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Turning the TIDE

India-Canada ties witness reset during Carney's New Delhi visit



Parth Nadpara

Carney's visit marked the most substantive political outreach since the rupture in ties towards the end of former Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's tenure.

Officials on both sides described the talks between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Canadian counterpart as "constructive" and forward-looking, with agreement to restore senior diplomatic representation, resume structured trade negotiations and revive working groups on mobility and investment.

Tangible benefits

For India, which hosts over 400,000 students in Canada and counts the latter among the top sources of pension



Pictorial summary of Carney's visit — PAGE 8&9

fund investment, normalisation carries tangible benefits. For Ottawa, rebuilding trust with the world's fastest-growing major economy is equally strategic.

Economically, the gains could be significant. Canadian pension giants have invested billions in Indian infra-

structure, renewables and logistics platforms. With India pushing large-scale capital expenditure and green transition projects, the reopening of institutional channels may accelerate fresh inflows. Agricultural trade – especially pulses

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New US Ambassador Sergio Gor



PRABHU CHAWLA

Imposing undiplomatic dominance

Recently, Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal posted a telling picture on his X handle. It showed the minister flanked by the controversial US Secretary of Commerce Howard Lutnick and Ambassador Sergio Gor in a convivial pose. The photograph captured the new informality that has suddenly infused Indo-American relations.

This image conveyed camarade-

rie rather than deference. Such pictures were rarely shared on public platforms during State visits in the past. Ambassador Gor has made that difference.

Ambassadors, traditionally, are the invisible persuaders who whisper counsel in shadowed corridors rather than stride forth as aggressive masters commanding the spotlight. Yet, in the teeming diplomatic theatre of New Delhi, Gor, America's freshly-minted envoy to India, has shattered this

cardinal tenet with a flamboyance that borders on the brazen.

At a mere 38 years old, the youngest Ambassador posted to this pivotal perch in recent memory has arrived like a whirlwind. He started his operations long before he pre-

sented his credentials to President Droupadi Murmu on January 14.

His hyperkinetic tenure suggests overreach. He has already completed visits of defence installations, state capitals, corporate boardrooms, and political salons. He has hosted lavish soirées at his residence. Indian ministers and MPs do not merely meet him; they trumpet these encounters as badges of prestige. One might mistake him not for the nominee of a foreign President, but for a de facto American viceroy wielding unfettered access to every corridor of power.

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WE STAND COMMITTED TO SDGs



An enabling reform



Deepak Dwivedi

Editor-in-Chief
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India's public health expenditure remains modest for a country aspiring to middle-income status

India's healthcare debate has reached a decisive moment. In the 2026-27 Budget, the Government withdrew GST on life and health insurance premiums – a move that immediately lowers costs for millions of households and signals that financial protection is a public good, not a taxable luxury. The reform is welcome. But it also sharpens a deeper question: can insurance-led expansion, even with tax relief, substitute for systemic public investment in health? The answer is no.

Insurance is a financing mechanism; it is not healthcare delivery. It pays for treatment after illness strikes. It does not build primary health centres, train nurses, stock district hospitals, or ensure rural diagnostics. In large swathes of rural India, the nearest well-equipped hospital may still be hours away. An insurance policy is only as useful as the network of hospitals available to honour it. By removing GST, the Budget has reduced the immediate burden on policyholders and may encourage wider insurance penetration. Premiums had been rising sharply due to medical inflation, and taxation compounded the pressure. The relief may improve affordability and could deepen the risk pool, a necessary step towards broader financial protection. Yet affordability of premiums is only one side of the equation. Accessibility of care is the other.

India's public health expenditure, hovering around 2 per cent of GDP, remains modest for a country aspiring to middle-income status. Fiscal space is tight, but health spending is productive capital. A healthier workforce enhances labour productivity, reduces out-of-pocket shocks, and stabilises household consumption. When medical bills push families into debt, the macroeconomic consequences extend far beyond individual distress.

Insurance penetration has improved over the years, aided by public schemes and private sector expansion. Urban India has embraced coverage more readily, supported by dense hospital networks and higher incomes. Rural India, however, remains underinsured and often dependent on public facilities that are uneven in quality and reach. The result is a structural urban-rural divide. The GST withdrawal addresses financial friction but does not correct infrastructural gaps. If public hospitals remain overstretched and primary care underfunded, insurance claims will continue to flow disproportionately towards private providers. That dynamic risks driving up overall healthcare costs, reinforcing a cycle of rising premiums and escalating claims.

Preventive care is another missing link in an insurance-dominated model. Non-communicable diseases – diabetes, hypertension, cardiac

conditions – require early detection and sustained management. Public health campaigns, screening programmes, and community health workers are indispensable. These reduce long-term costs and improve outcomes, but they depend on steady public investment rather than insurance reimbursements.

The Budget's tax decision should, therefore, be seen as an enabling reform, not a stand-alone solution. By foregoing GST revenue, the Government has effectively acknowledged that financial protection deserves encouragement. The next step is to match that recognition with expanded capital outlays for primary health centres, district hospitals, medical training, and digital health infrastructure. The reform imperative is not insurance versus public investment. It is insurance anchored in strong public systems. A recalibrated health financing architecture must combine risk pooling, affordability, and delivery capacity. Without that integration, financial protection will remain partial and geographically unequal.

Withdrawing GST on life and health insurance premiums is a significant gesture, but the true measure of the reform will be whether every Indian can access timely, quality care. **BI**

Deepak Dwivedi



Harvinder Ahuja

Trial court's verdict in Kejriwal case manifests

Institutional RESILIENCE

The acquittal of former Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal, his deputy Manish Sisodia and 21 others by a trial court in the excise policy case marks a significant moment in the country's political and legal landscape. Besides, the 'liquorgate' discharge along with its potential of reviving the fortunes of the Aam Aadmi Party has set off alarm bells in the BJP and the Congress.

The Rouse Avenue court verdict, delivered on February 27 after months of intense scrutiny and public debate, underscores the centrality of due process and judicial oversight in a robust and thriving democracy like India.

The case had drawn nationwide attention, not only because of the seniority of the political figures involved, but also due to the broader implications it carried for governance and accountability.

While the country's premier investigating agency CBI had alleged irregularities in the formulation and implementation of the now-scraped excise policy in Delhi, the AAP consistently maintained that the charges were politically motivated and lacked substantive evidence.

