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PERSPECTIVE

One swallow doesn't mean spring is here

Tripura proposes 784 polling stations for civic polls

AGARTALA

The Tripura State Election Commission has proposed 784 polling stations across 21 urban local bodies (ULBs) ahead of the upcoming civic elections, expected to be held towards the end of the year.

State Election Commission Secretary Anurag Sen said draft notifications for the polling stations have been issued across all 21 ULBs, including the Agartala Municipal Corporation, municipal councils and nagar panchayats.

The respective district magistrates and collectors, designated as District Municipal Election Officers, have notified the proposed polling stations in their jurisdictions.

The commission has invited claims and objections from stakeholders on the draft polling stations. The deadline for submitting objections is September 21, while the concerned urban local body authorities will dispose of the submissions by September 23.

The final notification on polling stations is scheduled to be issued on September 25 after the objections are examined, Sen said.

However, the State Election Commission is yet to announce the detailed election schedule and related guidelines.

Sen said the poll schedule would be issued after approval from the competent authorities and completion of the required formalities.

The civic elections will cover all 21 urban local bodies in the state, including the Agartala Municipal Corporation, municipal councils and nagar panchayats.

WHO SAID WHAT



Plastic waste has also been a major challenge for the environment. Therefore, India has banned single-use plastic. We have promoted the circular economy with the mantra of "reduce, reuse and recycle". Today, thousands of tonnes of waste are being recycled every day in India. Through the #GOBARdhan scheme, cow dung and other organic waste in villages are also being converted into useful resources ~ Narendra Modi, PM

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Mamata moves Supreme Court against EC freeze on TMC name, symbol

NEW DELHI

Former West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee has moved the Supreme Court challenging the Election Commission's interim decision to freeze the use of the Trinamool Congress' original name and reserved election symbol amid a dispute between rival factions of the party.

The EC on Thursday barred both factions from using the name 'All India Trinamool Congress' and the reserved 'Flowers and Grass' symbol for the upcoming bypolls in Nandigram and Rejinagar. The poll panel said the competing claims required a substantive determination under the Election Symbols (Reservation and Allotment) Order, 1968.

In her petition before the apex court, Banerjee has named the Election Commission and West Bengal Assembly Leader of the Opposition



Ritabrata Banerjee as respondents.

Following the interim order, the EC allotted separate names and symbols to the two factions. Banerjee's group was assigned the name 'Mamata All India Trinamool Congress' and the 'Football Player' symbol, while the rival faction led by Arup Roy was given the name 'Democratic Trinamool Congress' and the 'Envelope' symbol for the bypolls.

Banerjee had criticised the EC's decision on Friday, saying the freezing of the party's traditional name and symbol affected its political

identity. She said she would pursue the restoration of the original name and symbol through legal and democratic means.

The Nandigram and Rejinagar Assembly constituencies are scheduled to vote on October 6, with counting on October 9. The EC said its interim arrangement would remain in force until it takes a final decision on the competing claims under the Symbols Order.

The EC intervention follows a split within the TMC after the May Assembly elections, with rival groups staking competing claims over the party's organisational structure and leadership.

The poll panel began examining the rival claims earlier this month. It said the limited time available before the bypolls made it necessary to put an interim arrangement in place while the substantive proceedings continue.

36 Manipur athletes to represent India at Asian Games



IMPHAL

Thirty-six athletes and three coaches from Manipur are part of the Indian contingent for the 20th Asian Games in Aichi-Nagoya, Japan, Chief Minister Yumnam Khemchand Singh said on Saturday. The Chief Minister congratulated the sportspersons and wished them success at the continental multi-sport event, which began on Saturday and will continue till October 4.

According to the Chief Minister's Secretariat, athletes from Manipur will represent India in 10 disciplines - sepaktakraw, rowing, cycling, fencing, canoeing and kayaking, boxing, weightlifting, wushu, judo and

hockey. Of the 36 athletes, 12 will compete in sepaktakraw, while one each will represent India in rowing, boxing and judo.

Cycling, fencing, weightlifting and wushu have three athletes each from the state, while six athletes will compete in canoeing and kayaking. Three players from Manipur are also part of the Indian hockey contingent. Khemchand Singh urged the athletes to compete with confidence, discipline and determination and give their best in their respective events. The Chief Minister also extended his best wishes to all the sportspersons and coaches from the state representing India at the Games.

Assam CM joins BJP blood donation drive on Zubeen Divas



GUWAHATI

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Saturday donated blood at the BJP headquarters here as part of a statewide drive organised by the party to mark the first death anniversary of singer and artiste Zubeen Garg.

The blood donation programme was held as Assam observed "Zubeen Divas" with tributes, cultural programmes and various service activities in memory of the popular artiste.

Sarma donated blood at Vajpayee Bhawan in Guwahati and said similar camps had been organised across the state by BJP workers.

"Today is the first death anniversary of our beloved Zubeen Garg. The BJP and its workers are observing the day by donating blood," Sarma said.

Around 3,800 people have registered to donate blood at camps across Assam, while blood had already been collected from around 1,000 donors, the chief minister said.

He thanked BJP workers and state party president Dilip Saikia for organising the initiative.

Recalling his association with Garg, Sarma said the singer had a vision for

Assam and remained closely connected with its people.

"When he was alive, we had beautiful times with him. He had a vision for Assam, and the people of Assam will always remember him," he said.

Sarma said Garg's contribution extended beyond music to the cultural and social spheres.

"Whether culturally or socially, we should remember the direction Zubeen Garg showed us. We have to remember him as a person who loved the people of Assam," the chief minister said.

He also said "Zubeen Divas" had emerged as a public observance driven by people rather than being announced by the government.

"The people have made it, and when the people create something, the government follows it," Sarma said.

Meanwhile, thousands of admirers gathered at Zubeen Kshetra in Kamarkuchi as the three-day "Zubeen Divas" observance entered its final day on Saturday.

Garg, who died last year, continues to be remembered across Assam through musical tributes, memorial programmes and community initiatives.

Manipur CM leaves for Delhi, likely to attend conference

IMPHAL

Manipur Chief Minister Y Khemchand Singh left for New Delhi on Friday morning and is likely to attend a two-day conference, a BJP leader said.

Singh departed Imphal on an early morning flight, according to the party leader.

The chief minister is likely to participate in the two-day conference on "Financing India's Journey towards Viksit Bharat" in the national capital. The conference is expected to discuss financing and development-related issues linked to India's long-term growth objectives.

On Thursday evening, Singh met Union Minister of State for the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (DoNER) Sukanta Majumdar at the Chief Minister's Secretariat in Imphal.

After the meeting, Singh said in a social media post that they discussed various development initiatives and ongoing projects in Manipur.



Four bomb attacks hit Meghalaya government, police offices



SHILLONG

Four separate bomb and arson attacks targeting government and police establishments were reported in Shillong over two days, prompting authorities to step up security across the city, officials said.

No casualties were reported in the incidents between Wednesday evening and early Thursday. The attackers and their motive have not yet been identified.

The latest incident took place in the early hours of Thursday when a petrol bomb was allegedly hurled at the Directorate of Health Services campus in Laitumkhrah, triggering a fire. Firefighters were called in to contain the blaze.

Around the same time, a police booth at Nongmynsong was set on fire. A woman passerby alerted personnel at the nearby police outpost around 3.50 am, following which Fire and Emergency Services personnel reached the spot. The booth was

destroyed, but no one was injured.

Police said preliminary investigation indicated that a tyre may have been set on fire to cause the blaze, though efforts are underway to establish what happened and identify those responsible.

The two incidents followed a petrol bomb attack on Lumdingri Police Station on Wednesday night. The bomb hit the rear portion of the officer-in-charge's room, causing minor damage.

