

SHORT TAKES

Two killed in clash during Ravidas Shobhayatra in Haridwar village

Roorkee, Feb 2: Tension prevailed in the Bhagwanpur area of Roorkee in Uttarakhand's Haridwar district after a violent clash between two rival groups during a religious procession claimed two lives and left three others seriously injured on Sunday. The incident took place in Binarasi village during a bhandara organised as part of the Ravidas Shobhayatra. Following the violence, police deployed heavy security from multiple police stations, including Jhabrera, Roorkee and Kaliyar, to prevent further escalation. According to police sources, the clash erupted around 5 pm due to a long-standing rivalry and a dispute linked to "social prestige". What began as a verbal altercation soon escalated into a violent confrontation, during which firearms were allegedly used. Anand (28), a resident of Binarasi village, died on the spot after being shot in the chest. Later in the night, the body of Mangeram, belonging to the rival faction, was recovered from a nearby field. Preliminary findings indicate that he was beaten to death. The killings triggered protests by the victims' families and local residents, who blocked the road by placing Anand's body on it and refused to allow post-mortem examinations until the accused were arrested. Senior police officials intervened and managed to pacify the crowd, following which the bodies were sent for autopsy late in the evening.

Clash erupts in Chhattisgarh village, six cops injured

Gariaband, Feb 2: Violence erupted between two communities in Dudhkaiyya village of Chhattisgarh's Gariaband district on Sunday evening after three men, recently released on bail, allegedly attacked locals, police said. Six police personnel were injured in stone-pelting while trying to control the clashes, the authorities added. The accused, including a man identified as Arif, had been arrested a year ago for vandalising a temple idol. After being released, they allegedly harassed witnesses and intimidated villagers. On Sunday morning, they reportedly attacked four to six youths with rods, triggering the communal tension. Angry villagers gheraoed the accused's homes, setting them on fire, while a few vehicles were also torched. Gariaband SP Vedvrat Sirmour said additional forces were deployed, all three accused were re-arrested, and three cases registered. The situation is now under control.

Uttarakhand to launch online portal for LUCC scam victims

Dehradun, Feb 2: In a major relief for over 1.5 lakh investors affected by the Loni Urban Multi-State Credit & Thrift Co-operative Society (LUCC) scam, the Uttarakhand government has decided to launch a dedicated integrated online portal to enable victims to submit their complaints. The decision follows a formal request made by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) on January 14. Acting on this, Secretary Dilip Jawalkar directed the State Cooperation Department to immediately initiate the development of the portal. The LUCC management is accused of cheating investors of nearly Rs 800 crore by luring them with attractive returns on fixed and recurring deposits. The society operated through 35 branches across Uttarakhand and deployed hundreds of agents to mobilise small savings, primarily from rural and semi-urban areas. The scam surfaced in June 2024 after all LUCC offices abruptly shut down. The first FIR was registered at the Kotdwar police station based on a complaint by Tripti Negi, following which multiple complaints poured in. So far, 18 FIRs have been registered across six districts, including Dehradun and Haridwar, and more than 12 officials and agents have been arrested. Initially, the probe was handled by the state CID. However, a Public Interest Litigation filed by Ashutosh Negi, later merged with another petition by Vishal Chhetri, prompted the Uttarakhand High Court to intervene.

‘Gayaki, Gat, Ghazal’ Musical Evening Enthrals Hyderabad Audience at Taramati Baradari

Hyderabad: Chowrangee, a Hyderabad-based cultural platform celebrating India's artistic heritage, curated a captivating musical soiree titled "Gayaki, Gat, Ghazal" at the historic Taramati Baradari, offering music lovers a rich and immersive classical-contemporary experience.

The evening featured a distinguished lineup of acclaimed musicians including sitar maestro Purbayan Chatterjee and noted vocalist Gayatri Asokan, along with Ishaan Ghosh, Shikhar Naad Qureshi, Abshaar Ahmad, and Steve Thomas Kottoor. Together, they presented a seamless blend of classical, contemporary, and ghazal traditions. A major highlight of the programme was a spellbinding jugalbandi



Shri Navin Mittal, IAS, Special Chief Secretary, Energy at Government of Telangana, inaugurating the rare and extraordinary confluence of world-class artistry - 'Gayaki, Gat, Ghazal', hosted by Chowrangee, a new-age platform dedicated to arts and culture in the city of Hyderabad, at Taramati Baradari. Dr Santanu Paul, President, Chowrangee; look on.

between sitar and vocals, which drew prolonged applause and created a deeply meditative atmosphere. The repertoire included evocative pieces such as Waterbird, Lullaby, Garaj Garaj, Barsan Lagi, and Pace of Mind, along with popular ghazals like Ishq Ishq Hai, Harsoo Dikhai Dete Hain, and

Baat Karni Mujhse Mushkil. Organisers said the concert reflected Chowrangee's core philosophy of artistic dialogue and cross-cultural harmony, bringing together diverse musical styles and sensibilities on a single stage. Chowrangee President Dr Santanu Paul said the evening evolved into a free-flowing musical conversation where classical depth and global influences blended naturally, leaving audiences with a memorable and transcendent cultural experience. Chowrangee, an initiative of the Bengal and Beyond Foundation, continues to curate high-quality programmes across music, theatre, dance, and visual arts, aimed at fostering inclusive cultural exchange in the city.

Rajkot man held for repeatedly raping daughter, second FIR likely

Rajkot (TSIT): Rajkot Rural Police on Saturday arrested a man for allegedly raping his daughter repeatedly over the past several years. The survivor is now an adult. Police officials said another FIR is likely to be registered against the accused on Sunday for a similar offence against his teenage niece. According to police, the accused works as an electronics repair technician and was affected by polio at the age of seven months. He lived in a joint family with his wife, who is suffering from advanced-stage breast cancer, his daughter, and the wife and daughter of his younger brother, who

works in another town. Rajkot Rural Superintendent of Police Vijay Singh Gurjar said the case came to light after the accused filed a missing person complaint for his daughter at the jurisdictional police station on January 3. Initial efforts to trace the woman were unsuccessful. The accused later approached senior police officials, following which the Local Crime Branch (LCB) was assigned the case. The woman was traced on January 28 at an apartment in Rajkot city. During questioning, she told police that she had left home voluntarily and did not wish to return.

Further investigation revealed that the woman had allegedly been subjected to continuous sexual assault by her father over several years. She also alleged that the accused had sexually assaulted her minor cousin. Police said the woman had earlier informed her cousin's parents, but her claims were not believed. SP Gurjar said joint questioning was conducted to verify the allegations, following which the accused was booked under relevant sections of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) and the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act.

Fresh controversy at Sabarimala over film shooting

Thiruvananthapuram, Feb 2: A fresh controversy has erupted at the Sabarimala temple, already under scrutiny in connection with the gold heist case, with a Devaswom Vigilance investigation finding that a film shoot was conducted in violation of restrictions at the holy shrine and its surroundings. According to an inquiry report submitted by Superintendent of Police, Devaswom Vigilance, Sunil Kumar, shooting for a feature film took place over multiple days at Pampa and nearby areas. The report further states that on the auspicious day



of Makara Vilakku, shooting was carried out at a hilltop location close to the Sabarimala temple complex. The findings contradict earlier claims by the film's director, Anuraj Manohar, who had maintained that no shooting took place at the Sannidhanam. The director had earlier

been booked in connection with the incident. However, the vigilance report makes it clear that while shooting did occur in restricted zones, there is no mention of any police permission having been granted for the filming. This omission has raised serious questions about procedural lapses and possible violations of established norms governing activities in and around the pilgrimage centre. The vigilance report, supported by video evidence of the shoot, has been formally handed over to Travancore Devaswom Board (TDB) President K. Jayakumar.

Jaishankar heads to US for critical minerals talks, to meet senior American officials

New Delhi, Feb 2: External affairs minister S. Jaishankar is set to begin a three-day official visit to the United States starting Monday, during which he will participate in the Critical Minerals Ministerial convened by US secretary of state Marco Rubio, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) announced. According to the MEA, the ministerial meeting will focus on strengthening supply chain resilience, advancing clean energy transitions, and enhancing strategic cooperation in the critical minerals sector—an area of growing importance for both countries.

During his visit from February 2 to 4, EAM Jaishankar is also scheduled to hold a series of meetings with senior members of the US administration to discuss key bilateral and regional issues. The visit follows a series of high-level engagements between Indian and US officials. Last week, Jaishankar met US Ambassador to India Sergio Gor in New Delhi, where the two discussed various aspects of the India-US partnership. Welcoming the ambassador, Jaishankar expressed confidence in Gor's role in further strengthening bilateral ties.



Highlight Points:

- External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar will undertake a three-day official visit to the United States from February 2 to 4, participating in the Critical Minerals Ministerial to strengthen supply chain resilience, clean energy cooperation, and strategic ties.
- The visit underscores growing India-US engagement, with Jaishankar set to hold high-level meetings on bilateral and regional issues, following recent interactions with US officials on trade, Indo-Pacific security, critical minerals, and global developments.

“Pleased to meet US Ambassador to India Sergio Gor today in New Delhi. Our conversation covered the many dimensions of our partnership. Welcomed him and expressed confidence that he would contribute to the strengthening of India-US relations,” Jaishankar posted on X. On January 25, the External Affairs Minister also met a US Congressional delegation that included Mike Rogers, Adam Smith, and Jimmy Patronis, along with Ambassador Gor. Discussions during the meeting focused on enhancing bilateral cooperation, developments in the Indo-Pacific region, and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. Reflecting on

the engagement, Jaishankar noted on X that interactions with the US Congress have long been a vital component of the bilateral relationship. Earlier, on January 13, US secretary of state Marco Rubio held a telephone conversation with Jaishankar, during which the two reviewed major areas of cooperation such as civil nuclear energy, trade negotiations, and regional security in the Indo-Pacific. Ambassador Gor later described the conversation as positive, noting that the leaders discussed next steps in bilateral trade talks, cooperation on critical minerals, and the possibility of a meeting in the coming month.

