHO of Shakurabad police station in Jehanabad district.

### Woman drowns 4-year old niece in water tank

**Muzaffarnagar (UP):** A woman was arrested Tuesday for allegedly killing her four-year-old niece by throwing her into a water tank and stabbing her sister-in-law, who apparently opposed her relationship with a neighbour, police here said Tuesday. In the incident that took place around 2.30 am in Basikala village under Shahpur police station limits, Firdosh (40) and her three other children sustained stab injuries, while her four-year-old daughter was killed after she was thrown into the water tank of the house, police said.

### Cong leaders, workers clash with police

**Lucknow:** Congress leaders and workers clashed with police Tuesday as they tried to march to the Uttar Pradesh Vidhan Sabha during the budget session to protest against issues such as replacing of rural employment scheme MGNREGA and misgovernance. The clash led to several detentions and alleged lathicharge.



What we promise, we deliver. We have been working at a rapid pace to fulfil our promises

NAYAB SINGH SAINI | HARYANA CM

### TINA AMBANI SKIPS ED SUMMONS FOR 2ND TIME

Reliance Group chairperson Anil Ambani's wife Tina Ambani Tuesday skipped the Enforcement Directorate (ED) summons for the second time Tuesday



## NGT nod to Great Nicobar project unfortunate: Environmentalists

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

**New Delhi, Feb 17:** The National Green Tribunal's nod to the Great Nicobar project is disappointing and unfortunate and may have disastrous ecological impacts, according to environment enthusiasts. The National Green Tribunal (NGT) Monday cleared the proposed International Container Transshipment Terminal in the Great Nicobar Island, saying adequate safeguards had been provided in the environmental clearance (EC) conditions.

The eastern zonal bench of Kolkata, headed by NGT Chairperson Justice Prakash Shrivastava, passed the order Monday while hearing the objections to the proposed terminal, township, area develop-

ment and a 450 MVA gas and solar-based power plant.

Congress MP and former environment minister Jairam Ramesh, who has been vocal against the project, termed the decision "disappointing".

"The decision of the National Green Tribunal giving its approval to the Great Nicobar project is deeply disappointing. There is clear evidence that the project will have disastrous ecological impacts," Ramesh said in a post on X.

Debi Goenka, executive trustee at Conservation Action Trust, a Mumbai-based non-profit organisation, termed the NGT nod "unfortunate". Conservation Action Trust is one of the entities to challenge the project in court. "The decision is unfortunate. Our appeal against an earlier



NGT ruling is pending in the Calcutta High Court. We are hopeful that it will be taken up expeditiously," Goenka said.

Former Rajya Sabha MP and bureaucrat Jawahar Sir-car said, "This is unbelievable, unacceptable!"

'National Green Tribunal clears the massacre of irre-

placeable flora and fauna of Great Nicobar for a port (surely to be bagged by a crony to profiteer) and naval outpost! A whole tribe will be wiped out, and the project will endanger a

THE NATIONAL GREEN TRIBUNAL MONDAY CLEARED THE PROPOSED INTERNATIONAL CONTAINER TRANSHIPMENT TERMINAL IN THE GREAT NICOBAR ISLAND, SAYING ADEQUATE SAFEGUARDS HAD BEEN PROVIDED IN THE ENVIRONMENTAL CLEARANCE CONDITIONS

very ecologically fragile zone," he said on X.

Seventy scholars, former bureaucrats, activists, lawyers and environmentalists had previously written an open letter responding to Environment Minister Bhupender Yadav's defence of the proposed Rs 92,000 crore Great Nicobar Island mega infrastructure project, urging the minister to "set aside political considerations" and focus on the project's "grave and irreversible negative implications".

The signatories included historian Ramachandra Guha, wildlife conservationist Romulus Whitaker,

wildlife biologist Ravi Chel-lam, nature conservation-ist Asad Rahmani, scientist Sharachchandra Lele, and former Gujarat principal chief conservator of forests Ashok Kumar Sharma, among others.

Earlier, a batch of petitions challenged the clearances granted for the project, claiming violations of the Island Coastal Regulation Zone (ICRZ) notification.

This was the second round of litigation concerning the project. In April 2023, the tribunal largely upheld the EC while constituting a high-powered committee (HPC) to examine specific concerns. The tribunal also noted that the shoreline of the island will be protected, ensuring no loss of sandy beaches, as these provide nesting sites for turtles and birds, apart from protecting the island.

## India-France elevate ties to special strategic partnership

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

**New Delhi/Mumbai, Feb 17:** India and France Tuesday elevated their relations to a "special global strategic partnership" and vowed to boost cooperation in key sectors of defence, trade and critical minerals with Prime Minister Narendra Modi and French President Emmanuel Macron describing the bilateral ties as a "force for global stability" in the face of increasing geopolitical turbulence.

The two leaders, following their talks in Mumbai, also virtually inaugurated an Assembly line in Karnataka's Vemagal to build Airbus H125 helicopters that is expected to enhance India's aerospace manufacturing capabilities.