Fundamental threshold

In acquitting the accused, the court observed that the prosecution had not established its case beyond reasonable doubt — the fundamental threshold in criminal jurisprudence. The judgment reiterates a foundational principle of law: allegations, however serious, must be supported by credible evidence that with-



stands judicial scrutiny.

The special CBI judge's pronouncement that there was no conspiracy or criminal intent in the much-maligned excise policy of the Kejriwal Government, is bound to help the former CM and his party regain much of the moral ground, which it had ceded over the past several months.

For the ruling establishment at the Centre, the February 27 verdict presents a complex political dynamic. While critics may view the outcome as a setback to anti-corruption messaging, it is important to note that the investigative process itself unfolded within the framework of the existing legal institutions. Agencies con-

ducted inquiries, arrests were made, and the matter was adjudicated in court. The eventual decision was rendered by an independent judiciary, reinforcing institutional checks and balances.

For the Aam Aadmi Party, however, the acquittal offers political vindication and a morale booster. The party had framed the excise case as part of a larger pattern of political targeting. The court's ruling is likely to strengthen that narrative ahead of future electoral contests, but how much the party gains, only time will tell.

Accountability, perception

Beyond partisan calculations, the development highlights the delicate balance

between accountability and perception. In high-profile cases involving elected representatives, investigative actions inevitably attract political interpretation. This makes judicial clarity all the more essential. The lower court's decision does not necessarily close the chapter entirely – it has already been challenged in the higher court – but it does reset the immediate discourse.

In its petition before the Delhi High Court, the CBI has said that the trial court's order has ignored several important aspects of the investigation and that the material has not been adequately considered.

At a broader level, however, the Kejriwal verdict is a reminder that democratic institutions in India continue to function through established procedures. Governments are empowered to investigate alleged wrongdoing, but it is the judiciary that ultimately determines culpability.

The acquittal of Kejriwal and others is less about individual political fortunes and more about institutional resilience. It affirms that accountability must be pursued rigorously, yet adjudicated impartially, a balance that lies at the heart of constitutional governance.

Speaking to reporters soon after the court verdict, Kejriwal said, "We always had faith in the judicial system... Truth has triumphed." He also shed a few tears in front of the TV cameras, which might bring in some electoral dividends for his party in its future outings, but there is a long way to go till curtains are finally drawn on the Delhi excise case and AAP gets its exalted perch back. **BI**



PRABHU CHAWLA

Continued from Page 1

He is no ordinary diplomat. Gor, a Soviet-born political operative and Trump loyalist, once helmed the White House Presidential Personnel Office. He carries baggage that should have tempered such audacity. His nomination was shadowed by controversy: Elon Musk once branded him a "snake" for allegedly dragging his feet on personal security clearance paperwork while vetting thousands of others. Former National Security Advisor John Bolton dismissed him as unqualified, citing his lack of India-specific diplomatic pedigree. Critics painted him as the quintessential insider operative fluent in loyalty tests rather than languages of nuance.

In Senate hearings, Gor thundered that Trump had made it "crystal clear" that India must stop buying Russian oil. Detractors in Washington and beyond whispered of him as one of the most vocal anti-India voices in Trumpworld.

Contrast this with the decorous restraint of his peers. Ambassadors from Europe, Japan, China and Russia glide through Delhi like phantoms. They confine to official conclaves, terse communiqués and ceremonial handshakes. Even Gor's immediate predecessor Eric Garcetti, though energetic, maintained a more measured cadence. There were State visits, but never the feverish fusion of military briefings, industrial schmoozing and parliamentary glad-handing that defined Gor's opening salvo. Where others observe protocol, Gor orchestrates dominance.

Western Command HQ

Last month, he descended upon Chandigarh for a high-profile tour of the Indian Army's Western Command headquarters alongside Admiral Samuel J Paparo, Commander of the US Indo-Pacific Command. There, they were briefed on operational readiness, strategic dynamics along the western front and even Operation Sindoor – details ordinarily reserved for sovereign eyes. Indian opposition leaders erupted in outrage. Yet Gor boasted on X: "Just landed in Chandigarh. Looking forward to visiting the Western Command."

His highly-publicised itinerary didn't stop at the barracks. He has traversed states, wooed business houses, and flung open the doors of his residence for glittering receptions. Industrialists fete him and parliamentarians preen in his presence. Former Foreign Secretary and Rajya

New US Ambassador Sergio Gor

Imposing undiplomatic dominance

Sabha MP Harsh Vardhan Shringla, a stalwart of Indian diplomacy, hosted an elaborate reception in Gor's honour, drawing a constellation of MPs who promptly flooded social media with proud photographs. Posts from lawmakers across various parties hailed the evening as a significant moment in bilateral ties, with images of handshakes and smiles proliferating like confetti.

Ministers, too, propagate these encounters with gusto, elevating Gor beyond the status of mere presidential nominee to something approximating an American proconsul.

This relentless courtship of India's political, military and business elite – from four-star Generals to backbench MPs, from industrial tycoons to state-level bureaucrats – has raised unsettling questions about Gor's underlying motives. Opposition parties, already wary of creeping American influence, have seized upon this spectacle as proof of Washington's undue sway over New Delhi's policy establishment. The sight of Indian ministers and parliamentarians jostling for photographs with a foreign envoy and treating access to

him as a status symbol has provided fresh ammunition to critics who argue that the Modi Government has ceded too much ground to American interests.

Disconcerting asymmetry

What Gor frames as bridge-building, his detractors cast as influence-peddling and an orchestrated penetration of

India's decision-making apparatus that risks reducing sovereign policy calculation to mere appendage of American strategic preferences. His royal omnipresence is no accident. It is choreography. Gor has been instrumental in advancing the India-US trade deal, negotiating tariff

He has traversed states, wooed business houses, and flung open the doors of his residence for glittering receptions. Industrialists fete him and parliamentarians preen in his presence

adjustments tied to Russian oil purchases and championing initiatives like the Pax Silica Declaration for semiconductor and AI supply chains. In his inaugural embassy address and subsequent remarks, he has cast himself as the indispensable bridge-builder.

Yet, beneath the bonhomie lies a disconcerting asymmetry. Indian leaders host him, while Opposition voices question whether his interventions veer into

meddling. Critics, particularly from Opposition benches, have begun to voice alarm at this pattern of overweening involvement.