Earlier on Wednesday evening, a petrol bomb was hurled at the Directorate of Mineral Resources office at Risa Colony. A private vehicle belonging to a DMR employee was damaged, while residents managed to put out the fire.

Police are examining CCTV footage and other evidence to identify the perpetrators and determine whether the four incidents were connected. Security has been tightened around government and police establishments across Shillong.

Northeast states push for region-specific NEP 2020 framework

KOHIMA

A region-specific framework for implementing the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 in the Northeast, including separate norms for hilly areas and greater coordination among the eight states, emerged as a key focus at the Northeast Education Conclave 2026 in Nagaland.

The two-day conclave, organised by the Nagaland Department of Higher Education, began in Chumoukedima under the theme "Implementation of NEP 2020: Vision, Challenges & Opportunities for the North Eastern States." Policymakers, education ministers, academics and administrators from across the region are participating in the discussions.

Delivering the keynote address, Nagaland University Vice-Chancellor Jagadish K Patnaik called for an inclusive and context-specific transformation of education in the Northeast. He identified accessibility, equity, quality, flexibility, multilingualism and holistic development as key priorities, while stressing the need to integrate indigenous knowledge with formal education and strengthen skills through technology.

Patnaik also flagged funding



as a major challenge, noting that although NEP 2020 envisages substantially higher investment in education, the mechanism for mobilising the required resources remains unclear.

Mizoram seeks separate norms for hill areas

Mizoram Education Minister Dr Vanlalhlana called for education ministers from the eight northeastern states to meet twice a year under the North Eastern Council (NEC) and jointly prepare proposals based on a common assessment of the region's needs.

He said several provisions of

NEP 2020 and the Right to Education Act were framed largely with plain areas in mind and called for a separate index and system for hilly regions.

Vanlalhlana also sought construction norms suited to hill areas and highlighted declining enrolment in government schools across the Northeast. In Nagaland, he said, government schools account for around 80 per cent of schools but have only about 33 per cent of total enrolment.

'Degrees alone are no longer enough'

Nagaland Higher Education

and Tourism Minister Temjen Imna Along said the conclave was aimed at bringing together the region's experiences and challenges to develop a coordinated approach to NEP implementation.

He stressed that degrees alone could no longer guarantee employment and called for greater emphasis on the practical impact of education and development of critical thinking.

Along also raised the possibility of introducing Christian studies as an academic subject in universities in the Northeast, particularly in Nagaland, Mizoram and Megha-

laya. He clarified that the proposal concerned academic study and curriculum, rather than religious institutions.

Assam Education Minister Dr Ranaj Pegu stressed the need to combine academic knowledge with practical skills to improve students' employability.

He said information technology, media and technology literacy had become essential skills across disciplines, while research and innovation would play a key role in achieving India's development goals by 2047.

Arunachal Pradesh MLA and Advisor to the HME Mutchu Mithi said education-related decisions would have far-reaching consequences for future generations and called for their long-term impact to be carefully assessed.

Nagaland Chief Minister Neiphiu Rio, in a message read out by Along, said the conclave provided a platform for the northeastern states to exchange ideas and experiences on challenges facing the education sector.

The conclave is expected to explore greater cooperation among the eight states, including sharing of best practices, institutional resources and capacity-building initiatives.

Assam CM unveils bamboo bicycle, public rides from October 2



GUWAHATI

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Friday announced the launch of an Assam Bamboo Cycle, a bamboo-framed bicycle aimed at promoting sustainable mobility and value addition to the state's bamboo resources.

The bicycle will be showcased at the Brahmaputra

Riverfront in Guwahati from October 2, with members of the public and cycling enthusiasts invited to take part in test rides, Sarma said.

"Assam's bamboo story is ready to roll," the chief minister said in a post on X, linking the initiative to efforts to promote innovation and expand opportunities in the bamboo economy.

Sarma also credited Prime Minister Narendra Modi's decision to classify bamboo as grass under the law with opening up new opportunities for livelihoods and green industries.

The initiative is intended to demonstrate how bamboo can be used in contemporary products while encouraging greater value addition to a resource widely available across Assam and the Northeast.

The public showcase will allow visitors to see the bicycle and experience its bamboo-based frame from October 2 at the riverfront.



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Teachers Need Better Teachers

India's education debate has become remarkably crowded. We argue over curricula, examinations, education budgets, language, textbooks and the rewriting of syllabuses. Yet one question receives far less attention than it deserves: who is teaching the teachers?

Every education reform ultimately reaches the classroom through a teacher. A new curriculum cannot explain itself. A redesigned examination cannot teach a child to think. A larger education budget cannot, by itself, turn information into understanding. If teachers lack subject knowledge, pedagogical training or the confidence to encourage independent thought, even the most ambitious reform will remain largely on paper.

This is the uncomfortable gap in India's education discourse. We have become adept at examining the system around teachers without examining the teachers themselves.

The issue is not to blame individual teachers for every failure. Teaching is an increasingly demanding profession, burdened by administrative responsibilities, large classrooms, examination pressures and constantly changing educational expectations. But that makes the quality of teacher preparation more important, not less. Consider what happens when the people designing assessments themselves do not fully understand the material they are testing. Questions in school examinations have sometimes contained factual and interpretative errors, leaving students to answer what the examiner apparently intended rather than what the text actually says. An examination question on Shakespeare's Julius Caesar, for instance, asked students how Mark Antony's agreement to execute his nephew, Publius, demonstrated his political cunning. The question itself contained a basic problem: Publius is not the name of Antony's nephew in the play. It refers to two other characters. Such an error is not merely a slip in a question paper. It exposes a deeper weakness in subject preparation.

The consequences are particularly serious because examinations shape classroom behaviour. Students who spend years being rewarded for memorising textbook material are suddenly expected to demonstrate analysis and independent thinking. Yet when they attempt an answer that goes beyond the prescribed formulation, they may find that unconventional thinking is treated as a mistake. This contradiction cannot be resolved merely by changing the syllabus. A system cannot demand critical thinking from students while rewarding mechanical teaching. The problem begins much earlier in the institutions that prepare teachers. Teacher education colleges, both public and private, have long faced questions about academic standards, faculty quality, infrastructure and regulatory compliance. Where teacher-training institutions themselves operate without strong academic foundations, the weakness travels down the educational chain: poorly prepared teachers produce poorly prepared students, who eventually become candidates for higher education and, in some cases, teachers themselves. It becomes a cycle. India has understood the importance of professional teacher preparation before. The Central Institute of Education, established in 1947 and later incorporated into Delhi University's education structure, represented an early attempt to build a serious institutional foundation for teacher education. The larger idea was clear: teaching was not simply an occupation that required subject knowledge; it was a profession requiring specialised training in how knowledge is communicated. The National Council for Teacher Education was established through legislation to regulate and maintain standards in teacher education. Its mandate is important because pedagogy cannot be left entirely to market forces or administrative convenience. But regulation is meaningful only when standards are enforced consistently and teacher education is treated as an academic discipline rather than a credential-producing exercise.

There is another danger in the present moment. India needs teachers in enormous numbers, and filling vacancies is an urgent task. But recruitment alone cannot become the definition of educational progress. A vacant classroom is a problem; an occupied classroom without effective teaching is another. The country therefore needs a ground-up approach to education reform. Teacher-training institutions must be subjected to rigorous academic scrutiny. Faculty teaching future teachers must themselves meet high standards.