The two sides inked a total of 21 agreements and documents providing for deepening of co-operation in an array of areas including critical minerals, defence, high technology, renewable energy, and health.

The pacts included one on defence cooperation and another on a joint venture between Bharat Electronics Ltd and French defence giant Safran to produce Hammer missiles in India.

A separate pact was inked for reciprocal deployment of officers at Indian Army and French Land Forces establishments. Modi hosted Macron for the talks hours after the French leader landed in Mumbai on a three-day India visit.

"The world is going through a period of uncertainty. In such an environment, the India-France partnership is a force for global stability. We are combining France's expertise and India's scale," Modi



INDIA AND FRANCE ELEVATE THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO A 'SPECIAL GLOBAL STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP', ENHANCING COOPERATION IN KEY SECTORS

PRIME MINISTER MODI AND PRESIDENT MACRON INAUGURATED AN AIRBUS H125 HELICOPTER ASSEMBLY LINE IN KARNATAKA, BOOSTING MANUFACTURING IN INDIA

INDIA AND FRANCE ARE EXPANDING DEFENCE COOPERATION, INCLUDING RAFALE JETS AND SUBMARINES, STRENGTHENING THEIR SECURITY PARTNERSHIP

said in his media statement. The prime minister said the two countries share a "very special relationship" and that France is one of India's oldest strategic partners.

"And together with President Macron, we have given this strategic partnership unprecedented depth and energy. Based on this trust and shared vision, today we are establishing our relationship as a 'special global strategic partnership'," Modi said.

"This partnership is not just strategic. In today's turbulent era, it is a partnership of global stability and global progress," he said. Modi also made a ref-

erence to the H-125 helicopter Assembly line. "Today's inauguration of the helicopter assembly line in India is another shining example of this deep trust. We are proud that India and France will jointly manufacture the world's only helicopter capable of flying to the heights of Mount Everest. And we will also export it to the entire world," he said.

The prime minister, referring to Russia-Ukraine conflict, situation in West Asia and the Indo-Pacific, said both India and France believe in democratic values, the rule of law, and a multipolar world.

"It is our shared commitment to eradicate terrorism in all its forms and manifestations," Modi said. The prime minister also noted that the year 2026 is a "turning point" in India-Europe relations as he cited the India-EU free trade deal.

"Just a few days ago, we signed the largest and most ambitious free trade agreement in India's history with the European Union. This free trade agreement will also bring unprecedented momentum to India-France relations," he said.

The two sides also launched an initiative titled 'India-France Year of Innovation'.

## Guj ATS, Coast Guard foil int'l smuggling bid

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

**Ahmedabad, Feb 17:** The Gujarat Anti-Terrorist Squad (ATS) and the Coast Guard have apprehended two Iranians, who "daringly" navigated a speedboat from Iran to Indian waters, attempting to smuggle more than 200 kg of a suspected narcotic drug, officials said.

Acting on information shared by the Gujarat ATS, an Indian Coast Guard ship was diverted to intercept a foreign boat suspected of engaging in illicit drug trafficking Monday night, a defence release stated.

"A thorough search of the boat led to the recovery of 203 packets, each weighing approximately 1 kg, containing a crystalline substance suspected to be narcotic drugs," it said.

Speaking to reporters, ATS Deputy Inspector General (DIG) Sunil Joshi said that an Iranian speedboat was intercepted, about 140 nautical miles in the Arabian Sea, off the Porbandar coast, near the International Maritime Boundary Line (IMBL).

As many as 203 packets containing a white substance were seized from the boat, and it was ruled out to be heroin in a drug kit test, and will be further analysed by forensic experts.

The official said prima facie, it appears that the accused, Abdul Majid and Abdul Sattar, both residents of Chabahar in Iran, had travelled all the way from their home country on the speedboat.

"The manner in which they travelled so far in a speedboat is quite daring. According to our information, these packets were to be received by a person from Punjab, and an investigation is underway in this regard," he said.

## India ready to work with BNP govt: Birla in Dhaka



PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

**New Delhi, Feb 17:** Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla Tuesday attended the swearing-in ceremony of new Bangladesh Prime Minister Tarique Rahman in Dhaka, and said India stands ready to support Bangladesh's endeavours to build a democratic, progressive and inclusive nation.

Separately, the speaker called on the new Bangladesh prime minister and conveyed the wishes of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. He also handed over an invitation from Prime Minister Modi to Rahman to visit India, officials said here.

"Glad to attend the swearing-in ceremony of the new government of Bangladesh led by Prime Minister Tarique Rahman in Dhaka today. India stands ready to support Bangladesh's endeavours to build a democratic, progressive and inclusive nation," Birla posted on X. Bangladesh High Commissioner to India, Riaz Hamidullah, said in a post on X, "Prime Minister Tarique Rahman conveys his greetings

to India and PM Narendra Modi to the visiting India Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla at a courtesy meet following the swearing-in of the new government.