Rahul, Congress must apologise for ‘sin’ of surrendering territory to China: Kiren Rijiju



New Delhi: Parliamentary Affairs Minister Kiren Rijiju on Monday sought an apology from the Congress and Leader of the Opposition in Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi for his controversial “Chinese tanks in Doklam” remark and also for the sin of surrendering Indian territory to China in the past. Addressing reporters after an adjournment in Lok Sabha over Rahul Gandhi's remarks, Rijiju said compromising our territory will never be allowed; in fact, the Congress must apologise for the sins it committed by surrendering Indian territory to China before 1959 and in 1962. “Under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India would not surrender even an inch of its land,” he said, calling Rahul Gandhi's claims a bid to create a false narrative and project India as a weak nation. Criticising Gandhi's unsubstantiated claims, Rijiju said the Congress must apologise. “They can't reclaim the land that the Congress government surrendered to China 50-60 years ago. If they cannot undo the past, at least they can apologise,” said Rijiju. The Minister also disapproved of Gandhi's reluctance

to follow the instructions of the Chair and wasting nearly 30 minutes of the House. “We wanted to hear each other on Motion of Thanks to the President's Address and proceed to the next agenda, but just because Rahul Gandhi is born in a particular family, he considers himself above the House and its rules,” he said. Rijiju also assailed Congress MPs clapping over the LoP's repeated refusal to follow instructions from Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla and prevent the House from functioning as per rules. “I want Rahul Gandhi to introspect, apply his mind and advise his party MPs to function democratically and follow the rules of the House,” he said. The Minister said that if Indian territory has been surrendered to China, it has been done under the Congress rule in the past. He said under PM Modi, the border infrastructure has improved, and the armed forces are serving with full strength on the border. Rijiju parried a question over possible disciplinary action by the Speaker against Rahul Gandhi for his undemocratic behaviour, saying that this is a secondary matter which will be addressed later.

Calcutta High Court orders police to ensure full security for opposition political events

In his petition, Adhikari alleged that BJP leaders' public programmes were frequently disrupted by violence and resistance, despite prior intimation being given to the police.



Kolkata, Feb 2: A division bench of the Calcutta High Court on Monday directed the West Bengal Police and Kolkata Police to provide complete and uncompromised security for public political programmes organised by elected representatives of opposition parties. The order came in response to a petition filed by Leader of Opposition in the West Bengal Assembly, Suwendu Adhikari, who had approached the High

Court in October last year seeking judicial intervention to ensure long-term protection for public events held by Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) legislators and parliamentarians, including Union ministers of state. The petition cited repeated instances of hostility and obstruction allegedly faced from ruling Trinamool Congress activists. After hearing the matter, the bench comprising

chief justice Sujoy Paul and justice Partha Sarathi Sen instructed both the state police and the city police to ensure absolute security for opposition leaders during their public political engagements. The court further directed that its order be strictly complied with until February 18, the next date of hearing in the case. In his petition, Adhikari

alleged that BJP leaders' public programmes were frequently disrupted by violence and resistance, despite prior intimation being given to the police. He argued that such incidents pointed to a systemic failure of the police and the state administration in maintaining law and order. According to Adhikari, such disruptions have become increasingly common since the conclusion of the 2021 Assembly elections in West Bengal. He also highlighted that his own convoy had been attacked multiple times since 2021, allegedly by Trinamool Congress supporters, leading the Union Home Ministry to enhance his security cover. The petition also referred to attacks on the convoys of BJP Lok Sabha MP Khagen Murmu and Sankar Ghosh, the chief whip of the BJP's legislative party in the West Bengal Assembly, last year. Both leaders sustained serious injuries in those incidents and had to be hospitalised.

EDITORIAL

IS 'INVISIBLE KERALA' PAYING THE PRICE FOR BEING 'UNALIGNED'?

The Union Budget 2026-27 has landed with a thud in Kerala - not because of what it contains, but because of what it omits. For a state that contributes richly to India's skilled workforce, tourism brand, and foreign exchange reserves, the silence is deafening. No AIIMS. No high-speed rail. No last-mile connectivity to Vizhinjam port. No special packages, despite this being an election year. The Finance Minister's speech might as well have skipped us entirely. As the Member of Parliament for Kerala's capital, I watched our State Budget unfold with hope - hope that the Centre would match our aspirations with support. Instead, we've been handed a reality check. The State Budget was built on a fantasy of central funds that the Union Budget has now explicitly failed to deliver. The result? A fiscal mirage evaporating in the heat of political indifference.

No Vote, No Voice?
The tragedy is not just economic - it's political. The Centre sees no electoral gain in Kerala, so it offers no economic gain. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government has made a cold calculation: why invest in a state that doesn't vote for us? Meanwhile, the Left Democratic Front (LDF) government in Kerala screams "victim" but fails to present bankable projects or negotiate effectively with New Delhi. It proposes paper trains and acronyms - RRTS instead of SilverLine - but lacks the fiscal discipline or strategic clarity to make them real. Caught in this federal standoff is the common Malayali. We pay the price for a Centre indifferent to our pain and a State in denial of its own profligacy. We welcome headlines about coconut and cashew promotion schemes, but without concrete procurement prices or export support, they remain shell promises.

Many Ironies
We hear of national corridors and maritime ambitions, but Vizhinjam - India's gateway to global trade, our only port that can host the world's largest container ships - is treated as a local afterthought, with no Central support for the road and rail connectivity that is hampering its potential as a world-class transshipment port. Similarly, while 20 new National Waterways are to be operationalised, it remains unclear how many - if any - will benefit Kerala. Ship repair ecosystems are promised in Patna and Varanasi, but not in a state with 44 rivers and a rich inland waterway network! Our coastal communities face the deadly peril of sea erosion that has already leached so much of our territory into the sea, but there is no money for the sea-walls and groynes so essential for coastal protection. The Centre says it's the state's problem, and the State says it has no money, so we continue losing seafront to the marauding ocean. (If we lost an inch of territory to a foreign army, we would spare no expense to mobilise our forces and express outrage, but 64 square kilometres of Bharat Mata's soil have been lost from my constituency alone to the sea, and the government couldn't care less.) The lives and livelihoods of our fisherfolk, mostly living below the poverty line, are apparently of no concern to our budget-makers either. Even in sectors where Kerala leads, the neglect is striking. Our state accounts for nearly 72% of India's rubber production, yet close to 100,000 hectares of plantations remain untapped due to ageing trees, out-migration of owners, and a shortage of tappers. The Budget offers no targeted support to address these constraints.

Taxation Without Representation?

The Southern States' Federal Anxiety

R. Suryamurthy
The Sixteenth Finance Commission has not redrawn India's fiscal map, but it has confirmed, with unusual clarity, the structural bargain that underpins it: states that controlled population growth, expanded formal economic activity and generated a disproportionate share of national revenues will continue to finance the Union, while redistribution remains anchored to demographic scale rather than economic contribution—just as political representation itself is poised to tilt further in the same direction. Read alongside what the southern states collectively submitted to the Commission, the award is less a neutral technocratic exercise than a quiet affirmation of where power, money and voice are now expected to reside. Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, Telangana and Andhra Pradesh approached the 16th Finance Commission with memoranda that were strikingly convergent in diagnosis, even if framed in different idioms. All argued that India's fiscal federal architecture has failed to adjust to demographic transition; that population control has become a long-term fiscal penalty rather than a dividend; that indirect tax contribution, tax effort and compliance are systematically undervalued; and that the expanding use of cesses and surcharges has hollowed out the promise of the 41 per cent devolution headline. None asked for the dismantling of redistribution. All asked for recognition that redistribution cannot become a permanent extraction mechanism from a shrinking set of contributor states. The Commission listened. It made limited adjustments. It did not alter the underlying logic. The macro arithmetic explains why the southern grievance refuses to dissipate. The five southern states together account for around 30 per cent of India's GDP while housing just over 18 per cent of its population. Their share in direct taxes, GST collections, exports, formal employment and services output is consistently higher than their demographic

weight. By contrast, the large northern and central states—Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Jharkhand—account for over 40 per cent of the population but less than 30 per cent of GDP, and remain heavily dependent on fiscal transfers to finance even routine expenditure. This divergence is not new; what is new is that it is now demographically locked in. Fertility rates in the South fell below replacement decades ago, while population growth in much of the Hindi heartland remained elevated well into the 2010s. Southern memoranda repeatedly warned the Commission that continuing to privilege population metrics under these conditions would institutionalise a permanent fiscal asymmetry—rewarding demographic lag while penalising demographic discipline. Yet population remains central. Under the 16th Finance Commission's horizontal devolution formula, population (2011) and demographic performance together carry 27.5 per cent weight, while income distance retains a dominant 45 per cent. Against this, the long-demanded recognition of contribution arrives in the form of a 10 per cent weight for "contribution to GDP"—a concession that looks significant on paper but functions more as an adjustment at the margin than a rebalancing of priorities. The distributional outcomes reflect this imbalance. Karnataka emerges as the largest gainer, with its share rising from 3.65 per cent to 4.13 per cent, translating into an additional ₹7,387 crore over five years. Kerala's share increases from 1.93 per cent to 2.38 per cent, yielding about ₹6,975 crore. Tamil Nadu's gains are modest; Telangana and Andhra Pradesh see limited improvement. Politically, these increases are showcased as evidence that contributor states have been "heard". Economically, they barely scratch the surface. Even after the revision, Karnataka—responsible for close to 9 per cent of national GDP and a far higher share of direct taxes—receives just over 4 per cent of the divisible pool. Tamil Nadu and Kerala continue to

receive well under 1 for every 1 they contribute to the Union exchequer. Estimates place the return ratio at 0.50-0.70 for the larger southern states, compared to 2-3 for several northern and central states. These are not rhetorical constructs; they emerge directly from juxtaposing state-wise tax contribution estimates with Finance Commission devolution tables. Southern memoranda were explicit about this asymmetry. Tamil Nadu argued that redistribution had ceased to be transitional and had instead hardened into a permanent cross-subsidy, with little evidence of convergence in productivity or governance outcomes. Kerala highlighted demographic ageing as a fiscal stress that the formula refuses to recognise, even as health and pension costs rise inexorably. Karnataka and Telangana emphasised tax effort and compliance, pointing out that states generating buoyant revenues through formalisation are effectively financing both redistribution and the Centre's own fiscal expansion. On this last point, the memoranda were particularly blunt. All southern states flagged the explosion of cesses and surcharges, now accounting for close to 20 per cent of gross tax revenues, as the single largest erosion of fiscal federalism. Because these levies sit outside the divisible pool, the effective share of states has declined sharply even as the nominal devolution percentage remains fixed at 41 per cent. In effect, contributor states pay into a tax system from which a growing share is never shared back, while expenditure responsibilities continue to be pushed downward. The 16th Finance Commission acknowledges this trend. It does not correct it. The expenditure side compounds the tension. Southern states spend more—both per capita and as a share of GSDP—on health, education, urban infrastructure and social protection, reflecting higher expectations, older populations and denser urbanisation. They also tend to perform better on fiscal discipline metrics, with lower debt stress relative to output and greater transparency.