Prospective teachers need stronger preparation in their subjects as well as in pedagogy, assessment, child development and critical thinking. Continuing professional development should become meaningful rather than a box-ticking exercise. Most importantly, teachers must be given an intellectual culture in which learning does not stop. The central question should be simple: Are our teachers adequately prepared for the responsibility we place on them? Until that question becomes as prominent as debates over examinations, syllabuses and education spending, India's education reforms will remain incomplete. A curriculum is only as good as the person who teaches it. An examination is only as fair as the person who sets and evaluates it. And a child's educational experience is ultimately shaped not by the policy document sitting in a ministry, but by the teacher standing in front of the classroom.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

"To understand the actual world as it is, not as we should wish it to be, is the beginning of wisdom."
- Bertrand Russell

THE UNSEEMLY SCRAMBLE FOR GEN Z VOTES

RADHIKA RAMASESHAN

In the recent elections in northern and western India, women have indisputably evolved into an electoral constituency unto themselves, smashing the bounds of patriarchal diktat. The seemingly impossible development was achieved by an amalgam of schemes with nifty titles and handing financial doles in tranches under the rubric of 'gender empowerment'. It was an incremental step dictated by electoral considerations to create an independent vote bank.

Tamil Nadu pioneered gender outreach long before states north of the Vindhyas thought of the concept. M G Ramachandran promoted female entrepreneurship and introduced social security and women's pensions, while J Jayalalithaa followed up on her mentor's initiatives by enhancing disbursement to women's self-help groups, sanctioning nine months' maternity leave and legislating 50 percent representation to women in civic bodies.

Similarly, Bihar CM Nitish Kumar released a ₹10,000 grant to women via direct benefit transfer so that the money would not be pocketed by male relatives, subsidised bicycles and school uniforms for girls, and set aside 35 percent of government jobs for women. The cherry on top was a total ban on liquor sale to contain domestic violence and straighten household spending, though the policy is not a sure-fire success.

In Maharashtra, the National Democratic Alliance's pledge of the Majhi Ladki Bahin scheme swung women votes almost en bloc from the opposition. In Uttar Pradesh, which votes in early 2027, CM Yogi Adityanath has promised to hand over ₹50,000 to women in three instalments.

Women—once regarded as appendages to their fathers, husbands, brothers and even sons—are now etched as an autonomous category on the electoral map for time to

The discovery of Gen Z's potential to reshape politics had nothing to do with the prosaic calculations of parties who mapped their projections on old metrics. The BJP's humongous protests at Jantar Mantar torpedoed the forecasts made by political parties for future elections. The BJP—which consistently gained a bulk of the young votes (Millennials plus Gen Z) since 2014—took their allegiance to Narendra Modi for granted.

While the demand for former education minister Dharmendra Pradhan's resignation was the ostensible trigger for the protests, spearheaded and sustained by the youths primarily from the North and West, the lineup of targets expanded to include the government's top guns who were lampooned in memes, videos, poetry and songs. Indeed, having tasted blood, the BJP did not relent even after the Jantar Mantar demonstration ended.

The agenda segued into a crusade, undergirded on the demand for accountability and punishment for offenders from the government. The BJP narrowed its focus on public education, which aligned with its original raison d'être: the distress suffered by students following paper leakages in competitive national exams managed by the Union government.

The BJP, which rules in 21 states and Union territories as well as the Centre, was the hardest hit. So far, it had comfortably cruised on an admixture of Hindutva, caste equations, smart alliances and Modi's charisma. It was thrown into a tizzy, realising that its winning quartet of attributes no longer guaranteed victory. It would have to think beyond caste and religion. Generally nimble-footed, unlike the lumbering Congress, the BJP recast the blueprint, pivoting to Gen Z.

However, unlike its well-thought-out strategies of the past, the party seemed confused by the new challenge from a demography that is

caused a splash—at a recent event at Delhi's Shri Ram College of Commerce. His attempt didn't hit the spot. The contrast with his appearance at the same college in 2013, shortly after he had been declared his party's PM candidate, was striking to those who covered both the events.

Thirteen years ago, Modi was an attractive novelty in the national capital. The students then—now corporate workers and independent professionals—were beneficiaries of Manmohan Singh's economic reforms. Yet they were apparently sold on Modi, then the Gujarat Chief Minister, and his governance model, and perceived him as the best thing that could happen to the economy. He struck a chord with his college-canteen one-liners, management evangelism gleaned from self-help books, national pride and a blackout of unpleasant home truths. It looked like Modi was a synonym for unbridled optimism.

Last week, as Modi walked a ramp at Vadodara's M S University Pavilion Grounds for a Gen Z engagement, BJP founders led by Abhijeet Dipke amplified a campaign they had launched on Independence Day—a School Thik Karo (Set Schools Right) initiative to expose the terrible conditions at government schools across the country and pressure local authorities to act. This week on the PM's birthday, it extended the campaign in Rajasthan on to Adivasi School Thik Karo.

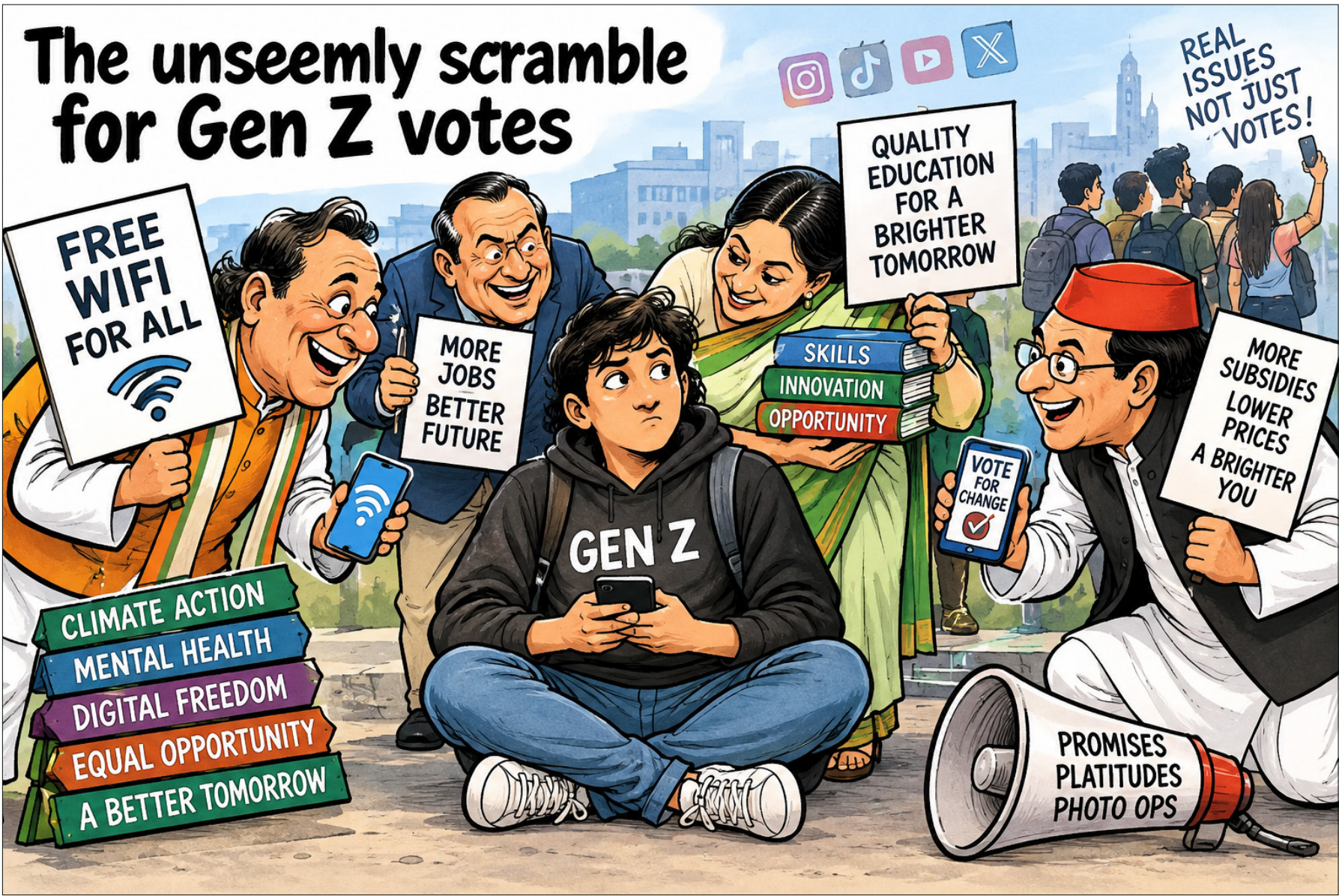
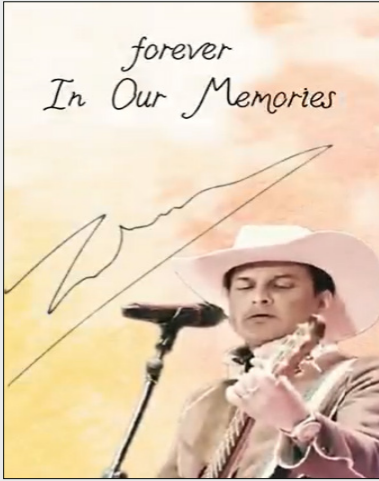
Amid accusations that Dipke and his BJP colleagues Ashutosh Ranka and Saurav Das only scrutinised schools in BJP-ruled states, the BJP retaliated in various ways. In West Bengal, a BJP volunteer's school inspection claimed the life of his father, who died after a deadly assault on the family. In Rajasthan, BJP workers were intimidated during an inspection, and the government eventually issued a circular restricting "outsiders" from