"Speaker Birla conveyed wishes and an invitation to India. Both leaders expressed optimism to work together for the well-being of the people of Bangladesh and India, pursuing a people-centric menu of cooperation." Birla also met Maldives President Mohamed Muizzu, Bhutan Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay and other leaders on the sidelines of the event.

Led by Rahman, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) swept to power with a two-thirds majority with 49.97 per cent votes and 209 seats in the polls held February 12, results for which were declared February 13.

The Jamaat-e-Islami, which was opposed to Bangladesh's independence from Pakistan in 1971, registered its best-ever performance with 31.76 per cent votes and 68 seats. The National Citizen Party (NCP) secured the third-highest number of seats, six, and 3.05 per cent votes.

BANGLADESH HAD INVITED NARENDRA MODI TO THE CEREMONY, BUT THE PRIME MINISTER COULD NOT ATTEND THE EVENT AS HE WAS SCHEDULED TO HOLD TALKS WITH FRENCH PRESIDENT EMMANUEL MACRON IN MUMBAI TUESDAY

## Borah to join BJP, suspended MLA switches to Rajior Dal

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

**Guwahati, Feb 17:** In a major jolt to the Opposition Congress in Assam ahead of the assembly polls, its former state president Bhupen Borah will join the BJP February 22, while its suspended MLA Sherman Ali Ahmed joined the Rajior Dal Tuesday.

Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma visited Borah's residence in the Ghoramara area of Guwahati, a day after the senior leader resigned from the Congress.

The two leaders held discussions for over an hour and a half, following which Sarma announced that Borah will join the BJP along with his supporters, and state BJP president Dilip Saikia will finalise the modalities.

"Borah, along with some of his supporters, will join the BJP in Guwahati, but there will be another joining programme at Lakhimpur from where he hails, as many Congress members have expressed their de-

sire to follow his steps," Sarma said, with the veteran leader by his side.

Claiming that Borah's move reflects poorly on the Congress, the CM alleged that the party is "no longer a place for Hindus". "He is the last recognised Hindu leader of the Congress without family antecedents in the party," he said. Sarma claimed Bora, who was the state Congress president from 2021 to 2025, has struggled for a long time in the opposition party, and he will get a platform in the BJP to do what he wants.

When asked about the constituency Borah may contest from in the Assembly polls, Sarma said no such discussions had taken place. "He is not joining the BJP in exchange for an Assembly seat. There is no bargaining involved. If required, he can even contest from Jalukbari," Sarma said, referring to his own constituency. Borah, however, did not speak at the press conference.



Youth Congress members stage a protest over the recent India-US interim trade deal, in Kolkata, West Bengal

PTI PHOTO







# international

## Quote of the day

India became an extremely important leader in the discussions on all aspects of the UN, in peace and security, sustainable development, where I remember the G20 presided by India, the very important decisions that were taken there

ANTONIO GUTERRES | SECRETARY GENERAL

Bangladesh is no longer a country with a submissive foreign policy or dependent on the instructions and advice of other countries

MUHAMMAD YUNUS | OUTGOING INTERIM GOVERNMENT CHIEF

The more this evil comes from Russia, the harder it will be for everyone to reach any agreements with them. Partners must understand this. First and foremost, this concerns the United States

VOLODYMYR ZELENSKY | PRESIDENT, UKRAINE

## SHORT TAKES

### Jesse Jackson dies at 84

**Washington:** Charismatic US civil rights leader Jesse Jackson, an eloquent Baptist minister raised in the segregated South who became a close associate of Martin Luther King Jr and twice ran for the Democratic presidential nomination, has died at age 84, his family said in a statement Tuesday. “Our father was a servant leader - not only to our family, but to the oppressed, the voiceless, and the overlooked around the world,” the Jackson family said. Veteran American civil rights activist Reverend Jesse Jackson receives Legion of Honour in Paris

### 11 security personnel, 1 child killed in attack

**Peshawar:** Militants rammed a vehicle filled with explosives into an army checkpoint in northwestern Pakistan, killing 11 security personnel and a child, the military said Tuesday, as the South Asian nation battles a surge in violence. Women and children were among seven wounded in Monday’s attack in Bajur district, which lies along the border with Afghanistan, the military said. The militants drove into the wall of a checkpoint after security forces blocked their attempt to enter a residential compound for soldiers, the military said, adding 12 attackers were killed as they attempted to flee the scene.

### Taliban frees three Pakistani soldiers

**Kabul:** Afghanistan’s Taliban government said Tuesday it had released three Pakistani soldiers captured during border clashes in October, in a move mediated by Saudi Arabia amid strained ties and a prolonged frontier closure between the two neighbours. The release comes months after the worst cross-border fighting since the Taliban returned to power in 2021.