The Western Command visit, timed amid deepening defence pacts, has been lambasted as emblematic of a larger syndrome – where American envoys cease to advise and begin to direct. One cannot dismiss the optics: a foreign Ambassador, barely credentialed, embedded in sensitive military discussions alongside a four-star US Admiral. This is not diplomacy. It is dominion dressed in decorum.

Roving vice-regency

His predecessors limited themselves to protocol. Gor transcends it, transforming the ambassadorial role into roving vice-regency. The peril is profound. By cultivating this cult of accessibility, inviting elites to his residence, posing for viral photographs, and inserting himself into the sinews of Indian power structures, Gor lends dangerous credence to the perennial suspicion that India dances to an American tune. When an envoy becomes more visible than the institutions he ostensibly serves, the host country's sovereignty appears negotiable. Opposition scrutiny is not paranoia; it is patriotism confronting overreach. Gor's hyperactive hegemony in New Delhi should serve as a cautionary parable.

Diplomats must remain invisible persuaders and not act as advisors. India, a civilisation of ancient grandeur and modern resurgence, deserves envoys who elevate alliance without eroding autonomy. Anything less is not diplomacy; it is dominance by another name. It's nothing but an affront to the very independence India so fiercely guards. **BI**

(The writer is a veteran journalist, political commentator, and TV personality)

COURTESY: The New Indian Express



BlitzINDIA SPECIAL

India's emergence as a global digital power now hinges on its ability to build Artificial Intelligence systems that are indigenous, inclusive, and aligned with national priorities. As AI increasingly shapes governance, public services, industry, and citizen engagement, the need for homegrown foundational models has become important.

These models must be trained on Indian languages, local data, and real-world contexts to ensure relevance and effectiveness.

Built with the vision of creating AI systems specifically for India, Sarvam AI is an organisation that is developing Artificial Intelligence tailored to India's needs by building foundational components and applying them to the country's unique linguistic, enterprise, and governance requirements.

The company has built a full-stack AI platform, with everything developed, deployed, and governed entirely in India. These enterprise grade platforms reflect the country's linguistic diversity and are designed to support public service delivery. Its work directly addresses longstanding barriers in accessibility, multilingual communication, and dependence on foreign AI infrastructure.

Indigenous AI infra

Strengthening indigenous AI infrastructure is central to India's vision of technological sovereignty, digital self-reliance, and inclusive growth. In an era where AI shapes governance, economic competitiveness, and citizen services, building AI systems rooted in local languages, datasets, and regulatory frameworks

AI Made-in-India REVOLUTION

Sarvam developing AI tailored to India's needs



ensures that innovation aligns with national priorities and societal needs.

In this context, Sarvam AI stands out as one of the 12 organisations selected under the Innovation Centre pillar of the IndiaAI Mission to develop indigenous foundational models, with financial and compute support amounting to Rs 246.72 crore. The company is building large language and speech models (LLMs) tailored for Indian languages and public service delivery, with capabilities such as voice-based interfaces, document processing, and citizen-centric applications.

Sarvam AI's models include: Bulbul

(Text-to-Speech): Available in 11 Indian languages with 39 distinct speaker voices; Saaras (Speech-to-Text): Supports all 22 scheduled languages, 8kHz telephony audio, and code-mixed speech; and Vision (Document Understanding): Tailored for 22+ Indian languages, mixed scripts, and handwritten text

Sovereign ecosystem

Sarvam AI has built a comprehensive, full-stack sovereign AI ecosystem designed to serve enterprises, governments, developers, and creators across the country.

The Sarvam AI ecosystem consists

of: Sarvam for Conversations; Sarvam for Work; Sarvam AI for Content; and Sarvam AI for Edge Intelligence. Through this integrated architecture, Sarvam AI is not merely building applications but establishing a scalable digital backbone for India's AI future.

By converging infrastructure, language intelligence, enterprise capability, and edge deployment into one sovereign ecosystem, it positions India to innovate independently, deploy responsibly, and compete globally, while ensuring that advanced AI remains accessible, secure, and aligned with national development priorities.

Strategic partnerships

Sarvam AI's institutional collaborations are transforming indigenous innovation into measurable public value across India. By working closely with national and state governments, the company is embedding advanced AI capabilities into critical service delivery systems.

UIDAI (Unique Identification Authority of India) partnered with Sarvam AI to enhance Aadhaar services using AI-driven voice interaction, real-time fraud detection, and multilingual support.

The Government of Odisha in collaboration with Sarvam AI is establishing a 50MW AI-optimised Sovereign AI Capacity Hub to serve as a national compute backbone. The Government of Tamil Nadu and IIT Madras, in collaboration with Sarvam, are developing Digital Sangam, India's first Sovereign AI Research Park.

Collectively, these initiatives demonstrate how coordinated public partnerships can deploy homegrown AI infrastructure at population scale. **■**

BlitzINDIA SPECIAL

The development and deployment of Kavach have been undertaken in a phased and systematic manner. Initial field trials on passenger trains commenced in February 2016. Based on operational experience and the Independent Safety Assessment, three firms were approved during 2018-19 for the supply of Kavach Version 3.2.

With over 1,465 route km on South Central Railway and the experience gained therefrom, the system has continued to evolve through successive improvements and upgrades. Subsequently, Kavach was adopted as the National Automatic Train Protection (ATP) system in July 2020.

Continuous improvements based on operational experience and independent safety assessments led to the approval of Kavach Version 4.0 in July 2024. It is a significant milestone in railway safety.

The upcoming launch of Kavach 5.0 was announced in April 2025. It is expected to significantly reduce inter-train headway, enabling a higher frequency of train operations while maintaining safe and efficient movement.

Strategy and progress

Nearly 96 per cent of railway traffic is carried on the High-Density Network (HDN) and Highly Used Network (HUN) routes.

ON SAFER TRACKS-II

The evolution of Kavach

To ensure safe transportation of this traffic, Kavach implementation is being undertaken in a focused manner based on priorities defined by the Railway Board:

After extensive trials, Kavach Version 4.0 was initially commissioned on 738 route km. In January this year, Indian Railways achieved a major milestone by installing the Kavach Version 4.0 safety system on 472.3 route km in a single day in a single month, the highest ever so far.