dane, they can transform an accountability campaign into a much larger political confrontation."

At the heart of the issue lies the BJP's failure to understand that the cockroach protests were not about camaraderie cemented over punchlines and sass, but expressions of angst over uncertain futures starting with an education system characterised by dysfunctional classrooms, absentee teachers, nepotism

DIGITAL WAR OF WORDS

It feels surreal that a year has passed without Zubeen. There are moments I almost expect him to walk in, in that inimitable style of his. Then the loss sinks in once more. Perhaps this is what grief is, a void we learn to live with, but never truly accept.
~ Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma, CM, Assam



come, overriding their castes.

This year also marks another pivotal shift in electoral landscaping caused by the emergence of a new vote bloc: Gen Z, or those born between 1997 and 2012. It originated serendipitously in a courtroom and on an X post before getting a life of its own in the shape of the Cockroach Janta Party, which is still non-committal about its political plans.

thinking distinctly and articulating concerns in barely-understood morphology. The BJP started by addressing superficialities. Modi used hip-hop lingo in place of the BJP's Sanskritised discourse and sprinkled his addresses with Gen Z colloquialisms such as "OG" and "flex", mixing in a Bollywoodish punchline—"Dhurandhar na ho lekin dhoom machaye hai" (They may not be stalwarts but they have

entering schools and documenting what they found. In Maharashtra, Dipke was booked after inspecting a school in Latur.

Although the BJP has not yet struck back collectively, in the prescient words of academic and human rights activist Anand Telumbde, "History offers a recurring warning: when governments respond coercively to grievances that initially appear narrow or mun-

in admission, arbitrary markings, paper leaks even as parents spend a bomb preparing their children, and worst, no guarantee of employment even for someone armed with degrees. The question is can the Congress or the Aam Aadmi Party, which had pulled out Delhi government schools from their pathetic state during its tenure, address the issues in earnest and partially fill the vacuum?

Manipur saw 523 days of bandhs, blockades since May 2023

IMPHAL

Manipur witnessed 523 days of bandhs, shutdowns and economic blockades since the outbreak of violence in May 2023, according to official records of the state Home Department.

The data covers the period from May 3, 2023, to September 8, 2026, spanning 1,225 days. During this period, internet services were suspended for 385 days, while curfew was imposed for 261 days across the state or in parts of it.

The figures underline the prolonged disruption in Manipur since the outbreak of ethnic violence between Meitei and Kuki communi-



ties.

In 2023, the state recorded 107 days of bandhs, shutdowns or economic blockades. The figure increased to 113 days in 2024, comprising 63 days of bandhs or shutdowns and 50 days of economic blockades.

In 2025, Manipur recorded 78 such days, including 49 days of bandhs or shutdowns and 29 days of economic blockades.

The highest annual figure so far was recorded in 2026, with 225 days of bandhs, shutdowns and economic blockades between January and September. This included 136 days of bandhs or shutdowns and 89 days of economic blockades.

Internet suspended for 385 days According to the Home Department records, internet services were suspended across the state or in parts of it for 385 days between May 3, 2023, and April 4, 2026.

The government cited concerns over the use of social media to circulate images, videos and messages that could inflame tensions and affect the law-and-order situation.

In 2023 alone, internet services remained suspended across the entire state for 218 days.

The latest suspension cited in the records covered Imphal West, Imphal East, Bishnupur, Thoubal, Kakching, Kangpokpi, Churachandpur, Jiribam and Pherzawl. Ser-

vices were suspended for five days from April 7, 2026, with the order revoked on April 12.

261 days of curfew Manipur also witnessed 261 days of curfew during the period covered by the records, with restrictions imposed across the state or in individual districts.

The longest period cited was in Litan village in Ukhrul district, where curfew remained in force for 209 days from February 8 to September 4, 2026.

The official figures provide a measure of the scale and duration of restrictions and disruptions that have continued in Manipur since the violence began in May 2023.

Himanta remembers Zubeen Garg on first death anniversary

GUWAHATI

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Saturday remembered singer and music icon Zubeen Garg on his first death anniversary, sharing two photographs with the late artiste on social media with the message, "Miss you Zubeen."

Sarma posted the photographs on his personal X account as Assam observed the first death anniversary of Garg, who died in September 2025.

The three-day Zubeen Divas began at Zubeen Kshetra in Sonapur, where the singer was laid to rest. The memorial has been decorated with flowers and fresh gamosas, with thousands of fans and admirers expected to visit during the commemorative programmes.

The observance began on Thursday with a prayer, followed by a naam-prasanga in the afternoon. Cultural programmes are scheduled for the second day, while the concluding day will feature Bhagawat recitation and Bhaona.

The Assam government has extended support for arrangements at the memorial site, including crowd management and facilities for visitors. Organisers have also appealed to attendees to maintain discipline and participate peacefully in the programmes.

Widely known to his fans as "Pranor Silpi", Garg remained a prominent figure in Assam's contemporary music and cultural scene. His first death anniversary has brought fans and admirers together across the state to remember the singer and his contribution to Assamese music.

BJP wins two Silchar civic seats unopposed



SILCHAR

The BJP secured two seats in Silchar's first municipal corporation election without a contest after Congress and other candidates withdrew their nominations on the final day of the withdrawal process, officials said. In Ward 20, Congress nominee Rupali Das withdrew, leaving BJP candidate Bhakti Sen Talukdar as the sole contestant. She was declared elected unopposed.

The BJP also secured Ward 9 without a contest. Congress candidate Amalendu Dey first

withdrew his nomination, followed by SUCI nominee Apan Lal Das, who had been expected to challenge BJP candidate Bijendra Prasad Singh. Singh was subsequently declared elected unopposed.

Congress suffered another withdrawal in Ward 12, where its candidate Mousumi Das pulled out of the race. An Independent candidate, however, remains in the fray, ensuring a contest in the ward.

Several Independents, including BJP rebels who had filed nominations after being denied party tickets, also withdrew. BJP dissidents Rathindra Saha, Saheli Deb and Sanghita Chakraborty, however, remained in the contest from their respective wards.