### Sannazaro theatre destroyed in blaze

**Naples:** A fire gutted the interior of the historic wood-framed Teatro Sannazaro in a wealthy neighbourhood of the Italian city of Naples Tuesday, officials said. The fire is believed to have started in an apartment block in the Chiaia district, but spread rapidly to the nearby 19th-century theatre, bringing its domed roof crashing to the ground and devastating the plush stalls and tiers of gilded boxes. “Very little of the theatre remains,” Naples fire commander Giuseppe Paduano told reporters.

## Rahman faces political stability, economic recovery challenges



Tarique Rahman sworn in as Bangladesh’s PM after landslide election victory

REUTERS

**Dhaka, Feb 17:** Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) leader Tarique Rahman was sworn in as prime minister Tuesday, marking an important political shift in the South Asian nation following a period of turmoil.

Rahman, 60, son of former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia and assassinated President Ziaur Rahman, takes office after his party’s sweeping parliamentary election victory.

He faces urgent challenges, including restoring political stability, rebuilding investor confidence, and reviving key industries such as the garment sector after the turmoil that followed the Gen Z-led uprising that toppled Sheikh Hasina’s government in 2024.

An interim administration led by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus ran the country through the transitional period leading up to the election.

### MIX OF EXPERIENCE AND EXPERTISE

Breaking with tradition, the open-air swearing-in ceremony was held at the South Plaza of the national parliament building, instead of the Bangabhaban, the president’s official residence.

President Mohammed Shahabuddin officiated as Rahman and his 49-member council of ministers took oaths in the presence of senior political figures, diplomats, civil and military officials, and representatives from countries including China, India and Pakistan.

The new government includes both senior and junior ministers - a mix of experienced BNP leaders and fresh faces, reflecting an effort to balance political experience with technocratic expertise as the government focuses on economic

recovery, law and order, and governance reforms.

Former Commerce Minister Amir Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury was named finance minister, and Khalilur Rahman, who was national security adviser in the interim government, was made foreign minister.

Rahman’s BNP secured a commanding two-thirds majority, returning to power after nearly two decades. The Islamist party Jamaat-e-Islami, contesting its first election since a 2013 ban was lifted following Hasina’s ouster, won a record 68 seats.

Hasina’s Awami League party was banned from contesting after its registration was revoked by the Election Commission.

Jamaat and its allies — including the National Citizen Party (NCP), led by youth activists who played a prominent role in the movement that toppled Hasina — will form the opposition.

### JAMAAT, NCP BOYCOTT EVENT

Jamaat and the NCP did not attend the ceremony in protest after Rahman’s party rejected the interim government’s request for its lawmakers to take an additional oath under the proposed ‘Constitution Reform Council’. The council intends to amend the constitution following the referendum held alongside the national election.

Rahman’s elevation caps a long and turbulent political journey. He returned to Bangladesh last year after 17 years of self-imposed exile in London, arriving shortly before his mother’s death.

Rivals have long criticised his political record, pointing to corruption allegations he denies, but his return energised party supporters and reshaped the BNP’s campaign.

In his first remarks after the election, Rahman urged calm and restraint, saying, “Peace, law and order must be maintained at any cost ... We will not tolerate any kind of chaos.”

Ireland’s Data Protection Commission opened an investigation into Grok February 17, examining its handling of personal data and potential to generate harmful sexualized images and videos, including of minors. The DPC oversees X in the EU as the company’s European headquarters are in Ireland.

Spain’s government meanwhile ordered prosecutors to probe X, Meta and TikTok over alleged distribution of AI-generated child sexual abuse material, Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez said.

Britain’s media regulator Ofcom has launched an investigation into X to determine whether sexually intimate deepfakes produced by Grok violated its duty to protect people in the UK from content that could be illegal, under the country’s Online Safety Act framework.

Paris prosecutor’s cybercrime unit raided X’s office in Paris February 3 and ordered

Based on the transformational achievements... during the Eighth period, the Ninth Congress of the party will set a grander goal of restoration and creation

KIM JONG UN | LEADER, NORTH KOREA

REUTERS

**Geneva, Feb 17:** Negotiators from Ukraine and Russia began two days of US-mediated peace talks in Geneva Tuesday that will focus on the main sticking point of land, with US President Donald Trump pressing Kyiv to act fast to reach a deal.

Trump is urging Moscow and Kyiv to reach a deal to end Europe’s biggest war since 1945, though Zelenskyy has complained that his country is facing the greatest pressure to make concessions.

Lead Ukrainian negotiator Rustem Umerov said “security and humanitarian issues” would be on the agenda.

“We are working constructively, focused and without excessive expectations,” he posted on X. “Our task is to maximally advance those solutions that can bring sustainable peace closer.”

### HEAVY AIRSTRIKES ON UKRAINE OVERNIGHT

Ahead of the talks, Russia carried out heavy airstrikes overnight across swathes of Ukraine, inflicting severe damage to the power network in the southern port city of Odesa, which Ukrainian President

REUTERS

**Geneva, Feb 17:** Iran and the United States reached an understanding Tuesday on main “guiding principles” in talks aimed at resolving their longstanding nuclear dispute, but that does not mean a deal is imminent, Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi said.