The system has been successfully tested through automatic braking trials. Further expansion is underway. Overall, Kavach has now been implemented on more than 2,200 route kilometres, reflecting a steady and accelerating expansion of India's indigenous Automatic Train Protection system across the national rail network.



To further enhance operational safety, improve communication reliability, and strengthen passenger information systems, Indian Railways is leveraging a range of Artificial Intelligence, telecom, and digital technologies across the railway network.

Alongside Kavach, these initiatives complement conventional safety systems by enabling real-time monitoring,

predictive maintenance, automated alerts, reducing dependence on manual intervention and improving system responsiveness.

An AI-enabled Intrusion Detection System based on Distributed Acoustic Sensing (DAS) technology has been developed to detect the presence of elephants and other wild animals on railway tracks in vulnerable corridors.

To strengthen station-level security, Video Surveillance Systems (VSS) have been commissioned at 1,731 railway stations. These systems are equipped with AI-based Video Analytics for automated event detection such as intrusion and loitering.

Predictive maintenance

AI-based predictive maintenance of signaling systems is being piloted at select stations to develop standardized failure prediction logics and alerts mechanism.

Online Monitoring of Rolling Stock System (OMRS) and Wheel Impact Load Detectors (WILD) adopted for early detection of rolling stock defects and improved asset health monitoring.

Safe train operations depend on reliable voice communication between the Loco Pilot and Guard. The procurement of Digital 5W Very High Frequency (VHF) Walkie-Talkie sets has been standardized, replacing conventional analogue systems. **■**

(Concluded)

World Wildlife Day

A global reminder for conservation and sustainable use of biological resources

Blitz INDIA FEATURE

EVERY year on March 3, the world observes World Wildlife Day, proclaimed by the United Nations to celebrate wild fauna and flora and to raise awareness about their importance to people and the planet.

The day marks the adoption of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), reinforcing global commitment to ensuring that trade in wildlife does not threaten species survival. The day underscores that wildlife is not merely part of nature's beauty, but a critical pillar of food security, healthcare, livelihoods, climate resilience, and sustainable development.

At a time when biodiversity faces mounting pressure from habitat destruction, overexploitation, illegal trade, and climate change, World Wildlife Day serves as a global call to conserve and sustainably use biological resources for present and future generations.

Medicinal plants

The theme for World Wildlife Day 2026 – 'Medicinal and Aromatic Plants: Conserving Health, Heritage and Livelihoods' – highlighted the importance of plants used for medicine, their role in preserving cultural traditions, and the income they provide to local communities.

For India, the theme carries particular significance. The country is one of the 17 mega biodiversity-rich countries in the world and has 7 per cent of the world's bio-diversity. It has 15 agro-climatic regions, 45,000 different plant species out of which 15,000 are medicinal plants. Of these, about 8,000 species are used in Indian systems of medicine and folk medicines.

The country has been taking strong steps to protect this rich heritage. The National Medicinal Plants Board (NMPB) runs a dedicated scheme for the conservation and sustainable management of medicinal plants. It

supports Conservation, IEC activities, farmer training, R&D and marketing.

Conservation approach

India has adopted a strong and multi-layered approach to conserve its rich medicinal and aromatic plant heritage.

In-situ conservation: It means protecting plants and animals in their natural habitats. It is carried out through national parks, biosphere reserves and gene sanctuaries.

Ex-situ conservation: It means protecting plant genetic resources outside their natural habitats under controlled conditions to ensure long-term preservation and possible reintroduction into the wild. In India, this includes the conservation of 9,361 medicinal and aromatic plant (MAP) accessions at the National Seed Gene Bank, National Bureau of Plant Genetic Resources, in New Delhi.

The Government has launched several key schemes and initiatives to promote the conservation, cultivation, and sustainable use of medicinal plants across the country.

Key Govt schemes

National Ayush Mission: In the past Ministry of Ayush had implemented Medicinal Plant Component under the National Ayush Mission (NAM) a flagship scheme of the Ministry of AYUSH through states and UTs to promote the cultivation of medicinal plants integrated with farming systems to support crop diversification and enhance farmer incomes from the financial year 2015-16 to 2020-21.

Currently, Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare under its Mission for Integrated Development of Horticulture – a Centrally-sponsored scheme is promoting the holistic growth of the horticulture sector including medicinal plants. All States and UTs are covered under MIDH.

Aushadhi Vanaspati Mitra Programme: The Ministry of Ayush recognises and rewards individuals, communities, and institutions for their outstanding contribution to medicinal plant conservation, cultivation, and marketing.

Central Sector Scheme for Conservation, Development and Sustainable Management of Medicinal Plants: The Government of India runs this flagship scheme with an outlay of Rs



322.41 crore for 2021-22 to 2025-26. Under this scheme, Medicinal Plants Conservation and Development Areas (MPCDAs) are set up to protect plants in their natural habitats.

e-CHARAK: It's a platform to enable information exchange between various stakeholders mainly farmers involved in the medicinal plants sector across the country.

Building awareness

Herbal Gardens and Awareness Programmes: Herbal gardens are promoted in schools, institutions, and public spaces to build awareness among students and the general public.

Livelihood Support to Local Communities: The scheme provides financial and infrastructural support to Joint Forest Management Committees, Self Help Groups, Van Panchayats.

Bilateral and International Cooperation: The NMPB actively collaborates with international organisations to promote the medicinal plant sector globally.

Protecting through GI tags: Navara Rice (*Oryza sativa* L.), grown mainly in Palakkad and nearby districts of Kerala; Green Cardamom has two GI varieties – Alleppey from Kerala and Coorg from Karnataka; Ganjam Kewda Flower is GI tagged for Odisha; Saffron is GI tagged for Jammu and Kashmir; and Nagauri Ashwagandha is GI tag registered under NMPB-supported project.

India's journey in protecting its medicinal and aromatic plant heritage is a story of deep roots and forward vision. The country is not just preserving its green wealth, it is turning it into a source of health, pride, and prosperity for generations to come. **BI**

India has adopted a strong and multi-layered approach to conserve its rich medicinal and aromatic plant heritage



India's internet users cross 1.02 billion

Steady growth in internet users, telephone subscribers: TRAI

BlitzBUREAU

India's telecom sector continued its growth momentum in the December 2025 quarter, with internet subscribers crossing the 1.02 billion mark and overall telephone connections rising sharply, according to the latest performance report released by the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India.