The withdrawals have reshaped the contest in several wards ahead of the October 3 civic polls. Silchar Municipal Corporation has 42 wards, with counting scheduled for October 6.

Bimol Akoijam flags delay in Centre's response on SoO agreement

IMPHAL

Manipur Lok Sabha MP Angomcha Bimol Akoijam has expressed disappointment over what he described as a delay in the Union Home Ministry's response to issues he raised in Parliament concerning the Suspension of Operations (SoO) agreement with Kuki armed groups.

Akoijam said he raised the matter under Rule 377 of the Lok Sabha on August 11, seeking clarity on the agreement and its implementation. Parliamentary records confirm that he raised the issue on that date, calling for a review of the SoO agreement and measures to ensure the free movement of goods and people in Manipur.

Addressing a press conference at his residence, Akoijam said more than a month had passed without a response from the Union Home Ministry.

The MP said his concerns in-



cluded allegations of extortion along highways, the lack of public disclosure of the SoO agreement's terms and the need for compliance reports on the ground rules governing the arrangement. He also referred to allegations linking SoO groups to killings and other unlawful activities.

Akoijam said he had questioned whether groups covered by the SoO framework were involved in such activities and argued that

the agreement should be reviewed, including the possibility of ending it where violations are established.

The SoO arrangement has remained a contentious issue in Manipur, with Akoijam previously urging the Centre to make the agreement and its compliance status public and take action where violations are established.

Akoijam also questioned the Manipur government's preparedness to undertake the proposed updation and implementation of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in the state.

He referred to the Manipur State Population Commission, constituted in March 2023, and claimed that it lacked a chairperson, adequate in-house experts and proper documentation. He also claimed that only two consultative meetings had been held so far.

Akoijam said these issues raised questions about the state

government's preparedness for the NRC exercise.

The MP has previously called for credible citizenship verification mechanisms before census and delimitation exercises in Manipur, citing the continuing displacement and security situation in the state.

Akoijam also expressed concern over the continuing law-and-order situation, saying violence had persisted despite the deployment of central security forces. Referring to recent incidents in which civilians were killed, he criticised the Centre's handling of the Manipur crisis and alleged that the situation had not received adequate attention from central leadership. Akoijam urged the Union Home Ministry to respond to the issues he raised in Parliament and called for greater attention to the continuing security situation in Manipur.

Academics seek probe into alleged harassment of professors at Nagaland House

NEW DELHI

More than 30 academics, journalists, scholars, writers, artists and concerned citizens have urged the Nagaland government to order an impartial inquiry into an alleged incident involving professors Dolly Kikon and Sanjay Barbora at Nagaland House in New Delhi on September 15. In a joint statement, the signatories alleged that the two professors were humiliated and intimidated following a screening of Kikon's documentary A Sacred Place, organised by the Naga Scholars' Association at Nagaland House in R K Puram.

The group has sought an "unqualified apology" to Kikon and Barbora and called for appropriate action based on the findings of an inquiry.

Kikon had been invited to screen the documentary and interact with students and scholars. The screening



was followed by a discussion with the filmmaker at the Conference Hall of Nagaland House.

According to the statement, some students and scholars continued interacting with Kikon near the reception area after the programme when a staff member allegedly asked them to leave.

When Barbora objected to the manner in which the group was being asked to leave, the staff member allegedly confronted him

and challenged him to a physical altercation, the statement claimed.

The signatories further alleged that the manager of Nagaland House defended the staff member instead of intervening to defuse the situation.

Kikon, who reportedly identified herself as an invited resource person of the Naga Scholars' Association, was also allegedly asked to leave. The gathering was described as a "nuisance" and a "disruption", according to the statement.

The group said the allegations were particularly concerning because Nagaland House is a government institution representing Nagaland in the national capital. Such institutions, it said, should provide a respectful environment for students, scholars, invited guests and members of the public.

The statement also raised concerns over what the signatories described as prejudice based on ethnic and linguistic identities in the Northeast. It called on public institutions representing northeastern states to ensure dignity and equal treatment irrespective of ethnicity, language or place of origin.

The signatories expressed solidarity with the Naga Scholars' Association, the Naga Students' Union Delhi and Naga students and scholars who they said supported Kikon and Barbora following the alleged incident.

Ibobi accuses Manipur government of failing on law and order



IMPHAL

Manipur Congress president and former chief minister Okram Ibobi Singh on Thursday accused the state government of failing to discharge its constitutional responsibility of maintaining law and order amid the continuing crisis in the state. Speaking at a Congress programme organised to welcome new members, Ibobi said law and order is a state subject and alleged that the government had failed to fulfil its responsibilities since ethnic violence broke out in May 2023.

The three-time former chief minister said the Centre should initially have allowed the state government two to three months to contain the violence. If normalcy could not be restored during that period, he said, alternative measures should have been taken to bring the situation under

control. Ibobi also alleged that the Centre had not made adequate efforts to end the violence.

His remarks came days after six people, including four women, were killed in separate incidents allegedly involving armed men in Tamenglong and Noney districts.

Referring to the prolonged crisis, Ibobi alleged that both the state and central governments had failed the people of Manipur and said the time had come for the public to hold them accountable.

President's Rule was imposed in Manipur in February 2025 following the resignation of then chief minister N Biren Singh. It was lifted in February 2026 after a new government was formed under Chief Minister Yumnam Khemchand Singh. Former Manipur chief secretary O Nabakishore Singh was among those who joined the Congress during Thursday's programme.

Nagaon LS bypoll: 18 of 25 nominations found valid

ASSAM TMC WITHDRAWS NAGAON BYPOLL CANDIDATE OVER EC ORDER



Quest!

Scientists have found that there is such a thing as an "emotional hangover," or a brain state that persists long after an emotional event.

tions were accepted are BJP's Devasish Sharma, Congress nominee Sibamoni Bora and AIUDF chief Badruddin Ajmal.

The last date for withdrawal of candidature is Saturday, after which the final list of candidates will be released.

Voting for the Nagaon Lok Sabha bypoll will be held on October 6, with counting scheduled for October 9.

The bypoll was necessitated after former Congress MP Pradyut Bordoloi resigned from the Lok Sabha ahead of the Assam Assembly election earlier this year and joined the BJP. Bordoloi subsequently contested and won the Dispur Assembly seat.

The Nagaon contest has attracted attention with candidates from the BJP, Congress and AIUDF among those in the fray, along with other contenders.

The Assam unit of the Trinamool Congress on Friday withdrew its candidature from the Nagaon Lok Sabha bypoll, protesting the Election Commission's decision to temporarily freeze the party's original name and election symbol.

The party had fielded educationist

Abdul Salam for the October 6 bypoll. Assam TMC convenor and MLA Sherman Ali Ahmed said the state unit supported party chairperson Mamata Banerjee's decision to protest the Election Commission's move.

Ahmed described the EC decision as "unjust and undemocratic" and said the party had decided not to contest the Nagaon election in protest.

The Election Commission has temporarily barred the use of the All India Trinamool Congress name and its traditional 'Flowers and Grass' symbol amid an internal dispute between rival factions of the party.

On Friday, the poll panel allotted the name 'Mamata All India Trinamool Congress' and the 'Football Player' symbol to the faction led by Mamata Banerjee. The rival faction was allotted the name 'Democratic Trinamool Congress' and the 'Envelope' symbol. The arrangement is interim and will remain in force pending the EC's final decision on the dispute.

The withdrawal means the TMC will not have a candidate in the Nagaon bypoll, scheduled for October 6.

The bypoll was necessitated after former Congress MP Pradyut Bordoloi resigned from the Lok Sabha and subsequently joined the BJP. He later won the Dispur Assembly seat in the Assam polls.