Oil futures fell and the benchmark Brent crude contract tumbled more than 1% after Araqchi’s comments, which helped ease fears of conflict in the region, where the US has deployed a battle force to press Tehran for concessions.

“Different ideas have been presented, these ideas have been seriously discussed, ultimately we’ve been able to reach a general agreement on some guiding principles,” Araqchi told Iranian media after the talks concluded in Geneva.

### BOTH SIDES HAVE ‘CLEAR NEXT STEPS’

The indirect discussions between US Special Envoy Steve Witkoff and US President Donald Trump’s son-in-law Jared Kushner, alongside Araqchi, were mediated by Oman. The White House did not respond to emailed questions about the meeting.

Oman’s Foreign Minister Badr al-Busaidi said in a post

## UKRAINE, RUSSIA BEGIN GENEVA TALKS

# Trump piles new pressure on Kyiv



US-mediated talks in Geneva follow two rounds in Abu Dhabi

and remains the key sticking point in the talks

Hopes are low for any major breakthrough

Talks come ahead of fourth anniversary of Russian invasion

Volodymyr Zelenskyy said left tens of thousands without heat and water.

Zelenskyy called for Kyiv’s allies to increase pressure on

Russia to reach a “real and just” peace deal via tougher sanctions and weapons supplies to Ukraine.

Trump pointed to Ukraine when asked by reporters what he was expecting from the talks in Geneva, which were following a morning of negotiations between US and Iranian officials at a different venue in the Swiss lakeside city.

“Well, we have big talks,” Trump told reporters aboard Air Force One. “It’s going to be very easy. I mean, look, so far, Ukraine better come to the table fast. That’s all I’m telling you.”

Russia is demanding that Ukraine cede the remaining 20% of the eastern region of Donetsk that Moscow has failed to capture - something Kyiv refuses to do.

“This time, the idea is to discuss a broader range of issues, including, in fact, the main ones. The main issues concern both the territories and everything else related to the demands we have put forward,” Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters Monday.

### NEGOTIATING TWO CRISES AT ONCE

The venue has switched to Geneva after Abu Dhabi hosted two rounds of talks that both sides described as constructive but which failed to reach any major breakthrough.

US envoys Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner were representing the Trump administration at the talks, a source told Reuters.

In a rare attempt to negotiate two major global crises simultaneously, they attended the morning indirect negotiations with Iranian officials in Geneva before crossing town to mediate the talks between Ukraine and Russia.

## SA’s Hindu, Muslim groups unite over burial law concerns

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

**Johannesburg, Feb 17:** South Africa’s Hindu and Muslim organisations have united in objecting to a proposed law which could delay cremations and burials for several days, requiring the obtainment of electronic death certificates before it.

Traditionally, cremations and burials are done on the same day of the death or as soon as possible thereafter in these religions. The proposed law will require organisations and individuals to first obtain electronic death certificates from the Department of Home Affairs before proceeding with cremations or burials.

Officials from various organisations said this would become impractical when the department was closed for weekends and sometimes for up to four days at a time for public holidays, such as during the Easter weekend.

In a letter to the department, the Hindu Coordinating Council (HCC) explained the Hindu cycle of ‘Samsara’, consisting of birth, death, and rebirth.

Badal added that the HCC was also concerned about the potential impact on rural areas with limited internet connectivity and the possible infringement on the rights of those who may not have access to digital technology.

# Musk’s Grok faces global scrutiny for sexualised AI deepfakes



Musk to face questions in April regarding a widening investigation over alleged algorithmic bias, complicity in the detention and diffusion of images of child-pornographic nature and the violation of a person’s image rights with sexually explicit deepfakes.

Italy’s data protection authority warned that using AI tools to create “undressed” deepfake imagery of real people without consent could amount to serious privacy violations

and, in some cases, criminal offences.

The Spanish government has ordered prosecutors to investigate social media platforms X, Meta and TikTok.

### ASIA

India’s IT ministry sent X a formal notice January 2 over alleged Grok-enabled creation or sharing of obscene sexualised images, directing the content to be taken down and requiring a report on the actions being taken within 72 hours.

Japan also probed X over Grok, stating that the government would consider every possible option to prevent the generation of inappropriate images.

Indonesia’s communications and digital ministry said it had blocked access to Grok, a move digital minister Meutya Hafid said was meant to protect women and children from AI-generated fake pornographic content, citing Indonesia’s strict anti-pornography laws.

Malaysia restored access to Grok for its users after X implemented additional safety measures, its communications regulator said January 23.

The Philippines will reinstate access to Grok after its developer pledged to remove image-manipulation tools that had sparked child-safety concerns, the country’s cybercrime investigation unit said January 21.

