



Latte to Talk About

Cafes are trying to reclaim their glory days as conversation hubs and wooing the young with curated lectures **DEEP DIVE >> 4**

magazine

To order your favourite newspaper, call 1800 1200 004 toll free or visit subscribe.timesofindia.com. To advertise with us, call 1800 120 5474

Inside Story

Deep Dive P4, 5

■ A New Chapter Begins for Bastar's Children

■ The Fragile Art of Sharing a Song

■ One Man's Search for the Defining Gadget of AI Age

Sunday Chatter P6

■ 'Not a Wife, But a Widow Can Realise the Importance of Life Insurance'

■ A Mad T Party (With Apologies to Lewis Carroll)

■ Phubbing is Killing Pubbing, With Silence

■ Korea, Japan Come to the Rescue in Kyrgyzstan

ETC P8

■ How to Stop AI from Scraping Your Data

World Play P10

■ Woods in the Rough Again

■ Breaking Point of a Relentless Mind



Pure Politics & Bottom Line

ET WEALTH ON MONDAY



PURE POLITICS

PAGE >> 2

Shah Hits Out at Trinamool in Bengal with 'Chargesheet'

Sharpening his attack on the Trinamool in poll-bound West Bengal, union home minister Amit Shah on Saturday released BJP's 39-page "chargesheet", accusing the state government of misgovernance in the last 15 years. **Jayatri Nag & Jatin Takkar report.**

Kumar Bhaskar Varma Setu Bridges Lives in Fin Hub Guwahati

The Kumar Bhaskar Varma Setu, a 1.24-km bridge across the Brahmaputra connecting Guwahati and North Guwahati, has become a key link for people in Assam's financial hub, with hundreds of office-goers and traders travelling through it daily. **Bikash Singh reports.**

Deepfake Ads Look to Derail Candidates on US Campaign Trail

Reel vs Real

Taking advantage of fast-improving AI tools, campaigns for November's midterm elections are increasingly using 'deepfake' ads



Following Trump's footsteps, Republicans use AI-generated ads more than Democrats

People struggle to identify deepfakes & misinformation affects opinions, says Journal of Creative Communications

REGULATIONS LACKING

Essentially no federal regulation in place; states playing catch-up

28 states have passed legislation on use of AI in political ads

No professional fact-checking systems in social media platforms

With few guardrails, experts say tech could erode already low public trust

Reuters

New York: As the video opens, Democratic Texas State Representative James Talarico appears to stand in front of a Texas flag, beaming. "Radicalised white men are the greatest domestic terrorist threat in our country," the US Senate candidate seems to say into the camera. As a voice whispers "white men," Talarico continues: "So true. So true." But Talarico never filmed that video. Instead, the clip is an AI-generated ad from the National Republican Senatorial Committee (NRSC), the party's Senate campaign arm, featuring a

computer-altered Talarico reciting social media posts he wrote years ago. The words "AI generated" show up in easy-to-miss font in the lower right-hand corner. The realistic video is among a vanguard of "deepfake" advertisements that some campaigns are already deploying ahead of November's midterm elections, taking advantage of AI tools that are improving at a breakneck pace.

The ads are being introduced into a media landscape with few guardrails. There is no federal regulation constraining the use of AI in political messaging, leaving only a patchwork of largely untested state laws. And while

social media companies like Meta and X label certain AI-generated content, they have scrapped professional fact-checking systems in favour of user-generated notes. Politics experts worry such videos could leave voters confused, or even deceived. The stakes are high: the election will determine which party controls Congress for the final two years of Republican President Donald Trump's term, with Democrats seemingly well positioned to capture a majority in the US House of Representatives but facing longer odds in the US Senate.

Effective, Say Strategists >> 7

'NEED TO REPRIORITISE SPENDING, BACK VULNERABLE BUSINESSES'

W Asia Conflict may Take Pace Off India's Growth

Tiding over Energy Crisis

WAR IMPACT

Costs of energy, logistics, fertilisers and related feedstocks surge

Exports to and remittances from West Asia hit

Shipping disrupted; war-risk premiums rise; deliveries delayed

Higher fertiliser & fuel subsidy will affect govt finances

SILVER LINING

Robust macro fundamentals

Sustained policy efforts offer resilience

Steps taken to boost local supply of energy, other inputs

POLICY PRESCRIPTIONS

Create fiscal space to meet strategic & long-term needs

Prepare as if the conflict will abate slowly

Double down on reforms to boost competitiveness

Monitor situation closely and respond

CEA Nageswaran flags impact on inflation, fiscal deficit, external balances in FY27

Our Bureau

New Delhi: India faces "considerable downside" risk to its projected growth of 7-7.4% for 2026-27 due to the West Asia conflict, chief economic advisor V Anantha Nageswaran said on Saturday, warning of significant threats to inflation, fiscal deficit and external balances if the war persists.

The country may need to re-prioritise spending, support vulnerable businesses and households, and create fiscal space for strategic and long-term needs, Nageswaran said in the preface to the finance ministry's monthly economic review for March. India's relatively robust macro-economic fundamentals and sus-

tained policy efforts provide resilience, it needs to double down on its reform efforts to improve competitiveness and preparedness while remaining vigilant to the evolving situation, the review said. India has remained the world's fastest-expanding major economy since 2021-22. Its growth rate for the current fiscal is estimated at 7.6%.

Given India's position as a key energy importer with strong trade, investment and remittance linkages with West Asia, the impact of the conflict on India will be felt through four channels, Nageswaran said.

These are supply disruptions to oil, gas and fertilisers, and elevated logistics costs; a possible drop in remittances by Indians in the Gulf countries.

It is prudent to assume a slow, gradual restoration of 'business as usual' in the Gulf rather than an accelerated one while firming up measures to cope with the external shocks, he suggested.

Near-term Outlook Uncertain >> 7

Smartphone PLI Surpasses Targets, Turns Out to be Right Call for India

Sop outgo at less than 1% of handsets worth ₹24Lcr made since FY21

Kiran Rathee

New Delhi: India has produced mobile phones worth ₹24 lakh crore (over \$250 billion) since fiscal 2020-21, with much of the activity stimulated by the government incentive scheme that has had an outsized impact compared with the monetary support.

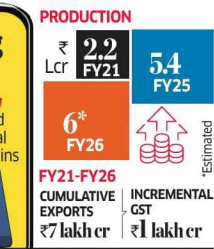
The fiscal stimulus under the production-linked incentive (PLI) scheme for smartphones is likely to be around ₹21,000 crore

for the FY21-26 period, or less than 1% of the value of production. If the calculation is limited to companies that directly benefited from the scheme, like Apple vendors Foxconn, Tata Electronics, Samsung and Dixon, the government outgo will still be under 2% against production worth around ₹11 lakh crore. The math shows that the scheme was highly effective as well as fiscally prudent, industry executives and government officials said.

One of the most effective among the production-linked programmes the government announced across industries, the smartphone PLI scheme was notified in FY21 and is coming to an end on March 31. It has exceeded the targets for both production and ex-



ports, with the original goal being production of ₹10.5 lakh crore and exports of ₹6.5 lakh crore. Pankaj Mohindroo, chairman of India Cellular and Electronics



Association (ICEA), lauded the scheme as a "progressive policy intervention".

Non-beneficiaries Gain Too >> 7



Sky is the Limit

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Uttar Pradesh governor Anandiben Patel, chief minister Yogi Adityanath, deputy CM Brajesh Pathak and others during the inauguration of the first phase of Noida International Airport at Jewar, Gautam Buddha Nagar district, on Saturday. **FULL REPORT >> 3**

India Seeks Safeguards in WTO Pacts

India on Saturday said safeguards must be put in place before talks on including plurilateral pacts into WTO framework. It reiterated that long-pending mandated issues, including a permanent solution on public stockholding for food security, must be addressed on "priority". **>> 3**

Spaceteck Co Bellatrix Raises \$20m

Bengaluru-based spaceteck startup Bellatrix has raised \$20 million (₹190 crore) in a funding round led by venture fund Cactus Partners among others, as it looks to scale commercial production of its satellite propulsion systems. **>> 3**

SHIPPING DISRUPTION RISKS IN RED SEA ARISE

Yemen's Houthis Join Iran War, Fire Missiles at Israel



Israeli rescue personnel at impact site following Iranian missile barrages

Pak PM Sharif speaks with Pezeshkian over holding talks for de-escalation

Agencies

Yemen's Houthi rebels announced their entry into the West Asia war on Saturday by launching a ballistic missile towards Israel, as the world struggled to contain the economic damage of a conflict now entering its second month.

The intervention of Iran's Yemeni allies into Tehran's conflict with Israel and the United States was expected to disrupt to Red Sea shipping, with trade from the Gulf through the Strait of Hormuz already choked off.

With Hormuz closed, many shipments to and from the region pass through the Omani

port of Salalah, on the Arabian Sea, but Danish shipping giant Maersk said operations had been temporarily suspended after a drone attack injured one worker and damaged a crane.

The war began when the US and Israel launched airstrikes across Iran, killing supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, engulfing West Asia in conflict and triggering global economic pain by sending oil and gas prices soaring. With no end to the conflict in sight, despite US President Donald Trump's optimism that US forces have obliterated Iran's military, a spokesman for the Houthis issued a video statement declaring that the group had launched ballistic missiles towards Israeli bases.

Speaking earlier, secretary of state Marco Rubio said the US States expected to conclude military operations within weeks but the Houthis said they would continue their operations until the "aggression" on all fronts ended.

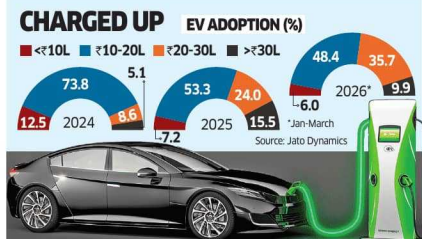
No Reports of Casualties >> 7

'MORE THAN A DOZEN KILLED IN ATTACKS' US, Israel Hit Civilian Areas: Iran

Iranian media said on Saturday that US-Israeli strikes hit multiple residential areas, killing more than a dozen people. Strikes on residential areas in Borujerd killed "seven and wounded 36 others", Fars news agency said. Attacks on Zanjan killed at least five people and injured 7 others. **>> 7**

FUEL PRICES, SUPPLY WOES NOT AT PLAY

Traffic in Middle Lane Revving Up E-car Growth



Penetration strongest in ₹10-30L segment; year-end discounts, offers pushing demand

Lijee Philip

Mumbai: The mid-market ₹10-30 lakh segment is driving India's electric passenger vehicle adoption, but concerns over rising fuel prices and supply disruptions amid the Israel-US-Iran war have not yet triggered a broader demand surge, dealers said. While electric PV sales rose 77% year-on-year to a record 175,000 in 2025, according to data from the government's Vahan portal, dealers attributed it largely to year-end discounts and promotional schemes rather than a structural shift linked to global uncertainties.

"If fuel prices increase sharply or fuel is rationed, then the-

re could be an uptick in demand for EVs," said a Delhi-based car dealer who requested not to be identified.

As increasing options and improving infrastructure push electric mobility in the country, adoption remains concentrated in the ₹10-30 lakh price range, where upfront costs and practicality align better, experts said. In contrast, both entry-level and premium segments continue to lag, constrained by pricing gaps, limited model availability and range considerations. "EVs are gaining traction where buyers can balance upfront cost with everyday usability," said Ravi Bhatia, president of automotive markets intelligence firm Jato Dynamics. "Lower price segments remain highly cost-sensitive, while the premium end is driven by different considerations."

Better Product Offerings >> 7

■ Subsidies for E-bikes Extended till July 31 >> 3

AMID CONCERNS OVER RISING COSTS, ENERGY SITUATION

Ecomm, Delivery Cos Take EV Rides

Ecomm and logistics firms are accelerating the shift to EVs for last-mile deliveries, amid rising costs and fuel supply risks. **Sreeradha Basu & Brinda Sarkar report. >> 3**

BJP'S 39-PAGE 'CHARGESHEET ON 15 YEARS OF TMC MISGOVERNANCE'

BJP Alleges 'Assault on Democracy'; Shah Targets Mamata's 'Sympathy' Politics

Jayatri Nag

Kolkata: Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Saturday released the BJP's 39-page "chargesheet/white paper" against 15 years of alleged misgovernance by the Trinamool Congress ahead of the West Bengal Assembly polls, flagging issues ranging from infiltration and systemic corruption to institutional collapse, economic decline, healthcare distress and "assault on democracy".

Sharpening his attack on Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, Shah said eliminating infiltration from West Bengal and the country remains a "declared agenda" of the BJP. He also asserted that the BJP would secure a majority in the state, adding that the party aims to establish its rule across "Ango-Bongo-Kalinga" — referring to Bihar, West Bengal and Odisha.

Accusing Banerjee of playing the "victim card" over the special intensive revision (SIR) of electoral rolls, Shah said the Supreme Court had to appoint judicial officers for adjudication only in West Bengal, unlike in other states, including opposition-ruled Tamil Nadu and Kerala. He also referred to her 2021 campaign, alleging attempts to draw public sympathy.

On infiltration, Shah alleged that the state government had allowed illegal migrants to become a "vote bank", and claimed that administrative machinery in Bengal had been politicised. "Whenever elections happen, the ECI undertakes reshuffles. In Bengal, officials have effectively become Trinamool cadres," he said.

Framing the electoral choice as

one between "bhay" (fear) and "bharosa" (trust), Shah said Bengal would be transformed from a "bimaru" state into a "viksit" one under BJP rule, citing examples of Assam, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. He also described the state as an "industrial graveyard".

On border management, Shah said the state government had failed to provide land for fencing along the Bangladesh border despite repeated requests. "Once BJP comes to power, the land allotment process will be completed within 45 days," he said.

BJP's chargesheet described as a "people's chargesheet", the document accuses the state government of systemic corruption, institutional collapse and compromised national security.

BJP would secure a majority in West Bengal. We aim to establish BJP rule across "Ango-Bongo-Kalinga" — referring to Bihar, West Bengal and Odisha

AMIT SHAH
Home Minister

On infiltration, it claims 569 km of the 2,216.7 km India-Bangladesh border in the state remains unfenced due to delays in land acquisition, and alleges that fake IDs were facilitated for infiltrators. On governance, it flags a "cut-money" culture, non-payment of dearness allowance to around 20 lakh state government employees, and non-implementation of the 7th Pay Commission.

It also alleges obstruction of electoral roll revisions, cites over 300 political murders since 2016 and more than 13,000 attempted murders, and points to recurring communal tensions.

On women's safety, the document cites 34,738 reported crimes against women in 2023. It further alleges a "flight of capital", claiming over 6,000 companies have left the state and that around 40 lakh youth have migrated to other states for work.



Shah releasing the 'chargesheet' against TMC in Kolkata on Saturday — IANS

'MINORITY WOMEN MERCILESSLY DELETED'

Citing Voter Deletions, CM Targets EC Over SIR

Our Political Bureau

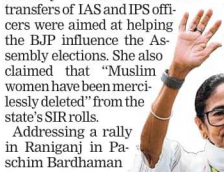
Kolkata: West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on Saturday mounted a sharp attack on the Election Commission of India, alleging that recent administrative reshuffles, preparation of supplementary electoral rolls and transfers of IAS and IPS officers were aimed at helping the BJP influence the Assembly elections. She also claimed that "Muslim women have been mercilessly deleted" from the state's SIR rolls.

Addressing a rally in Raniganj in Paschim Bardhaman

district, Banerjee said the BJP had "crossed all limits" and warned it not to breach the "Lakshman Rekha".

Alleging targeted deletions, she said women—particularly Muslim women—along with tribals, Matuas and Rajbanshis had been removed from voter lists, adding that many Hindus were also affected. "Out of 220 who died due to SIR, half are Hindus. They are trying to create divisions and incite tensions between communities," she said.

Banerjee also questioned the transparency of the process, asserting that the ECI "cannot snatch away voting rights in the name of SIR".



BJD vs BJP Over 'Shifting' of Steel Plant to Andhra

A war of words has broken out between the opposition BJD and the BJP after Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu laid the foundation stone on March 23 for a ₹1.36 lakh crore steel plant in Anakapalli district, to be developed in two phases.

The BJD claims the project was originally planned for Kendrapara in Odisha but has now moved out. "It is a sad and shameful development that the ArcelorMittal Nippon Steel plant, once planned for Odisha, is now being shifted to Andhra Pradesh," senior BJD leader and Rajya Sabha MP Sasmit Patra told ET.

Odisha Industries Minister Sampad Chandra Swain dismissed the allegations, saying the company is free to invest in any state and that its Odisha plans remain on track. "The Kendrapara project is awaiting environmental clearance and has not been shelved," he said, adding that raw materials for the Andhra plant would come from Chhattisgarh, not Odisha.

The BJD, however, continued to question the move, alleging that the "double-engine" model was diverting resources from BJP-ruled states to those governed by NDA allies, and accused the state government of failing to safeguard Odisha's industrial interests.

AP Seeks Central Nod For Amaravati as Capital

In a special Assembly session on Saturday, the Andhra Pradesh Assembly passed a resolution urging the Centre to recognise Amaravati as the state's permanent capital.

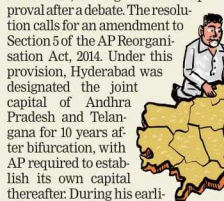
Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu moved the resolution at the start of the session, seeking the House's approval after a debate. The resolution calls for an amendment to Section 5 of the AP Reorganisation Act, 2014. Under this provision, Hyderabad was designated the joint capital of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana for 10 years after bifurcation, with AP required to establish its own capital thereafter. During his ear-

ly tenure, Naidu had pushed for Amaravati as a greenfield capital, built on about 34,000 acres of land pooled from around 30,000 farmers, who were made stakeholders in the project.

However, after the YSR Congress Party came to power in 2019 under YS Jagan Mohan

Reddy, it proposed a three-capital model—Amaravati, Visakhapatnam and Kurnool—stalling development in Amaravati.

With Parliament currently in session, the state government is hoping the Centre will move the required amendment and formally seal Amaravati's status as the capital.



31 L Added to Bengal Electoral Rolls, No Word on Deletions

Jayatri Nag

Kolkata: The Election Commission of India on Saturday said around 31 lakh names have been added through two supplementary electoral lists in West Bengal. With this, the state's total electorate has risen to 6.76 crore, up from 6.44 cr as of February 28, excluding the adjudication list of 60.6 lakh.

However, the Commission did not provide clarity on deletions in the supplementary lists.

Of the 60.6 lakh cases under adjudication, around 37 lakh have been disposed of by 705 judicial officers under the supervision of the Calcutta High Court.

The second supplementary list was published last Friday night, while the first was released earlier this week.

Those left out can appeal within 15 days—online or offline—before appellate tribunals.

State Chief Electoral Officer Manoj Kumar Agarwal said the Commission is prepared to publish daily supplementary lists, subject to submissions from judicial officers.