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IIT-Bombay student dies by suicide after being caught using ChatGPT during exam



MUMBAI

A second-year student of the Department of Energy Science and Engineering died by suicide at IIT-Bombay on Friday.

The student was reportedly found using a mobile phone in the examination. He had uploaded the exam question paper on an AI platform to seek answers, a report quoting the institute said.

The officials reportedly claimed that no disciplinary action was initiated against the student. The matter was also discussed with the student by the instructor and the Head of the Department, who counselled him and assured him that the incident would not adversely affect his academic career.

Following the discussion, the student went back to his hostel room. Later in the evening, he was found dead in his room, a report said.

Students soon launched a protest demanding a detailed probe into the circumstances that led to the suicide. The students alleged the authorities are not focusing on their mental health concerns.

This is reportedly the third suicide in six months at the IIT Powai Campus.

Police have deployed personnel on campus to control the situation as discussions were held between students and the administration.

DCP Dattatray Nalawade

said that the investigation in the case is underway.

“Today, a student died by suicide at IIT Powai. Following this, some IIT students gathered and started a protest over their demands. The IIT administration is holding discussions with them to reach an amicable solution,” he told reporters.

Asked about the nature of the students’ demands, the DCP said, “The students have internal administrative issues which the IIT administration has addressed in the past as well, and the administration is actively speaking with the students right now too.”

He added that while some protesters had dispersed, others remained on the ground as talks continued. “Some students are still protesting, and efforts are being made to speak with them as well,” he said.

IIT Bombay student dies by suicide after being caught using ChatGPT in exam; third in six months.

“The reason for our protest today is that a suicide took place in our college today. That is why we have gathered to protest—to demand accountability, transparency, and answers from our administration,” he said, alleging, “This is not the first incident—four have happened this year alone, and two within the last two months. We have no idea why this is happening, what the reasons are behind all this.”

Outlining the students’

demands, Pranay said the administration needed to be held responsible and take corrective steps.

“First, the administration must be held answerable. Professors who mistreat students or behave harshly need to be held in check. We simply want the Dean, the Director, and the administration to provide a report assuring us that they will look into the matter, ensure accountability and transparency, and guarantee that such incidents do not happen again on their watch,” he said.

Not all students framed the moment as a confrontation with the administration.

Ansh, another student, said the campus was grieving and said that the death should not turn into a standoff.

“All of us are deeply devastated. It is shocking and heart-breaking. Whatever happened, it feels like he was one of us, and someone among us has been left behind,” he said.

He urged restraint in assigning blame in the incident. “I don’t think we should be blaming anyone at a moment like this. I feel that everyone is going through something; everyone has struggles in their mind. I don’t think we should be pointing fingers at each other. Right now, it is turning into an ‘Administration vs. Students’ conflict. What we really need is to stand together at this moment,” he said.

‘Energy sourcing based on national interest’: India amid US pressure over Russian oil



NEW DELHI

India reiterated that its energy sourcing decisions are guided by national interest, with the Ministry of External Affairs saying that meeting the energy requirements of the country’s 1.4 billion people remains an “imperative”.

MEA spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal made the remarks during the weekly press briefing in New Delhi while responding to questions about India’s continued purchase of

Russian oil despite pressure from the United States.

“When it comes to energy sourcing, it is based on our national interest. We have said that meeting the energy requirements of our 1.4 billion people is an imperative that we have to follow. And we continue to buy energy from diversified sources,” Jaiswal said.

Jaiswal was also asked about India’s response to the Lindsey Graham Sanctioning Russia and Iran Act, particularly its assess-

ment that the legislation could have implications for bilateral ties, energy security and ongoing trade negotiations with the US.

He said India had already conveyed its concerns to senior levels of the US administration and had nothing further to add at this stage.

“To your question, we have already issued a statement. You would have seen that we have clarified our position very well. As we have stated, at senior levels of the US administration, we have

conveyed the implications that this legislation could have on India’s energy security, for international energy markets, and for the overall bilateral relationship. I don’t have anything further to add at this point,” he said.

Asked whether the proposed US sanctions and tariffs could alter the bilateral trade agreement framework announced by India and the US in February, Jaiswal said New Delhi remained determined to protect its trade and economic interests.

“On that, I will say that we have made clear our determination to take all necessary measures to protect our trade and economic interests, as you would have seen in the statement that we issued,” he said.

Jaiswal added that the government would work closely with Indian trade and industry bodies to address the implications arising from developments related to the legislation.

“The government will work closely with Indian trade and industry bodies to deal with the implications of developments related to the legislation. Our interest in a balanced and mutually beneficial trade relationship with the United States needs no repetition,” he said. His remarks come as US President Donald Trump is expected to sign legislation targeting Russia and Iran.

The Lindsey O. Graham Sanctioning Russia and Iran Act of 2026 was passed by the US House of Representatives by a vote of 262-159, after having cleared the Senate last month. The legislation now awaits Trump’s signature.

The bill gives the US president discretion to impose tariffs of up to 100% on countries that continue buying Russian oil and gas, including India and China. The levies, however, would not be imposed automatically under the legislation.

INTERNATIONAL

Carney says Canada is ‘strong’ as US borrowing costs rise and Europe ties deepen



TORONTO

Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney on Friday cast Canada as moving quickly beyond its historical reliance on the United States after a whirlwind week in which he embraced the prospect of becoming the European Union’s first associate member.

Carney, who returned from Europe on Thursday night, said Canada and Europe had “launched a process for a new alliance.” He also called the latest U.S. tariffs a “miscalculation” and repeated that suspending trade talks

with Washington last month was the right decision.

“Amidst this global rupture, we must move forward,” Carney said.

He spoke Friday to Liberal lawmakers gathered in Ottawa ahead of a new session of Parliament, his first public remarks since returning Thursday evening from Strasbourg.

A day after telling the European Parliament that Canada and Europe needed greater resilience so no country could control their markets, impair their sovereignty or dictate their choices,

Carney pointed Friday to Canada’s fiscal position as another source of strength. Carney, a former head of the central banks of both Canada and England, also appeared to contrast Canada with the United States as U.S. government borrowing costs remain significantly higher than Canada’s.

“We’re now seeing financial markets starting to change the pricing ... to separate the strong from the weak,” Carney said. “We are the strong. We are Canada strong.”

The remarks capped a seven-day

stretch in which he hosted Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, convened major global investors in Toronto, met new U.K. Prime Minister Andy Burnham in Liverpool and addressed the European Parliament.

In Strasbourg, Carney embraced a shift toward Europe, calling for a far deeper alliance spanning energy, critical minerals, defense, artificial intelligence, research and other strategic sectors where he says Canada can no longer afford to depend on a single country.

The next major step is an Oct. 29-30 Canada-EU summit in Montreal. President Donald Trump has imposed tariffs on Canadian goods, repeatedly talked about making Canada the 51st state and threatened additional economic measures. Trade negotiations collapsed last month and remain suspended. Carney also touted a business tax break announced at this week’s Canada Investment Summit that is expected to cut the effective tax rate on new investment to 6.4%, less than half the U.S. rate. “We didn’t need a big beautiful bill. We needed a targeted initiative,” Carney said, drawing laughter with an apparent jab at Trump’s signature tax-and-spending law. Carney also appeared to mimic Trump while boasting that a major clean-energy project would produce the equivalent of “18 Hoover Dams,” repeating the phrase as he twice used the president’s familiar accordionlike hand gesture. The government announced nearly half a trillion dollars in investment commitments around the summit.

“In the last seven days, we have stood shoulder to shoulder with an ally, we’ve catalyzed record investment into our country, we’ve deepened our ties with Europe,” Carney said.

“It’s a lot, but that was the warm-up.”