### AMERICAS

California’s governor and attorney general said January 14

they were demanding answers from xAI amid the spread of non-consensual sexual images on the platform.

Canada’s privacy watchdog said it was widening an existing investigation into X after reports that Grok was generating non-consensual, sexually explicit deepfakes.

Brazil’s government and federal prosecutors gave xAI 30 days to prevent the chatbot from spreading fake sexualised content, according to a joint statement January 20.

### OCEANIA

Australia’s online-safety regulator eSafety said on January 7 it was investigating Grok-generated sexualised deepfake images, assessing adult material under its image-based abuse scheme and noting current child-related examples it had reviewed did not meet the legal threshold for child sexual abuse material under Australian law.

REUTERS







Ahmedabad demands runs from Abhishek’s bat as India look to improve spin play

# Men in Blue await Dutch

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

**Ahmedabad, Feb 17:** A peer-less India will be hoping that Abhishek Sharma returns to his destructive ways and the other batters up their game against spin when the side takes the field for its final T20 World Cup league fixture against the Netherlands here Wednesday.

Having established himself as one of the most dangerous batters in the game over the last 18 months, Abhishek is yet to go ballistic in the ICC event at home thus far.

After a nought in the opener, a stomach infection forced him out of the game against Namibia. He returned for the high stakes Pakistan contest but failed to get a run for the second time in as many matches.

But with Ishan Kishan showing imperious form at the other end, the lack of runs from Abhishek's bat have not impacted the team's cause.

To be fair to the 25-year-old, his high-risk play has resulted in multiple wins for India and perhaps it is only a matter of time before he makes the best of bowlers look ordinary again.

However, four ducks in his last six innings do suggest that he may need to review his plans in the powerplay.

Considering his intimidating credentials, it is clear that teams have spent extra time in preparation to tackle the India opener. With India already through to the next stage of the tournament, the Netherlands game presents an ideal opportunity for him to get back among the runs.

India managed to make short work of Pakistan, thanks to a sublime effort from Kishan and the bowlers. However, for the second game in a row, the batters did not show the conviction displayed by Kishan.

After Namibia captain Gerhard Erasmus was able to trouble the Indian batters with his round arm and behind the



## Zim enter Super 8s; Aus, Ire eliminated

**Pallekele:** Zimbabwe entered the Super 8 stage of the T20 World Cup Tuesday after their crucial Group B match against Ireland was washed out due to rain, a result that also eliminated former champions Australia and Ireland from the tournament. Both teams were awarded one point each. The shared points took Zimbabwe to five, enough to secure a Super 8 berth. They will face India in their opening Super 8 match February 26 in Chennai. Zimbabwe became the seventh team to get a ticket to the Super 8s, completing group G1 also comprising India, South Africa and West Indies. Zimbabwe will play their final group match against co-hosts Sri Lanka February 19. With table-toppers Sri Lanka (6) having already qualified for the Super 8s, the contest held significant importance for Zimbabwe and Ireland, who had come into the game with four and two points respectively.

## New Zealand beat Canada by 8 wickets

**Chennai:** New Zealand's top-order batters Rachin Ravindra and Glenn Phillips scored unbeaten half-centuries to guide their team to an eight-wicket win over Canada in a T20 World Cup Group D match here Tuesday. After young Canadian opener Yuvraj Samra played a defiant 110 off 65 balls, featuring 11 boundaries and six sixes to help his side post a challenging 173 for 4, New Zealand's experienced batters made chasing the target look easy. They overhauled it in 15.1 overs, with Ravindra scoring an unbeaten 59 runs off 39 balls and Phillips contributing 77 not out off 36 balls. Their partnership yielded 146 runs for the third wicket.

## Nepal snap 12-year winless run in T20WC

**Mumbai:** Kushal Bhurtel's early fireworks and Dipendra Singh Airee's unbeaten fifty helped Nepal end their 12-year-long winless run in T20 World Cup with a seven-wicket triumph against Scotland in an inconsequential Group C match here Tuesday. Nepal had gone winless since 2014 when they beat Afghanistan and the Netherlands on T20 World Cup debut, but the Rhinos signed off from this edition with a memorable victory in front of more than 19,000 fans at the Wankhede Stadium here. Chasing 171, Nepal responded with 171/3 in 19.2 overs with Airee's quickfire 50 not out off 23 balls. Earlier, Michael Jones' brisk 71 steered Scotland to a competitive 170 for 7. Both the teams were out of reckoning for the Super Eights with the West Indies and England advancing to the next round from the group.

## FIH PRO LEAGUE

# Hardik to lead India in Hobart

*Men in Blue will be aiming to seek redemption after losing all four matches at home, including a shocking 0-8 drubbing at the hands of Argentina*

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

**New Delhi, Feb 17:** Mid-fielder Hardik Singh was Tuesday named captain of the embattled Indian men's hockey team for its FIH Pro League matches in Hobart from February 20 to 25 after regular skipper Harmanpreet Singh opted out due to "personal reasons."