With polling scheduled in two phases on April 23 and 29, the Commission is also stepping up surveillance with 100% webcasting.

The bridge slashed travel time between Guwahati and North Guwahati from 45 to 60 minutes down to a mere 7 to 10 minutes. This 1.24-km extradosed bridge is a part of a wider 8.4-km connectivity corridor.

The bridge is a part of a larger plan to decongest the southern bank of the city. Chiranjit Nandi, a Yoga instructor, had to commute twice a week to North Guwahati. He is a yoga instructor for young cricketers.

Nandi told ET, "I stay in the Jyotikuchi area of Guwahati. I had a tough time travelling to the stadium. First I



UBT Sena Faces Internal Dissent After Civic Election Setback

Months after losing the Mumbai Municipal Corporation to the BJP, the Shiv Sena (Uddhav Balasahab Thackeray faction) appears to be facing internal strain, with senior leaders openly questioning party decisions and leadership style.

The latest flashpoint was the Rajya Sabha nomination. The leadership, led by Uddhav Thackeray, was keen to renominate Priyanka Chaturvedi for the lone opposition seat from Maharashtra, citing her role in articulating the party's position in the Upper House. However, a senior party MP opposed the move and is learnt to have secured backing from the Indian National Congress for Sharad Pawar, effectively isolating the UBT Sena.

Sources said the Thackeray leadership is displeased with the MP but is constrained from taking action.

Discontent appears to run deeper. Some Lok Sabha MPs have reportedly flagged concerns over the party's leadership, describing it as lacking dynamism and proactiveness.

At the state level too, senior leader Bhaskar Jadhav publicly criticised the decision-making process, warning that the current approach could hurt the party's prospects in Maharashtra.

KUMAR BHASKAR VARMA SETU

Rewriting Guwahati Travel Story: Setu Cuts Distance, Links Lives



₹3,030cr project opens up North Guwahati growth corridor

Bikash Singh

Guwahati: Call it an engineering marvel or game changer for Assam's financial hub Guwahati, the Kumar Bhaskar Varma Setu which connected the two banks of mighty Brahmaputra of Guwahati has joined the separated hearts.

From Guwahati travelling to North Guwahati was full of ordeal. One must take ferry service or move via Saraghat bridge which was the first bridge over the Brahmaputra. The 1,298 km rail cum road bridge was built in 1982.

When the water level of Brahmaputra increased, ferry services were discontinued. Moving through the road meant one had to bear the traffic congestion and hours of driving. Kumar Bhaskar Varma Setu was inaugurated on February 14, 2026, by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The 6-lane bridge, 1.24 km extradosed bridge across the Brahmaputra connecting Guwahati (Bharalumukh) and North Guwahati was built at a cost of ₹3,030 cr.

The bridge slashed travel time between Guwahati and North Guwahati from 45 to 60 minutes down to a mere 7 to 10 minutes. This 1.24-km extradosed bridge is a part of a wider 8.4-km connectivity corridor.

The bridge is a part of a larger plan to decongest the southern bank of the city. Chiranjit Nandi, a Yoga instructor, had to commute twice a week to North Guwahati. He is a yoga instructor for young cricketers.

Nandi told ET, "I stay in the Jyotikuchi area of Guwahati. I had a tough time travelling to the stadium. First I

had to come to the riverbank and put my two wheeler in the ferry and travel to North Guwahati. My travel time has reduced drastically."

"When restrictions were imposed on movement due rise in water levels during monsoon I had to go all the way taking my two-wheeler. The bridge is a great boon for us."

Hundreds of people everyday come to the Southern side of Guwahati from North Guwahati to work in the government offices and private firms. Traders come to the whole hub of Pan-cy to pick up their stocks.

Premier institutions like Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) are located in North Guwahati.

Several years ago now Assam chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma had said that he had a dream of making a bridge from this side of Guwahati to North Guwahati.

Maheesh Nath, a businessman who crosses between the two banks said, "Often when you reach the other side North Guwahati one had to take a vehicle to reach the destination. All these troubles are gone now. One does not need to wait for the ferry now."

The project was implemented by the Assam PWD with funding from the BRICS New Development Bank. Assam government plans to move government offices to North Guwahati in a move to decongest the city.

Guwahati High Court and several important government offices slated to move to North Guwahati, the new bridge ensures that the northern bank remains seamlessly accessible. A new Gauhathi High Court complex has been proposed as part of a judicial township at Rangmahal.

The real estate prices of North Guwahati have soared up. The riverbank on the South front is being developed, and one portion is open to the public. The government plans to extend the riverbank from Kharguli to Khamakhya.

India, Russia Sign MoU to Set up UAV & Satellite Lab

Dipanjana Roy Chaudhury

New Delhi: The Indo-Russia Innopraktika Technology Hub has signed agreements with academic institutions in India to establish a state-of-the-art Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) and Satellite Laboratory in the country.

Last week, the Chhatrapati Shahu Ji Maharaj University (CSJMU) Foundation, Kanpur; Kalam SPS Research Centre, and Russia's Geoscan Group signed the memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Innopraktika Technology Hub. The signing was accompanied by the inauguration of drone and satellite certification courses.

Denis Alipov, Russian Ambassador to India, called it a watershed moment in bilateral cooperation.

"The inauguration of the drone and satellite certification courses and setting up of the UAV laboratory at the CSJMU campus is without exaggeration a landmark step in Russia-India technological partnership, being an integral part of the rich bilateral agenda set forth recently during the state visit of President Putin to India in December 2025."

The MoU also lays emphasis on the human dimension of technological progress, ensuring that the benefits of this collaboration are built into the talent pipelines of both nations.

Economic Ties With Azerbaijan Improve Despite Political Drift

Dipanjana Roy Chaudhury

New Delhi: India's investments into Azerbaijan saw robust growth in 2025 despite their political ties remaining flat. According to the Central Bank of Azerbaijan, Investments from India into Azerbaijan reached \$56.407 million in 2025. This represents an increase of \$12.9 million, or 29.8%, compared with 2024.

India's total investments in Azerbaijan have increased considerably over the past decade. According to a recent report by the Eurasian Development Bank (EDB), these investments rose from \$480 million in 2016 to \$1.26 billion by the end of the first half of 2025.

According to the EDB, this increase brought India's total investment in Azerbaijan's economy to \$1.26 billion.

Azerbaijan also facilitated repatriation of nearly 200 Indians from war-torn Iran.

However, no direct investment flows from Azerbaijan into India have been registered over the years, highlighting an imbalance in bilateral capital movement and suggesting untapped opportunities for Azerbaijani investors in the Indian market.

Assam BJP Expels Nine Rebel Leaders, Six Workers

Bikash Singh

Guwahati: Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Saturday held a roadshow in Guwahati as the BJP stepped up its campaign for the Assam Assembly elections.

The roadshow began at Arya Vidyaapeeth College field and passed through key city stretches before culminating near Nepali Mandir. Shah later attended a party meeting at the BJP's state headquarters, Atal Bihari Vajpayee Bhawan. He is scheduled to address two Vijay Sankalp Samaroh programmes in Dhekiajuli and Tihu on Sunday.

Amid intensified campaigning, the Bharatiya Janata Party expelled nine leaders for six years for contesting against officially nominated candidates. Those expelled include Uddhav Das (Barpeta), Jayanta Kumar Das (Dispur), Jitendra Singh Gour (Kaliabor), Amalendu Das (Barkhola), Dhanjit Rabha (Gopalpara West), Chakradhar Das (Bongaigaon), Gagan Chandra Haloi (Barpeta), Ankur Das (Kamalpur) and Yashoda Dulal (Shyamal) Rakshit (Lumding).

In a March 27 letter, state BJP president Dilip Saikia said the action was taken under the party constitution. "The party has expelled the workers for six years with immediate effect for contesting against officially nominated candidates," the letter said, citing Clause XXV.

Additionally six party workers were removed from primary membership for supporting rebel candidates, following directions from the state leadership. The disciplinary action comes ahead of polling on April 9 and counting on May 4, as parties intensify their campaign across the state.



AKSHAY ROUT

Election process for five assemblies is in full flow. But special intensive revision (SIR) of electoral rolls has continued to receive attention from all: political parties, constitutional courts, election officials and citizens at large, both in implementation and consequences. SIR transformed the dull routine of annual electoral roll revision an exciting affair. Reintroduction of SIR after more than two decades began on June 24 last year ahead of the Bihar election and moved into another 12 states and Union Territories (UTs) so on after. The final rolls of 11 of these have been published, except for gigan-

SIR Rewrites the Rules of Roll Revision

tic Uttar Pradesh, where it is scheduled for next month. Election-bound West Bengal, after a noisy SIR journey, still awaits supplements to the final roll and still retains the noise.

SETTLED BUT EVOLVING
In a deeply polarised polity, a political reading of the SIR was inevitable. Its legality was challenged through PILs and by some state governments before being settled. As expected, electoral rolls in SIR states have seen notable pruning. But the publication of final rolls is only part of the story. The past few months have seen all stakeholders grappling with an evolving SIR, with little recent precedent to fall back on.

DIFFERENT REVISION
SIR is qualitatively and procedurally distinct from the annual special

summary revision (SSR), with key additions such as mapping electors to the previous SIR or over two decades ago and submission of unique enumeration forms. Provisions under Article 326 of the Constitution—covering eligibility, including citizenship—are under close scrutiny, with special and micro-observers in the field. Booth-level officers, largely part-time schoolteachers, face pressure to quickly learn and execute new procedures, while even senior electoral officials continue to grapple with the demands of the exercise.

LEARNING TO COPE
Political parties have learnt to express less shock and awe as slimmer final rolls got published state after state, after discounting the absentee, shifted and dead, and after checking

on basic eligibility. Parties are reconciled to fight the upcoming state polls based on post-SIR electoral roll, and recalibrating strategies. Whether they make SIR a campaign issue is a political call; the Bihar experience informs that picking holes in election management may not exactly yield profit. Appointment of booth



level agents demands resources which many political groups might not be able to afford.

MANAGERS MODIFY
Despite no appeals against Bihar's final electoral roll post-SIR, the second phase has tested election managers. Alongside extensive training, the Election Commission has made key course corrections. It dropped the requirement for specific documents at the enumeration stage, allowing other relevant proofs, and showed flexibility in revising timelines. The plan to publish draft rolls by December 9 and final rolls by February 7 has been recalibrated, with officials recognising the need for more time for a thorough, people-friendly exercise. This learning should inform timelines in the next SIR phase.

PERTURBED AND OCCUPIED
The Supreme Court has found itself drawn into fraught disputes between combative state governments and the Election Commission, noting with concern the trust deficit in implementing SIR. In Bihar, it directed the use of para-legal volunteers to assist voters. In West Bengal, in an unusual move, it ordered judicial officers to adjudicate claims and objections, and later set up judicial benches for appeals—roles typically assigned to election officials. These judicial entrants required training to handle lakhs of cases, many of which remain pending. The court had also allowed Aadhaar to be considered for enrolment, while clarifying it is not proof of citizenship, and has enabled extensions of key SIR deadlines in states.

ALERT FOR CITIZENS
Citizens are learning that the fran-

chise granted by the Constitution demands periodic, careful upkeep. A new term—"logical discrepancy"—has gained currency flagging inconsistencies in voter details that require verification. Migrant urban populations are often found lagging in updating their electoral records, while technology flaws error with little regard for individual circumstances. The onus is on citizens to stay vigilant about their inclusion; the act of voting comes next.

EASIER NEXT TIME
The second phase of SIR has pushed all sides to adapt, with signs of both flexibility—voluntary and compelled—and innovation. The next round, covering the remaining 23 states and UTs, may be imminent and should bring fewer uncertainties and less strain after a steep learning curve. But fresh questions may still arise.

The writer is Ex-DG, ECI



Rentomojo Files Draft Papers for ₹1,200-cr IPO

Proposed offer includes fresh issuance of ₹150 cr

Our Bureau

New Delhi: Furniture and home electronics rental startup Rentomojo has filed a draft red herring prospectus (DRHP) with the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) for an initial public offering of ₹1,100-1,200 crore. The proposed offer includes a fresh issue of shares worth ₹150 crore. The remainder will be shares offered for sale by existing shareholders. Early and institutional investors such as Accel, Chiratae Ventures and Edelweiss Financial Services plan to pare stakes in the company, along with founder and chief executive Geetansh Bamania. Classified as a promoter, Bamania holds a little over 14% in the Bengaluru-based company. According to the DRHP, Rentomojo plans to utilise ₹70 crore from the sale of primary shares for repayment of certain debt. A further ₹42.5 crore will be allocated towards lease rental payments for its warehouses and offline experience centres, with the remaining funds earmarked for general corporate purposes. The company has raised about ₹400 crore from private investors to date. Its most recent funding was in February 2024, when it secured ₹210 crore in a round led by Edelweiss at a valuation of ₹650-900 crore. Merchant bankers Motilal Oswal Financial Services, Axis Capital and LPL Capital Services are managing the IPO.

Over 54 L LPG Refills Delivered in a Day: Govt

NEW DELHI The government on Saturday said more than 54 lakh LPG refills were delivered on Friday and the delivery of domestic LPG cylinders is normal despite prevailing geopolitical situation that has affected the supply chains. There are no reported dry-out at LPG distributorships and online LPG cylinder bookings increased to 91% on industry basis on Friday, according to the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas. To prevent diversion at the distributor level, Delivery Authentication Code (DAC) based deliveries have been increased from 53% (February 2026) to 84% now. The ministry further stated that all refineries are operating at high capacity, with adequate crude inventories in place. — IANS

In A Nutshell

Certain Stores Constrained: Jubilant

NEW DELHI Jubilant FoodWorks, India's largest food services chain operator that runs Domino's Pizza and Dunkin' Donuts, said it is taking steps to conserve LPG and move to alternate sources like electricity and piped natural gas as some of its stores face supply constraints amid the West Asia war. "Operational impact at this stage is limited and being actively managed," it said in a BSE notification on Saturday. "The company is in constant engagement with oil marketing companies (OMCs) to remain apprised of the latest developments and plan operational responses accordingly, given the rapidly evolving nature of the situation," it added. — Our Bureau

NEW DELHI Jubilant FoodWorks, India's largest food services chain operator that runs Domino's Pizza and Dunkin' Donuts, said it is taking steps to conserve LPG and move to alternate sources like electricity and piped natural gas as some of its stores face supply constraints amid the West Asia war. "Operational impact at this stage is limited and being actively managed," it said in a BSE notification on Saturday. "The company is in constant engagement with oil marketing companies (OMCs) to remain apprised of the latest developments and plan operational responses accordingly, given the rapidly evolving nature of the situation," it added. — Our Bureau

MUMBAI Former Raymond chairman Vijaypat Singhania died here on Saturday evening, his family said. He was 87. His son Gautam Singhania, the group's current chairman and managing director, announced the death on the microblogging platform 'X'. A Raymond spokesperson said Singhania's last rites will be performed on Sunday. Vijaypat Singhania, a recipient of the Padma Bhushan, led Raymond as chairman for two decades till 2000. After handing over the reins of the company to Gautam, he also transferred his entire 37% stake in the company to his son. — PTI

India Seeks Guardrails on WTO Plurilateral Pacts

New Delhi pushes priority resolution on public stockholding for food security, special safeguards mechanism and cotton issues

Our Bureau

New Delhi: India on Saturday said safeguards must be put in place before discussions on incorporating plurilateral agreements into the World Trade Organization (WTO) framework. It reiterated that long-pending mandated issues, including a permanent solution on public stockholding for food security, special safeguard mechanism and cotton, must be addressed on "priority". "The incorporation of plurilateral outcomes into the WTO framework should be based on consensus and not impair the existing rights of non parties or cast additional obligations on them. Therefore, I believe necessary guardrails have to be in place before we discuss this subject further," commerce and industry minister Piyush Goyal said in a video statement issued early Saturday. Saturday marked the third day of the 14th ministerial conference of the WTO in Yaounde, Cameroon. "To show that the WTO remains central to global trade, at the same time, we must focus on trade rather than taking up newer issues and trying to expand the



Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal with Cameroon's Minister of Trade Luc Magloire Mbarga Atangana at a meeting in Yaounde on Saturday

ambit of the WTO to subjects that are not a part of the WTO," Goyal said, adding that "WTO is relevant, and WTO will continue to be very important for global trade and to promote multilateral rules of trade". His remarks come amid calls, particularly from the US, that the WTO needs to change to be relevant. Goyal's statement also assumes significance as about 120 WTO members are pushing to include a China-led Investment Facilitation for Development Agreement (IFDA) through a plurilateral route under Annex 4. India has opposed the move, citing a 2004 WTO decision that bars negotiations on investment facilitation.

FOR FULL REPORT, GO TO www.economictimes.com

FLIGHTS TO COMMENCE AFTER A MONTH

After A 25-year Wait, NCR Gets a New Airport

Jewar Airport in Noida to start with initial capacity of 12 million passengers a year and around 10 flight departures and arrivals a day; Airport expected to handle 70 million flyers annually

Our Bureau

New Delhi: Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday inaugurated Noida International Airport, fulfilling the National Capital Region's wait for a second airport nearly 25 years after it was initially proposed. The new airport at Jewar in Noida will start with an initial capacity of 12 million passengers a year. When the four phases are completed, it would handle 70 million flyers annually with six runways. Initially slated to open in September 2024, the airport missed multiple deadlines as the pandemic earlier this decade hit supply of construction materials and regulatory approvals took longer than usual. Commencement of flights will take around one more month as the airport is still awaiting some regulatory approvals including clearance of security programme. The airport will initially start with around 10 daily departures and arrivals each and will gradually expand capacity. Zurich Airport International AG, which won the bid to build and operate the airport for 40 years in 2019, has invested around ₹7,200 crore in the first phase. While billed as a second airport to Delhi's Indira Gandhi international Airport, it is around 75 km

Ready to Fly High

Noida Airport Passenger Footfall Projection

Phase 1 will cater to 12 million passengers per year

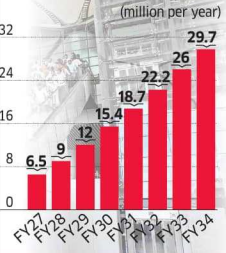
Phase 2 30 million passengers per year

Phase 3 50 million passengers per year

Source: Noida Airport



Projected Footfall



away from the capital and is more likely to get flyers from the western region of Uttar Pradesh in the first few years. "The airport will benefit a vast region encompassing Agra, Mathura, Aligarh, Ghaziabad, Meerut, Etawah, Bulandshahr and Faridabad and will bring numerous new opportunities for the farmers, small and medium enterprises and the youth of western Uttar Pradesh," Modi said while inaugurating the airport. As of now, the airport lacks any fast mode of transport connecting Delhi, but the Uttar Pradesh government has approved a ₹16,000 crore rapid rail corridor

GLOBAL LINK Zurich Airport International has invested around ₹7,200 crore in the first phase

That will connect the two airports along with other parts of Delhi. It will also allow airlines to start more flights from the NCR. Akasa Air, which has struggled to get slots at Delhi Airport, will be one of the first airlines to start flights from Noida along with market leader IndiGo.