The Real Reason Mamata Has Taken

The SIR Fight To Delhi

West Bengal Chief Minister and Trinamool Congress chief Mamata Banerjee landed in Delhi on Sunday in full battle-gear, bringing her fight against the Centre over the SIR (Special Intensive Revision) of electoral rolls in the state, to the frontline. She was expected to meet Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar today, demanding that SIR be halted before the assembly polls in Bengal, as the process has created widespread harassment of electors. This comes after she has written seven letters to the ECI on specific issues of SIR that go against "the democratic and constitutional norms" of the People's Representation Act or the rights of the electorate. But even before she lands in the capital, a whole army of family members of 126 BLOs (Block Level Officers) employed by the Election Commission for the grass-roots surveys, who died by suicide or collapsed due to stress, unable to take the mounting pressures of their jobs, have arrived here. The Chief Minister will lead the contingent, with her able lieutenant, Diamond Harbour MP and party's national general secretary, Abhishek Banerjee, holding street protests in the heart of the Capital, taking up the cause of the "victims" of the SIR exercise. The timing also lends itself to full public attention as the country's entire political class is here attending the Budget Session of Parliament. Mamata believes in taking every political battle to the streets, showcasing the power of the people and



highlighting her mass leader appeal. Street fighting has been her greatest strength, and she revels in its flourish. That is exactly how she plans to take the fight forward against the poll body's SIR move - turning it to the Trinamool Congress's advantage by gaining popular support as she prepares to contest for a fourth term as Chief Minister. If the image of a Chief Minister campaigning on a wheelchair with one foot in a plaster, throwing a football - Bengal's favourite game - at the crowds, saying "khela hobey" (the game is on), was the most successful Trinamool campaign during the 2021 assembly polls, the latest challenge at the hustings has already seen the viral footage of the Chief Minister bargaining in and retrieving a "green file" purportedly containing her party's poll plans, all in the midst of an unannounced ED raid at the I-PAC office in Kolkata. An angry "Didi", as she is popularly referred to, addressed the media as she explained her impromptu

reaction and descended on the streets the next day in a protest march, galvanising her party leaders and cadres to the hilt, barely two months before the elections are declared. While the central agency and the Chief Minister fight it out in the courts on whether either of their actions (the raid and the counter-raid) can be constitutionally justified, the latter, according to sources, could be present in the Supreme Court when the matter comes up on Tuesday, February 3. That again is how Mamata likes to play the game - commanding her contingent from the frontline. Mamata, a 24X7 politician, has already led protest rallies in every district - especially in north Bengal, where the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has its main strength in the state - to highlight the plight of the people under the SIR exercise, taking up the cause of booth level officers and attacking the BJP for trying to "disenfranchise voters", while opposition leaders in the state are dependent only

on central agencies to take on the ruling Trinamool in Bengal. The relentless counter-moves to the threats from the SIR process have kept her entire party cadres on the ground for the last three months, whereas opposition party leaders in the state are hardly visible on the ground. Having come up from students' politics and years of experience as a leader in opposition against the Left Front regime, fighting for her cause comes naturally to Mamata. She had to battle her seniors in the Congress, take the risk of breaking away and getting wiped out, and then create her own party. Instead of losing, she gained strength from her street fights to finally oust the Left Front and become Chief Minister for three consecutive terms. Through all of it, "going for the offensive" has remained her game, says Trinamool's Rajya Sabha MP Dola Sen, who joined the party during the Singur-Nandigram movements. The slogan "khela hobey" in Bangla is uttered by the challenger, in the spirit of "offence is the best defence". That is what Mamata, the street fighter, is doing with the Narendra Modi government at the Centre. With Modi being the face of the BJP-led opposition in Bengal, Mamata has also ensured that her battle for Bengal is played out in Delhi. She has pitched herself as the opposition leader against none other than Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who heads the central government in Delhi. Hence, the battleground must spill over to the national capital now.

Edit

Budget 2026: No More 'Instant Gratification'

The ninth consecutive and record-setting Union Budget of Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman was the first without the backdrop of usual macroeconomic concerns - either about anaemic growth or high inflation - that have dogged most FMs. In fact, given that economic growth is projected at a very impressive 7.4% in 2025-26 and retail inflation plumbing an unprecedented low of 1.33% in December, the Indian economy is experiencing the so-called 'Goldilocks' moment - neither too hot, nor too cold, perfect. The Finance Minister exploited this rare opportunity to share a national blueprint to strengthen the foundations of the Indian economy, which commits the government to pursue domestic reforms and accelerate the ongoing decentralisation - a strategy that cements India as the landing stage for the next phase of growth. No surprises then that the downside of shunning instant gratification - an expectation sharpened by the social-media era's demand for headline-ready Budget sops - and placing the wager on long-term growth drew a negative reaction from the markets. The truth is that enhancing the Indian economy to realise the audacious ambition of becoming a developed economy in the next 21 years entails unglamorous work: fixing the plumbings of the economy and cities, restoring the credibility of regulators, deepening financial and consumer markets, improving the quality of education, ensuring the predictability of taxes, seamless logistics, instilling the discipline of governance, and last but not the least, dealing with the political opposition. The outcome of this rather boring heavy-lifting, if pursued, will be a stronger Indian economy - the best defence against frequent geopolitical disruptions, something that is rapidly becoming the norm rather than the exception. Rebalancing the Fisc Reclaiming fiscal control - manifesting in reduced government debt - is what allowed Sitharaman the space to focus on renewing the economic foundations of the country. In fact, this admirable fiscal management is now part of her legacy as Finance Minister. In 2020-21, in the



aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, which led to the Indian economy contracting by 24.4% in the first quarter of the year, the fiscal deficit had climbed to a staggering 9.2% of gross domestic product. Thanks to a combination of prudent spending - focusing on capital expenditure, which has an inherent multiplier effect on growth, and targeted social welfare spending by triangulating the beneficiary based on their Jandhan-Aadhaar-Mobile, because of which the exchequer saved a cumulative sum of Rs 3 lakh crore - Sitharaman was able to commit the country to a glide path. Not only did she halve the fiscal deficit to 4.4% in a span of five years, but she has also committed to lowering it further to 4.3% next year. Prudent fiscal management has a very positive fallout for the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) in managing inflation - its primary objective. Fiscal slippage means more government borrowing, which, if not managed, crowds out the private sector and raises the cost of borrowing in the economy. And the outcome is there for all of us to see. The only question is whether retail inflation, too, like economic growth, has discovered a new trend rate. The Wager Every government

gets one defining economic wager. In the case of previous regimes, it was already decided by inclement macroeconomic circumstances. The difference with the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) is that they have, through some hard work, earned the right to make their own choice: Viksit Bharat by 2047. Therefore, this year's Budget is best not read merely as an annual fiscal statement. Instead, it is an important waypoint in the next stage of growth of the Indian economy. Essentially, it seeks to answer the most vexing question that has dogged policy makers forever: how does a nation of such immense aspiration and potential finally master the art of conversion? Especially, since India, in the past, has always flattered to disappointment. Not on one occasion, but several. India has never suffered from a shortage of ambition or talent. What it has struggled with, across decades, is the statecraft that can turn promise into productivity, growth into jobs, redistribution into dignity, and policy intent into institutional delivery. The Finance Minister said as much in her speech - that the NDA intends to check all these boxes and transform aspiration into achievement and potential into perform-

ance, while ensuring that the dividends of growth benefited everyone. Framing the Finance Minister's speech in this way signals a subtle shift in the role of the state. This government is no longer positioning itself merely as a dispenser of welfare or a passive facilitator of markets. It is reclaiming the harder role of performance enabler - building platforms, absorbing risks where and when markets cannot, and nudging the economy up the value chain. Exactly what was prescribed in the Economic Survey, released last week; it argued that the state needs to evolve into the role of an entrepreneur. The clearest expression of this new intent is the big boost to industrial policy. This Budget proposes scaling up manufacturing across strategic sectors, anchored by multi-year interventions. For instance, Biopharma SHAKTI, backed by ₹10,000 crore, proposes to make India a global hub for biologics and biosimilars, moving beyond low-cost generics into high-value health manufacturing. Semiconductors follow a similar logic, with ISM 2.0 expanding the ambition from assembly into equipment, materials and full-stack Indian IP.

‘DUBAI, READY FOR A SURPRISE’:

Anushka Sharma and Virat Kohli’s winter journey is showcased in new campaign film



February 2026: The Dubai Corporation for Tourism and Commerce Marketing (Visit Dubai), part of the Dubai Department of Economy and Tourism (DET), has unveiled the latest film in the ‘Dubai, Ready for A Surprise’ series featuring India’s power couple, Anushka Sharma and Virat Kohli With a focus on winter in Dubai, the film is rooted in the core idea of how the city continues to surprise both first-time and repeat visitors, always offering something new, and this time it’s Anushka’s turn to surprise Virat. As part of their ongoing destination partnership with Dubai, this

new chapter builds on the success of the previous film and follows the couple through a day of thoughtful surprises planned by Anushka, highlighting the depth, variety, and convenience that make Dubai an effortless choice for Indian travellers. Launched during Dubai’s vibrant winter season, the film beautifully captures Dubai’s stunning cityscapes and expansive outdoors, from serene desert escapes to sun-soaked beachfront moments, showcasing how Dubai enables travellers to enjoy both nature and the city, two distinct holidays within one stay, just moments apart. The film



ends with a gentle hint from Anushka about how spectacular the view might be when summer arrives, reinforcing Dubai as a city for every season. The story begins with a tranquil desert escape at the Presidential Villa at Al Maha, a Luxury Collection Desert Resort & Spa, located within the Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve, where the couple immerse themselves in the beauty of the desert dunes, cooking under open skies and watching the graceful gazelles roam freely. The film spotlights the lesser-explored side of Dubai, with luxurious desert resort stays,

nature drives, and immersive wilderness experiences that many travellers are yet to discover. After enjoying some playful moments by the beach, the couple then heads to One&Only One Za’abeel, where Virat tries on his latest shopping finds and shares his dance moves with Anushka at the two-storey Skyline Loft suite. The film highlights how effortlessly Dubai blends luxury, fashion, cuisine and entertainment, and offers these with in easy reach, making it one of the world’s most convenient urban playgrounds. Wandering through the soulful lanes of Al Seef,

Virat and Anushka soak in its heritage, traditions, and the timeless charm that lies at the heart of Old Dubai, underscoring the city’s cultural depth, where authentic experiences sit harmoniously alongside modern attractions. Their fun exchange at the aromatic spice stalls leads to a nostalgic moment when Anushka surprises Virat with chole bhature, evoking the cherished flavours from Delhi. The moment also reflects Dubai’s unique ability to make Indian travellers feel instantly at home, whether through familiar cuisine or interactions with locals. The film concludes with a quiet sunset moment by the elevated infinity pool at Tapasake at One&Only One Za’abeel, where Virat surprises Anushka with a cold coffee. The closing line reinforces the campaign’s essence that Dubai is a city for every season, always ready to reveal something new. The film, which is a part of the ongoing collaboration with Anushka Sharma and Virat Kohli, reinforces Dubai’s ability to surprise both first-time and returning travellers by offering a fresh take and a unique twist to every experience.