Trump extends H-1B fee amid push to restrict foreign hiring



WASHINGTON

U.S. President Donald Trump has signed an executive order extending a USD 100,000 fee requirement for certain new H-1B visa applications through September 21, 2027.

Indians remain the single largest beneficiary group of the US H-1B visa program.

In a presidential proclamation issued on Friday, Trump said the 2025 decision to impose a USD 1,00,000 fee has led to a 92 per cent decrease in H-1B registrations by large IT outsourcing firms.

“An extension of the 2025 Proclamation will continue to protect the economic and national security interests of the United States, improve labour market access for American workers and graduates, and ensure that employers recruit only the most highly-skilled and essential alien workers when needed in line with the original intent of the program,” Trump said.

The 2025 decision to levy the USD 1,00,000 fee has run into a legal challenge and the matter is before two different federal courts.

The 2025 order for a fee hike was set to expire this month. It did not apply to visas granted to foreign citizens already in the United States on student visas, who make up a large share of new H-1B recipients, or to renewals of current visas.

The order also sets a 30-day deadline for the Secretary of Labour, acting through the Wage and Hour Division, to begin reviewing data from previously submitted labour condition applications.

The review will determine whether further action against sponsoring employers is warranted.

The President also issued a separate proclamation, tightening the scrutiny of H1-B visa applications through better inter-agency cooperation.

“The Order enhances program integrity in the H-1B

visa program by improving interagency coordination and directing enhanced scrutiny of H-1B visa applications where there is a heightened risk that American workers would be laid off,” a fact sheet issued by the White House said.

The Order directs the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Labour, and the Secretary of Homeland Security to consider petitioner employers’ recent or planned layoffs of similarly situated US workers when considering H-1B visa applications.

The H-1B nonimmigrant visa program was created to identify uniquely skilled and highly specialised foreign temporary workers to strategically supplement the United States economy, the US President said in the executive order.

“Instead, the program has been widely abused by certain employers, third-party placement groups, and outsourcing firms to undercut and displace the supply of skilled United States labour,” Trump said.

UPI at Ten: India’s Free-Payment Revolution Faces Its Next Test

GAURAV CHANDRA NATH

UPI was built to make digital payments disappear into everyday life. It succeeded.

A decade after its launch, paying for tea, vegetables, a taxi ride or a restaurant bill has become almost instinctive for millions of Indians. There is no counting notes, searching for change or waiting for a card machine. A QR code, a few taps and the transaction is over.

That success is now creating an unusual policy problem.

When the Unified Payments Interface began, the priority was adoption. The country needed people and merchants to trust a new digital payment system. Keeping transactions free was an effective way of encouraging that transition.

But UPI is no longer a fledgling experiment. It has become the backbone of India’s digital payments economy.

And that raises a question India has so far avoided: what happens when a successful public digital infrastructure grows too large to remain dependent on subsidy?

That is the real issue behind the current controversy over Merchant Discount Rate, or MDR.

From October 15, a 0.4 per cent MDR will apply to specified merchant transactions above 2,000, subject to exemptions and a 300 cap. Person-to-person payments and transactions up to 2,000 remain free, while qualifying small merchants are also protected. The government estimates that around 96 per cent of merchant transactions by number will remain unaffected.

On paper, it is a relatively small change. Politically, however, it is anything but small. When free becomes the starting point

The controversy has been framed in the simplest possible terms: UPI was free and now a charge is being imposed.

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi has called the MDR a “UPI tax” and questioned whether the move could benefit international payment companies such as Visa and Mastercard. The government has rejected that description, arguing that MDR is a payment charge and not a tax imposed on consumers.

Both the political rhetoric and the government’s response obscure a more basic question. Who has been paying for UPI all these years?

The answer is not “nobody”.

Digital payments require servers, data networks, banking infrastructure, software engineers, cybersecurity systems, fraud monitoring, customer support and continuous investment. The absence of a charge at the point of payment does not mean the underlying service has no cost.

A parliamentary committee has estimated the annual operating cost of the UPI ecosystem at around 20,700 crore against government support of about 2,000 crore. It warned that a widening gap could eventually affect investment in cybersecurity, fraud prevention and infrastructure and recommended a sustainable, tiered revenue model.

That changes the nature of the debate. The question is not whether UPI costs money. It does.

The question is who should bear that cost, and how much?

India’s biggest digital experiment has already worked

UPI’s numbers illustrate how dramatically the experiment has changed the country’s financial habits.

In its first financial year, UPI processed just 1.78 crore transactions. In 2025-26, that figure reached 24.162 crore. It now accounts for roughly 84 per cent of India’s digital payments by volume. In August 2026 alone, Indians carried out around 24.5 billion UPI transactions worth nearly 30 lakh crore.

But statistics do not fully explain its importance.

The real transformation happened at the smallest end of the economy.

A roadside vendor could accept payment without installing a conventional card machine. A customer did not need to carry cash. A small shop could participate in digital commerce with little more than a printed QR code.

This is where UPI differed from the conventional card model.

India did not invent digital payments. Visa and Mastercard had already built enormous international payment networks.

India’s more significant innovation was architectural.

UPI created an interoperable account-to-account payment rail connecting banks and applications. Money could move directly between bank accounts without requiring the same infrastructure associated with conventional card payments.

That made digital payments extraordinarily cheap.

And perhaps this is where the current debate has gone slightly wrong.

India’s achievement was not necessarily making payments free.

It was making them cheap enough to become universal.

Those are two very different achievements.

The 0.4 per cent question

Consider a 10,000 transaction.

At 0.4 per cent, the MDR would amount to 40.

A conventional card transaction carrying a 2 per cent merchant cost would imply 200; at 3 per cent, it would be 300.

The comparison is not exact. Credit cards, for example, provide credit, rewards and other services that UPI does not replicate in the same way.

But the comparison demonstrates why the argument should not be reduced to “free versus expensive”.

The more relevant question is whether a mature payment network needs to remain completely free at every level, or whether it can operate at a very low cost while generating enough revenue to maintain itself.

There is a significant difference between those two models.

A service that costs nothing to the user can still be economically sustainable if somebody else pays for it.