"Two of the most critical markets have been slot-constrained for quite some time now. So, considering that there are new spaces opening up at Delhi and Mumbai, we will see much more increase in growth," an airline official said. The Navi Mumbai airport started operations last December. Modi said the area is becoming the hub of two major freight corridors, special railway tracks laid for goods trains, which have enhanced North India's connectivity with the seaports of Bengal and Gujarat. "This kind of multi-modal connectivity is making UP a major attraction for investors worldwide," he said.

PLANS TO SCALE UP PRODUCTION OF SATELLITE PROPULSION SYSTEMS

Bellatrix Aerospace Raises \$20 Million

Our Bureau

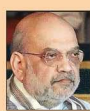
Bengaluru: Spaceteck startup Bellatrix Aerospace has raised \$20 million (₹190 crore) in a funding round led by venture fund Cactus Partners, as it looks to scale commercial production of its satellite propulsion systems and expand global deliveries. The round also saw participation from Hero Investment Office, 35 North Ventures, Indusbridge Ventures, and Monarch Holdings, along with continued backing from existing investors including Inflexor, Pavestone, GrowX, StartupXseed and Survam Partners. Founded in 2015, Bengaluru-based Bellatrix develops electric and green propulsion systems for satellites. It operates a vertically integrated model, handling design, manufacturing and testing in-house. Having successfully flight-



qualified its core technologies, it is now focused on building a reliable production propulsion system, said Rohan Ganapathy, cofounder & CEO, Bellatrix. The company said it will deploy the funds to expand its manufacturing capacity and set up production lines to meet growing demand from satellite constellation operators in India and overseas. The investment will also support ongoing customer programmes. "We've moved from flight-proven to factory-ready," said co-founder and COO Yashas Karanam, adding that the company has reduced propulsion system lead

times to under six months while improving unit economics. Bellatrix won the Best on Campus award at the Economic Times Startup Awards (ETSA) in 2020. The investment comes amid rising global demand for propulsion systems, driven by the expansion of low-earth orbit satellite constellations and many startups, both Indian and global, getting closer to their launch timelines. "Bellatrix is a unique asset with a robust history of space technology innovation," said Amit Sharma, general partner at Cactus Partners.

India Only Country With No Hike in Fuel Price: Shah



NEW DELHI Emphasising that there was no shortage of LPG cylinders or fuel, Union Home Minister Amit Shah said India has managed to maintain supplies and prices despite a spike in global oil prices due to geopolitical tensions. Urging people to trust the Narendra Modi Government, Shah said when retail prices across the globe are increasing, India is the only country where there is no increase in petrol and diesel prices. In an interview at the Times Now Summit 2026, Shah said the prime minister has assured that there will be no lockdown. "We are ensuring uninterrupted supply while maintaining business as usual in the country," he said. Responding to criticism of the government's handling of the crisis, he said the Centre has

shouldered the financial burden to shield citizens by slashing excise duty on oil products. "I believe there is no other country in the world that has taken the entire burden of the crisis upon itself," the home minister said. The steps taken during the last 11 years of the government have made the Indian economy so resilient that the government is able to cut its excise duty, he said. He said India has not only increased its oil reserves, which were non-existent in 2014, but also diversified its oil procurement. India used to import fuel from 27 countries, but now it imports from 42, he said. Shah said the government wants to hold the 2029 elections with Women's Reservation for one-third of the Lok Sabha seats, but Congress wants to hold talks on the delimitation commission only in May. — PTI

Fuel Volatility Accelerates EV Leap in Last Mile Delivery

Rising fuel costs and supply risks reshape fleet economics, nudging ecommerce players to speed up electrification timelines

Sreeradha Basu & Brinda Sarkar

Bengaluru: Ecommerce and logistics companies are accelerating the shift to electric vehicles (EVs) for last-mile deliveries, driven not just by sustainability goals but also by rising costs and supply risks. While EV adoption was already gaining momentum at companies such as Flipkart, Delhivery and Porter, fuel price volatility linked to global conflicts is hastening the transition, executives at bigbasket, Zippee and Dealshare said. With fuel costs becoming increasingly unpredictable, companies expect EV timelines to advance as delivery partners seek to reduce risk. "While the energy crisis is a recent phenomenon, fluctuating fuel prices are also a key catalyst in accelerating EV adoption," said TK Balakumar, chief operating officer, bigbasket. "We estimate that our transition has been advanced by ~6-9 months, as delivery partners increasingly shift to EVs to reduce fuel cost volatility and improve net earnings." At the grocery retailer, about 48% of the active last-mile fleet runs on EVs, which it expects to scale up to 70% over the next 12-24 months.



Economics Drive Electrics

Ecommerce, logistics companies scale up EV adoption, supported by strong cost economics

Fuel price fluctuation pushing faster-than-planned adoption

Delivery partners shifting to EVs to protect earnings

COST EFFICIENCY, CLIMATE GAINS Lower running costs translate into higher earnings for delivery workers, while companies benefit from lower emissions and a reduced climate footprint. The current fuel environment is accelerating adoption. "Rising fuel costs are a wake-up call," said Madhav Kasturia, CEO of ecommerce logistics platform Zippee. "Every rupee saved on energy directly impacts the bottomline, so it's definitely speeding up our EV adoption."

About 25% of Zippee's last-mile fleet is electric, with plans to expand, especially for hyperlocal and quick commerce deliveries. "The fuel situation makes EVs more urgent, so timelines are being nudged forward where possible, especially for high-density delivery zones," said Kasturia. Value-e-tailer Dealshare is also seeing faster EV adoption, primarily because of the significantly lower per-kilometre operating cost, according to its CEO Kamaldeep Singh. "For delivery partners, this directly im-

proves earning potential, making EVs an economically compelling choice," said Singh. "From 3-5% EV share last year, currently 20 to 25% of our last-mile fleet operates on electric vehicles, with higher penetration in dense urban clusters like Kolkata and Jaipur. We expect this to scale to 55 to 60% over the next 18 to 24 months." EVs offer lower operating and maintenance costs, improving predictability and efficiency. A Flipkart study of more than 6,000 delivery partners found nearly 46% were willing to transition, with key barriers including financing, charging infrastructure and ecosystem readiness. "To address this, we are actively working with infrastructure partners to expand charging solutions across key hubs and high-density routes, while also collaborating with OEMs and financiers to strengthen the broader ecosystem," said Nishant Gupta, head of sustainability, Flipkart Group. Flipkart aims to transition to 100% electric mobility by 2030 under the EV100 initiative and has doubled its EV fleet over the past year, "with strong adoption emerging across high-frequency delivery use cases," added Gupta.

Govt Extends EV Subsidies, Raises e2w Targets

NEW DELHI The ministry of heavy industries has extended subsidies for electric two-wheelers (e2w) till July 31, 2026, and for e-rickshaws and e-carts till March 31, 2028, under the PM Electric Drive Revolution in Innovative Vehicle Enhancement (PME-DRIVE) scheme. Of the ₹1,772 crore outlay for e2w subsidies, ₹1,259.91 crore has already been spent, according to official estimates. A gazette notification said the e2w target has been raised to 2.48 million from 1.4 million under the original scheme. Targets for e-rickshaws and e-carts have also been revised to 39,034 units from 36,462 earlier. Around 1 million electric two-wheelers have been sold so far, according to official estimates. The large electric three-wheeler segment has exceeded targets, with sales of 162,981 units against a target of 159,862. — Our Bureau

FOR FULL REPORT, GO TO www.economictimes.com

Latte to Talk About

Apoorva Mittal

Akanksha Sundar wanted to trade "brain rot" and "bed rot" for something more meaningful. Last year, the 23-year-old moved back to her hometown, New Delhi, after graduating in clinical psychology in Bengaluru.

"I was on the hunt for things that felt meaningful and helped me meet like-minded people," she says. "I was looking for a way to fulfil all these things and also fall back in love with the city I grew up in."

On a coworker's recommendation, she attended a lecture at a cafe in Saidulajab on the "Powerful Powerless Sarkari Official" sometime last year. There has been no looking back.

Sundar is now a regular at talks organised by unLecture, which curates lecture series across cafes and bars in Delhi. She says she has stayed in touch with some of the people she met there. "Most of the people I've met at these lectures are looking for some kind of intellectual stimulation. That's really absent once you leave college and get stuck in professional life."

She also values how low-pressure these spaces feel. "There's no expectation to sound smart. It's just a nice way to learn something new, engage with ideas you haven't in a while and meet people along the way."

Sundar is among the curious young Indians looking for intellectually satisfying conversations and more meaningful ways to spend time beyond the flickering screen. Across India, coffee chains—such as Blue Tokai, Third Wave Coffee, Barista and Araku—along with a bunch of independent venues are leaning into this need by reshaping the cafe from a place of consumption to one that also enables connections.

They are doing this through workshops and community-led programming that aren't just one-off events. These are being looked at as a way to build footfall, deepen brand affinity and position cafes as cultural spaces, especially at a time of intense competition.

THE OL' COFFEEHOUSE

In a way, this is about reclaiming the past. Historically, cafes were hubs of exchange. They were so central to public discourse that coffeehouses of 17th and 18th century England were dubbed "penny universities".

Over time, especially in the last couple of decades, that role gave way to takeaway counters, laptop tables and screen-lit solitude. Cafes now want to reclaim some version of itself as a hub

A lot of people want to be part of these conversations, but not necessarily in alcohol-driven spaces"

PRANAV SAWHNEY, director, marketing and partnerships, Blue Tokai



Araku is doing a mix of farmer storytelling, sustainability dialogue & brewing showcases

We see ourselves not just as serving coffee, but as hosting a certain kind of dialogue. And that, increasingly, is where the differentiation lies"

NEHA REGE, CFO, Araku Coffee

of chatter and conversations.

Blue Tokai, for instance, has partnered with unLecture to launch a platform, "Grounds for Thought", with the latter handling speaker outreach and marketing and Blue Tokai providing the venue and collaborating on programming.

Pranav Sawhney, director of marketing and partnerships, Blue Tokai, says the idea emerged from a gap he noticed abroad: many conversations were happening in bars and breweries, spaces that were not always accessible or appealing, especially to younger consumers who are drinking less or older audiences seeking quieter settings. "A lot of people want to be part of such conversations, but not necessarily in alcohol-driven spaces," he says.

Blue Tokai's role is to host such talks. "We are not an authority on topics like gender or class, but we do want to be a space that facilitates these conversations," says Sawhney. The programming has ranged from conversations on feminist publishing and urbanism to Women's Day session where a psychologist spoke about the Madonna-whore complex in the Indian context.



A talk at a Blue Tokai cafe

After a decade of plugged-in silence, cafes are trying to reclaim their glory days as hubs of conversation and are wooing the young with curated lectures

Audience at a talk curated by unLecture at Siyah Arthouse in Delhi



are true community spaces where people gather not just for coffee but also for conversations and shared experiences," he says.

The brand is holding curated sessions, workshops and community gatherings as people are using cafe as a place to meet, collaborate and exchange ideas. For instance, at its cafe at the Sattva Knowledge Park in Hyderabad, it hosted one-on-one sessions with a Singapore-based university, giving students an opportunity to receive personalised guidance on applications.

Rajat Agrawal, chief executive of Barista Coffee Company, says they are making workshops and curated events more frequent at their

cafes in metro cities to start with. "The audience is diversified in age groups but with common interests and goals. The essence is to build a community, and not just be seen as a place to buy or sell. This is quite mature in the western countries and India is adapting to that in a big way over the last couple of years."

WILL THIS SELL COFFEE?

However, this may not have a direct impact on

sales. "Is there a one-to-one business sense? Absolutely not," says Sawhney. In some cases, these events are programmed at cafes with lower footfall to bring in visibility and transactions. In others, he says, they are a way of introducing Blue Tokai to younger audiences who may spend time in cafes, but do not necessarily feel affinity towards any brands.

The payoff, he suggests, is slower and more subliminal: not an immediate coffee purchase the next day, but a longer-term sense of connection. "You have to be really committed to show up," he says. The brand plans to take the format to Bengaluru next, followed by Mumbai and Hyderabad.

The shift is not limited to coffee chains. Across venues, there is a growing focus on activity-led programming. Krishna Khurana, 29-year-old cofounder of Social Sailor, an events and marketing company in Bengaluru that works with cafes and other venues, says consumers are seeking more than just food or drinks, especially on weekends.

"People are a bit bored of the usual plans. They are looking for something more experiential," he says, adding that this demand cuts across audiences—from couples and friend groups to individuals going out alone.

Events, says Khurana, have taken off in the past two years, with cafes using them to build brand awareness and community, while also addressing uneven footfall. "There are peak periods in a year, but there are also dips, and that's where programming helps," he says. Smaller cafes work on events and marketing, sometimes investing upfront to build awareness and draw in an audience.

BEYOND CAPPUCCINO

Araku's Rege says good coffee is now a baseline. "What differentiates a cafe is what it enables beyond the cup. Conversation is emerging as a powerful layer not in a loud, programmed way, but in a thoughtful, curated manner. The cafes that will stay relevant are the ones that create spaces for exchange, reflection and community," she says. "At Araku, we see ourselves not just as serving coffee, but as hosting a certain kind of dialogue. And that, increasingly, is where the real differentiation lies."

At a time when consumers are increasingly able to spot when they are being sold to, the line between genuine community-building and commercial intent has become sharper. Younger audiences, in particular, are wary of overt marketing.

"Brands need to be very careful about how they join these spaces, because if you try to market yourself too aggressively, or even in a very upfront way, then it becomes inauthentic. Brands can choose to facilitate such experiences but it should not be a product-first approach. It should be experience- and community-first," says Kapoor.

apoorva.mittal@timesofindia.com

There's a lot of fatigue around loud spaces. There's also digital fatigue and people want to engage meaningfully with others"

SNEHA KAPOOR, founder, Plum Insight

April, Sawhney says, will be Dalit history month.

LEC LUSTRE

A range of subjects is important to hook listeners. Someone may walk in for a session because of its political theme but could return for a conversation on art simply because they have come to trust the format. Over the past four months, Blue Tokai and unLecture have had around 15 sessions, usually drawing 30-60 attendees, most of them in the 20-to-28 age bracket. Many sessions are scheduled for under an hour, but often run longer and attendees linger to chat among themselves.

unLecture is founded by three 20-something graduates of St Stephen's College, Delhi. Mishka Lepps, the 22-year-old cofounder of unLecture, says she and her friends Kezia Mammen and Sonalika Aggarwal, started out in August last year with two lectures a month. The young company has gone on to curate a dozen lectures each in February and March. "The audience is increasing, and we typically sell out. That is why we have scaled from two to 12 events a month," says Lepps.

Sneha Kapoor, founder of Plum Insight, a consumer and cultural consultancy firm, says the coffee shop has long been a third space and, as people sought to connect post-pandemic, its role has only grown. "There is a lot of fatigue around loud spaces. There is also digital fatigue. People want to engage meaningfully with others. It's not just cafes, we are seeing vinyl clubs and book clubs and knitting and crochet clubs."

While Blue Tokai hosts cerebral conversations, Araku is doing a mix of farmer storytelling, sustainability dialogue, book launches, brewing showcases, paint-and-sip sessions, music evenings and quiz nights. The company views these as a way of activating the cafe as a cultural and intellectual space.

"What has been particularly interesting is the mix of audience—we see coffee professionals, art enthusiasts, entrepreneurs, students and even those new to specialty coffee engaging with equal curiosity," says Neha Rege, CFO, Araku Coffee.

Third Wave Coffee CEO Rajat Luthra says such initiatives are now central to how the brand engages with audiences across cities. "These events have evolved organically as our cafes

Curious young Indians are looking for intellectually satisfying conversations. And cafes are trying to fulfil this need



Barista holds workshops and curated events

The Fragile Art of Sharing a Song

Why recommending a song to someone so often misses the mark

Kanav Gupta

There is a unique vulnerability in recommending a song to someone.

You remember a lyric that sounded uncannily precise about that person, a melody that understood something deep about them. The tune enters your bloodstream.

You imagine the moment they will hear it. Perhaps, they shall pause and see your delicate ache hiding in the song. Perhaps they will respond immediately, agreeing that the song had indeed been waiting for them all along.

You preface it with a little ceremony of dedication. You press send. And then? Nothing. Worse, they text: "Nice song." Nice? That was not meant to be a nice song.

It was sent to destabilise and unhinge them momentarily from quotidian existence. The embarrassing disappointment that follows "nice" is disproportionate but real. One wonders if the recommendation failed or the sentiment.

But, hey, it's not you. It is in the very nature of music to be resonant or opaque, as if by volition.

The ethnomusicologist Philip Bohlman wrote that music "stands out as the form of communication that is at once most familiar and most incomprehensible".

We encounter this profound insight into music's dual nature. Music often feels immediately recognisable. And yet, its meaning is remarkably difficult to trans-

fer to another.

Even for an individual, the experience of a song keeps shifting. We have all returned to a once-adored song only to find it strangely empty.

The opposite happens too. A once insignificant track suddenly reveals unexpected beauty, weeks, even years, later. The recording remains unchanged. It is we who have moved elsewhere.

Music operates at a constantly shifting meeting point between sound and subjectivity. The entire history of our personality actualises the moment of listening. Mood, memory and habit quietly determine whatever music is to us in that moment.

Which means that when you send someone a song, you are sending it from inside your moment. They receive it inside theirs.

LISTENING IN

Let's step back. There is no way to expand listening except via recommendations. Before the explosion of streaming platforms, radio served as the great distributor of musical taste.

Akashvani listeners had their narrators, voices that shaped the soundscape of Indian music as gently as Ameen Sayani

songs with warmth and context, creating a sense that one was participating in a shared musical event. Each track arrived with a little story, a sense of anticipation. One encountered a new song through a trusted guide.

The commercial FM—and music TV—boom post the late 1990s altered that dynamic. Private stations came with their relentless loop. A few songs played ad nauseam through the day.

As listeners, your passivity was key. You did not seek these songs out. They simply surrounded you, inescapably.

This constant circulation on the FM shaped the sound of film music in the 2000s.

Composers like Himesh Reshammiya, Shankar-Ehsaan-Loy and Salim-Sulaiman found recognisable niches within this sonic habitus. Before you realised, you had memorised the entire refrain, the stanzas, the preludes and interludes.

You did not need to sit down to listen. The song simply accompanied your chores. After a few inevitable listens, the tune settled into passive memory.

In fact, the tide of nostalgia around Himesh's recent concerts can be understood through this phenomenon. Audiences responded enthusiastically to songs that had once wormed their way in, reappearing suddenly like a friendly ghost.

THE ALGORITHMIC EAR

Cassettes allowed us to curate personal anthologies. One could record directly from the radio or assemble a tape at a shop.