BUDGET FY27 DEMONSTRATES COMMITMENT TO MACRO STABILITY: FITCH



New Delhi: India’s budget demonstrates the ongoing commitment to maintaining macro stability through a gradual path of government debt reduction balanced against a still-robust capex program to enhance growth prospects, Fitch Ratings said on Monday, February 2. While the budget did not flag specific large-scale reform announcements, Fitch said it expects more reforms to be forthcoming, particularly on the deregulation agenda. Strong GDP growth is driving positive momentum in several of India’s sovereign credit metrics and if sustained, could improve the credit profile over time, even as lingering fiscal challenges remain, it said. Building on recent reform momentum should help accelerate private investment and give greater upside and resilience to India’s potential growth, Fitch added. It said fiscal consolidation is set to be very modest with fiscal deficit target at 4.3 per cent of GDP in FY27, just a touch below 4.4 per cent in FY26. “The slowing pace of consolidation is in line with our view that further progress on deficit reduction is becoming more difficult without

compromising more on GDP growth,” Fitch said. The government opted to keep capex spending relatively stable at 3.1 per cent of FY27 GDP rather than pursue a greater degree of consolidation. This likely reflects an effort to offset lagging private investment. “India’s budget demonstrates the ongoing commitment to maintaining macro stability through a gradual path of government debt reduction balanced against a still-robust capex program to enhance growth prospects,” Fitch Ratings Director and Primary Sovereign Analyst Jeremy Zook said in a note. Fitch forecasts FY27 growth at 6.4 per cent. The continued emphasis on capex spend-

ing should be supportive of both near and medium-term prospects. “A lengthening record of fiscal credibility should help strengthen India’s credit profile, particularly as it has come amid greater fiscal transparency and improved spending quality. Although the overall fiscal deficit is still higher than pre-pandemic levels this reflects stronger capex spending, as the revenue deficit is narrower than pre-pandemic levels- even including previously off-budget spending,” it said. Still, general government deficits, debt and interest payments all remain elevated compared to peers and are only declining gradually, Fitch added.

Gold rebounds to Rs 1.48 lakh/10g after early slump

New Delhi: Gold prices recovered to Rs 1.48 lakh per 10 grams in futures trade on Monday, February 2, after an early sharp fall that triggered the lower circuit level, while silver extended losses to witness heavy selling for the third consecutive day. On the Multi Commodity Exchange (MCX), gold futures for April delivery opened on a weak note and plunged Rs 10,688, or 7.2 per cent, to hit a low of Rs 1,37,065 per 10 grams during early trade. Later, the metal rebounded strongly, erasing all of its losses to trade higher by Rs 259, or 0.18 per cent, to Rs 1,48,012 per 10 grams in a business turnover of 8,501 lots. In addition, silver futures remained under pressure, opening lower and declining Rs 39,847, or 15 per cent, to hit an intraday low of Rs 2,25,805 per kilogram, also its lower circuit limit on the exchange. The white metal later pared some of its losses to trade at Rs 2,50,242 per kilogram, down 5.8 per cent, or Rs 15,410, in 6,892 lots. In the international market, Comex gold futures



for April delivery went up by USD 5.21, or 0.11 per cent, to USD 4,750.31 per ounce, while silver for the March contract rose by USD 3.33, or 4.24 per cent, to USD 81.86 per ounce. Gold prices recovered to Rs 1.48 lakh per 10 grams in futures trade on Monday after an early sharp fall that triggered the lower circuit level, while silver extended losses to witness heavy selling for the third consecutive day. On the Multi Commodity Exchange

(MCX), gold futures for April delivery opened on a weak note and plunged Rs 10,688, or 7.2 per cent, to hit a low of Rs 1,37,065 per 10 grams during early trade. Later, the metal rebounded strongly, erasing all of its losses to trade higher by Rs 259, or 0.18 per cent, to Rs 1,48,012 per 10 grams in a business turnover of 8,501 lots. In addition, silver futures remained under pressure, opening lower and declining Rs 39,847, or 15 per cent, to hit an intra-

day low of Rs 2,25,805 per kilogram, also its lower circuit limit on the exchange. The white metal later pared some of its losses to trade at Rs 2,50,242 per kilogram, down 5.8 per cent, or Rs 15,410, in 6,892 lots. In the international market, Comex gold futures for April delivery went up by USD 5.21, or 0.11 per cent, to USD 4,750.31 per ounce while silver for March contract rose by USD 3.33, or 4.24 per cent, to USD 81.86 per ounce.

Rupee rises 42 paise to close at 91.51 against US dollar

Mumbai: The rupee gained 42 paise to close at 91.51 (provisional) against the US dollar on Monday, February 2, a day after the Union Budget 2026-27 was presented, largely as crude oil prices retreated from their elevated levels. Forex traders said the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) seemed to be defending the 92 per dollar level with a lot of resolve. At the interbank foreign exchange market, the rupee opened at 91.95 against the US dollar, then gained some ground to touch an intraday high of 91.45 and a low of 91.95 against the greenback. At the end of the trading session on Monday, the rupee was quoted at 91.51 (provisional) against the greenback, registering a gain of 42 paise from its previous close. On Friday, the rupee hit a record low of 92.02 before ending 6 paise higher at 91.93 against the US dollar. For the rupee, the Budget offered reassurance, not relief, and the government’s high



borrowing plan is likely to weigh on investor sentiments going ahead. The government is likely to borrow Rs 17.2 lakh crore in the next financial year to fund its fiscal deficit projected at 4.3 per cent of the GDP. “Overall, it looks like a prudent budget, focusing on continuity. Given the geopolitical uncertainties and challenges, it seems the government it seems has chosen to go a bit slow on fiscal consolidation,” IFA Global said in a research note. Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges

the greenback’s strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading 0.09 per cent higher at 97.07. Brent crude, the global oil benchmark, was trading 4.46 per cent lower at USD 66.23 per barrel in futures trade, as the US and Iran were talking about avoiding US strikes on Iranian soil. The oil prices had touched USD 72 per barrel after traders expected a US strike on Iran during the weekend. “As the Budget volatility subsides, the Indian rupee and domestic equities have emerged as regional

outperformers. A combination of cooling commodity prices, enhanced fiscal control, large forex reserves and suspected corporate dollar selling has provided a tailwind for the local currency,” Dilip Parmar, Research Analyst, HDFC Securities, said. In the near term, the USD-INR spot is likely to consolidate within a tight range, finding support at 91.10 and facing resistance near 91.85, Parmar added. On the domestic equity market front, Sensex jumped 943.52 points to settle at 81,666.46, while the Nifty surged 262.95 points to 25,088.40. On Sunday, equity markets reacted negatively to the FY27 Budget as it proposed a higher securities transaction tax on derivatives and changes to buy-back taxation, raising concerns over increased costs for investors. Foreign Institutional Investors offloaded equities worth Rs 588.34 crore on Sunday, according to exchange data.

GOVT RAISES LIMIT FOR BRINGING DUTY-FREE IMPORTED GOODS TO RS 75,000



New Delhi: The government on Sunday, February 1, raised the limit for passengers bringing duty-free imported goods into India from Rs 50,000 to Rs 75,000. Under the Baggage Rules, 2026, notified on Sunday, a resident or a tourist of Indian origin arriving in India other than by land, shall be allowed clearance free of duty articles, up to Rs 75,000, if such articles are carried on the person or in the bona fide accompanied baggage of the pas-

senger. The new baggage rules, 2026, come into effect from midnight on February 2, replacing a decade-old baggage rule. A tourist of foreign origin, not being an infant, arriving in India, shall be allowed duty-free clearance of articles up to the value of Rs 25,000. This limit was Rs 15,000 in the Baggage Rule, 2016. In case of a resident or tourist of Indian origin residing abroad for more than one

year, upon return to India, they shall be allowed duty-free clearance of jewellery up to a weight of 40 grams, if brought by a female passenger. The limit will be 20 grams if brought by anyone other than a female passenger in bona fide baggage. Jewellery, for this Rule, means articles of adornment ordinarily worn by a person, made of gold, silver, platinum, or other such precious metals, whether studded or not.

MONTRA ELECTRIC DELIVERS INDIA’S 1ST ‘PM E-DRIVE’ CERTIFIED ELECTRIC TRUCK

Hyderabad 2026: Montra Electric (e-M&HCV business vertical), part of the Murugappa Group, has achieved a significant milestone in India’s clean mobility journey by becoming the first heavy-duty electric truck manufacturer in the country to receive certification under the Government of India’s PM E-DRIVE Scheme. Marking this achievement, the company has also delivered the country’s first PM E-DRIVE-certified electric heavy truck, Rhino 5538 EV 6x4 Tractor trailer, to UltraTech Cement Limited, India’s largest cement and ready-mix concrete company, reinforcing its commitment in advancing growth of electric vehicles. The milestone was commemorated in the presence of Shri Arun Murugappan, Chairman-Montra Electric (TI Clean Mobility), Jalaj Gupta MD-Montra Electric (TI Clean Mobility), Shri Sathia Raj, Chief Procurement Officer, UltraTech Cement Limited, underscoring the significance of this achievement for India’s



clean mobility ecosystem. This move is expected to expedite the adoption of electric heavy-duty trucks across India’s logistics, mining, infrastructure, and manufacturing sectors by significantly improving the business case for electrification. By enabling large fleet operators and industrial customers to transition away from conventional fuels without compromising on performance, uptime, or economics, the certification marks a decisive step towards cleaner, more efficient, and future-ready freight movement. The first PM E-DRIVE-certified Rhino 5538 EV was flagged off and handed

over to UltraTech by Shri Arun Murugappan. The INR 10,900 crore PM E-DRIVE scheme has an outlay of Rs 500 crore dedicated for e-trucks, translating into a direct customer benefit of up to 79.6 lakh per vehicle for the Rhino 5538 EV. The incentive improves long-term fleet economics by lowering operating costs, reducing fuel price volatility exposure, and supporting compliance with evolving sustainability and emission norms. Commenting on the occasion, Shri H.D. Kumaraswamy, Hon’ble Union Minister for Heavy Industries, said, “The PM E-DRIVE scheme is a testament



to the growing prowess of Indian innovation in the heavy-duty electric vehicle segment. Under the visionary leadership of Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi, we are committed to decarbonizing our logistics and making India a global hub for EV manufacturing. Electric trucks are pivotal to our Net Zero goals, and by fostering a self-reliant ecosystem through such certifications, we are driving the spirit of Atmanirbhar Viksit Bharat. We are very happy to see our Prime Minister’s vision coming to life with the 1st PM E-Drive certified heavy duty electric truck from ‘Montra Electric’ getting deliv-

ered today.” Commenting on the milestone, Arun Murugappan, Chairman, Montra Electric (TI Clean Mobility Private Limited), said, “Decarbonising freight is one of the most critical challenges in India’s energy transition. We are grateful to the Government of India and our Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi for introducing forward-looking and progressive policy frameworks such as the PM E-DRIVE Scheme, which represent a welcome and transformative step in accelerating this shift, particularly in heavy commercial vehicles where emissions intensity is high.