The TRAI released its Indian Telecom Services Performance Indicator Report for the quarter ending December 31, 2025.

The report showed steady growth in



internet users, telephone subscribers, revenues and average earnings of telecom companies.

The total number of internet subscribers increased from 1,017.81 million at the end of September 2025 to 1,028.61 million by the end of December 2025, registering a quarterly growth of 1.06 per cent.

Out of the total internet users, 983.29 million were wireless subscribers, while 45.32 million were wired users.

The broadband subscriber base crossed the 1 billion mark and stood at 1,007.35 million -- reflecting steady demand for high-speed data services.

The total number of telephone sub-

scribers in the country saw a strong jump during the quarter.

It increased from 1,228.94 million in September to 1,306.14 million in December, marking a quarterly growth of 6.28 per cent and a year-on-year growth of 9.77 per cent.

Overall tele-density in India improved from 86.65 per cent to 91.74 per cent during the same period.

Wireless subscribers, including mobile and fixed wireless access (FWA) users, rose by 76.45 million during the quarter to reach 1,258.77 million.

Wireless tele-density also increased from 83.36 per cent to 88.41 per cent. The mobile subscriber base alone grew to 1,244.20 million.

Telecom companies also reported improved financial performance. Gross Revenue (GR) of the telecom sector stood at Rs 1,02,475 crore in the December quarter, while Adjusted Gross Revenue (AGR) was Rs 84,270 crore. **[B]**



Crude oil reserves well-stocked: Govt

BlitzBUREAU

The Centre has said that India has adequate stocks of crude oil and key petroleum products such as petrol, diesel and aviation turbine fuel (ATF) to handle any short-term disruptions arising from the ongoing hostilities in the Middle East.

Petroleum and Natural Gas Minister Hardeep Singh Puri said the country is fully prepared to deal with the evolving global energy situation. He assured that there is no immediate cause for concern as India remains well stocked and is closely monitoring developments.

"India is currently the world's third-largest importer of crude oil, the fourth-largest refiner, and the fifth-largest exporter of petroleum products," he noted.

Given its strong position in the global energy market, the country has built sufficient inventories to manage temporary supply disruptions.

The minister said that over the past few years, India has taken significant steps to diversify its sources of crude oil to ensure both availability and affordability for consumers.

"Indian energy companies now have access to supplies that do not pass through the Strait of Hormuz, a key global oil transit route that could be impacted by tensions in the Middle East," the minister noted.

"These alternative routes, will help cushion any short-term supply issues," he mentioned. **[B]**

BlitzBUREAU

The Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) has approved an interest rate of 8.25 per cent on Employees' Provident Fund (EPF) deposits for 2025-26, retaining the same rate for the second consecutive year, according to an official statement.

The decision was taken at the 239th meeting of the Central Board of Trustees (CBT) held in New Delhi and chaired by Union Labour and Employment Minister Mansukh Mandaviya.

Following the CBT's approval, the proposed interest rate will be forwarded to the Ministry of Finance for concurrence. Once formally ratified, the new rate will be credited to the accounts of over seven crore EPFO subscribers.

Interest on EPF deposits is calculated on a monthly running balance but is credited to subscribers' accounts at the end of the financial year. However,

EPFO sticks to 8.25-pc interest

Board also nods amnesty plan on compliance issues



accounts that remain inactive for 36 months are classified as dormant and do not earn further interest. According to the statement, despite global economic uncertainties, the EPFO has maintained strong financial discipline, ensuring stable and competitive returns without straining its interest account.

Continuing its reform initiatives, the

Board also approved a one-time Amnesty Scheme to address compliance issues relating to income tax-recognised trusts that are yet to be covered under or granted exemption under the Employees' Provident Funds and Miscellaneous Provisions Act, 1952 (EPF & MP Act), taking into account the provisions of the Finance Act, 2026.

The proposed scheme aims to bring such establishments and trusts into compliance within a defined six-month window. It seeks primarily to protect workers' interests by waiving damages, interest and penalties for entities that have already provided benefits equal to or better than the statutory scheme. The scheme also allows retrospective relaxation or exemption, subject to specified conditions, and ensures that all eligible employees receive statutory benefits. **[B]**

PM Modi most followed global leader

Surpasses 30 million YouTube subscribers

BlitzBUREAU

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has crossed the landmark figure of 30 million subscribers on YouTube, reinforcing his standing as the most-followed world leader on the video-sharing platform.

With this milestone, PM Modi now leads the global rankings among serving and former heads of government in terms of subscriber base. According to available figures, he remains well ahead of other prominent political figures worldwide in this category.

The second position is held by former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, who has approximately 6.6 million subscribers -- a number that amounts



to roughly one-fourth of PM Modi's subscriber count.

PM Modi's digital reach on YouTube also significantly exceeds that of US President Donald Trump, with the Indian Prime Minister having more than seven times the number of subscribers, highlighting the scale of his online engage-

ment and global outreach.

Within India, the gap is equally pronounced. In terms of subscriber numbers, PM Modi's channel has nearly three times as many subscribers as that of Rahul Gandhi.

His subscriber base is also more than four times higher than that of both the Aam Aadmi Party and the Indian National Congress individually.

With over 30 million subscribers, PM Modi's YouTube channel now stands as the most subscribed among world leaders globally, underscoring his continued dominance in the digital communication space.

Just a few days ago, on February 26, PM Modi surpassed the landmark figure of 100 million followers on Instagram, becoming the first serving world leader and politician to reach the milestone on the social media platform. **[B]**

Another twist in Bihar

Nitish to shift to Rajya Sabha; files papers

BlitzBUREAU

In a new twist to political developments in Bihar, Chief Minister Nitish Kumar on March 5 filed his nomination papers for the Rajya Sabha elections.

Nitish Kumar's shift to the Rajya Sabha could potentially reshape the leadership structure in the state.

All five candidates, including BJP president Nitin Nabin, Shivesh Kumar Ram, and Upendra Kushwaha (president of the Rashtriya Lok Morcha) of the ruling alliance, also submitted their nominations.

Several senior NDA leaders were present during the filing process, including Union Home Minister Amit Shah, who arrived in Patna from New Delhi for the occasion.

While the nomination marked a significant political transition for Nitish Kumar, the development triggered unrest among a section of Janata Dal(United) leaders and workers.