For many a listener-turned-recommender, these mix-tapes functioned like letters written in music. Later technologies preserved the soul. Burned CDs circulated through college hostels. MP3s moved around on pen drives.

Music's social mobility still required recommendation, persuasion and repetition. Despite increasing privatisation of listening, listeners often encountered the same songs repeatedly across different spaces.

A track that appeared on a mix reappeared later on TV. The familiarity accumulated. Shared listening environments preserved shared musical vocabularies.

Digital platforms have radically reorganised that vocabulary of sharing in subtle ways. Streaming services now observe individual listening patterns, generating and modifying playlists in real time. The precise categories reveal how music is now mapped—and parochialised—onto every day activity.

There is a playlist for exercise, another for study, another for evening walks, another for reflection and a painfully large number for yoga. You no longer search widely for songs.

The system arranges sequences designed to maintain attention, or indeed, distraction—by relegating music to an ambience.

This automated curation has privatised listening to an acute degree. Each user moves through a different musical pathway shaped by their previous choices.

Wireless earbuds enclose the listener in a portable acoustic bubble, where a

recommendation from another person competes with an algorithm.

The listener may or may not even open it. The circumstances that shaped your attachment to the song are suspended, even altogether absent. Even so, it is not that there is no room for sharing music anymore; only, that it has narrowed.

That perhaps makes shared songs more special.

MEETING MUSIC

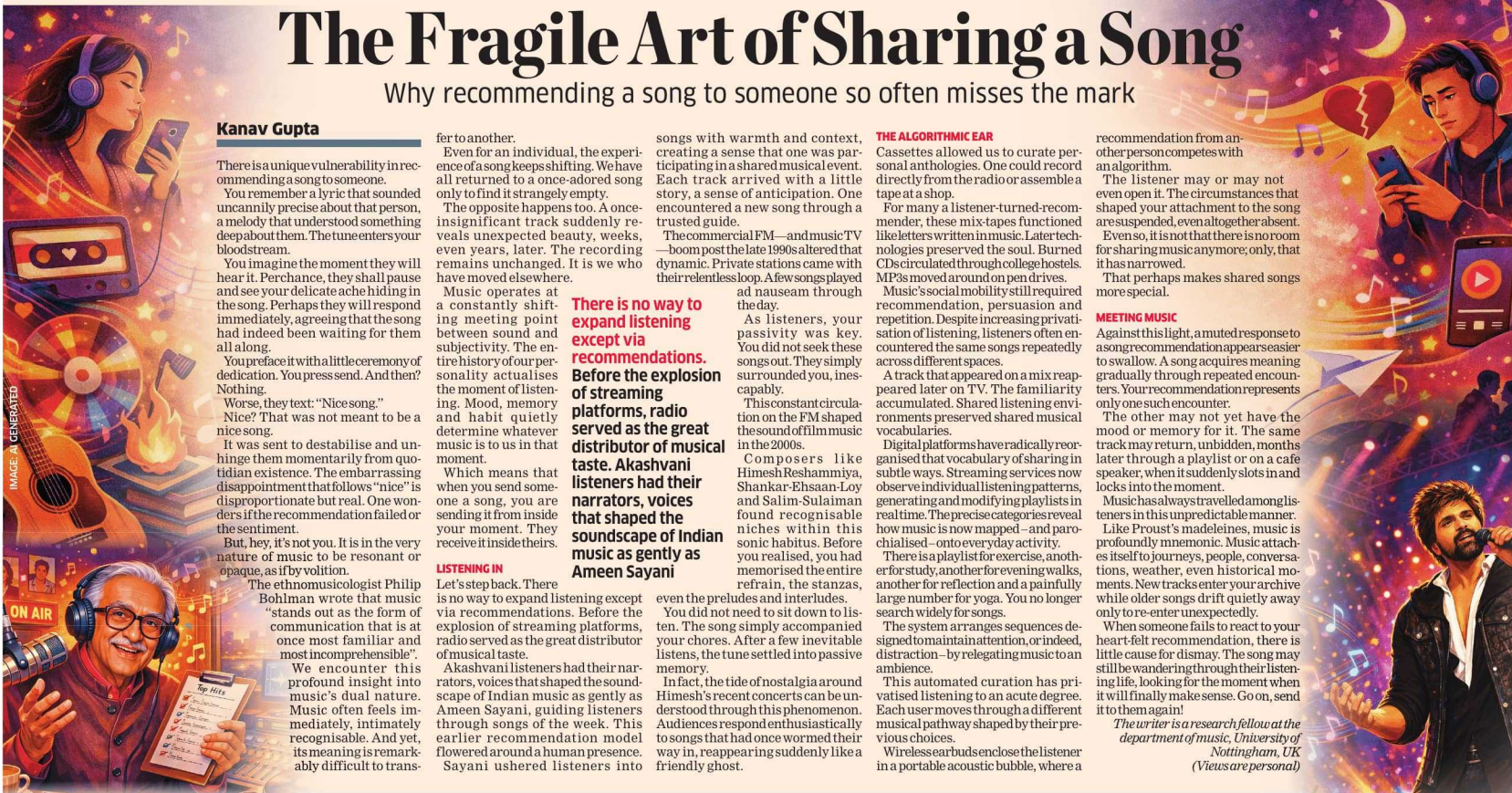
Against this light, a muted response to a song recommendation appears easier to swallow. A song acquires meaning gradually through repeated encounters. Your recommendation represents only one such encounter.

The other may not yet have the mood or memory for it. The same track may return, unbidden, months later through a playlist or on a cafe speaker, when it suddenly slots in and locks into the moment.

Musical has always travelled among listeners in this unpredictable manner. Like Proust's madeleines, music is profoundly mnemonic. Music attaches itself to journeys, people, conversations, weather, even historical moments. New tracks enter your archive while older songs drift quietly away only to re-enter unexpectedly.

When someone fails to react to your heart-felt recommendation, there is little cause for dismay. The song may still be wandering through their listening life, looking for the moment when it will finally make sense. Go on, send it to them again!

The writer is a research fellow at the department of music, University of Nottingham, UK (Views are personal)



Shantanu Nandan Sharma | Dunga (Abujhmad, Chhattisgarh)

As you cross the knee-deep waters of a stream that locals call Kute Mangi, you arrive at a small campus with a few pucca buildings. This was once a kanya ashram, a residential school for girls. Today, it has over 100 students, including about five dozen boys and girls who, until 2024, studied in a school run by the banned CPI (Maoist). The campus is situated at Dunga, a non-descript village in the Orchha block of Narayanpur district in Chhattisgarh. Across the school stands an imposing red column erected by the ultras. "This memorial was built last year. But now the Maoists have deserted the area and most of them have surrendered," says Madharam Netam, the village's deputy sarpanch, as he collects manhua flowers that are used to brew a local liquor. The Maoists, says Netam, had hired Dilip, an educated man from nearby Taklod, to teach children at their school at Ambapara, about 7 km west of Dunga. "The party paid him ₹4,000 a month," he says. "All those students were shifted here last month. You should go in."

In the school, Class V students have just finished their Hindi exam. As the midday meal is served, students—aged between 6 and 18 years—line up with steel plates for rice, dal and vegetables. They chanta prayer and settle down for lunch.

"Sixty-three students from the Ambapara school have joined this campus. We are assessing their abilities and enrolling them in different classes accordingly," says Anju Dhrew, a teacher, who has placed an 18-year-old boy in Class V.

The teachers don't prod their past. "We never ask the students what they were taught when the party ran the school," says Dhrew. "Let them forget the past, and forget it quickly." Until recently, many children in Bastar went to Maoist-run schools managed by the underground Jantana Sarkar. Now, as the state government takes over their education after the crackdown on Maoists, sarkari teachers are assessing the children's age and learning levels to place them in appropriate grades—carefully steering them away from the old curriculum and helping them move on from that difficult chapter. Some of the children from Ambapara who find it difficult to travel to the school daily live on the campus.

Dhrew and Arti Kujur were recruited as teachers for the Ambapara school by the Chhattisgarh government in 2023. However, as insurgency escalated in the area, they were temporarily attached to a girls' school in Orchha, the block headquarters.

Now, the government is constructing a new school at Rekawaya, which falls between Dunga and Ambapara, with separate buildings for boys and girls. The plan is to eventually shift all the students from Ambapara to Rekawaya.

"As examinations are under way, we are spending our nights on the campus at Dunga," says Kujur. They have to ride 100 km on a motorbike from Orchha—where they live in rented accommodation—to reach Dunga, because of the long detour they have to take around a hill, although the distance between the two places, as the crow flies, is just 20 km.

THE RED SCHOOLS

Vivekanand, additional director general of police (ADGP) for anti-Naxal operations in Chhattisgarh, estimates that until a few years ago, Maoists ran 12-15 schools in the remote pockets of the Abujhmad region as well as in the Sukma-Bijapur belt in the south. "The schools were meant to be the breeding grounds for Maoist recruitment. At times, the students were also deployed for spying activities," he says. "For very young children, the syllabus was largely the same as in government schools. The Maoists somehow managed to procure textbooks from government supplies, so the books were the same. But alongside, they subtly indoctrinated the children from a very young age," he adds, noting that many of the teachers were recruited from among Maoist sympathisers.

According to Vivekanand, since late last year, no Maoist school is in operation, and the government has shifted those students to regular state schools. Gaurav Rai, superintendent of police, Dantewada, says security forces often recovered educational material during encounters with Maoists. "During encounters, we found reading material meant both for young students and cadres," he says. "In the Maoist-run primary schools, the focus was largely on children's basic literacy—learning the alphabet, constructing sentences and developing reading and writing skills. Most of the teaching was done in the Gondi language."

Political or ideological lessons for cadres, and live inside.

Ive is again at the centre of the biggest product question in technology. In May, OpenAI announced that it, the hardware venture cofounded by Ive, would merge with it and create a new AI hardware device. OpenAI's Sam Altman and Ive framed it not as another gadget launch, but as an attempt to rethink our relationship with computers at a moment when they are beginning to "see, think and understand".

The pressure is immense as the market is a graveyard of first attempts. Humane's AI Pin arrived with grand claims of replacing the smartphone, and died with poor reviews and weak demand. Rabbit's r1 generated early excitement; now the one Ive serves as a pretty orange paperweight.

Every great technology age eventually finds its device. The internal combustion engine had the car; telecommunications had the telephone; the information age had the PC. The internet age found its perfect vessel in the smartphone. Now, as we enter the Age of AI, the trillion-dollar question is: What is the defining gadget for the AI era?

This question now hangs over one man more than any other: Jony Ive. If there is one designer who has already helped shape a technological age, it is Ive. He became Steve Jobs' closest creative partner and together they made era-defining products: the translucent iMac, the revolutionary iPod and then the most powerful gadget ever, the one to rule them all—the iPhone. It turned the internet into something you could hold, touch

and live inside. Ive is again at the centre of the biggest product question in technology. In May, OpenAI announced that it, the hardware venture cofounded by Ive, would merge with it and create a new AI hardware device. OpenAI's Sam Altman and Ive framed it not as another gadget launch, but as an attempt to rethink our relationship with computers at a moment when they are beginning to "see, think and understand".

The pressure is immense as the market is a graveyard of first attempts. Humane's AI Pin arrived with grand claims of replacing the smartphone, and died with poor reviews and weak demand. Rabbit's r1 generated early excitement; now the one Ive serves as a pretty orange paperweight.

A New Chapter Begins in Bastar

Children who went to a Maoist-run school are now studying in a government school in Chhattisgarh. Teachers assess their age and learning levels to place them in appropriate classes, gently steering them away from old lessons and doctrines



A deserted school of Maoists at Ambapara. It was called the Bhumkal school, after the tribal rebellion against Britain in 1910



Many of the over 100 students at Dunga studied in the Ambapara school

CHANGE OF CLASS 12-15
No. of schools run by Maoists in the Bastar range till 2024. Syllabus of primary classes was nearly identical to that of govt schools

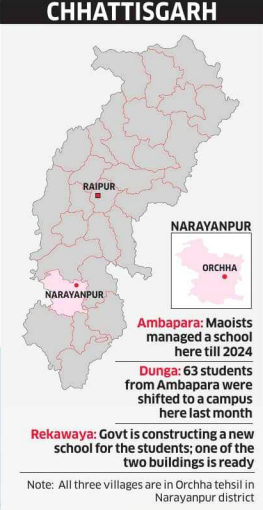
4
No. of Maoist teachers in and around Rekawaya, as recalled by villagers: Dilip, Pawan, Vasu and Mangesh

35
No. of schools reopened by govt in 2024-25: 28 in Bijapur, 5 in Sukma and 2 in Narayanpur

Source: Govt of Chhattisgarh, ET's interactions with police officers, former Maoists, villagers



All the children in the Dunga school will be shifted to the new govt school being built in Rekawaya



CHHATTISGARH
Ambapara: Maoists managed a school here till 2024
Dunga: 63 students from Ambapara were shifted to a campus here last month
Rekawaya: Govt is constructing a new school for the students; one of the two buildings is ready
Note: All three villages are in Orchha tehsil in Narayanpur district



When we were recruited as teachers in 2023 and posted to Ambapara, we feared for our lives. The government temporarily attached us to another school in Orchha. Now, with examinations underway, we are spending our nights on the campus in Dunga
Arti Kujur, teacher, Dunga

building that was blown up by the Maoists with IEDs in 2003, say local people. Beside it stands a broken red memorial pillar that has been demolished by the security forces.

One of the teachers, Hitesh Kapoor, who was posted there last year, says he is unaware of any school that was run by Maoists in the vicinity. "I can say for sure that none of my students ever went to a Maoist school," he insists.

THE MAOIST CLASSROOM

Yet, further ahead, beyond another stream, a large building emerges from the jungle. At first glance, it resembles an abandoned insurgent camp—clusters of makeshift structures without walls and roofs draped in blue plastic sheets.

A weathered sign board identifies it as Bhumkal School, named after the great Bhumkal Rebellion, an armed tribal uprising against Britain in 1910.

This is the Ambapara school of Maoists. The campus is deserted—most Maoists have surrendered and the students have moved to the government school at Dunga.

Although there are no students, one teacher lingers. He was appointed by the local panchayat to teach the kids in 2024, after the Maoists had left the region. He says representatives of Chandrashekhar Azad's Bhim Army had held discussions with village elders about running the school some time ago. Perhaps that explains the blue flags of the Bhim Army—rather than the Maoists' trademark red ones—hanging at the entrance of the campus.

"Maoists ran this school for years," says Samila Kawasi. She studied at the Ambapara school between 2008 and 2010, before she got recruited by the party. "However, at that time, the Ambapara school was located 2.3 km further west, closer to the hills," she recalls. "That's where I learnt to read and write the Gondi alphabet."

Kawasi says she and most of her batchmates would be taken to a nearby training camp where they were introduced to the Maoist doctrine, including lessons about Mao Zedong and his Long March. Last year, Kawasi returned to the mainstream and has since joined the police force.

With the surrender of the last significant Maoist leader, Papa Rao—alias Mongu—earlier this week, Bastar appears nearly free of Maoist influence, at least for now. With just a couple of days to go for the government's March 31 deadline to eliminate Maoism in India, only a handful of senior leaders remain at large. Among them are Muryula Lakshmana Rao alias Ganapathy and Mihir Bestra. "We tracked Ganapathy till November," says ADGP Vivekanand. "But he slipped out of Chhattisgarh."

THE STUDENTS

"What is Maoism?" I ask the children in the school at Dunga. The responses are telling. While the younger children have not grasped the difference between the two schools of teaching, the older ones, more aware of the shifting political and security landscape and the government's deadline to eliminate Maoism, choose their words carefully.

Who were the teachers at the Maoist-run schools? One name comes up repeatedly: Dilip. But locals also speak of three other teachers—Pawan, Vasu and Mangesh—who taught young children and who, the police believe, shaped their thinking. "Pawan was a full-time Maoist cadre. He recently surrendered in Rajnandgaon," says Kawasi.

If a former armed cadre like Kawasi can lay down her weapons and join the police force, could the Maoist teacher Dilip surrender and return one day to the classroom—this time as a government school teacher?

In the shifting sands of Bastar, anything is possible.

shantanu.sharma@timesofindia.com

Where is the Defining Gadget of AI Age?

Jony Ive, the former design chief of Apple, is working on his toughest assignment yet—give AI a physique

and live inside. Ive is again at the centre of the biggest product question in technology. In May, OpenAI announced that it, the hardware venture cofounded by Ive, would merge with it and create a new AI hardware device. OpenAI's Sam Altman and Ive framed it not as another gadget launch, but as an attempt to rethink our relationship with computers at a moment when they are beginning to "see, think and understand".

The pressure is immense as the market is a graveyard of first attempts. Humane's AI Pin arrived with grand claims of replacing the smartphone, and died with poor reviews and weak demand. Rabbit's r1 generated early excitement; now the one Ive serves as a pretty orange paperweight.

Devices such as Plaud and Limitless have found narrower uses as meeting and memory tools, but they are at best background devices, not the piece de resistance of the AI age. The most credible contender so far may be Meta's glasses. They have slipped AI into an existing, socially acceptable form factor and sold close to 10 million units. But smart glasses remain a specialty gadget rather than a universally acknowledged replacement for the phone. It is

also entirely possible that the defining gadget of the AI era is not a new object at all, but the smartphone reborn. After all, the phone already has the screen, the microphones, the cameras, the sensors, the chip, the connectivity and, above all, our habits. We may not kill the smartphone but it may dissolve into it, transforming it from an app machine into an always-present agent. This is what Apple

seems to be betting on—that the next great gadget is hiding in plain sight, inside the device already in our hands.

REDEFINING THE STACK However, I think the AI gadget will be fundamentally different. A smartphone is defined by four pillars: the operating system (iOS/Android), the chip (CPU), the UI (the screen and apps) and the data (what we type or tap). I believe that in the AI era, this stack will be redefined.

LLM as the new OS: You don't open an app; you tell the system your intent, and the agentic model executes it.

NPU/GPU as the new chip: Neural processing units designed for lightning-fast inference required for real-time thought.

Voice as the new UI: For two decades, the touch UI has dominated, but as AI becomes more conversational, voice becomes the Zero UI. The next gadget may not want

you to open an app, but will simply ask: what do you want done?

Ambience as the new data: The richest stream of human data is not what we type or browse. It is what we say and see, where we go, who we meet and the thousands of fragments of daily life that never make it onto a screen. The AI gadget of the future will try to capture that world of gestures, conversations, surroundings and routines.

This omnipresence is a superpower and a danger: The privacy nightmare is not theoretical anymore: recent reporting on Meta's AI glasses has raised disturbing questions about intimate footage being reviewed by contractors.

Other reports say Meta has explored adding facial recognition-style features that could identify people seen through the glasses. That, a stranger wearing AI glasses can look at you on the street, have the AI instantly scrape your LinkedIn, your home address and your recent bank transactions, and tag you with that data in real time.