ISRAEL REOPENS GAZA'S KEY RAFAH BORDER CROSSING WITH EGYPT

Palestinians have started to enter the Rafah border crossing between the Gaza Strip and Egypt after it reopened for the movement of people. The crossing has largely been closed since May 2024, when the Gaza side was captured by Israeli forces. The reopening was supposed to happen during the first phase of US President Donald Trump's ceasefire plan between Israel and Hamas, which began in October. But Israel blocked it until the return of the body of the last Israeli hostage in Gaza, which happened last week. It will come as a relief to many Palestinians who see it as a lifeline to the world, although there is frustration that only small numbers of people and no goods will be allowed through. Around 20,000 sick and wounded Palestinians are waiting to leave Gaza for treatment, according to local hospitals and the



World Health Organization (WHO). Israeli reports say only 50 patients - accompanied by one or two relatives - will be allowed to exit each day, and that 50 people who left Gaza during the war will be allowed to return. The crossing will be run by supervisors from the European Union and local Palestinian staff, while Israel will carry out remote

security checks. On Monday morning, an Israeli security official said the Rafah crossing had "now opened to the movement of residents, for both entry and exit" following the arrival of teams from the European Union Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM). Al Qahera News TV, which is close to Egyptian intelligence,

meanwhile said the crossing had "received the first batch of Palestinians returning from Egypt to the Gaza Strip". It added that the move came "as part of Egyptian efforts to facilitate movement through the crossing". A Palestinian mother, Sabrine al-Da'ma, told the BBC she was hoping to travel abroad with her 16-year-old daughter, Rawa,

who suffers from kidney disease. She plans to donate Rawa one of her kidneys. "She used to be treated through monitoring, ultrasound imaging and tests to check the condition of her kidneys. Since the war started, because of food shortages, hunger, and the food she was forced to eat, she began dialysis," Da'ma said. "We hope they will speed up our referral so that we can travel quickly, because she is getting exhausted. I am also 45 years old, and they may tell me that as I get older, I won't be able to donate anymore. That's why we're rushing." On Sunday, Israeli authorities said a trial opening of the crossing was carried out and completed. One Palestinian official familiar with the arrangements for the trial told the BBC that around 30 Palestinian staff members had arrived at the Egyptian side of the crossing, ahead of the initial

operational phase. The WHO will oversee the transfer of patients from territory under Hamas control, transporting them by bus to the crossing over the so-called "Yellow Line" and into territory controlled by the Israeli military, the BBC understands. Trump's 20-point Gaza peace plan says the reopening of the Rafah crossing in both directions will be subject to the same mechanism implemented under a previous ceasefire deal in January last year. Before being seized by Israel in 2024, the crossing was the main exit point for Palestinians allowed to leave during the war and a key entry point for humanitarian aid. Now, aid that enters from Egypt is routed via Israel's Kerem Shalom crossing point. In December, the Israeli government said the Rafah crossing would open to allow Palestinians to leave Gaza.

Australian woman dies after becoming snagged in ski lift in Japan



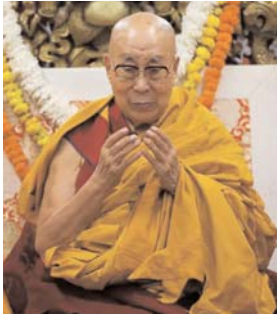
Candidate tough on crime wins Costa Rica presidential election



The candidate for the governing conservative Sovereign People's Party, Laura Fernández, has won the presidential election in Costa Rica. With more than 88% of the votes counted, Fernández had over 48% of the votes, far ahead of the second-placed centrist candidate, Álvaro Ramos, who conceded defeat. Fernández ran on a promise to deepen the tough-on-crime approach of the outgoing President Rodrigo Chaves, who had handpicked her as his successor. Voters had said they were concerned about a surge in drug-related violence in the Central American country. The size of her vote share - which exceeded the 40% needed to win outright in the first round - means that there is no need for a run-off. Fernández will be sworn in on 8 May. In her victory speech, the 39-year-old said she would plough ahead with the policies introduced by Chaves, whose chief of staff she was. Under Costa Rica's

constitution, presidents are not allowed to serve two consecutive terms and Chaves was therefore barred from standing for re-election. Fernández has hinted she may appoint him to a post in her cabinet. Costa Rica, one of Central America's safest countries and a stable democracy, has seen a rise in crime over the past years as transnational criminal gangs have expanded in the region. On the campaign trail, Fernández said she would emulate some of the policies of the El Salvador's President Nayib Bukele. Bukele has sky-high approval ratings with Salvadorans saying they are grateful for his iron-fist approach to crime, which has seen the murder rate plummet. Fernández has said she will declare a state of emergency in areas where gangs hold sway and finish the construction of a high-security jail similar to the Cecot prison in El Salvador.

BEIJING CRITICISES DALAI LAMA GRAMMY WIN AS 'MANIPULATION'



China has reacted angrily to an unlikely winner at the Grammys - the Dalai Lama - saying it opposes art awards being used for "anti-China political manipulation". The Buddhist spiritual leader was recognised in the audiobook category for Meditations: The Reflections of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama said he accepted the award with "gratitude and humility". The 90-year-old

has lived in exile from his Tibetan homeland since 1959 and is condemned as a rebel and separatist by Beijing. China's foreign ministry spokesman Lin Jian told a news conference: "We firmly oppose relevant parties using art awards as a tool for anti-China political manipulation, and this position is consistent and clear." The spiritual leader, who lives in Dharamshala in India, left China in fear of his life after Chinese troops crushed an uprising. He has campaigned for more autonomy for Tibet, but Beijing considers it an integral part of China. In a message on social media the Dalai Lama, who is also a Nobel peace laureate, said: "I receive this recognition with gratitude and humility."

'Enemy' insults and questioning Putin: Steve Rosenberg on tightrope of reporting from Russia

On his Russian TV show, a famous presenter takes aim and unleashes a tirade against the UK. I'm just glad it's not his finger on the nuclear button. "We still haven't destroyed London or Birmingham," barks Vladimir Solovyov. "We haven't wiped all this British scum from the face of the earth." He sounds disappointed. "We haven't kicked out the goddamned BBC with that Steve Rottenberg. He walks around looking like a defecating squirrel...he's a conscious enemy of our country!" Welcome to my world: the world of a BBC correspondent in Russia. It's a world we offer a glimpse into in Our Man in Moscow. The film for BBC Panorama charts a year in the life of the BBC Moscow



bureau, as the Kremlin continues to wage war on Ukraine, tighten the screws at home and build a relationship with President Trump. The squirrel barb doesn't bother me. Squirrels are cute. And they have a thick skin - something a foreign correspondent needs here. But "enemy of Russia"? That hurts. I have spent

more than thirty years living and working in Moscow. As a young man I fell in love with the language, literature and music of Russia. At university in Leeds, I ran a choir that performed Russian folk classics. For one concert I wrote a song in Russian about a snowman who put on so many clothes that he melted.

Like that snowman, the Russia I knew seemed to melt away in February 2022. With its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the world's largest country had embarked on the darkest of paths. President Putin's "special military operation" would become the deadliest war in Europe since World War Two. Looking back, this hadn't come out of nowhere: Russia had annexed Crimea from Ukraine back in 2014; it had already been accused of funding, fuelling and orchestrating an armed uprising in eastern Ukraine. Relations with the West were becoming increasingly strained. Still, the full-scale invasion was a watershed moment.

EIGHTY KIDNAPPED NIGERIANS RETURN HOME AFTER ESCAPE

Dozens of worshippers kidnapped by gunmen in Nigeria's northern Kaduna state have returned home weeks after their abduction, police have confirmed. They were among 177 people seized last month from three churches in the remote village of Kurmin Wali. The 80 people escaped on the day they were taken but hid in neighbouring villages for a fortnight "due to fear of being captured again", state police spokesman Mansur Hassan told the BBC. The authorities say efforts are ongoing to secure the release of the remaining 86 people still being held. The attack was part of a wave of kidnappings for ransom affecting many parts of Nigeria, but no group has said it was behind the abductions. The raid was initially denied by police, who only confirmed the kidnappings on 21 January after local residents had reported to the BBC that 177 worshippers were abducted, with 11



escaping shortly afterwards. The official response drew criticism from Amnesty International, which accused Nigerian authorities of "desperate denial". The rights group urged officials to "take immediate and concrete measures to prevent rampant abductions that are

gradually becoming the norm in Nigeria." In November, more than 300 students and teachers were taken from a Catholic school in Niger state, which neighbours Kaduna, before being released in two groups. Nigeria faces multiple, overlapping security challenges beyond kidnappings, including an Islamist insurgency in the north-east, separatist violence in the south-east, and frequent clashes between herders and farmers in central regions over land and water. Security experts say efforts to tackle these crises are hampered by corruption, poor intelligence sharing, and underfunded local police forces.