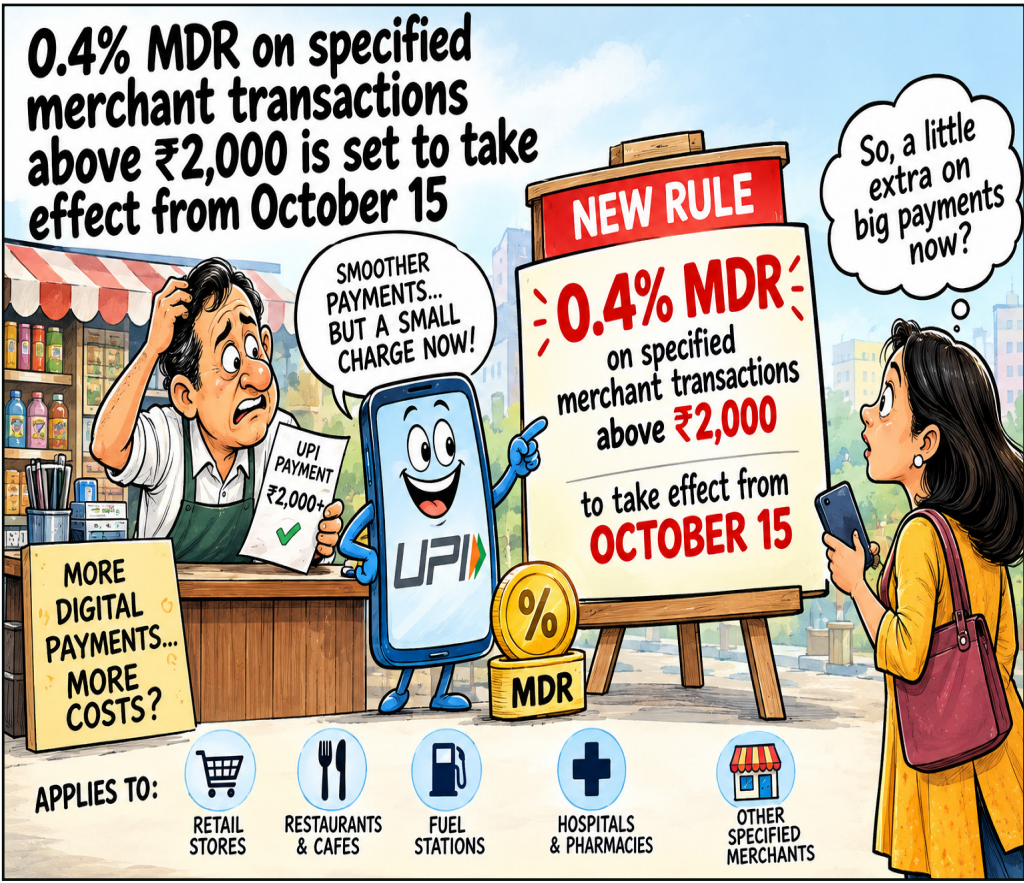


Delete everything in your mind that is not moving you forward.

A service that costs a tiny amount can also remain highly accessible.

The challenge is to find the point at which sustainability does not undermine inclusion.

The subsidy



made sense. Does it still make sense everywhere? There was a compelling case for subsidising UPI during its early years.

Payment networks depend on scale. Consumers are reluctant to use a system that merchants do not accept. Merchants are reluctant to adopt a system that customers do not use.

Government support helped break that cycle.

But public policy faces a difficult problem once the network reaches enormous scale.

The argument for intervention at the beginning does not automatically justify the same intervention forever.

Suppose the government spends another 1,000 crore supporting UPI.

The question should not be whether UPI deserves the money.

The question should be what else that 1,000 crore could achieve.

It could support cybersecurity, healthcare, schools, rural broadband, water infrastructure or another piece of digital public infrastructure.

This is the opportunity-cost problem, and it is almost invisible to voters.

A merchant who pays 40 on a 10,000 transaction can see that 40 immediately.

Nobody receives a notification saying that a different public service lost 40 because the payment was subsidised.

Politics naturally gravitates towards the visible cost. Economics has to account for the invisible one as well.

The political difficulty of changing a successful policy

This is where the UPI debate becomes particularly revealing.

Five Congress MPs, including P. Chidambaram, Manish Tewari and Gaurav Gogoi, were members of the parliamentary committee whose report addressed the funding challenge facing UPI. The committee recommended exploring a sustainable, tiered revenue framework rather than relying indefinitely on government support.

The report did not, however, approve the government’s present 0.4 per cent structure.

Tewari has argued that the committee was never presented with the specific rate, transaction threshold, exemptions or cap subsequently announced by the government. Concerns over MDR were also raised during deliberations, according to members.

That distinction matters.

Recognising that UPI requires a sustainable revenue model is not the same thing as endorsing a particular revenue model.

Yet the episode also exposes a broader political reality.

Inside a parliamentary committee, policy-makers examine infrastructure costs, cybersecurity, sustainability and financing.

Outside it, politicians face voters who experience policy through their household budgets and business expenses.

The two conversations inevitably produce different incentives.

The danger of turning subsidy into entitlement

There is a larger lesson here.

Governments often begin by subsidising something for a clear public purpose. Over time, the subsidy becomes normal. Eventually, people stop seeing it as a subsidy at all.

They see it as their right.

That transformation makes reform politically difficult.

UPI is especially vulnerable to this because its most visible characteristic has been its zero price.

The irony is that the very success of the policy has changed the economic circumstances under which the original policy was designed.

When millions of people had to be persuaded to use UPI, keeping it free was an effective incentive.

When hundreds of millions use it routinely, the same incentive may no longer have the same value.

That does not mean every charge is justified. It means the policy should be evaluated against present conditions rather than the circumstances of 2016.

Merchants have a legitimate concern

The answer cannot simply be that businesses should absorb the new cost.

For a large merchant, 40 on a 10,000 transaction may be manageable.

For a low-margin business operating at scale, transaction charges can accumulate quickly.

Retail organisations have warned that MDR could encourage some merchants to prefer cash or pass costs on to consumers. A legal challenge

has also reached the Supreme Court.

These concerns deserve evidence rather than political dismissal.

The impact should be measured carefully.

Will merchants reduce UPI acceptance?

Will cash usage increase?

Will businesses pass the cost to consumers?

Will small merchants remain protected?

Will the additional revenue actually strengthen cybersecurity and payment infrastructure?

Will fraud prevention improve?

Will competition between banks and payment providers keep costs under control?

These are empirical questions.

They should be answered by data.

A mature UPI needs a different policy framework

India therefore has an opportunity to move beyond the sterile argument over whether UPI should be “free”. A better framework would recognise that different users and transactions create different costs.

Small-value payments have enormous social and economic importance. Keeping them free can protect financial inclusion and prevent cash from returning to the economy.

Large commercial transactions are different.

A tiered system can potentially protect ordinary users and small businesses while allowing larger transactions to contribute towards the cost of maintaining the network.

The objective should not be revenue maximisation.

It should be sustainability.

A public digital infrastructure that constantly requires taxpayers to cover its operating costs may eventually face limits. A commercial

model that extracts excessive fees could undermine the very accessibility that made UPI successful.

The middle ground is therefore important. Cheap, accessible and sustainable may be a better long-term objective than simply free.

The bigger opportunity lies beyond India’s borders. There is another dimension to UPI that deserves far more attention than the domestic MDR argument.

India has built something other countries are studying. UPI is now connected in some form with several countries, including Singapore, the UAE, France, Nepal, Mauritius, Cambodia, Greece and the Maldives. The government has said UPI accounted for about 49 per cent of global real-time payment transaction volume in 2025.

That creates an opportunity much larger than domestic payment charges.

India could export payment infrastructure, technical expertise, interoperability standards and digital-public-infrastructure capabilities.

For countries with large populations outside formal banking systems, an account-to-account model may offer a different route into digital finance. Cross-border UPI links could make remittances easier and cheaper. Indian travellers could use their domestic accounts abroad more easily. Foreign payment systems could connect to Indian networks. Indian technology companies could develop services around overseas deployments.

That is potentially where public investment can generate a much larger return.

The question should therefore be not simply how much India can charge for UPI transactions. It should also be how much economic value India can create from the infrastructure it has already built.

The next stage is not about defending the past

Every successful public policy eventually faces a difficult transition.

The policy that helped create success may not be the policy required to manage success.

UPI’s first challenge was adoption.

Its next challenge is sustainability.

Its future challenges will include cybersecurity, fraud, resilience, privacy, cross-border interoperability and international expansion.

That means India’s conversation about UPI needs to become more mature as the system itself has matured. There are good reasons to keep very small transactions protected. There are good reasons to support financially vulnerable users and tiny merchants. There are equally strong reasons to ensure that the infrastructure itself has adequate resources for security, maintenance and expansion.

The debate should therefore move away from the emotionally powerful question — “Why are you charging for something that was free?”

The more useful question is:

“What is the most efficient and fairest way to pay for a payment system that has become indispensable?” That question has no simple political slogan. But it is the question India now needs to answer. UPI has already demonstrated that India can build a world-scale digital payment network.

The next achievement would be to demonstrate that such a network can mature without losing its affordability, openness and reach.

The real measure of success may not be whether UPI remains free forever.

It may be whether India can make it so efficient that even when someone pays for using it, the cost remains small enough that the revolution remains accessible to everyone.

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