So, what will I live come up with? There are rumours that he is exploring devices, including a smart speaker with a camera, while earlier court filings indicated the first device would not be in-ear or wearable. The device is mentioned as "peaceful". It may not be glasses or a pin or look like a gadget category we recognise today.

THE ANTI-PHONE? Reports suggest it is targeting a reveal in the second half of 2026. If I were to speculate, Ive is not building a better phone. He might build the anti-phone. He has famously lamented the "unintended consequences" of his creation, the iPhone, and how it sucks our time and attention. So, his AI gadget might be a lesson in minimalism: screenless, tactile and ambient. Not demanding your attention, but sitting in the background, a silent presence that only speaks when it has something truly meaningful to contribute. The smart-phone era was about the screen; maybe the AI era will be about the presence.

The irony is rich: the designer who helped give us the iPhone may now have to invent the thing that rescues us from living inside it.

If he gets it right, he will not just design the next device. He will define the next human habit—if the iPhone was the gadget that made us look down, Ive's next creation will be the one that finally makes us look up again.

Views are personal



JASPREET BINDRA, Co-founder, AI&Beyond

Every great technology age eventually finds its device. The internal combustion engine had the car; telecommunications had the telephone; the information age had the PC. The internet age found its perfect vessel in the smartphone. Now, as we enter the Age of AI, the trillion-dollar question is: What is the defining gadget for the AI era?

This question now hangs over one man more than any other: Jony Ive. If there is one designer who has already helped shape a technological age, it is Ive. He became Steve Jobs' closest creative partner and together they made era-defining products: the translucent iMac, the revolutionary iPod and then the most powerful gadget ever, the one to rule them all—the iPhone. It turned the internet into something you could hold, touch

and live inside. Ive is again at the centre of the biggest product question in technology. In May, OpenAI announced that it, the hardware venture cofounded by Ive, would merge with it and create a new AI hardware device. OpenAI's Sam Altman and Ive framed it not as another gadget launch, but as an attempt to rethink our relationship with computers at a moment when they are beginning to "see, think and understand".

Devices such as Plaud and Limitless have found narrower uses as meeting and memory tools, but they are at best background devices, not the piece de resistance of the AI age. The most credible contender so far may be Meta's glasses. They have slipped AI into an existing, socially acceptable form factor and sold close to 10 million units. But smart glasses remain a specialty gadget rather than a universally acknowledged replacement for the phone. It is

also entirely possible that the defining gadget of the AI era is not a new object at all, but the smartphone reborn. After all, the phone already has the screen, the microphones, the cameras, the sensors, the chip, the connectivity and, above all, our habits. We may not kill the smartphone but it may dissolve into it, transforming it from an app machine into an always-present agent. This is what Apple

seems to be betting on—that the next great gadget is hiding in plain sight, inside the device already in our hands.

REDEFINING THE STACK However, I think the AI gadget will be fundamentally different. A smartphone is defined by four pillars: the operating system (iOS/Android), the chip (CPU), the UI (the screen and apps) and the data (what we type or tap). I believe that in the AI era, this stack will be redefined.

LLM as the new OS: You don't open an app; you tell the system your intent, and the agentic model executes it.

NPU/GPU as the new chip: Neural processing units designed for lightning-fast inference required for real-time thought.

Voice as the new UI: For two decades, the touch UI has dominated, but as AI becomes more conversational, voice becomes the Zero UI. The next gadget may not want

you to open an app, but will simply ask: what do you want done?

Ambience as the new data: The richest stream of human data is not what we type or browse. It is what we say and see, where we go, who we meet and the thousands of fragments of daily life that never make it onto a screen. The AI gadget of the future will try to capture that world of gestures, conversations, surroundings and routines.

This omnipresence is a superpower and a danger: The privacy nightmare is not theoretical anymore: recent reporting on Meta's AI glasses has raised disturbing questions about intimate footage being reviewed by contractors.

Other reports say Meta has explored adding facial recognition-style features that could identify people seen through the glasses. That, a stranger wearing AI glasses can look at you on the street, have the AI instantly scrape your LinkedIn, your home address and your recent bank transactions, and tag you with that data in real time.

So, what will I live come up with? There are rumours that he is exploring devices, including a smart speaker with a camera, while earlier court filings indicated the first device would not be in-ear or wearable. The device is mentioned as "peaceful". It may not be glasses or a pin or look like a gadget category we recognise today.

THE ANTI-PHONE? Reports suggest it is targeting a reveal in the second half of 2026. If I were to speculate, Ive is not building a better phone. He might build the anti-phone. He has famously lamented the "unintended consequences" of his creation, the iPhone, and how it sucks our time and attention. So, his AI gadget might be a lesson in minimalism: screenless, tactile and ambient. Not demanding your attention, but sitting in the background, a silent presence that only speaks when it has something truly meaningful to contribute. The smart-phone era was about the screen; maybe the AI era will be about the presence.

The irony is rich: the designer who helped give us the iPhone may now have to invent the thing that rescues us from living inside it.

If he gets it right, he will not just design the next device. He will define the next human habit—if the iPhone was the gadget that made us look down, Ive's next creation will be the one that finally makes us look up again.

Views are personal

shantanu.sharma@timesofindia.com

shantanu.sharma@timesofindia.com

shantanu.sharma@timesofindia.com

shantanu.sharma@timesofindia.com

shantanu.sharma@timesofindia.com

shantanu.sharma@timesofindia.com

shantanu.sharma@timesofindia.com

shantanu.sharma@timesofindia.com

'NOT A WIFE, BUT A WIDOW CAN REALISE THE IMPORTANCE OF LIFE INSURANCE'

A man who helps the dead make money, actually aids the living by discovering lost FDs, long-forgotten share certificates – and unknown debts – once some old patriarch passes away

FUNNY BUSINESS



ANUVAB PAL

Some years ago, I met a fascinating man on a train. When I asked him what he did, he said he helped the dead make money. Since I barely manage that while alive, I was intrigued. He explained that, early in his career, he worked for a life insurance company and would attend strangers' funerals, approach the bereaved, and ask whether they knew what the deceased might have left behind in a life insurance policy. After getting over the shock and anger at the inappropriateness of

the timing, most realised they didn't know. Soon after, they were grateful to this gent for having found them money from a long-lost policy. In India, billions of rupees are lost not to theft or extravagance, but to not knowing you have them. Meet Bharat Parekh. In 2022, BBC did a story on him, 'LIC: How the dead helped a salesman to become a star agent', in which Parekh explained his modus operandi. 'You don't need funeral invitations in India. You identify the bereaved family by the people carrying the bier. You approach relatives and friends of the deceased and tell them you are offering your free services to settle any claims on life insurance the dead person had. And you leave behind your visiting card'. Parekh has reportedly sold \$324 mn worth of life insurance, almost all of it in and around Nagpur, where he is based. What is fascinating about the Indian financial ecosystem is that in a culture obsessed

with money, we are one of the worst cultures at having open discussions with family members about investments. It's commonplace to discover random FDs, some long-forgotten share certificates, and equally, unknown debts, once some old patriarch passes away. It is usually Indian men, for some reason, who love to die with secrets. As a financial adviser once put it, 'Once a man passes away, and all these documents and people come out of the woodwork... finally you get an accurate picture of who the father/grandfather really was. He may have been kind, loving, entrepreneurial, or fiery, but that's not the real person. You may find he took a wild bet on say TIT in the 1970s, which he forgot about, only to leave his descendants very wealthy. Or a 20-year court case over a huge debt amount, which might bankrupt his grandkids'. In all cases, he dies with the information. People like Parekh show



GRATEFUL DEAD & MAHA BHARAT (RIGHT)

One relies on the kindness of strangers like Parekh at funerals to tell us what we're worth

up, while embers are still red, with information that could change everything. Did the old man open an LIC policy eons ago that he told no one about and paid premiums for? According to Parekh, this is far more frequent than an aberration. When I reached out to him for a chat, he explained, 'Life insurance can do what no one else can. Condolences eventually stop. But it is only life insurance that brings in the money.' He gave me his book to read, in which he explained that not everyone welcomes a stranger at a funeral. But everyone wants to know if the de-

ceased left behind a policy and the amount. To quote him, 'A wife cannot realise the importance of life insurance, only a widow can.'

The book also has an incredible anecdote about Usha Uthup. Parekh recounts a Uthup concert organised by Gondwana Junior Chamber. He noticed that arrangements—stage design, sound systems, lighting, and ambience—were handled by her team, which arrived 3 days before the event. Uthup, however, arrived only 2 hours before the show. It taught him a powerful lesson: delegate all small logistics and show up at the end to give the star presentation, presumably leaving the LIC-buying family mesmerised.

What men like Parekh teach us about money is that one may have an obsession for it, but until families learn to speak to each other honestly, one relies on the kindness of strangers at funerals to tell us what we're worth.

SUNDAY ROAST



RESHOM MAJUMDAR

Phubbing is Killing Pubbing, With Silence

Tune out, turn off, phone out and connect with your inner natter-raj

London: In his 1816 novel, *The Antiquary*, Walter Scott depicted the phrase 'showing of the cauld shoulder'. Probably an already well-used Scottish expression by then, it was fancifully tied to the muton theory: hosts dismissing overstaying guests with a cold side of muton leg, a subtle nudge toward the door.

Ethymologists dismiss that tale as thin gruel. More convincingly, it evokes turning away, literally baring one's shoulder, in icy proclamation, a gesture as old as human saul.

Whatever its roots, 'the cold shoulder' marched into the English language, embraced by Dickens in his tales of social slights, and settled into everyday speech across the English-speaking world. After two centuries of service, though, it craves a Gen Z-Gen Alpha upgrade for our screen-lit era. Enter phubbing, the cute portmanteau for phone snubbing, the digital heir of the cold shoulder.

London café owners and pub lords bemoan a silent plague: patrons who order via apps, play with a tap, and never once look up from their devices. And even when they order at the till, no smiles exchanged, just a stoic and intense look at the screen.

These haunts once buzzed with laughter, natter, and unsolicited therapy. The pub as couch, commons, and confessional. The shrink. Think the corner boozer in EastEnders, where pints loosened tongues, and strangers swapped life stories. Today, heads bow to glowing screens, turning communal tables into islands of isolation. No wonder that last week, a California jury called out YouTube and Instagram for what they are: digital door dealers.

Phubbing guts face-to-face bonds, muting lively spaces into tap-and-swipe silos. Places report empty tables lost to phones: meals eaten in silence, goodbyes swapped via nods or waves, no eye contact exchanged. It's the 'cauld shoulder' amplified and your companion might as well be a spirit wrapped in a white sheet, while you doomscroll or reply to work pings.

This shift hits hospitality hard. Café owners in Camden or Notting Hill whisper of 'zombie diners':



UNHAPPY HOURS

groups of 4 staring at individual feeds, ignoring the barista's smile or chalkboard specials. Pubs, once the heartbeat of British social life, feel the chill. Football holds, but the chatter fades. Turnover speeds up, tips dwindle.

Globally, it's the same story. From Tokyo ramen joints to NY delis, the phone rules. Yet, in London, the loss stings deeper—an erosion of the very natter that built community and public houses, a.k.a. pubs.

Phubbing springs from deeper wells: smartphone addiction, FOMO, and those addictive dopamine pings from likes and alerts, making real conversation feel slow by comparison. Psychologists note it sends a brutal signal: the virtual world outranks the flesh-and-blood one right in front of you.

Victims feel it keenly as studies show phubbed partners report lower relationship satisfaction, higher jealousy, even symptoms mimicking depression. Parents phubbing kids at dinner tables sow disconnection, friends at brunch trade stories for Stories. It's loneliness engineered in real time, all while we're 'connected' 24/7. Your brain rewires for the quick hit, sidelining the slow joy of unfiltered chats.

But recipes for reconnection are also being cooked up. Cafés tempt with 'phone-stack' discounts, devices piled like a Jenga tower for the bold, charity jars brim with '£1 per forbidden peek; feed the Soho strays! Pubs revive the lock-in, phones banished till the first round warms the room, or deploy conversation dice: 'Your dream supper guest?' over a frothy pint.

Gen Z, the bright sparks, leads the detox dance. Forestparks growing virtual trees for focus, pop-ups in no-signal nooks, 'talk menus' dishing icebreakers instead of lattes. I'd add my twist: a nook with candlelit prompts like 'Share a scandalous supper memory' and platters that demand two hands, no scrolling allowed.

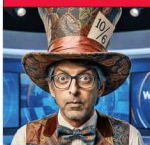
Brew a pot of proper builder's tea, pour with eye contact, and let the confab rise like perfect Yorkshire puds. Ditch the device.

The writer is a communications director

A Mad T Party (With Apologies to Lewis Carroll)

When Alice from CNN drops by (uninvited) at the chaos-crazy tea party hosted by the Mad Hatter, March Hare, and Dormouse

RED HERRING



INDRAJIT HAZRA

There was a table set out under a tree in front of the White House, and the March Hare and the Mad Hatter were having Kool-Aid at it. A Dormouse was sitting between them, fast asleep, wearing shoes two sizes too large that the Hatter, not being the Cobbler, had gifted him. The other two were using the Dormouse – whom the Hatter disparagingly called 'Little Dormo' from time to time – as a cushion, resting their elbows on him, and talking over his head.

'Very uncomfortable for the Dormouse,' thought Alice from CNN. 'Only as he's asleep, I suppose he doesn't mind.'

The table was a large one, enough to host every contradiction under the sun. But the three were all crowded together at one corner of it: 'No room! No room!' And we know what CNN's ratings are. Pathetic. Crash and burn. Fake news channel! they cried when they saw Alice coming.

'There's plenty of room!' said Alice indignantly, and she sat down in a large armchair at one end of the table mysteriously marked 'Karoline Leavitt Empty'. 'Have some Iranian chai,' the March Hare said in an encouraging tone, the

tattoo on his arm with the line from Matthew 10:34 proclaiming: 'I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.'

Alice looked around the table, but there was nothing on it but Kool-Aid. 'I don't see any chai,' she remarked. 'There isn't any,' said the March Hare. 'Then it wasn't very civil of you to offer it,' said Alice angrily.

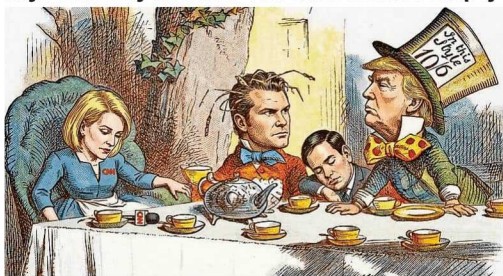
'It wasn't very civil of you to sit down after the White House has banned CNN access here,' said the March Hare.

'You should learn not to make personal remarks,' Alice said with Chelsea Clintonesque severity. 'It's very rude.'

The Hatter opened his eyes very wide on hearing this, but all he said was, 'Why is a THAAD missile defence system like a writing desk?'

'Come, we shall have some fun now!' thought Alice, flipping open her reporter's notebook. 'I'm glad they've begun asking riddles—I believe I can guess that,' she added aloud.

Alice sat down in a large armchair mysteriously marked 'Karoline Leavitt Empty'



KOMPLETLEY KU KOO KLAN (WITH APOLOGIES TO JOHN TENNIEL)

'I didn't know it was your table,' said Alice. 'It's laid for a great many more than three.'

'Your ratings need cutting,' said the Hatter. He had been looking at Alice for some time with great curiosity, and this was his first speech.

'Do you mean that you think you can find out the answer to it?' said the March Hare.

'Exactly so,' said Alice. 'Then you should say what you mean,' the March Hare went on.

'I do,' Alice hastily replied. 'At least –

Korea, Japan Come to the Rescue in Kyrgyzstan

Both ghosts, and descendants of migrants and prisoners, from a Soviet past revel

THE FLYING DUTCHMAN



MICHEL BAAS

Snow had settled heavily over Bishkek by the time we arrived, the Kyrgyz capital wrapped in a thick white blanket that seemed determined to mute whatever bustle the city might normally produce. Staring out of the hotel window that morning, we found ourselves confronted with a practical question that invariably arises sooner or later on any trip: what exactly does one eat in Kyrgyzstan?

The country's culinary traditions are shaped by its nomadic pastoral heritage and rely heavily on meat – especially mutton, beef, and horse – often accompanied by noodles, dumplings or broth. Having already travelled through several Central Asian countries over the past weeks, I could see that this might present a small complication.

My partner grew up vegetarian and can manage chicken when circumstances demand it. But red meat is unvaryingly a firm no. Pizza reliably appears wherever you go these days, and there is usually Chinese food somewhere in the vicinity. But we were hoping for something that felt at least a little more local. As long as it wasn't, strictly speaking, too local.

Unexpectedly, salvation appeared in the form of an excellent Japanese restaurant around the corner from the hotel. Stepping inside felt like entering a neighbourhood eatery in Wakayama or Hokkaido: cheerful welcomes of 'irasshai-mae!' greeted us at the door, while warm oshibori – small rolled-hand-towels – were handed over with urgency given the freezing temperatures outside. A quick scan of Google Maps

revealed that Bishkek had also quietly accumulated a small constellation of Korean eateries, ranging from noodle houses to those specialising in a baffling variety of kimchi. Travelling almost non-stop, we have developed something of a talent for sniffing out precisely the opposite of what it means to sample local cuisine.

In Argentina and Paraguay, for instance, we somehow managed to locate remarkably authentic Korean restaurants in the most unlikely corners. In Peru, we found that long-standing migration from Japan had

ing hungry, while determinedly skipping skewers of anticucho, or beef heart.

Presence of Koreans in Kyrgyzstan traces back largely to a forced migration ordered by Stalin in 1937. Tens of thousands of ethnic Koreans living in the Russian far east were abruptly deported to Central Asia on suspicion that they might collaborate with Japan. Their descendants – 'Koryo-saram' (Korean people) – went on to become farmers, traders and urban professionals across Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

Japanese presence has a different origin. After the end of WW2, thousands of Japanese prisoners captured by the Soviet Union were transported to labour camps scattered across Central Asia, including Kyrgyzstan, where they were put to work on construction and infrastructure projects.

Stepping back out of the restaurant into the brittle cold of the evening, Bishkek presented itself in its most stripped-down form. Wide Soviet-era boulevards cut through low apartment blocks and marble government buildings, all framed by the distant, snow-capped wall of the Tien Shan mountains.

Trudging through the snow eventually brings one to the heart of the city: Ala-Too Square. Here, the open expanse is dominated by the towering statue of the national hero Manas, sword raised and cloak billowing. The vast Epic of Manas – allegedly even eclipsing the Mahabharat in length – tells the story of a warrior-leader who united the Kyrgyz tribes and defended them against foreign enemies.

Traditionally performed by specialist storytellers known as manaschi, we found one happily blasting lines at the night sky, stars blinking as if keeping pace with the rhythm of his recitation. Standing there listening to his lines, the meaning of which escaped us, did remind us of how the past is always present, and nothing is ever truly far away.