Trump threatens to sue Trevor Noah over Epstein joke at Grammys



US President Donald Trump has threatened to sue comedian Trevor Noah after he joked about Trump and Jeffrey Epstein at the Grammy Awards. Hosting the event, Noah said: "Song of the Year - that is a Grammy that every artist wants almost as much as Trump wants Greenland, which makes sense because Epstein's island is gone, he needs a new one to hang out with Bill Clinton." Trump is known to have been an associate of Epstein for years, but says he had no knowledge of his crimes and that they fell out in about 2004. There are no suggestions he ever visited Epstein's private island and he has not been accused of any crime by Epstein's victims. The US justice department has said allegations about him are unfounded and false. In 2020, a spokesperson for Clinton said the former president had "never been" to Epstein's island, Little St James. Clinton has not been accused of any wrongdoing. Trump responded to Noah's joke by saying he would be "sending my lawyers to sue". Posting on Truth Social, Trump wrote: "Noah said, INCORRECT-

LY about me, that Donald Trump and Bill Clinton spent time on Epstein Island. WRONG!!! "I can't speak for Bill, but I have never been to Epstein Island, nor anywhere close, and until tonight's false and defamatory statement, have never been accused of being there, not even by the Fake News Media. "Noah, a total loser, better get his facts straight, and get them straight fast." He added: "Get ready Noah, I'm going to have some fun with you!" Epstein was found dead in his New York prison cell in 2019 while awaiting trial on sex trafficking charges, more than a decade after he was convicted of soliciting prostitution from a minor. He had purchased his private island in 1998. Multiple survivors have alleged that they were trafficked there and abused. Trump has engaged in legal action with multiple media organisations in recent years, including the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal. In December, he filed a multi-billion dollar lawsuit in a Florida court accusing the BBC of defamation and of violating a trade practices law over the editing of a Panorama

NORWAY'S PM AGREES CROWN PRINCESS HAD 'POOR JUDGEMENT' OVER EPSTEIN LINKS

Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre has said he agrees with Crown Princess Mette-Marit's admission of "poor judgement" after it emerged she had extensive contacts with the late sex offender Jeffrey Epstein. The princess features hundreds of times between 2011-14 in the latest files released by the US Department of Justice relating to Epstein. This latest embarrassment for the royal family comes on the eve of her son's seven-week trial in Oslo on 38 charges including rape and assault. Princess Mette-Marit married Norway's Crown Prince Haakon as a commoner when her son Marius Borg Høiby was

four and is in line to become queen when her husband accedes to the throne. As the content of her email exchanges began to emerge, the princess released a statement on Saturday saying: "I showed poor judgement and regret having any contact with Epstein at all. It is simply embarrassing." She went on to express her "deep sympathy and solidarity with the victims of the abuses committed by Jeffrey Epstein". Although the prime minister did not go further than agreeing with the princess's admission of poor judgement, his implicit criticism of her is considered unusual. Støre said he also believed that ex-Prime Minister Thorbjørn



Jagland had exercised "poor judgement", after it emerged that he had planned a family holiday on Epstein's private island, though he then cancelled it. Jagland was expected to make a statement on the issue on Monday. The latest cache of Epstein files suggests that the correspon-

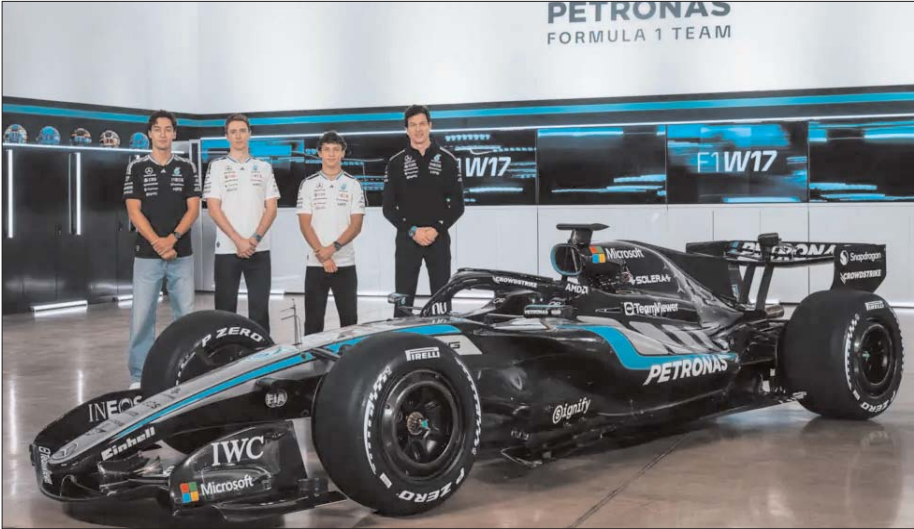
dence between Princess Mette-Marit and Epstein began in autumn 2011. The warm nature of the messages has appalled commentators in Norway. An email from the HRH Crown Princess account on 23 October 2011 implies she had by then become aware of his initial jail term in

2008. "Googled u after last email," she wrote. "Agree didn't look too good." By this time, Epstein was a registered sex offender. It also emerged that the crown princess spent four days at Epstein's house in Palm Beach, Miami in January 2013, when he was not present. In one email, Epstein was asked whether a mother should suggest naked women carrying a surfboard for her son's wallpaper. Norway's royal family has been buffeted by a succession of scandals of late, including the marriage of the crown prince's sister, Princess Märtha Louise to a self-styled American shaman. But the latest revelations concern the future

queen of Norway, and the wider monarchy. Princess Mette-Marit is patron of several organisations including the Red Cross. Norwegians are already preparing for the trial of her son, Marius Borg Høiby, and questions are being asked about his mother's failure to realise the toxic nature of maintaining contact with Epstein, and especially the role of her advisers. Mette-Marit is suffering from pulmonary fibrosis and her doctors are preparing to put her on a list for a lung transplant. Her 29-year-old son, who is not part of the royal family, denies the most serious charges against him. One charge of rape involves intercourse while a woman was asleep.

RUSSELL 'WANTS TO GO HEAD-TO-HEAD' WITH VERSTAPPEN

Mercedes driver George Russell says his hope for the 2026 Formula 1 season is to find himself in a title fight with Red Bull's Max Verstappen. Russell said he would "love for it to turn out that way" as he and Mercedes officially launched their new car on Monday. The 27-year-old Briton added that he did not feel any more pressure as a result of his status as pre-season favourite. "I do want to go head-to-head with Max and obviously Lando [Norris, McLaren's world champion] had a great season last year but, no, it didn't add any more pressure," he said. Russell has won five F1 races for Mercedes since joining the team in 2022 but, up until now, has not had a car consistently fast enough to challenge for a drivers' championship. F1 has made the biggest regulation change in its history over the winter, with the



cars, engines, tyres and fuel all new heading into 2026. Russell said that although the first test in Barcelona had gone well for Mercedes, he had been impressed by other teams, especially Red Bull, who are producing their first in-house engine in partnership with Ford for this season. "Probably the fans and

people were expecting potentially Mercedes versus McLaren because there was a lot of anticipation that Mercedes would clearly have the best power unit," Russell said. "But it seems like the other power-unit manufacturers have done a good job and we know that Red Bull have always had an amazing

car. Even through the years of dominance of Mercedes, it was their engine that was letting them down not their car and we obviously know how good Max is. So I think he's very much going to be in the fight this year and that is great." Russell and team boss Toto Wolff were downplaying expectations

of Mercedes, saying it was impossible to know at this stage which team was the most competitive. "It's still very early days but, quoting Toto, it doesn't look like it's a turd, which is a bonus," Russell said. "In the early days like this, you know when it could be a really bad car and you can sort of highlight those negatives early on. "We don't believe it is, but is it a car that can produce a world championship? It's still way too early to say." Wolff added: "We don't have really a performance picture yet because we haven't seen Max driving the car fast and we haven't seen McLaren and Ferrari doing what they can do. So I would carefully refrain from saying that was great for us. We simply don't know." Russell, who said he felt ready to fight for a title, was generally positive about the new generation of cars.

MARY KOM BREAKS SILENCE ON CONTROVERSIAL "DIDN'T EARN A SINGLE RUPEE" DIG AT EX-HUSBAND

Indian boxing icon Mary Kom, who has been in the news over her personal life, has officially addressed the social media firestorm surrounding the comments she made against her ex-husband K Onler Kom at a talk show. The decorated athlete, known for her composure inside and outside the ring, sought to clear the air regarding the controversial comments she made at the show, saying the outburst was a result of long-suppressed emotions over fallout with her husband and personal issues. She further said that the comments were in no way directed towards the male community overall. The controversy erupted following an emotional segment on Aap Ki Adalat where Kom discussed her personal life, leading to a viral "Ek Rupiya Bhi Nahi Kamaya" (not a single rupee was earned) remark that many felt targeted her former partner's career and contributions.



Addressing the timeline and the nature of her past relationship, Mary emphasised that the marriage was not always a 'failure'. She highlighted that she maintained a dignified silence even after she and her husband parted ways. "Mein ye clarify karna chahti hoon, ye nahi ki meri shaadi kabhi success hi nahi thi. Sab theek tha kafi saal tak. Lekin baad mein jab trust completely tut gaya tab cheezen badli. Iske bawajood yeh ki clarify karna chahti hoon, apne divorce ke baad, April 2025, mein mere khilaf jo press release circulate hua uske

baad bhi maine public ya media mein koi statement nahi diya. Mein hamesha dignity aur restraint ke saath khud ko conduct kar rahi hoon." A significant portion of the backlash came from sports fans who felt her comments belittled the struggles of aspiring footballers. Mary Kom was quick to dismiss any notion that she holds a bias against the sport, citing legends like Sunil Chhetri as examples of the determination she admires. "Mere is remark ko social media par galat direction mei leke chale gaye, jo kaafi unfortunate hain.

ICC Contemplates 'Suspending' Pakistan As T20 World Cup 'India Boycott' Row Deepens

The T20 World Cup 2026 has become a battleground between the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) and the International Cricket Council (ICC), with the global body now preparing for a meeting that could change the map of world cricket forever. Outside, the clock is ticking: 48 hours remain before the governing body is expected to drop a verdict that might leave the PCB in total isolation. Sources have told NDTV that the Jay Shah-led ICC is contemplating imposing severe sanctions on Pakistan after the nation announced a boycott of the T20 World Cup match against India on 15 February, in solidarity with Bangladesh, who were replaced by Scotland in the



biennial event. The tension, which had been simmering since the removal of Bangladesh, reached a boiling point on Sunday. In a move that stunned the cricketing world, the Pakistani government cleared its team to travel to Sri Lanka but made a "selective participation" announcement. The



Pakistani government's official X (formerly Twitter) account clarified that its team has received the go-ahead for participation in the T20 World Cup, but it has been barred from taking the field against India on 15 February. The PCB, led by Mohsin Naqvi, framed this as a stand of solidarity with

Bangladesh, whose request to move matches out of India was rejected by the ICC. To Pakistan, it was a matter of principle; to the rest of the world, it felt like a wrecking ball swung at the heart of the tournament's commercial and sporting integrity. Historically, India has faced immense pressure to boycott fixtures against Pakistan due to geopolitical tensions. Despite this, the Indian team fulfilled its 2025 Asia Cup fixture in Pakistan, with the BCCI prioritising the stability of associate members and the global game. However, when required to reciprocate this commitment, Pakistan chose political posturing over sporting integrity.