The upcoming leg of the tournament will feature India alongside Spain and hosts Australia at the Tasmania Hockey Centre in Hobart.

The side lost all its four matches in the just-concluded Rourkela leg, which included a shocking 0-8 drubbing at the hands of Argentina.

"After a disappointing four matches in Rourkela, where the results didn't go our way, we've learned some good lessons and made some notable improvements," India coach Craig Fulton said.

New captain Hardik is a two-time Olympic bronze-medalist. The team will also feature youngsters including Amandeep Lakra and Manmeet Singh, who made their debut appearances for the senior team during the Rourkela leg.

"Harmanpreet Singh will not be part of the squad due to personal reasons," Hockey India said in a statement.

A source close to the player said that the seasoned campaigner would be missing the games to welcome his second child with wife Amandeep Kaur.

Suraj Karkera and Mohith Honnenahalli Shashikumar will share the goalkeeping responsibilities. Pawan, who was there in the Rourkela leg, makes way for Mohith in the



squad.

Amit Rohidas, Jarmanpreet Singh, Jugraj Singh, Sanjay, and Sumit add the experience to the defensive unit that also includes exciting youngsters such as Amandeep Lakra, Yashdeep Siwach, and Poovanna Chandura Bobby.

Hardik, Sanjay, Vivek Sagar Prasad and Raj Kumar Pal will anchor the mid-field alongside Rajinder Singh, Manmeet Singh, Moirangthem Rabi-chandra Singh and Vishnu Kant Singh.

The forward line will be led by established stars including Mandeep Singh, Abhishek and Shilanand Lakra.

Striker Maninder Singh also marks his return to the team. He last played for India in the FIH Hockey Pro League in 2023-24.

Another forward Angad Bir Singh, who made his debut for the senior team last year, also comes back to the team for his first international tour, while young guns Arajeet Singh Hundal and Aditya Arjun Lalage complete the attacking line.

"Going into the Hobart leg, we're aiming for improved performances and looking to finalise our squad for the World Cup and the Asian Games," Fulton said.

## India's squad

**Goalkeepers:** Suraj Karkera, Mohith Honnenahalli Shashikumar

**Defenders:** Amit Rohidas, Jarmanpreet Singh, Jugraj Singh, Sanjay, Sumit, Amandeep Lakra, Yashdeep Siwach, Poovanna Chandura Bobby.

**Midfielders:** Rajinder Singh, Manmeet Singh, Vivek Sagar Prasad, Hardik Singh, Moirangthem Rabi-chandra Singh, Vishnu Kant Singh, Raj Kumar Pal.

**Forwards:** Abhishek, Shilanand Lakra, Mandeep Singh, Arajeet Singh Hundal, Aditya Arjun Lalage, Angad Bir Singh, Maninder Singh.

| TODAY'S CLASHES |  |
|-----------------|--|
|                 | <b>South Africa vs UAE</b><br>Time- 11:00 am |
|                 | <b>Pakistan vs Namibia</b><br>Time- 3:00 pm  |
|                 | <b>India vs Netherlands</b><br>Time- 7:00 pm |

## SHORT TAKES

### Fit-again Pratika added to squad for Oz ODI series

**New Delhi:** Having recuperated from an ankle injury, batter Pratika Rawal was Tuesday added to India's women's cricket squad for a three-match ODI series against Australia beginning February 24 in Brisbane. Rawal picked up the injury during the World Cup last year while fielding during a game against Bangladesh. She was replaced by Shafali Verma in the tournament that India went on to win for the first time. After the opening game in Brisbane, the other two ODIs of the series will be held in Hobart February 27 and March 1. The 25-year-old is already a part of the Test squad for the one-off game from March 6 in Perth.

### Nagal advances to 2nd round

**New Delhi:** India's top-ranked singles tennis player Sumit Nagal opened his campaign with a straight game win over Spain's David Jorda Sanchis at the Delhi Open here Tuesday. However, the day also produced a major upset as top seed Dane Sweeny of Australia was knocked out in the opening round by Kazakhstan's Belbit Zhukayev. Nagal, ranked No 297 in the world, defeated Sanchis 6-3, 7-5 in one hour and 27 minutes to move to the second round. Nagal broke the Spainiard in the opening game of the first set and maintained his advantage to take it to 6-3. The second set proved more competitive, with both players holding serve until the Indian secured the decisive break in the 11th game and served out the match. Nagal's win was the lone positive result in singles for the Indian contingent, with 18-year-old Manas Dhamne, qualifier Manish Sureshkumar and wildcard entrant Digvijay Singh all bowing out in their openers. Kazakhstan's Zhukayev, ranked No 292 in the world, produced the biggest upset of the tournament, as the 25-year-old came from a set down to beat top seed and World No 134 Sweeny 6-7 (6), 6-2, 6-2.