The towering statue of national hero Manas dominates Bishkek's Ala-Too Square



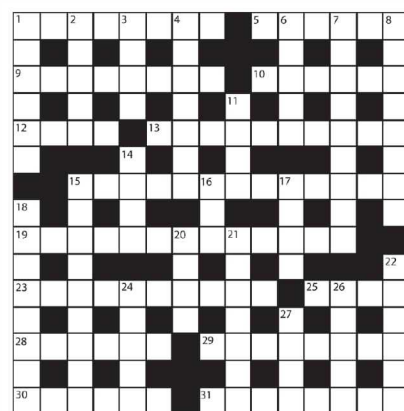
MANASSMRITI

even resulted in an entire fusion cuisine of its own called 'Nikkei'. It blends Japanese techniques with Peruvian ingredients such as lime, chilli peppers and Pacific seafood. We happily alternated between sashimi and ceviche, never go-



ET Sunday Crossword

0161



- ACROSS
- Chase popular member into small church (8)
 - Lots of dairymaids returned, free of disease (6)
 - Shorten description of how jumbo fed itself (8)
 - Greek primate's source of drink (6)
 - Company boss drinks one litre, not bitter (4)
 - How to teach singing loudly in exotic locations (5, 3-2)
 - About day's end he'll catch kid maybe, a lonely one (8, 5)
 - It helps you progress in two ways, one crossing forest (8, 5)
 - Meeting's nervous, uneasy about last letter returned (10)
 - Curiously examine small tin (4)
 - A chap traps unknown duck in river (6)
 - Fifty in a cast forming relationship (8)
 - Permission to get in course (6)
 - The Spanish get on swimmingly over a stretch (8)
- DOWN
- Punctual, as musicians should be (2, 4)
 - Sailor's first to select oar (5)
 - Quake in Gibraltar? (4)
 - Pledge to sort out bother? It's about time! (7)
 - Second cart goes over a few feet (5)
 - Reckless writer's heart-throb swallows four (9)
 - Old man's locking swine up – and then some! (8)
 - Two diamonds cut into cubes (4)
 - Prevent vessels capsizing (4)
 - Prepare to ambush drunk drinking bad wine? Excellent! (3, 2, 4)
 - Potassium, say, in barrel (3)
 - Milk supplier traps rook? Could be (4)
 - Computer 10 menus are out of sequence (8)
 - Star picks up British flower (4)
 - Emotional, single and sozzled, you might say (7)
 - Enemy scattered, having seized unknown protein (6)
 - Weather person who rules lines (5)
 - Mate in London, Derby or Worcester perhaps (5)
 - Notice sound made by function (4)

LET'S TALK ABOUT...

Return of The Toupee

Hair today, gone tomorrow.

What's Hair?

Here where? No, hair. The protein filament, dead, keratinised cells on top of our head that we are so attached to.

Ah, you are punning. So, what gives? Well, apparently according to The Guardian, the toupee is making a return in 2026. Much shunned for its unnatural look and the 'nudge-nudge-wink-wink' it elicits, the rug is firmly back in place.

But why, it looks so obvious. Just embrace the hair loss.

Easier said than done. There's also something called vanity, no? Not everyone is cool with baldness as a case with grey-ing. We are programmed to prolong the feeling of youth as much as possible. Plus, these toupees are not your old-style patches, they are now called hair systems. You can even sweat, shampoo and style them like normal hair.

But why not transplant?

Yes, transplants are getting more common now with men openly talking about it like footballer Wayne Rooney and closer home actor/comedian Danish Sait. But it's not for everyone – for lack of money or chances of effectiveness. Male pattern baldness is extremely common, affecting 30%-50% of men by the age of 50 and up to 80% of men over the course of their lives. Solutions are many like special shampoos, creams and mousses, medication and surgery, the efficacy is questionable at best. But hair systems are the instant fix.

But how common is it?

Well, The Guardian reports that Google searches for 'hair systems' have risen sharply since 2025. Aderans (making hairpieces since 1965) reported a 43% increase in men buying hair systems in 2025 compared with the previous year. Apparently social media is making it more popular.

Text: Team Sunday ET

Indonesia Starts First Social Media Ban for Kids in Southeast Asia

JAKARTA: Indonesia began enforcing restrictions on social media accounts for children under 16 on Saturday, becoming the first country in Southeast Asia to adopt nationwide curbs as governments worldwide take a tougher approach to limit harmful online content. The policy, influenced by Australia's landmark curbs, marks one of the most aggressive efforts yet to police how minors use digital platforms in the world's fourth-most populous nation. There has been mounting alarm over cyber-bullying, pornography, online fraud and compulsive screen use where social media has become deeply embedded in daily life. — Reuters

Russian Strikes Kill 4 in Ukraine, Damage Hospital

ODESA, UKRAINE: Russian air attacks across Ukraine early on Saturday killed at least four people and damaged critical infrastructure, including a port and a maternity hospital, authorities said, as Russia pressed on with its war against Ukraine. Moscow has been firing drones at Ukraine in nightly barrages during its four-year invasion launched in February 2022, with Kyiv accusing it of attacking residential areas and targeting civilians. In the southern port city of Odesa, two people were killed and at least 13 wounded, said Sergiy Lysak, the head of the city's military administration. — AFP

Effective, Say Strategists

From Page 1
The ads appear to be effective, political strategists and experts said. One 2025 study published in the peer-reviewed Journal of Creative Communications, found that people struggle to identify deepfake videos and that their opinions are affected by this type of misinformation.
So far, Republicans appear to be utilizing the technology more frequently than Democrats this election cycle, according to politics experts and a Reuters review of publicly available ads.
The Republicans are following the lead of Trump's White House, which has released scores of AI-generated videos and gaming-inspired memes on social media that do everything from disparaging protesters to hyping up the Iran war.
The Talario ad, for instance, is one of three recent ads created by national Republicans that use deepfake technology — realistic yet fabricated videos made by AI algorithms that have become increasingly easy to create.
NRSC Communications Director Joanna Rodriguez defended the ad in a statement to Reuters, saying Democrats were "panicking after seeing and hearing James Talario's own words." JT Ennis, a spokesperson for Talario's campaign, said that while his opponents "spend their time making deepfake videos to mislead Texans, we are uniting the people of Texas to win in November."
Among Democrats, the most notable user of AI-generated videos is California Governor Gavin Newsom, a potential 2028 presidential candidate who has frequently employed deepfake videos to troll Trump. But the Democratic Party's national campaign committees have not yet sought to mirror the NRSC's efforts in midterm campaigns.

MISINFORMATION RISKS
The campaign of Republican US Representative Mike Collins of Georgia, who is vying to challenge Democratic Senator Jon Ossoff in November, created a deepfake video in which Ossoff appears to say: "I just voted to keep the government shut down. They say it would hurt farmers, but I wouldn't know. I've only seen a farm on Instagram." In a statement, Collins' campaign spokesperson said that as technology evolves, the campaign "will be at the forefront embracing new tactics and strategies that pierce through lopsided legacy media coverage and deliver our message directly to voters."

US-Israeli Strikes Hit Civilian, Residential Areas Across Iran

Seven killed, 36 injured as strikes hit residential areas in Borujerd, western Iran: Officials

AFP
Tehran: Iranian media said on Saturday that US-Israeli strikes hit multiple residential areas, killing more than a dozen people overnight.
Strikes on residential areas in Borujerd, a city in the western province of Lorestan, killed "seven" and wounded 36 others, Fars news agency quoted provincial official Ghodrathollah Valadi as saying.
Similar attacks on the northwest city of Zanjan on Saturday killed at least five people and wounded seven others, according to ISNA, quoting the city's political deputy governor Ali Sadeghi.
Israel and the US launched strikes on Iran on February 28, killing the Islamic republic's supreme leader and sparking a war that has since spread across the West Asia. Iran has yet to provide an overall death toll, with the latest tally of over 1,200 released on March 8, according to the health ministry, which could not be independently verified.
Blasts rocked the Iranian capital overnight, hitting Iran's University of Science and Technology in the city's northeast causing damages to the buildings but no casualties, local

West Asia War Toll



TOTAL DEATH TOLL: Over 6,000+ people killed across the West Asia since the war began on February 28
IRAQ IMPACT: 95 deaths, including civilians, militia members, Kurdish fighters, and soldiers
ISRAEL TOLL: 24 deaths, including 19 civilians, 4 soldiers, and 1 farmer killed in friendly fire
LEBANON CASUALTIES: 1,142 people killed, including 122 children, amid Israeli strikes
HEZBOLLAH LOSSES: Over 400 fighters killed in clashes with Israel (separate from civilian toll)
Source: Reuters

Gulf Region Casualties:

UAE: 10 killed
Qatar: 7 killed in helicopter crash
Kuwait: 6 killed
Other Regions:
West Bank: 4 killed
Syria: 4 killed
Bahrain: 2 killed
Oman: 3 killed
Saudi Arabia: 2 killed
France: 1 soldier killed in Iraq

IRAN WORST HIT: Up to 3,389 deaths reported; include 1,527 civilians and 228 children
At least 1,900 killed and 20,000 injured, according to Red Cross figures

12 US Troops Wounded at Saudi Base

WASHINGTON: Twelve US troops were wounded, two of them seriously, in an Iranian military strike on Prince Sultan Air Base in Saudi Arabia, a US official told Reuters on Friday. The latest casualties add to the more than 300 US military service members who have been wounded since the war against Iran started on February 28. — Reuters

media reported. On Saturday, rescuers from the Iranian Red Crescent were pulling bodies out from under the rubble of residential buildings in the western city of Kermanshah where at least 13 people were killed in separate attacks there the day before, according to local media.

Nepal Police Arrest Former PM and Ex-home Minister over Protest Deaths

AP
Kathmandu: Police in Nepal arrested former Prime Minister Khadga Prasad Oli early on Saturday over the deaths of dozens of people during violent protests in September that toppled the government and resulted in new elections.
Authorities arrested the powerful Communist Party leader at his residence on the outskirts of the capital Kathmandu. They also arrested Ramesh Lekhak, the former home minister who has been accused of ordering authorities to fire on protesters.
The arrests come a day after a new government headed by rapper-turned-politician Balendra Shah took office following a landslide win in parliamentary election by his Raastriya Swatantra Party.
"No one is above the law. We have taken former Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli and former home minister Ramesh Lekhak under control," Home Minister Sudan Gurung said in announcing the arrests on social media. "This is not revenge against anyone. It is just the beginning of justice."



Police attempt to clear a flaming tyre during a protest by supporters of Nepal's former Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli (inset) on Saturday. — Reuters

An investigation by a commission established by the recent interim government called for punishment of up to 10 years in prison for Oli, Lekhak and the chief of police at the time of the protests.
Several trucks of police officers in riot gear conducted the arrests at the men's homes before taking them to the Kathmandu District Police office. The arrests triggered the anger of Oli's supporters, and hundreds gathered near the prime minister's office later on Saturday to protest and demand that Oli be immediately released from custody.
They chanted slogans against the new government, burnt tires and scuffled with riot police who used batons to try clear the road blocked by the protesters.

Better Product Offerings

From Page 1
EV penetration is strongest in the ₹10-20 lakh segment, where it is around 48%, making it one of the most active segments for electrification, data from Jato Dynamics show. Buyers in this category are more open to experimenting with new technologies, supported by better product offerings and feature sets.
The concentration of demand in the mid-market is not accidental. Even before the introduction of EVs, Indian consumers had begun shifting towards higher-value vehicles. "The Indian auto market had already evolved from being price-sensitive to becoming value-sensitive by the time EVs arrived," said Vinay Raina, chief commercial officer at JSW MG Motor India. "Going forward, the maximum traction will continue to be in the mid-priced segment."
In contrast, the entry-level segment remains heavily price-driven, with limited room for automakers to offer the range, features, and performance that customers increasingly expect from EVs. This has resulted in a clear product gap, further slowing adoption at the lower end of the market. Models such as the MG Comet EV cater largely to urban use cases, while mass-market demand in the below Rs 10 lakh segment continues to favour petrol-powered vehicles like the Tata Tiago and Tata Punch.

As more models enter the market and technology evolves, India's EV transition would continue, but largely from the middle outward rather than as a full-market shift, experts said. And the adoption is likely to be gradual unless geopolitical tensions persist long enough to materially disrupt fuel supply or sharply increase prices.
Automakers remain optimistic about long-term growth. Tata Motors, which leads the domestic EV market, sees electric mobility as a mainstream opportunity driven by improving affordability and scale. Mahindra & Mahindra is focusing on premium electric SUVs, where early demand visibility is stronger and customers are more willing to absorb higher upfront costs, while MG Motors has a wide portfolio, from the Comet to the ₹75-lakh Cyberster.

Near-term Outlook Uncertain

From Page 1
"It is always easier to call off preparations than to make them at the eleventh hour. It is also an opportunity for countries to structurally fortify themselves against future supply disruptions, whether man-made or natural," the review said.
Data for March may not indicate the true magnitude of risks to the growth momentum, since businesses are trying to meet full-year targets. But April and May data could give a better handle on the likely growth rate for the next fiscal, Nagaswaran said.

near-term disruptions arising from global developments, while ongoing monitoring and calibrated responses remain important in view of evolving conditions," the review said.

A sustained rise in global oil and gas prices could trigger second-order effects through higher input costs across sectors. "Nonetheless, the government remains vigilant, with measures underway to ensure adequate domestic energy availability and mitigate potential inflationary pressures," the review said.
The near-term outlook remains uncertain, with external shocks posing downside risks to growth through higher costs and supply constraints, although domestic demand may offer some cushion.
"The government's interventions across energy diversification, agricultural preparedness, inflation conditions, external sector strength, and policy measures support the economy's ability to absorb

ELEVATED RISKS
Higher oil import bills, increased logistics costs and weaker exports to West Asia could widen the current account deficit. Remittances also remain at risk, with Gulf economies accounting for about 38% of India's total remittances in FY24, or around \$45 billion, and hosting nearly half of India's migrants worldwide.
Alongside portfolio capital outflows, these factors have added pressure on the rupee, requiring calibrated policy responses. On the fiscal side, higher fertiliser and fuel subsidies and potential revenue shortfalls could widen the fiscal deficit, underscoring the need to prioritise expenditure.
The cumulative impact will operate through three channels: reduced output due to input and energy constraints; lower consumption amid higher prices and shortages; and weaker exports to affected regions.
In an uncertain global environment, the review said resilience will depend on strengthening domestic fundamentals.

No Reports of Casualties

From Page 1
A few hours earlier, the Israeli military had said it had "identified the launch of a missile from Yemen toward Israeli territory, aerial defence systems are operating to intercept the threat."
There were no reports of any casualties or damage in Israel, and the missile was reportedly intercepted. Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian spoke to Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, whose government will host a meeting with the Turkish, Egyptian and Saudi foreign ministers to seek to ease regional tensions.
Shehbaz Sharif's government has emerged as a key facilitator between Iran and the United States as their war drags on, serving as an intermediary for messages between the two sides. Top diplomats from Riyadh, Cairo and Ankara are due in the Pakistani capital on Sunday and Monday for "in-depth discussions on a range of issues, including efforts to de-escalate tensions in the region," the Pakistan foreign ministry said. They will be hosted by their Pakistani counterparts, Ishaq Dar, and a meeting with Sharif is also planned, a statement read.
RED SEA SHIPPING
During Israel's recent war



US aircraft carrier 'Gerald R Ford' arrives in front of Split, in the Adriatic Sea

in Iraqi Kurdistan said airport facilities had been damaged in strikes. Fire also broke out after Iranian missiles and drones hit an industrial zone in the UAE, injuring five people.
In Iran, meanwhile, production was shut down at a major steel plant in the southwest of the country after US-Israeli strikes, according to a statement from the Khuzestan Steel Company, cited by the Sharh newspaper. Iran's Revolutionary Guards have warned they will retaliate for any economic damage by striking industrial sites across the region, having earlier issued similar warnings for US military bases and hotels hosting American troops.
Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian sent a message to other countries in the region, warning: "If you want development and security, don't let our enemies run the war from your lands."
'COULD SOLVE IT ALL'
Trump's special envoy Steve Witkoff said on Friday he believed Iran would hold talks with Washington "this week, we're certainly hopeful for it". Washington expected Tehran to respond to a 15-point US peace plan, he told a business forum in Miami.

Non-beneficiaries Gain Too

From Page 1
"What stands out is the efficiency of this success. PLI stimulus accounts for only about 1% of overall mobile production and roughly 2% of PLI-linked output, underscoring the high return on policy support," he told ET.
Companies that did not get direct government incentives too benefited, as the scheme helped create an entire manufacturing ecosystem in India.
Amid geopolitical uncertainties and the United States' flip-flop on tariffs, the industry is seeking continuation of the incentives for the next five years and the government, according to officials, is considering a fresh round of the PLI scheme.

GST CONTRIBUTION
The mobile manufacturing industry contributed nearly ₹1 lakh crore in incremental GST during the scheme tenure. The GST rate for mobile phones was increased to 18% from 12% effective April 1, 2020, coinciding with the PLI scheme.
Unlike other PLI schemes, which were designed to reduce import dependence in large domestic consumption sectors, smartphone PLI was explicitly structured around incremental net sales, global scale and export competitiveness. It replaced the Merchandise Exports from India Scheme, which offered a 4% export incentive, with a performance-linked architecture tied to incremental production.
Officials said the smartphone PLI delivered on key areas like transitioning from import substitution to export leadership, integrating India meaningfully into global value chains and generating scale far beyond domestic demand, offering net-positive fiscal returns to the

government. While the scheme was a major success, manufacturing cost still remains 11-14% more in India compared with competitors like China, according to industry executives. This disability, before the introduction of the PLI scheme, was 18-19%.
Meanwhile, a tariff advantage that India had in the US market over China is now gone. China was paying 10%entanyl tariffs to the US which increased the cost of that country's smartphone exports. India didn't face such tariffs. However, with the US Supreme Court scrapping sweeping global tariffs imposed by the Trump administration, New Delhi has lost its competitive advantage against Beijing. Further, China has well-developed supply chains and advanced manufacturing, while India is in the process of developing these capabilities.

ET THE ECONOMIC TIMES

AI Is Rewriting Marketing. Even Rank #1 Doesn't Guarantee A Click Anymore

AEO + GEO Masterclass

30TH & 31ST MAY 2026 • LIVE ONLINE

Neil Patel
MARKETER

Ethan Smith
GROWTH SPECIALIST

Get your brand recommended by AI

Build authority in AI search

Win visibility in the next era of SEO

LIMITED SEATS ONLY - REGISTER NOW

SCAN TO REGISTER

WhatsApp: +91 8829059734

Email: devvrat.sisodia1@timesinternet.in

The Great Scrape

AI has quietly been scraping your data for years, whether you opted in or not, often even without you knowing about it. **Atul Bandekar** has some pointers on how you can turn that tap off

Every post, every update, every comment you make on social media — it's all fodder for the artificial intelligence (AI) companies, who are systematically mining all the content that is up on the internet to train their models. This process is termed 'data scraping'. The scale is mindblowing. According to Stanford's human-centered AI Institute's report this

month, 97% of leading AI models were trained using scraped data from open web and social media users. A Pew Research Center study underlined that 76% of social media users remain unaware that their public posts can be used to train AI models. Many of us are part of these groups. In such a world, understanding how data scraping works and the steps you can take to protect yourself can be key.