"Regrettable": Shahid Afridi's Blunt Take On Pakistan's Refusal To Play Against India In T20 World Cup 2026

Former Pakistan captain and cricketing legend Shahid Afridi shared quite an intriguing statement after his government confirmed a boycott of the Indian team at the upcoming T20 World Cup 2026. Pakistan and India are scheduled to square off in Colombo on 15 February, but Salman Ali Agha's men have been asked not to take the field by their government as a mark of protest against the International Cricket Council (ICC). The Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) has been flirting with the idea of giving the India match a miss ever since the ICC booted Bangladesh out of the tournament. Afridi, who has time and again advocated for sports and politics to be



kept separate, expressed 'regret' over Pakistan's decision to not play against India in the T20 World Cup. However, he also stood behind his government's decision while asking the ICC to resolve the matter through impartial actions. "I've always believed cricket can open doors when politics closes them. Regrettably, Pakistan

won't play India at the #T20WorldCup, but I stand behind my government's decision. " This is the moment for @ICC to lead and prove through decisions, not statements, that it is impartial, independent, and fair to every member." Afridi's post on X (formerly Twitter) read. Afridi himself was at the centre of a

controversy after India Legends pulled out of a match against Pakistan Legends in the World Championship of Legends at Edgbaston. "Sports bring people closer, but if politics gets involved in everything, how will we move forward? ... Sometimes, there's one bad egg (or rotten egg) that spoils everything for everyone else," Afridi had said, in a dig at former India batter Shikhar Dhawan after he refused to play against Pakistan in the tournament. It is rather bizarre that the same Afridi is now backing the political interference of his country's government, especially in an event of the stature of the T20 World Cup.

PGA TOUR SUCCESS VINDICATES REJECTING LIV - ROSE



Three PGA Tour victories and two near misses in the majors have left Justin Rose feeling vindicated by his decision to reject offers from the Saudi Arabia-backed LIV Golf series. The Englishman claimed his 13th PGA Tour title on Sunday after a dominant week at Torrey Pines in California, winning with a tournament record score. In 2022, some of the sport's biggest names chose to defect to the breakaway LIV Golf with lucrative contracts being offered by the controversial new competition. Rose, however, chose not to move and since then the 45-year-old has climbed to third in the world rankings. He has won three times on the American circuit, finished runner-up at the 2024 Open Championship and was beaten in a play-off at last year's Masters by Rory McIlroy. "I feel like my career goals have only been attainable by staying on the European Tour and the PGA Tour because access to them is not possible the other way," said Rose. "I've been sniffing and knocking on the door for a couple of majors

since those decisions have been made, and those moments did validate that decision. "It's good to see people wanting to play where it motivates them to be their best." Rose finished 23 under at last week's Farmers Insurance Open, beating the tournament's previous best winning score of 22 under by Tiger Woods in 1999 and George Burns in 1987. Rose also became the oldest player to secure a wire-to-wire finish on tour - leading in all four rounds - since Rocco Mediate in October 2010 aged 47. "I want to play in and among the best players in the world; that's what keeps me motivated, keeps me hungry, keeps me pushing," Rose continued. "It would have been easy to potentially do other things but none of that excited me and none of that gave me access to what I wanted to achieve. "I always felt my childhood self wouldn't feel very good about making that decision and giving up on those dreams." Last month, Patrick Reed announced he was leaving LIV Golf to make a return to the PGA Tour.

Australia Skipper Shuts Down Pakistan Reporter Over T20 World Cup India Boycott Question

As Pakistan confirmed its stance of barring the national team from taking the field against India in the T20 World Cup 2026 match on February 15, a reporter looked to pounce on the opportunity by asking Australia skipper Mitchell Marsh his views on the matter. The Australian team, at present, is in Pakistan for a 3-match T20I series. After the conclusion of the series, Marsh had to face some unexpected questions in the press conference. The Pakistani reporter asked Marsh two questions - Pakistan's boycott of the India match and Bangladesh's removal from the T20 World Cup. But, was shut down on both occasions. The reporter's attempt to draw a reaction from Marsh fell flat on both occasions as



the Australia skipper maintained a clear stance of focusing on only what he and his team have to do in the upcoming T20 World Cup. Here's how the conversation went: Reporter: Just came to know about the Pakistan-India match on the 15th February. You know, Pakistan is going to boycott the Pakistan-India match. So, your point of view,

if you want to add some words about this. Mitchell Marsh: Yeah, I don't really have a comment on that at this point in time. You know, we're going to the World Cup to just focus on what we're doing, and we'll let that stuff take care of itself. Reporter: Also, ICC full member Bangladesh is not going to participate in this World Cup

due to security concerns. As a player, how do you feel that an ICC full member is not going to participate in this World Cup? Mitchell Marsh: Yeah, I think the same goes for my previous answer, that we're going to the World Cup to try and win it, and we're solely focused on that. And as the Australian team, we trust the people who are in place to keep us safe, and that's all I'll say. Yeah. The tour of Pakistan didn't end on the most promising note for Australia, with the visitors suffering defeats in all three matches, hence incurring a 0-3 sweep at the hands of Salman Ali Agha and Co. But, Australia do have some injured and absent stars returning as they kick off their T20 World Cup 2026 campaign on February 11.

Will Seahawks stop Patriots' record bid? Lowdown on Super Bowl 2026

The NFL's 2025 season has provided the most wide-open race for the Super Bowl in years. Now just the New England Patriots and the Seattle Seahawks remain and they will meet on Sunday to decide the NFL champions. It is a title New England have held six times but this is their first Super Bowl since 2019 and the departure of legendary quarterback Tom Brady and coach Bill Belichick. A revitalised Patriots team have come from nowhere to reach Super Bowl 60 in California and secure a record-extending 12th appearance in the NFL showpiece. The Seahawks have reached their fourth Super Bowl, and their first

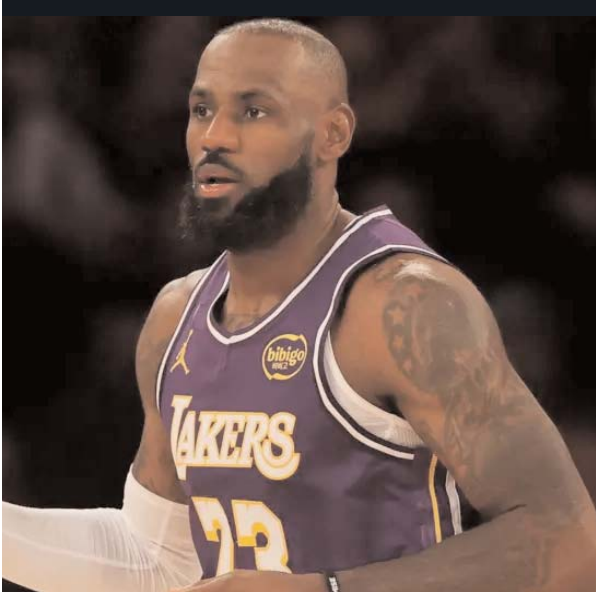


since 2015, when the Patriots denied them back-to-back championships. Now a Briton could become the first overseas coach to win arguably the biggest game in world sport having helped turn Seattle back into title contenders. There will also be a historic half-time show from a Latin

superstar amid concerns over how US immigration agents handle an event which for each of the past three years has been the most-watched broadcast in American television history. How the Patriots can make NFL history Brady and head coach Belichick led New England to nine

Super Bowls between 2002 and 2019, winning six. That tied the record for most Super Bowl wins with the Pittsburgh Steelers so the Patriots will go clear if they win at Levi's Stadium, Santa Clara. Last season, New England finished with a 4-13 record under Jerod Mayo, who was replaced by another coach who won the Super Bowl as a player with the Patriots, Mike Vrabel. The ex-Tennessee Titans coach rebuilt the Patriots' roster and they improved to 14-3. That 10-win swing is tied for the biggest turnaround from one season to the next - and the Patriots are the first of those teams to reach the Super Bowl.

JAMES A SURPRISE SELECTION FOR NBA ALL-STAR GAME



LeBron James has been selected for a record-extending 22nd consecutive NBA All-Star game by being named among the reserves from the Western Conference. The 41-year-old Los Angeles Lakers star was not selected as a starter in January but was among the seven reserves chosen from each of the Eastern and Western Conferences by NBA coaches. James, who missed his side's first 14 matches of the 2025-26 campaign because of sciatica, has played 31 times this season and is averaging 21.9 points per game. "It wasn't a goal of mine to come into the season, miss the first 14 games and say, 'OK, I can be an All-Star,'" James told reporters after playing in the Lakers' 112-100 defeat against the New York Knicks. "I just wanted to get back to playing the game at a high level I knew I was capable of once

I kind of worked the rust off of missing pre-season, training camp and my summer workouts, which I've never done in my whole career. "So I didn't think about the All-Star Game, to be honest." James was selected for the NBA All-Star game in 2025 but did not play because he picked up an injury. Kevin Durant, who plays for the Houston Rockets, Devin Booker of the Phoenix Suns and Anthony Edwards from the Minnesota Timberwolves were also selected as a Western Conference reserves. The All-Star game has been revamped this season and will feature two teams of players from the United States and one team of international players. They will compete in a round-robin tournament of four 12-minute games. The top two teams will then face each other in a championship game.

I HOPE BARABAR PREMISTHA GIVES CHANDRA HASS A STRONG BREAKTHROUGH: AADI SAIKUMAR AT THE PRE-RELEASE EVENT

Barabar Premistha, starring Attitude Star Chandra Hass in the lead, is directed by Sampath Rudra. Presented by Kakarla Satyanarayana, the film is produced by Geda Chandu, Gayatri Chinny, and AVR under the banners of CC Creations and AVR Movie Wonders. Miss India finalist Meghna Mukherjee plays the female lead, while Arjun Mahi (of Ishtanga fame) essays the antagonist's role. The film is all set for a grand theatrical release on February 6th. Ahead of the release, the makers hold a pre-release event on Sunday (February 1). The event was graced by chief guests Jayanth C Paranjee, JD Chakravarthy, and Aadi Saikumar, along with the film's cast and crew. Chandra Hass said: "I am a big fan of Jayanth sir's films like Teen Maar and Shankar Dada. Aadi anna has made an incredible comeback—he is truly an inspiration to me. JD Chakravarthy sir looks the same even today. I'm deeply grateful that so many people came here for me. I can never repay the debt of my father Prabhakar, who gave birth to



me and raised me. Meghna will become a big heroine in Telugu cinema. Dhruvan is extremely talented and has delivered fantastic songs for this film. My thanks to Chinny garu, Chandu garu, and Venky garu for producing this movie without any compromises. Special thanks to cinematographer Shekhar anna, who played a key role in bringing this project to me. This film will not bore the audience even for a second. With countless and unimaginable twists, it will keep viewers glued from start to finish. Director Sampath has made this film beautifully and presented me really well. I hope audiences watch and support Barabar Premistha

on February 6." Aadi Saikumar stated: "I worked with Prabhakar anna on Next Nuvve. Even back then, he spoke highly of Chandra Hass and said he would become a good hero—and I believed it. I've seen how hard Chandra Hass works with complete honesty. I sincerely wish him a big hit. I hope Barabar Premistha becomes a major turning point in Chandra Hass' career. I urge audiences to watch the film in theatres on February 6 and support the team." Jayanth C Paranjee said: "The title Barabar Premistha itself reflects attitude, confidence, and swagger—just like Chandra Hass, our Attitude Star. He is also a

good singer. Meghna too has great energy and attitude. Sampath has directed the film wonderfully, and I really liked all the songs composed by Dhruvan. I strongly believe this film will be a big hit. I request everyone to watch Barabar Premistha on February 6 and support the team." Prabhakar acknowledged: "Aadi is my first hero. When Shambhala became a hit, I was happier than even Sai Kumar garu. I'm delighted that Aadi attended this event. DOP Shekhar brought this story to me, and the entire team worked extremely hard on this film. I hope their efforts are rewarded on February 6. Dhruvan has given excellent music.