## LA LIGA

# Yamal misses penalty as Barca collapse to Girona

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

**Girona (Spain), Feb 17:** Lamine Yamal missed a penalty as Barcelona lost at Girona 2-1 Monday and passed up a chance to overtake Real Madrid at the top of La Liga.

The defeat was the second in less than a week for Barcelona and left it second in the table, two points behind Madrid.

A win would have taken it above its archrival but, instead, a crisis brewed for coach Hansi Flick, whose side lost to Atletico Madrid 4-0 in the Copa del Rey last week. The second loss came even though Barcelona took the lead early in the second half.

Yamal hit the post with his spot kick on the stroke of half-time but 14 minutes into the second period Pau Cubarsi met Jules Kounde's cross from the right and placed his header perfectly into the top corner.

The goal was Barcelona's



100th in all competitions this season and made it the second club in Europe's big five domestic leagues to hit the century after Bayern Munich.

However, Girona roared back into the game just three minutes later. Barcelona's Joan Garcia was already the busier of the two goalkeepers but he could not stop Thomas Lemar side-footing home from close range after nice work from Vladyslav Vanat on the left wing.

Both sides pushed for a decisive second and it was Girona who executed with three minutes remaining, substitute Fran Beltran scoring with a low shot from just inside the box.

## BAN TO BELIEF

### After being handed 18-month ban, the para-badminton star redeemed himself by clinching his sixth SL3 singles gold, scripting his comeback run

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

**New Delhi, Feb 17:** From missing 2024 Paralympics due to suspension handed by the BWF to a triumphant return to rewrite badminton history, Pramod Bhagat's recent world title was less about the success but more about reclaiming a life, career and lost trust.

Returning to action after being handed 18-month ban for violating the BWF's anti-doping whereabouts clause, Bhagat

redeemed himself by clinching his sixth SL3 singles gold at the Para World Championships.

The victory delivered Bhagat his fourth consecutive singles world title, but its emotional weight far outweighed the numbers.

"I was banned for one and a half years. I missed my Paralympics. After that, I came back and became world champion again. So this medal is very close to me because I have seen a lot of difficult situations in this phase of my life," Bhagat told PTI during an interview.

The 37-year-old had watched helplessly as 2024 Paris Paralympics slipped away, a crushing blow for a player who had dominated his category for more than a decade. For many, it could have been the end. But for Bhagat, it became a starting point.

"I was determined that when

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE

**Dubai, Feb 17:** India delivered a commanding performance at the opening Dubai 2026 Grand Prix- Fazza International Athletics Championships, finishing on top of the medals table with an overall 43 medals, laced by 16 gold, 13 silver and 14 bronze. Colombia and Kenya followed with 11 and 6 gold from their 20 medals each, while the hosts UAE finished fourth with 6 gold out of 31 medals at the first World Para Athletics Grand Prix of the season.

For India, who will host the next WPA Grand Prix at the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium in New Delhi, it was important for their athletes to open the season with confidence, and they did it exactly that way at the Dubai Club for People of Determination grounds.

Two-time Paralympic champion Sumit Antil returned to one of his favourite grounds with the gold in men's javelin



F64, while his fellow throwers and Paris 2024 gold medallists Navdeep (men's javelin F41) and Dharambir Nain (men's club throw F51) also began the season on a winning note in Dubai. They were joined by Paris 2024 double bronze medallist Preeti Pal who claimed gold and bronze in women's 100m and 200m T35 events, respectively. Her medal in Dubai reaffirmed her consistency after the Paris

# Bhagat sets eye on Asian Games, LA 2028



I come back, I will stand out from my thoughts and continue the dominance I had before. All my matches were straight games. None went to a crucial stage. That shows my mindset," he said.

The SL3 class is for standing players with significant lower limb impairment.

Bhagat defeated Indonesia's Muhammad Al Imran 21-12, 21-18 in the final to claim the title.

His title also made him the most decorated men's singles world champion in badminton history, surpassing Chinese Lin Dan's five world crowns in able-bodied badminton.

Yet Bhagat insisted the mile-

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PRAMOD BHAGAT

stone was secondary to proving himself again.

Bhagat later added a second gold, pairing with Sukant Kadam to win the men's doubles SL3-SL4 title, completing a golden double that underlined the completeness of his comeback.

Behind the medals lies months of quiet rebuilding in Pune under former Olympian Nikhil Kanetkar, focusing on rhythm, basics and mental strength. With his status

restored, Bhagat has already turned his focus to the future.

"Our next target is the Asian Games in Japan and then the Paralympics in Los Angeles," he said.

"We will prepare well for both. We will discuss new techniques, experiment with some new strokes and keep improving."

He believes India's standing categories are entering a golden phase.

So how will Bhagat celebrate? Well, not with parties.

"This time, I will go to my village. I will go to my family, friends and all the villagers," he said.

"They were very upset about this ban. They had big hopes for Paris. I want to regain their hope and trust.

"I will try to move forward. And in 2028, I will try to live up to their trust," he signed off.