Privacy Alarm»

According to a report from IBM Institute for Business Value, 94% of users' photos and 91% of written posts on public social media profiles are harvested by AI training bots. The AI Now Institute's annual report found that 91% of the companies use social media data for AI development without providing explicit user notice.

Users hardly read terms and conditions before installing an app or registering on a new platform. This spells trouble. For example, Meta's Terms of Service, Section 3.3, as of March 2026, gives the company a licence to use your content for 'Safety and Integrity', a category that includes AI model development. Similarly, X's Terms of Service, section 3.3, permits content use for training its AI chatbot Grok.

HERE'S WHAT IS GETTING SCRAPED AND WHY IT MATTERS TO YOU

- Human generated content:** To learn about topics
- Photos:** To train facial recognition, and to learn to read emotions
- Social media posts:** To train language models that can mimic your writing style. Also tracks your opinions, political and social inclinations
- Location:** Movement algorithms and predictions
- Clicks:** what you click, how long you stay on a post with the aim of creating a detailed psychological profile

Risk Assessment»

Every platform carries different risks. This is how the major platforms fare on their AI data exposure

Platform	What AI Collects	Opt-Out Status
FACEBOOK/INSTAGRAM	Photos, Posts, faces, behaviour, connections	Partial (submit objection form)
X (TWITTER)	Tweets, media — feeds Grok AI	New data only (protect account)
LINKEDIN	Work history, skills, endorsements	Full opt-out available
GOOGLE/YOUTUBE	Search, location, voice, watch history	Full control via Activity Controls

AI scraping fundamentally changes digital privacy by ending privacy by obscurity. Once a post is indexed, it becomes a permanent data point for behavioral prediction or likeness recreation. This fuels 'Identity Syntheticism', where scraped voices and faces create a supply chain for deepfakes and highly convincing social engineering.

HOW TO DEFEND YOURSELF

Audit Your Footprint: "Make profiles private or 'Friends Only' to block automated crawlers. For professional public accounts, avoid sharing high-resolution personal imagery or real-time location data."

Deploy Data Poisoning: "Use tools like Glaze or Nightshade to add invisible noise to images. These protect your work by confusing AI models without altering the visual for humans."

Restrict App Access: "Regularly prune third-party permissions. Many AI apps bypass standard privacy settings to harvest personal history."

—Karmesh Gupta, CEO, WiJungle

10 Things You Can Do to Reduce Your Exposure

- Set all social accounts to private
- Remove face tags from Facebook and disable facial recognition features
- Never post location data in real time after visiting a place
- Use Google's 'Results About You' tool (google.com/results-about-you) to remove personal information from search results
- Use alias email addresses. Apple's 'Hide My Email' or SimpleLogin offer options to prevent cross-platform identity linking
- Switch browsers from Chrome to Firefox or Brave — both of these block most known AI scrapers automatically
- Always select 'Reject All' on cookie consent banners. Analytics cookies are primary AI training sources
- Search your name on Google on regular intervals and submit removal requests for unwanted results
- Audit app permissions regularly and revoke camera, microphone and contact access from unused apps
- Enable two-factor authentication on all accounts to prevent bot or imposter takeover

Putting You in Control»

While every major platform collects your data, they also provide a mechanism to limit its use to a certain extent. If you want to opt out, here's how to go about reclaiming your data on iOS and Android:

PROTECTION TIPS BASED ON YOUR OS



iOS
Settings → Privacy & Security → Tracking → toggle OFF
'Allow Apps to Request to Track.'
This single action prevents cross-app tracking that feeds AI profiling systems.

ADDITIONAL CRITICAL iOS SETTINGS

LOCATION SERVICES: Set all apps to 'While Using' — never 'Always' (Settings → Privacy & Security → Location Services)

PHOTO ACCESS: Limit to 'Selected Photos' only (Settings → Privacy & Security → Photos)

APPLE ADVERTISING: Turn OFF Personalised Ads (Settings → Privacy & Security → Apple Advertising)

ANALYTICS: Toggle OFF 'Share iPhone Analytics' (Settings → Privacy & Security → Analytics & Improvements)



ANDROID
Android devices have extensive data sharing with Google's AI programs. Google introduced Personal Intelligence and confirmed in January 2026 that user activity data contributes to training its Gemini AI family.

ESSENTIAL ANDROID SETTINGS

DELETE YOUR ADVERTISING ID: Settings → Google → Ads → Delete Advertising ID → Confirm

PAUSE WEB & APP ACTIVITY: Go to myaccount.google.com → Data & Privacy → Web & App Activity → Pause

TURN OFF GEMINI ACTIVITY: myaccount.google.com → Data & Privacy → Gemini Activity → Turn Off

DISABLE LOCATION HISTORY: myaccount.google.com → Data & Privacy → Location History → Turn Off

AUDIT APP PERMISSIONS: Settings → Privacy → Permission Manager → Review camera, microphone, location access

For Individual Apps:»

Platform	Critical Setting	Exact Path
FACEBOOK	Object to AI Training Settings → Privacy → Meta AI & Optional Uses → Submit Objection	
LINKEDIN	Generative AI Opt-Out Settings → Data Privacy → Generative AI Improvement → Toggle OFF	
X (TWITTER)	Disable Grok AI Settings → Privacy & Safety → Data Sharing → Uncheck Grok boxes	
GOOGLE	Pause Activity Tracking myaccount.google.com → Data & Privacy → Pause All Activity	

Today there are AI-powered open source intelligence tools that can scrape images and videos of people. A lot of it is sold to companies that collate this data. Keeping social media accounts private is the first big step, especially Facebook and Instagram. Influencers will face the biggest issue here, since they have to keep their profiles open. WhatsApp impersonations are a big problem too. The other big problem is images of children shared by parents, something that is termed 'sharenting'. By the time these children grow up, they will have a massive digital footprint that is not of their own making, which could lead to impersonation or abuse. Parents should restrict putting their children's pictures public."

— Kanishk Gaur, CEO, Athenian Tech

"In 2025, Incogni analysed 15 of the leading social media platforms and found that all but one were using user content to train AI models. Most people have no idea that this is happening by default. Facebook and Instagram alone collect up to 37 out of 38 possible data types from users and devices. This means that every photo, check-in, comment or interaction shared on a public profile can potentially be harvested, repurposed, and fed into AI systems, often without clear visibility, consent, or control over how that data is ultimately used. What this highlights is a growing gap between user expectations of privacy and the reality of how platforms operate. Many people still assume that 'public' simply means visible to others, not that their data may be systematically collected and used to train AI at scale. Strengthening digital hygiene is no longer optional, it's essential."

Jaydeep Singh,
General Manager — India, Kaspersky

— With inputs from Nirmal John

MOHALI RISES AS INDIA'S INVESTMENT POWERHOUSE WITH TECH, INFRASTRUCTURE AND POLICY PUSH

BACKED BY POLICY REFORMS, INFRASTRUCTURE EXPANSION AND A RISING TECH ECOSYSTEM, MOHALI IS FAST EMERGING AS A PREFERRED INVESTMENT DESTINATION



INSIDE MOHALI'S GROWTH STORY

- Mohali is among the top 5 fastest-growing urban economies in India
- Over 4,000 active startups driving innovation
- ₹7,500 crore+ investment in IT and ESDM sectors
- 50,000 to 60,000 professionals in IT and the GCC ecosystem
- Projected 2X growth in tech jobs by 2030
- 10-12 million sq ft office demand in the next five years
- 20-50 percent lower operational costs vs tier-1 cities
- Approval timelines reduced to 30-45 days
- 4.5 million annual air passengers with strong growth
- 150+ registered IT units
- 40,000+ graduates annually ensuring talent supply
- 45 million sq ft housing stock with high absorption rates



As Punjab continues to build on the "Brand Mohali" narrative, the city's transformation into a hub for innovation, enterprise and quality living appears not only plausible but increasingly inevitable. Under the leadership of Chief Minister Bhagwant Singh Mann, Punjab has embarked on an ambitious transformation of Mohali, positioning it as a future-ready urban and investment hub within the Tricity region. The government's focus on infrastructure, ease of doing business and sectoral diversification is steadily reshaping Mohali into one of India's most promising growth centres. This vision was prominently showcased at the recently concluded Progressive Punjab Investors' Summit 2026, where "Brand Mohali" was positioned as North India's emerging hub for artificial intelligence, IT, and next-generation industries. The dedicated session during PPIS 2026 highlighted Mohali's transition from an agrarian base to a technology-led ecosystem, anchored by projects such as the 162-acre Expo City and India's first dedicated AI Tower.

A FAST-GROWING URBAN ECONOMY WITH STRONG FUNDAMENTALS

Mohali today ranks among the top five fastest-growing urban economies in India, with an estimated gross district domestic product growth of around 10 percent over the past decade. Its economic profile is increasingly diversified, spanning IT and IT-enabled services, biotechnology, advanced manufacturing, electronics system design and emerging service industries. The city benefits from its strategic location within the Tricity cluster of Mohali, Chandigarh and Panchkula, which together serve a catchment of over 60 million people across Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir. This provides a strong consumption base, talent pool and demand ecosystem for businesses.

IT, GCCs AND STARTUPS DRIVE THE GROWTH ENGINE

A key driver of Mohali's investment appeal is its rapidly expanding technology ecosystem. The city hosts more than 4,000 active startups and has evolved into a growing hub for Global Capability Centres and IT firms. Major companies such as Infosys, Tech Mahindra and Zscaler have established a strong presence, supported by a workforce of 50,000 to 60,000 professionals, including nearly 35,000 IT specialists. The presence of the Semiconductor Laboratory, India's only integrated semiconductor device manufacturing

facility, further strengthens its position in the electronics and semiconductor ecosystem. Investment momentum is also visible in capital inflows, with more than ₹7,500 crore already invested in IT and electronics system design and manufacturing in the region. The pipeline remains robust, with projections indicating a doubling of IT and GCC jobs to over 1.1 lakh by 2030, driving demand for 10 to 12 million square feet of commercial office space.

COMPETITIVE COST ADVANTAGE ENHANCES INVESTOR APPEAL

One of Mohali's most compelling advantages is its cost competitiveness compared to tier-1 cities. Land and real estate costs are 20 to 25 percent lower than in major urban centres, while commercial rentals are up to 50 percent cheaper than markets such as Delhi NCR and Bengaluru. Operational costs also remain attractive, with electricity tariffs around ₹6 per kWh and overall salary and living costs significantly lower than leading metros. This cost efficiency, combined with lower attrition rates, makes Mohali a preferred destination for companies looking to optimise operating expenses without compromising on talent quality.



INFOSYS' ₹290 CRORE CAMPUS IN MOHALI TO CREATE 7000 JOBS

Under this project, an integrated campus will be established in the first phase, which will include a software development block, food court and other facilities.

EASE OF DOING BUSINESS

Policy reforms have played a critical role in strengthening investor confidence. The Unified Single Window System introduced by the Punjab government has streamlined regulatory approvals across more than 23 departments, reducing project approval timelines from over 100 days to 30



Punjab is witnessing a turnaround in its industrial sector, with investors returning to the state. The recent success of the Progressive Punjab Investors' Summit is a testament to this trend. The Punjab government is transforming Mohali into a world-class IT hub through cutting-edge landscaping and urban beautification, aiming to create a globally competitive and visually stunning urban environment."

— Bhagwant Singh Mann
Chief Minister, Punjab



MOHALI'S COMPETITIVE EDGE

- Mohali is a high-productivity city powered by new-age (AI/IT) and traditional industry cluster blends, startups and knowledge institutions
- Renowned for being the national education capital with elite schools, universities, and research institutions
- DIVERSE ECONOMIC BASE
 - IT/TeS, biotech, med-tech, ESDM and advanced manufacturing, services & government
- BUSINESS STABILITY
 - Low attrition, lower operational cost than tier-1s & single window approvals
- CONNECTIVITY HUB
 - Robust national & global connectivity via NH, rail and air, supported by high-speed fibre & reliable DC2 infrastructure
- STARTUP & INNOVATION ECOSYSTEM
 - Incubators & accelerators (STPI, NIPER), tech parks (Bestech, Quark City, NetSmartz), Biotech hubs (NABI)
- LOW ELECTRICITY & POWER COSTS
 - Mohali electricity cost is ~₹6/kWh, which is cheaper than Haryana, Maharashtra & Telangana (range of ₹6.5-9/kWh)

IMC Rajpura-Patiala powering Punjab's industrial progress with innovation-led growth

POSITIONED AS A FUTURE-READY INDUSTRIAL ECOSYSTEM, IMC RAJPURA-PATIALA REFLECTS A CALIBRATED EFFORT TO ATTRACT LARGE-SCALE INVESTMENTS, FOSTER INNOVATION AND GENERATE EMPLOYMENT ACROSS SECTORS

Punjab's industrial vision is taking concrete shape at the Integrated Manufacturing Cluster at Rajpura-Patiala, which is fast emerging as a high-potential hub for industry and innovation. Backed by strategic location, robust infrastructure upgrade and strong policy support, the project reflects the Bhagwant Singh Mann government's focused push over the past four years to accelerate industrial growth in the state. Positioned as a future-ready industrial ecosystem, IMC Rajpura-Patiala marks a shift from fragmented industrial expansion to a more integrated and infrastructure-led development model. The approach aligns with India's broader ambition of strengthening domestic manufacturing and building globally competitive industrial hubs.

A STRATEGIC NODE IN INDIA'S INDUSTRIAL CORRIDOR NETWORK

The Rajpura-Patiala Integrated Manufacturing Cluster is a key greenfield project under the Amritsar-Kolkata Industrial Corridor (AKIC) and the National Industrial Corridor Development Programme. It is among the first nodes to be taken up for development under the corridor, underscoring its strategic importance in catalysing industrialisation across the region.

The project is being implemented by the National Industrial Corridor Development and Implementation Trust through its joint venture company, the National Industrial Corridor Development Corporation, in partnership with the Government of Punjab. This institutional framework ensures coordinated planning and execution, in line with global standards for industrial infrastructure.

Spread across a total project area of 1,099 acres, IMC Rajpura-Patiala has been carefully planned to balance industrial activity with sustainability and urban infrastructure. Around 59 percent of the land has been earmarked for industrial use, while 1.67 percent is allocated for commercial development and nearly 16 percent is reserved for green spaces and water bodies.

SCALE MEETS STRATEGY: IMC RAJPURA DRIVES INDUSTRIAL PROGRESS

- The IMC Rajpura-Patiala is one of the first developments to kick-start the development for overall 7 nodes under AKIC
- Large integrated manufacturing cluster with multi-sector industrial focus
- 59% of the area of IMC Rajpura-Patiala has been earmarked for industrial development
- Strategically located with strong road and rail connectivity
- Designed as a plug-and-play industrial ecosystem

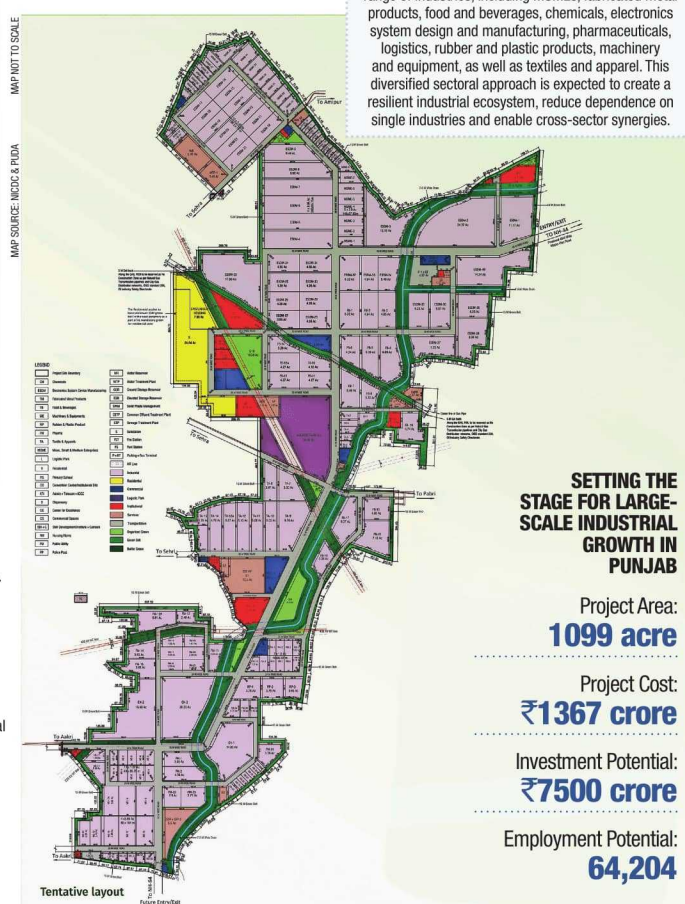
INFRASTRUCTURE-LED DEVELOPMENT WITH PLUG-AND-PLAY ADVANTAGE

A defining feature of IMC Rajpura-Patiala is its focus on world-class trunk infrastructure. The development includes internal road networks, water supply systems, drainage and sewerage networks, power distribution infrastructure and other essential utilities required for industrial operations.

This plug-and-play model reduces entry barriers for investors and enables faster project execution. Unlike traditional industrial estates, the cluster integrates industrial, logistics and support infrastructure within a single ecosystem, ensuring operational efficiency and scalability.

STRATEGIC LOCATION STRENGTHENS MARKET ACCESS

Situated along key industrial corridors, IMC Rajpura-Patiala enjoys seamless connecti-



DIVERSE SECTORAL FOCUS TO DRIVE GROWTH

IMC Rajpura-Patiala has been designed to host a wide range of industries, including MSMEs, fabricated metal products, food and beverages, chemicals, electronics system design and manufacturing, pharmaceuticals, logistics, rubber and plastic products, machinery and equipment, as well as textiles and apparel. This diversified sectoral approach is expected to create a resilient industrial ecosystem, reduce dependence on single industries and enable cross-sector synergies.