Chandra Hass never lets negativity affect him—he always moves forward positively. Meghna is extremely passionate about cinema. I request audiences to watch and encourage this film." JD Chakravarthy stated : "Whatever Chandra Hass does naturally attracts people. I will definitely watch this film for Prabhakar. Starting his life as a constable and rising to become a television star, Prabhakar's journey is truly inspiring. Meghna looks impressive, and Dhruvan's music is excellent. My best wishes to the entire team. Don't miss Barabar Premistha in theatres on February 6." Director Sampath Rudra said: "I've always admired Aadi garu's love stories, and I'm happy he came to support us today. Producer Venky is my classmate—without him, this film wouldn't exist. Chandu and Chinny joined the project later. Chinny and I worked together as assistant directors on Rechipo. Dhruvan has delivered outstanding music. No commercial film like this has come with a Telangana backdrop before.

Couple Friendly will be a memorable film in my career Santosh Shobhan at the Trailer Launch Event



Couple Friendly, starring Santosh Shobhan in the lead role, features Manasa Varanasi as the female lead. Presented by the reputed production house UV Creations and produced under the banner UV Concepts, the film is being made on a grand scale in Telugu and Tamil. Ajay Kumar Raju P. serves as the co-producer, while Ashwin Chandrasekhar has directed the film. Touted as a musical romantic love story, Couple Friendly is set for a Valentine's Day release on February 14 in both Telugu and Tamil. Passionate producer and

distributor Dheeraj Mogilineni is releasing the film across Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. The film's trailer was launched today at a grand event held in Hyderabad. Manasa Varanasi said, "I played the character of Mithra in Couple Friendly, and I'm very happy to have received such a beautiful role. I connected deeply with Mithra on a personal level. Just like me, she believes in taking action without hesitation when something needs to be done. She doesn't overthink or doubt herself. This film is like a roller-coaster ride a

fresh, youthful love story set against the Chennai backdrop. We shot guerrilla-style across many locations in Chennai, which added great authenticity. Santosh Shobhan is a wonderful actor. I closely observed his dedication and his constant desire to perform better in every scene, and I learned a lot from him. Aditya has composed beautiful music. Two songs have already been released and turned into chartbusters, and my favourite songs are yet to come. I'm also very happy that Dheeraj garu is distributing our film.

The film 'Winter', jointly produced by Crescent Cinemas and TSR Makers, launched grandly with traditional pooja



Highlights

■ 'Winter' features Ram, Aadithya Suraj Singh, Kusuma Chandhaka, Shashikala, and Srijitaa Ghosh in lead roles. The film is being produced by Riyaz Ahmed and T. Srinivas Rao. Suresh Lankalapalli, who received critical acclaim for Racharikam, is handling the story, screenplay, and direction for this project.

'Winter' features Ram, Aadithya Suraj Singh, Kusuma Chandhaka, Shashikala, and Srijitaa Ghosh in lead roles. The film is being produced by Riyaz Ahmed and T. Srinivas Rao. Suresh Lankalapalli, who received critical acclaim for Racharikam, is handling the story, screenplay, and direction for this project. With this film, Rizwan Ali will be introduced to the screen as the antagonist. Notably,

Winter is being made based on real-life incidents that occurred in Kashmir. The pooja ceremony marking the commencement of the film was recently held in a grand manner, with the entire team in attendance. The rituals were performed seeking the film's success and a smooth, obstacle-free production journey. Details regarding the remaining cast and technical crew will be announced soon.

HRIM HERO PAWAN'S GRANDFATHER HAS GREAT TALENT - HERO NANDU AT PAWAN'S BIRTHDAY CELEBRATIONS



Pawan Tata and Chaminda Varma star in the film 'Hreem'. Sujatha Mallala presented it under the banner of Shivam Media and Shivam Mallala produced it. Rajesh Ravuri is the director of this film. On Monday, Sri Nandu, the hero of 'Dandora' and 'Psych Siddhartha', participated in the birthday celebrations held at the film office on the occasion of the film's hero Pawan Tata's birthday. On this occasion, Nandu said - "I have just seen the posters and

glimpses of the film 'Hreem'. This is the content that excited me the most when I saw it. Soon, all of you will also see this content. I have a special connection with the producer of this film. Our journey has been going on for many years. If I ever have any doubts about anything, I share it with Shivam Mallala's brother without thinking. He is a well-wisher to many people in the industry. My gratitude to hero Pawan's grandfather and heroine Dr. Chaminda

Varma, who are planning their careers in a big way with this film. This is a great opportunity for Rajesh, who is going to become a director after working in MaTV. All the best to everyone," he said. Hero Pawan said, "This birthday is very special for me. I got a good opportunity through the film 'Hreem'. Thanks to everyone who believed in me and gave me the opportunity. I am very happy that my family members, my aunt Renukamma, Gopi and Rekha, are all par-

ticipating in this celebration. I hope that all of you will also praise me after watching the content," he said. Heroine Chaminda Varma said, "My first film co-star Pawan acted very well. Happy birthday to him. Thank you Nandu garu for participating in this celebration and wishing our team." Producer Shivamallala said, "Thank you to Nandu for participating in our hero Pawan's birthday celebrations as soon as I asked and giving energy to all our team.

When Farah Khan revealed how Malaika Arora came on board 'Chaiyya Chaiyya'



Mumbai: Choreographer and director Farah Khan revealed how actress Malaika Arora came on board the iconic song 'Chaiyya Chaiyya' for Mani Ratnam's "Dil Se.". When the 'Om Shanti Om' maker appeared on the popular chat show, "Jeena Isi Ka Naam Hai", she shared that they approached a lot of people for the song before Malaika was finalized at the last minute. She added that she knew Malaika way before they shot the track. Farah said, "We actually tried for a lot of people. We had no one even one week before the song was supposed to be shot." The 'Main Hoon Na' maker said that she desperately called Malaika to be a part of the track, despite not knowing if she could dance or not. "I did not even know if she could dance. But I knew that her look was right. She looks beautiful." Farah said that in the last minute, director Mani Ratnam left the decision to her. "Get anybody".

At the end, she admitted that Malaika ended up giving a mind-blowing performance in the 'Chaiyya Chaiyya' track. The pop-folk song was a part of the Bollywood film "Dil Se.". The song has reportedly been adapted from the lyrics of "Tere Ishq Nachaya", written by Bulleh Shah. Oscar-winning composer A.R. Rahman has provided the score, with lyrics penned by Gulzar. The track has been crooned by Sukhwinder Singh and Sapna Awasthi. The iconic number has been performed on top of a moving train by Malaika and the protagonist Shah Rukh Khan. Choreographed by Farah, the mesmerizing number continues to be one of the most memorable tracks, remembered for its energetic steps and deep lyrics. It still remains an inspiration for several dance enthusiasts across the country. "Dil Se." further featured Manisha Koirala and Preity Zinta (debut movie) in significant roles.

"One by Four (One/4) is being embraced by audiences across all sections; absence of heroines during promotions caused loss to our film" – Movie Team at Success meet

Tejas Gunjal Films and Rohit Gunjal Films banners have produced the action crime drama "One by Four (One/4)", starring Venkatesh Peddapalem, Aparna Mallick, and Heena Soni in lead roles. The film is directed by Bahubali Palani K, who earlier worked as an associate director for the blockbuster Baahubali. The movie is jointly produced by Ranjana Rajesh Gunjal and Rohit Ramdas Gunjal. Recently released, "One by Four (One/4)" has emerged as a successful film, receiving appreciation from audiences across all categories and running successfully in all centers. On this occasion, the success meet was held at the Hyderabad Film Chamber, where the team shared their thoughts. Director Bahubali Palani K



said: "Audiences have made One by Four (One/4) a blockbuster. Collections are good in every theatre. Once again, viewers proved that if the content is strong, even a small film can achieve big success. Hero Venkatesh impressed everyone with his fights and performance. He has already done action films in Kannada, and he has a

bright future in Telugu cinema as well. Our producers Ranjana and Rohit came from Mumbai with great passion for cinema and entered Tollywood. I hope they produce many more films. However, it is unfortunate that some actors who initially come seeking opportunities do not show up during promotions. They should at least pro-

mote the film with gratitude." Producer Ranjana Rajesh Gunjal said: "Our film One by Four (One/4), which carries a strong message along with entertainment, is being well received by audiences. The success is purely due to its solid content. The character 'Pavitra' is getting special appreciation, and hero Venkatesh's performance is

being widely praised. The film shows the struggles a woman faces due to blackmail, making it a thought-provoking experience. We are deeply hurt that we did not receive promotional support from the heroines. Despite providing all facilities, they did not show gratitude towards the film. Their absence during promotions caused losses to the movie. It feels better to encourage and cast Telugu girls as heroines rather than depending on North Indian heroines." Producer Rohit Ramdas Gunjal said: "Out of love for Telugu cinema, we came from Mumbai to Tollywood. Achieving success with our very first attempt is very encouraging. The message we wanted to convey through this film reached the audience, and collections are strong. Viewers

never reject a good film. Unfortunately, the actors themselves did not cooperate during promotions; otherwise, the film would have reached even more people." Hero Venkatesh Peddapalem said: "All of us worked extremely hard for One by Four (One/4). We also faced release issues due to competition from bigger films, but our producers bravely overcame all hurdles and released the movie. The film is receiving good talk from all theatres. Many are saying this is a must-watch film for women. Even now, when we want to continue promotions, the heroines are not attending press meets. Actors who skip promotions should think about the situation of producers who invest so much passion and money into making a film."