The JD(U) chief has been the Chief Minister of Bihar for 10 times since 2005. Nitish Kumar led the ruling NDA to a landslide victory in the Assembly elections held in November 2025.

Earlier, taking to the social media platform X, Nitish Kumar addressed the people of the state, writing that for more than two decades, they have consistently reposed trust and support in him, enabling him to serve Bihar with dedication.

He credited the people's faith for Bihar's progress and enhanced respect at



the national level, expressing gratitude once again for their continued backing.

Nitish Kumar stated that since the beginning of his parliamentary career, he had aspired to become a member of both Houses of the Bihar Legislature and Parliament.

While the nomination marked a significant political transition for Nitish Kumar, the development triggered unrest among a section of Janata Dal(United) leaders and workers

In that spirit, he announced his decision to seek election to the Rajya Sabha in the current election.

Assuring the people of his continued commitment, Nitish Kumar said his relationship with the citizens of Bihar would remain intact and that his resolve to work towards building a developed Bihar would not waver.

He added that he would extend full support and guidance to the new government that would be formed.

With Nitish Kumar's nomination, two names have emerged as the key contenders for the top post of chief ministership.

According to political watchers, Samrat Choudhary and Nityanand Rai are the likely contenders for the chief minister's seat. **BI**

Rule of law, dialogue and diplomacy

No issue can be resolved through military conflict, says PM Modi

BlitzBUREAU

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has said that India and Finland believe in the rule of law, dialogue and diplomacy as he expressed support for every effort made to end the ongoing conflict in West Asia and Ukraine.

While addressing a joint press meet with Finland President Alexander Stubb following their talks at Hyderabad House in Delhi on March 5, PM Modi said that India and Finland agree that reforming global institutions is necessary to address global challenges.



"India and Finland believe in the rule of law, dialogue, and diplomacy. We are unanimous that military conflict alone cannot resolve any issue. Whether in Ukraine or West Asia, we will continue to support every effort for a speedy end to the conflict and peace. We also agree that reforming global institutions is not only necessary but urgent to address growing global challenges, and that eradicating terrorism in all its forms is our shared commitment," he said.

"Your Excellency, you have completed the Ironman Triathlon. We are confident that with an energetic leader like you, India and Finland will also achieve a new triathlon of innovation, digital, and sustainability," PM Modi added.

He noted that the growing cooperation between India and Europe is giving new strength to global stability, growth and shared prosperity. PM Modi also mentioned about the recently-signed Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between India and the European Union (EU). **BI**

March 6 World Lymphedema Day

The invisible epidemic

BlitzBUREAU

A 71-year-old doctor recently underwent a high-end robotic surgery for his prostate cancer. Weeks later, first the left leg and then right one, started swelling up. "This is lymphedema, but we can do nothing about it", he was informed by the treating doctor.

Most patients are never told that cancer and its treatment can cause lymphedema. This changed somewhat in 2018-19 when due to canvassing by Lymphatic Education & Research Network (LE&RN), a law was promulgated in the USA that all patients undergoing treatment of cancer be warned about the possibility of lymphedema occurrence.

This rule, as per renowned surgeon Dr Shashi Gogia, does not exist in India. He also emphasises, "Nothing can be done is a misnomer, as early diagnosis and treatment offers much hope".

Delhi-based Dr Shashi Gogia, along with his wife Arun Rekha, is running the only LE&RN-recognised Centre of Excellence (CoE) in the country.

Globally, he says, lymphedema is a

staggering public health crisis, affecting an estimated 170 to 250 million people – between 20 and 40 million in India alone. It is the second highest cause of morbidity, he informed further.

While the West grapples primarily with cancer-related and genetic lymph-



edema, India faces a dual burden. Historically, it has been the epicentre of Lymphatic Filariasis (elephantiasis), a mosquito-borne parasitic infection. The country still carries approximately 40 pc of the global filariasis burden. Despite high prevalence, lymphedema is plagued by systemic medical neglect.

According to Dr Gogia, though lymphedema is incurable, it is manageable. The global gold standard is Complete Decongestive Therapy (CDT) – a daily regimen of specialised massage, compression bandaging, meticulous skin hygiene, and exercise. However, a massive 'skilling gap' remains.

To combat this, the Society for Administration of Telemedicine and Healthcare Informatics (SATHI) and LE&RN India chapter are collaborating with Healthcare Sector Skill Council (HSSC) to train a grassroots workforce of caregivers, nurses, and ASHA workers in basic CDT protocols.

Besides, LE&RN India-SATHI have also been organising World Lymphedema Day every year on March 6 with a view to spreading awareness about this tropical disease. **BI**

India-Canada ties reset

After a long diplomaic chill, the two countries make constructive gains during Carney's visit

Continued from Page 1



and fertilisers – also stands to stabilise, reducing supply volatility.

For Canada, expanding and diversifying trade partnerships is critical in view of its souring relations with the United States, its largest trading partner. Ottawa faces the risk of heightened trade uncertainty within the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) which is crucial because roughly 70-75 per cent of its exports go to the United States. That deep integration makes the Canadian economy highly sensitive to any shifts in US trade policy.

For India, too, the geopolitical calculus is shifting. As Washington debates tariff walls and supply-chain realignments, New Delhi is keen to expand trade corridors with middle powers that share democratic and Indo-Pacific interests. A thaw with Canada fits into that broader strategy.

While Carney's visit did not produce dramatic headline-grabbing agreements, its symbolism was powerful. It re-established political dialogue at the highest level, lowered rhetorical temperatures and reopened pathways for economic cooperation.

In diplomatic terms, the visit was less about immediate breakthroughs and more about restoring predictability. Carney's New Delhi outreach may thus prove a turning point – not just in bilateral ties, but in shaping a more diversified economic strategy for both nations. Relations between the two countries had frayed sharply in 2023 after the then-PM Trudeau alleged potential Indian involvement in the killing of a Khalistani separatist on Canadian soil, an accusation New Delhi rejected as "absurd". The fallout saw reciprocal expulsions of diplomats, suspension of trade talks and a freeze in high-level engagement. **BI**





Air ticket refund rules tightened

Airlines will have to give back money within 7 days of cancellation



Blitz BUREAU

The Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) on February 24 notified stricter timelines and clearer rules for refunding airline tickets in India, following years of complaints over delays, high charges and forced credit shells for passengers, according to a report in The Financial Express.