SETTING THE STAGE FOR LARGE-SCALE INDUSTRIAL GROWTH IN PUNJAB

Project Area:
1099 acre

Project Cost:
₹1367 crore

Investment Potential:
₹7500 crore

Employment Potential:
64,204

INVESTMENT POTENTIAL

- Significant opportunity for large-scale domestic and global investments
- Focus on capital-intensive and high-value manufacturing sectors
- Strong multiplier impact on the regional economy

INFRASTRUCTURE EDGE

- Planned internal road network and industrial utilities
- Logistics-friendly location with access to major consumption centres
- Integrated industrial and support ecosystem

ity to major markets in North India, including Delhi NCR, Haryana and Himachal Pradesh. The cluster is well connected through national highways and rail networks, enabling efficient logistics and reduced turnaround time for industries.

Its proximity to urban centres and airports enhances its appeal for export-oriented units and supply chain-driven businesses. This locational advantage positions the cluster at the intersection of production networks and consumption hubs, a critical factor for manufacturing competitiveness.

POLICY PUSH ENHANCES INVESTOR CONFIDENCE

The Punjab government's emphasis on ease of doing business has played a key role in strengthening the investment climate around IMC Rajpura-Patiala. Streamlined approvals, digital processes and proactive investor facilitation have reduced procedural delays and improved transparency. The focus on governance and execution is helping build confidence among investors and positioning Punjab as a competitive destination for industrial investments.

STRONG EMPLOYMENT AND ECONOMIC MULTIPLIER IMPACT

IMC Rajpura-Patiala is expected to generate significant employment opportunities, both direct and indirect. Once fully operational, the cluster is estimated to create around 64,204 jobs across industrial units and support services.

Beyond job creation, the project is likely to have a strong multiplier effect on the regional economy by boosting ancillary industries, logistics networks and service sectors. The development of the Amritsar-Kolkata Industrial Corridor is also expected to contribute to GDP growth and strengthen manufacturing output.

VITALS

Injured Raphinha to Miss Barcelona's Champions League Quarter-final

Barcelona: Barcelona will be without winger Raphinha for their Champions League quarter-final tie against Atletico Madrid in April after the Brazilian was diagnosed with a hamstring injury on Friday. Raphinha was hurt during Brazil's 2-1 friendly defeat by France in the US on Thursday. In a statement, the Brazilian Football Confederation said that Raphinha and Roma full-back Wesley had both "felt pain in their right hamstrings during the match against France". Barcelona released their own statement confirming the length of Raphinha's convalescence. "The player is returning to Barcelona to begin the appropriate treatment. The estimated recovery time is five weeks," Barcelona said. Raphinha is a key player for the Catalan giants, who will be without him for both legs of the tie against Diego Simeone's Atletico, at home on April 8 and then away on April 14. **AFP**

Sinner on Doorstep of 'Sunshine Double' After Beating Zverev in Miami

Miami: Jannik Sinner beat Alexander Zverev 6-3 7-6(4) on Friday to reach the Miami Open final, where the Italian will be a heavy favourite to complete the 'Sunshine Double' following his triumph in Indian Wells earlier this month. World No. 2 Sinner, who will play Czech Jiri Lehecka in Sunday's final, roared "Let's go!" after the German failed to put his powerful serve back in play on match point. "It has been an incredible swing," said four-times Grand Slam champion Sinner, who picked up his 16th consecutive Masters 1000 match victory. Sinner is now one win away from becoming the first man since Roger Federer in 2017 to complete the 'Sunshine Double' by winning at Indian Wells in the California desert and the Miami Open in South Florida in the same season. **Reuters**

Shah Questions Politician's Presence at Closed-door PSL, Draws PCB Ire

Lahore: The Pakistan Cricket Board has attacked fast bowler Naseem Shah for criticising a politician's presence at the start of the opening game of the Pakistan Super League, which is being played behind closed doors. Fans are barred from attending games at the country's premier domestic tournament, which was originally scheduled for six venues but now reduced to just two—Lahore and Karachi. Chief Minister of Punjab Maryam Nawaz was invited to Lahore's Gaddafi Stadium on Thursday, along with other dignitaries, and was introduced to officials of the eight franchises and players ahead of the opening game of the tournament. Shah commented on a tweet about the opening game by the PCB, with the bowler saying on X, "Why is she treated like the queen at Lord's?" in an apparent reference to Nawaz's presence at the stadium. He deleted the post soon afterward and later said his account had originally been hacked. The PCB said in a statement that Shah had been issued a notice for violating terms of his central contract as well as media policy and regulations. **AP**

Indian Teams Bolster World Athletics Relays Qualification Chances

Chandigarh: India's men's 4x400m and mixed 4x100m relay teams took a major step toward qualification to the World Athletics Relays in Botswana in May, delivering standout performances at the International Invitation Relay Competition on Saturday. The men's 4x400m squad, featuring Manu TS, Amoj Jacob, D Chaudhary, and Rajesh Ramesh, secured gold with a time of 3:01.43 seconds. The performance significantly bolsters their standing as they push for a spot in the World Athletics Relays. In the mixed 4x100m relay, the National B team stole the show by shattering the national record. The quartet clocked 42.30 seconds, erasing the previous mark of 43.44 seconds set by Tamil Nadu in 2025. The India A team followed closely in second at 42.34 seconds, while the Maldives took third. **PTI**

Abhishek Takle

Suzuka: Italian teenager Kimi Antonelli looked every bit the seasoned veteran as he eased to a second successive pole position in Saturday's qualifying for the Japanese Grand Prix.

The 19-year-old Mercedes driver, two weeks on from having scored his first pole and win, lit up the timing loops around the iconic 5.8 kilometer-long Suzuka race track with a one minute 28.77-second lap.

Set on his first attempt, it was enough to beat teammate George Russell by a handy 0.296 seconds, with the Briton making it three out of three front-row lockouts for the team.

Australian Oscar Piastri, 0.354 seconds off the pace, took third for McLaren.

"I felt very good in the car and every run I was just improving and improving," said a composed Antonelli after taking his second career pole and 50th for an Italian driver.

"I'm really happy with the session and now we'll focus on tomorrow," he added, a minor lock-up that prevented him from improving even further on his final run offering the only indication of his relative inexperience.



This photo provided by the Martin County Sheriff's Office shows the overturned vehicle in a rollover crash which involved Tiger Woods

Woods in the Rough Again

Tiger arrested for DUI in Florida rollover car crash, released on bail after eight hours in jail

Tiger Woods was released on bail late Friday, hours after his Land Rover clipped a truck, rolled onto its side and the golfer was arrested on suspicion of driving under the influence, officials said.

Woods had been traveling at "high speeds" on a residential road and after the crash showed "signs of impairment," Martin County Sheriff John Budensiek said, adding that investigators believe he had taken some kind of medication or drug. He described Woods as lethargic and said he agreed to a Breathalyzer test that showed no signs of alcohol, but he refused a urine test and was arrested.

Florida law required that he spend at least eight hours in jail before he could post bail.

Woods, who was not injured in the crash, had been held separate from others at the jail, Budensiek said. "He's not going to be with other inmates that could hurt him or try to capitalize on what he did," he said. "He'll pay the price, but he's not going to pay the price by getting punished in jail."

Woods' manager at Excel Sports did not immediately respond to a text message seeking comment. US President Donald Trump, whose former daughter-in-law is dating Woods, was asked about the golfer when he landed in Miami on Friday afternoon for an investment summit. "I feel so badly. He's got some difficulty," Trump said. "Very close friend of mine. He's an amazing person. Amazing man. But, some difficulty."

The crash occurred just before 2pm not far from where Woods lives on Jupiter Island.

Budensiek said Woods attempted

to pass a pressure cleaner truck while driving on a two-lane road with a 30 mph (48 kph) speed limit. He said authorities could not determine how fast Woods was going.

The Land Rover swerved to avoid a collision as he was passing the truck but clipped the back end of the truck's trailer, Budensiek said. Woods' car then rolled onto its driver's side and he crawled out.

The sheriff said Woods was "cooperative, but he's not trying to incriminate himself." He said Woods has the right to refuse the urine test

and that authorities "will never get definitive results with what he was impaired on."

This was the fourth time Woods has been involved in a car crash, most recently in February 2021 when his SUV ran off a coastal road in Los Angeles at a high rate of speed, leading to multiple leg and ankle injuries. Woods said later doctors considered amputation. He also previously sustained multiple injuries to his left knee and his back during his golf career.

Woods returned from multiple

When it came time for us to ask for a urinalysis test, he refused, and so he's been charged with DUI, with property damage and refusal to submit to a lawful test in the crash

JOHN BUDENSIEK Martin County Sheriff

THIS IS TIGER'S FOURTH CAR ACCIDENT

2009 Woods ran out of his home in Orlando, Florida, on Nov. 27, 2009, and drove his Cadillac Escalade into a fire hydrant and a tree in his neighbour's yard about 2:30am. That came two days after the National Enquirer published a story alleging Woods had been seeing a New York nightclub hostess, and that they recently were together in Melbourne. The Windermere police chief at the time said officers found Woods lying in the street with his then-wife, Elin Nordegren, hovering over him. The chief said Nordegren told officers she was in the house when she heard the crash and "came out and broke the back window with a golf club." Woods had lacerations to his upper and lower lips, and blood in his mouth.

2017 Woods was charged with driving under the influence in 2017 when south Florida police found him asleep behind the wheel of his car with the engine running. It was parked in a traffic lane and had damage to the driver's side. Woods said he had taken a mix of prescription painkillers and had a bad reaction. He pleaded guilty to reckless driving in 2017 and agreed to complete a first-time DUI offender program to stay out of jail. He received a year of probation, a small fine and community service.

2021 In February 2021, Woods survived a rollover crash in which his SUV ran off a coastal road in Los Angeles County at a high speed, leading to multiple leg and ankle injuries. The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department said Woods was driving between 135 to 140 kmph on a winding road with a speed limit of 72 kmph when he crashed. No charges were filed. **AP**

Red-eyed Tiger Woods showed signs of 'impairment' although he passed a breathalyzer test



Dhoni to Miss Start of IPL With Calf Strain

Chennai: MS Dhoni is likely to miss the first two weeks of the IPL with a calf strain, his team Chennai Super Kings said on Saturday.

Dhoni, 44, led Chennai to five Indian Premier League titles and has only played in the tournament since his international retirement in 2020.

"MS Dhoni is currently undergoing rehabilitation for a calf strain. As a result, he is likely to miss the first two weeks of TATA IPL 2026," Chennai said in a statement.

Wicketkeeper-batter Dhoni, a two-time World Cup winning captain for India, has defied age to be in CSK's yellow

low, batting at number seven under skipper Ruturaj Gaikwad.

Dhoni played all 14 matches last year, scoring 196 runs, but Chennai finished bottom of the 10-team table.

Chennai, who last won the IPL in 2023, will play their opening match on Monday against Rajasthan Royals. **AFP**

TURNED DOWN OFFERS TO MAINTAIN WORK-LIFE BALANCE: BUTTLER

New Delhi: How much cricket is too much cricket?

Jos Buttler says it depends completely on an individual and his ability at times say "no" to some of the T20 franchise league offers which helps in finding the perfect work-life balance.

Buttler, one of England's

finest white-ball keeper-batters, will turn 36 in September but he is still managing his white career for England while also playing his trade as a sought-after T20 smasher for the 11th successive season in the IPL.

It will be his second season with Gujarat Titans. So, has he come to a stage where he might have to choose between club and country?

"I am just trying to be very immediate actually with my stuff and just be where my feet are. Obviously, the IPL is the thing right now," Buttler told PTI ahead of GT's first match against

Punjab Kings on Tuesday.

For Buttler, it is important to know what one's priority is professionally as well as personally and then take an informed call.

"After a period of time, you reflect and say, okay, where am I at with my career? What's important to me?" said Buttler, one of Gujarat Titans' batting mainstays.

"Alongside the franchise stuff, there are things I've turned down to spend time at home because that's very important to me. I need to maintain energy and relationships and that kind of thing," former England skipper said. **PTI**



Jos Buttler

Antonelli Ends Verstappen's Streak to Put Mercedes on Japanese GP Pole

Russell completes front-row lockout for the Silver Arrows, McLaren's Piastri starts third

The car never turns mid-corner, but at the same time this weekend also again, we just oversteer a lot on entries. We thought we fixed it a little bit... but now in qualifying it was again, for me, undriveable

MAX VERSTAPPEN after his run of four successive Suzuka pole positions ended, he will start 11th on the grid

READY TO TAKE CHAMPIONSHIP LEAD

Antonelli heads into Sunday's race fired up from his success in China and knowing a repeat performance in Japan would see him take the championship lead from Russell, who is four

points ahead.

The Briton, winner of the opening race in Australia and the Saturday sprint in China, complained of a lack of rear grip throughout the session and never looked in a position to challenge his younger teammate.

"Over the last two weekends it's both gone wrong come qualifying," said Russell. "But the race is tomorrow and still a lot to play for," added the Briton, who was hamstrung by technical gremlins during qualifying in China.

Piastri was encouraged by McLaren's improved fortunes after neither of the Woking-based team's cars were able to start the last race in China.

"I think this weekend we've looked good, and I think we've executed well," said the 24-year-old, who has only raced in the China sprint after also fail-



Mercedes' Kimi Antonelli

The Breaking Point of a Relentless Mind

Alcaraz's despair after third-round loss in Miami reminds us even the best endure moments of frailty



Gaurav Kalra



"I can't take it anymore. I'm going home, man... I can't take it anymore."

"I can't do anymore."

"I want to go home now, man."

Last week in Miami, a 22-year-old young man was frustrated, fragile and enraged. That young man is the world's best tennis player, the owner of seven major titles already and destined to take his place among the greatest ever to play the sport. Yet, in those fleeting moments, as he turned helplessly to his support staff, Carlos Alcaraz provided a glimpse of the loneliness of his chosen pursuit and the price it extracts.

Alcaraz's indignation played out in the course of his second defeat of the year, at the hands of Sebastian Korda, in a third-round match at the Miami Open. Even as he found the gumption to recover from this mid-match meltdown, the world No. 1 went down in three sets, booking himself the early ticket home he craved for.

For sports fans, elite athletes are a borderline robotic construct. They observe their steel and vigour with awe, and admire the ferocity with which they swat challenges aside. Alcaraz embodies this near flawless design—supremely skilled, staggeringly athletic and seemingly invincible. Yet, lurking below that exterior lies a vulnerability that champion athletes train relentlessly to hide away. On days like these though, it sneaks through. In those moments, you are just a 22-year-old, missing home.

At the Australian Open in January, Alcaraz steamrolled his way into the history books by becoming the youngest man to complete the career slam. A fortnight later in Doha, he showed no signs of fatigue or a lack of motivation, as he savoured the title for the loss of just one set. Now coach Samuel Lopez even whispered aloud the possibility of an accomplishment the

likes of Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal and Novak Djokovic failed to pull off in their storied careers.

"The challenge would be to win all four Grand Slams this year," Lopez mused. "It's ambitious, but possible." Alcaraz arrived for the "Sunshine Swing"—back-to-back ATP Masters 1000 events in Indian Wells and Miami—riding the crest of this wave. He swept aside rivals with disdain while continuing to charm fans with his cherubic, effervescent exterior.

Until one night in Indian Wells when a reality check crept up unannounced. Former world No. 1 Daniil Medvedev produced an assured performance for his first win over Alcaraz in over two years. A few days later, world No. 36 Korda pulled the rug from under Alcaraz's feet again. Suddenly the indestructible Spaniard wasn't quite that anymore.

"All of a sudden I have to get back on track, go back on the court," Alcaraz reflected. "The clay season is around the corner. I have really good tournaments that I am just excited about playing there. My mind right now is to take some days off, to reset my mind, reset the batteries, and be ready in good shape for the clay season."

Once he "resets," it is almost inevitable that Alcaraz will re-unleash the near infallible gameplay that makes him a modern-day colossus. However, it is in the defeats, and in the instinctive responses they evoke, that the price of sporting excellence is glaringly visible. Even the most finely tuned physical specimens, imbued with divine skills, can endure moments of frailty. Fatigue is not always just physical. It loiters within the mind, lungs and bloodstream, trapping you when least expected.

Soon, Alcaraz will step onto the red clay and start his build-up to win the French Open for the third year running. Eyes will glue in as he returns to the courts, and in little corners of his tummy, the butterflies will do some dancing. He will aspire to his muscular, all-conquering avatar but a little beneath that sculpted perfection, a sometimes vulnerable, sometimes fragile human being will be lurking.

ry in my shoulder and elbow of which I didn't know the extent of during the Australian summer." "These individuals have made some strong statements around involvement in the IPL and provided heavily misinformed opinions of players, preached them as facts, and claim to know my body better than me."

The 36-year-old, who grabbed 14 wickets last IPL season, though "apologised" to his franchise for his unavailability in the beginning of the league this year while also pledging his commitment to the side.

"I remain committed to join DC, are in continual communication updating the team and will continue to do what I can to be available for DC asap," Starc said. **PTI**

STARC SLAMS 'MISINFORMED' CLAIMS ABOUT HIS INJURY

New Delhi: Mitchell Starc lashed out at critics over his delayed arrival for IPL 2026, saying that his absence at the start of the season is due to injury management and not due to a lack of commitment to Delhi Capitals.

The left-arm pacer is yet to arrive in India and will miss DC's opening matches, sparking debate around overseas players' commitment to their franchises.

Breaking silence on the growing criticism, Starc said in a statement on Saturday, "Despite the opinions and views of certain individuals with their platforms in and through the Indian media, I'm currently rehabbing and managing an injury."

ing to make the start of the season-opening race in Melbourne. Ferrari, a clear second to Mercedes over the first two rounds, appeared to have lost ground.

Charles Leclerc was fourth quickest, 0.627 seconds off the pace, and will line up on the second row alongside Piastri. McLaren's reigning champion Lando Norris will start fifth with seven-times world champion Lewis Hamilton alongside him on the third row in sixth.

Norris lost a significant amount of track time in the practice sessions due to issues with his car.

Four-times world champion Max Verstappen delivered the major upset of the session. The Red Bull racer, who has started from pole at Suzuka for the last four years in a row, failed to make it through to the top-10 shootout after being knocked out by Racing Bulls rookie Arvid Lindblad.

He will start 11th, behind the 18-year-old, Audi's Gabriel Bortoletto and Red Bull teammate Isack Hadjar in eighth.

Aston Martin propped up the timesheets at what is a home event for power unit partners Honda with Fernando Alonso set to start 21st and Lance Stroll last.

Reuters



JAPANESE GRAND PRIX

SUZUKA CIRCUIT

First Grand Prix	1987
Circuit Length	5.807km
Number of Laps	53
Race Distance	307.471km
Fastest lap time	1:30.965 (Kimi Antonelli, 2025)

LINE-UP (Top 10)

1. Andrea Kimi Antonelli	Mercedes
2. George Russell	Mercedes
3. Oscar Piastri	McLaren
4. Charles Leclerc	Ferrari
5. Lando Norris	McLaren
6. Lewis Hamilton	Ferrari
7. Pierre Gasly	Alpine
8. Isack Hadjar	Red Bull
9. Gabriel Bortoletto	Audi
10. Arvid Lindblad	Racing Bulls