Under the new regulations, airlines are now required to process refunds for credit card ticket purchases within seven days following a cancellation, directly returning the funds to the cardholder's account. The new norms come into effect from 26 March, 2026.

For tickets paid in cash, refunds must be issued immediately at the airline's ticket

office where the purchase was made. Additionally, for those who booked through travel agents or online platforms, airlines must ensure refunds are completed within 14 working days.

The new policy also places the responsibility firmly on airlines, rather than third-party intermediaries, to handle the refund process efficiently. The revised Civil Aviation Requirement (CAR) also mandates that airlines return all statutory taxes and airport-linked charges, such as the User Development Fee (UDF), Airport Development Fee (ADF), and Passenger Service Fee (PSF), in cases of cancellation, non-utilisation of tickets, or no-show.

This requirement applies even to promotional or special fares and to bookings where the basic fare is non-refundable, limiting the amount that can be retained

when a passenger does not travel, the new rules stated.

Transparency in fees and taxes

The regulator said that the CAR on "Refund of Airline Tickets to Passengers of Public Transport Undertakings" will come into force from March 26 and applies to scheduled domestic airlines, non-scheduled operators and foreign carriers operating to and from India.

To enhance customer flexibility during the booking process, airlines must provide a "look-in" option for 48 hours following the purchase of a ticket directly through their websites. During this designated time, passengers have the option to cancel or change their bookings without incurring any extra fees, apart from any fare difference for the new flight. However, this feature is not available for domestic flights scheduled to depart within seven days or international flights departing within 15 days of booking.

The regulator has also established a ceiling on cancellation fees. Airlines and their agents are prohibited from charging a cancellation fee that exceeds the basic fare plus the fuel surcharge, excluding any extra fees that travel agents disclosed at the time of booking.

Additionally, airlines are not permitted to impose separate processing fees for refunds and must clearly display cancellation fees during the booking process.

In a bid to promote transparency, the CAR mandates that airlines clearly outline the refund amount and its breakdown during the cancellation process, either on the ticket or in a separate document.

Airlines are also required to publish their refund policies and amounts on their websites.

Industry legal experts believe that this new disclosure standard will empower passengers to more effectively contest unjustified deductions in consumer courts and with ombudsmen.

On the practice of credit shells, the rules specify that holding the refund amount as a credit with the airline can only be done at the passenger's request and cannot be used as a default or forced option.

For foreign carriers flying to and from India, refunds must follow the ticket refund regulations of their home country, but the mode and timelines of refund need to comply with the DGCA's framework for credit card, cash and agent-booked tickets.

The regulator has also prohibited airlines from charging for the correction of a passen-

ger's name if the mistake is flagged within 24 hours of booking, provided the ticket was bought directly from the airline's website.

The new rules also introduce a specific clause for medical emergencies. If a passenger or a family member on the same booking is admitted to the hospital during the travel period, airlines may extend either a refund or a credit shell.

In all other cases involving medical issues, refunds will depend on an assessment of the passenger's fitness to travel by an airline aerospace medicine specialist or a DGCA-empanelled specialist. **BI**

"Refund of Airline Tickets to Passengers of Public Transport Undertakings" will come into force from March 26 and applies to scheduled domestic airlines, non-scheduled operators and foreign carriers operating to and from India

Blitz BUREAU

OpenAI CEO Sam Altman last week compared human development to artificial intelligence training, arguing that discussions around the energy consumed by AI models often overlook the resources required to educate and nurture people.

Altman said concerns about the power required to train advanced AI systems should be viewed in a broader context of how societies invest energy and resources in building human intelligence.

"People talk about how much energy it takes to train an AI model. But it also takes a lot of energy to train a human. It takes about 20 years of life — and all the food you consume during that time — before you become smart," the OpenAI CEO told The Indian Express.

Altman, who was in India for the AI Impact Summit, said the country is currently leading the world in AI adoption and is poised to become one of the largest markets for the technology. He added that India is not just participating in the artificial intelligence revolution but helping lead it.

Altman defends AI's power consumption

Says, training a human also takes 20 yrs of food

He also said his study of history suggests that concentrating AI power in the hands of a single company or country, even in the name of safety, would be a "disastrously bad" thing to do.

"I do share the concern about concentration of AI. Our stance is that the only path forward is to heavily democratise AI and to put these tools in the hands of people, even if it comes with some downsides, even if it means that society has

got to wrestle with some big challenges," he said at a select briefing on the sidelines of the summit.

OpenAI, he said, pioneered what it calls an "iterative deployment" strategy, allowing people to become familiar with AI systems and use them even when they are imperfect or still evolving.

"And it doesn't mean we aren't responsible in how we do it, doesn't mean that we don't start conservatively, but it does mean we empower people to do things with the technology that

OpenAI pioneered an "iterative deployment" strategy, allowing people to become familiar with AI systems and use them even when they are imperfect or still evolving

we ourselves might not like. It means that we try to encourage a robust ecosystem being built around the world," he said.

"It means that we take the trade-off of empowering people and accepting that society is going to have to wrestle with a new thing, rather than try to hold on to all the power ourselves and say we can guarantee this or that outcome," he added. **BI**



Blitz BUREAU

Union Communications Minister Jyotiraditya Scindia on February 27 highlighted India's rapid 5G expansion, adding that the country recorded the fastest 5G rollout globally and is now sitting at the global 6G standard-setting table for the first time, according to a report by ANI.

Speaking at the News18 Rising Bharat Summit, he emphasised that India has transitioned from a technology adopter to a key architect in shaping the future of global telecommunications.

"On 6G, the Prime Minister set the goal. The Bharat 6G Alliance, which is a group of companies across the entire value chain, has grown from 15 members to over 100," Scindia said.

He added that India has forged partnerships with similar 6G alliances in 30 countries. "India is on that standard-setting table for the first time. We are on that table as 6G gets rolled out," he said.

Highlighting India's rapid 5G expansion, Scindia noted that the country recorded the fastest 5G rollout globally. "India had the fastest rollout of 5G in the world -- we did it in 22 months. We have 99.9 per cent of districts connected with 5G. Forty crore people have already transitioned to 5G," he said, calling it a testament to coordinated policy and industry execution.

The minister also addressed the Government's push for SIM binding, describing it as a necessary safeguard in an increasingly digital ecosystem. He said linking SIM cards to verified devices strengthens security, curbs fraud, and prevents misuse in cases involving cybercrime and financial scams.

According to Scindia, as India deepens



India setting 6G global standards

Saw world's fastest rollout of 5G services, says Jyotiraditya Scindia

its digital penetration and prepares for 6G, ensuring trust and user protection will remain central to telecom reforms.

India has officially pivoted from a passive observer to a primary stakeholder in the global telecommunications landscape.

For the first time, the nation is working directly with the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and 3GPP to define the technical DNA of 6G technology.

India's vision for 6G is built on inclusivity. A landmark research paper proposing "Ubiquitous Connectivity"--a protocol designed to ensure seamless, dead-zone-free network access for every global citizen--has been formally accepted into the international 6G standard-setting framework.

Since its inception in 2023, the Bharat 6G Alliance has transformed into a high-octane innovation engine and has grown from 15 to over 100 stakeholders, including elite IITs, agile startups, and telecom giants.

For the first time, the nation is working directly with the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and 3GPP to define the technical DNA of 6G technology



India is aggressively targeting a 10 per cent share of all global 6G patents, marking a significant leap in indigenous R&D. India is not building in a vacuum. It has successfully established 6G research corridors with platforms in over 30 countries, creating a collaborative bridge between the US, UK, Brazil, and emerging mar-

kets across Africa.

Parallel to these hardware and software leaps, the Ministry is prioritising user safety through advanced cyber security mandates.

To combat the rise in digital fraud, a new mandate requires SIM-to-app binding for major messaging platforms like WhatsApp, Telegram, and Instagram.

This ensures that accounts are tethered to verified hardware, making it significantly harder for scammers to operate anonymous or hijacked accounts. **BI**

Blitz BUREAU

Fears that new artificial intelligence tools could replace large IT services firms are "overblown" as clients still need help deploying and scaling the technology, Babak Hodjat, chief AI officer at Cognizant, told Reuters in an interview.

Automated AI tools from start-ups such as Anthropic have stirred concerns about disruption in the business models of software and services firms globally, including India's traditionally labour-intensive IT services industry.

Enterprises are far from being able to rely on a single, all-purpose AI agent, said Hodjat, adding that most clients still need help engineering, integrating, and governing AI systems.

"That mapping is our job, it does not come just automatically out of the box," said Hodjat, whose work helped power Apple's Siri voice assistant.

Nasdaq-listed Cognizant, which has more than 70 per cent of its workforce operating from India, forecast annual revenue above Wall Street estimates on the back of strong demand as businesses adopt AI into

their workflows.

Rivals Tata Consultancy Services and Wipro have also maintained that rapid AI adoption will boost, rather than shrink, demand for software service providers.

Hodjat's vote of confidence in the role of services companies comes despite AI-related job cuts already underway.

Shipping and logistics management software company WiseTech Global said it would lay off nearly a third of its workforce as it integrates AI into its cus-



tommer software and internal operations. TCS announced 12,000 job cuts last year, but has since denied that the layoffs were AI-related.

Cognizant, which generates about 30 per cent of its code through

CEO Ravi Kumar S said during the company's earnings call last month that it hired 25,000 fresh graduates in 2025, and expects to exceed that in 2026

AI and aims to reach 50 per cent, is not worried about automation eliminating entry-level jobs. CEO Ravi Kumar S said during the company's earnings call last month that it hired 25,000 fresh graduates in 2025, and expects to exceed that in 2026.

Almost all of Cognizant's clients have already tried to work with AI agents, Hodjat said, but have acknowledged that they need us to deploy it within their systems for returns. **BI**

Abhishek Sen

Future of pay

Competitive compensation reshaping salary structures

India's new Labour Codes are prompting organisations to reassess wage structures and statutory obligations, highlighting the impact of these codes on wages and compliance, according to the EY Future of Pay 2026 report.

As the effects of the Labour Codes become clearer, organisations are conducting cost modelling exercises, upgrading payroll systems and strengthening governance frameworks. Investments in modern HR technology platforms are accelerating to facilitate compliance, efficiency and improved workforce visibility.

At the same time, the Union Budget 2026 reinforces workforce competitiveness through tax stability, investments in skilling, incentives for digital infrastructure and sustained public capital expenditure.

Across boardrooms in 2026, one theme is becoming impossible to ignore: the forces shaping compensation have shifted — deeply and permanently. India Inc. is entering 2026 with steady salary budgets, and the salary increase outlook for 2026 across key sectors reflects stabilisation.

Overall salary increases are projected at 9.1 per cent, in line with emerging compensation trends, following two years of recalibration and cost discipline, as per the report.

Indian employers are redesigning their total rewards strategy, pointing toward sharper performance differentiation, rising AI skill premiums and moderated attrition amid economic normalisation. The conversation is no longer about uniform increments but about targeted investment and measurable returns.

Why pay is changing

As analytics and AI adoption accelerate, organisations are moving from traditional models to evidence-based, transparent and capability-driven decisions. Rather than distributing pay evenly, leaders are embracing pay-for-performance and enabling pay differentiation through variable pay and performance metrics.

Intent, not inertia, is guiding how reward capital is deployed. This marks a defining moment in the future of pay in India, where organisations increasingly anchor decisions in rewards analytics and data-backed workforce insights.

Industry dynamics: Where pay is accelerating and where it is stabilising

Beneath the national average, sector trajectories tell a nuanced story shaped by GCC pay trends and digital transformation priorities.

GCCs continue to exhibit the highest salary momentum at 10.4 per cent, powered by global demand and digital specialisation.

Financial services follow closely with salary projections around 10 per cent, driven by regulatory, risk and platform modernisation talent needs.

E-Commerce, at 9.9 per cent, rounds out the top-performing sectors, signalling that technology and e-commerce are normalising, with a sharper focus on productivity and sustainable growth.

Skills-led pay: Where the real shifts are happening

Close to half of surveyed organisations report transitioning to skills-based pay models, reflecting the rise of structured skills-based pay frameworks and premiums for AI and digital roles. This shift signals that capabilities are evolving faster than job descriptions.

Variable pay is rising to 16.1 per cent of fixed compensation in 2025, reflecting a steady shift towards at-risk structures that link earnings to productivity, adoption and strategic impact.

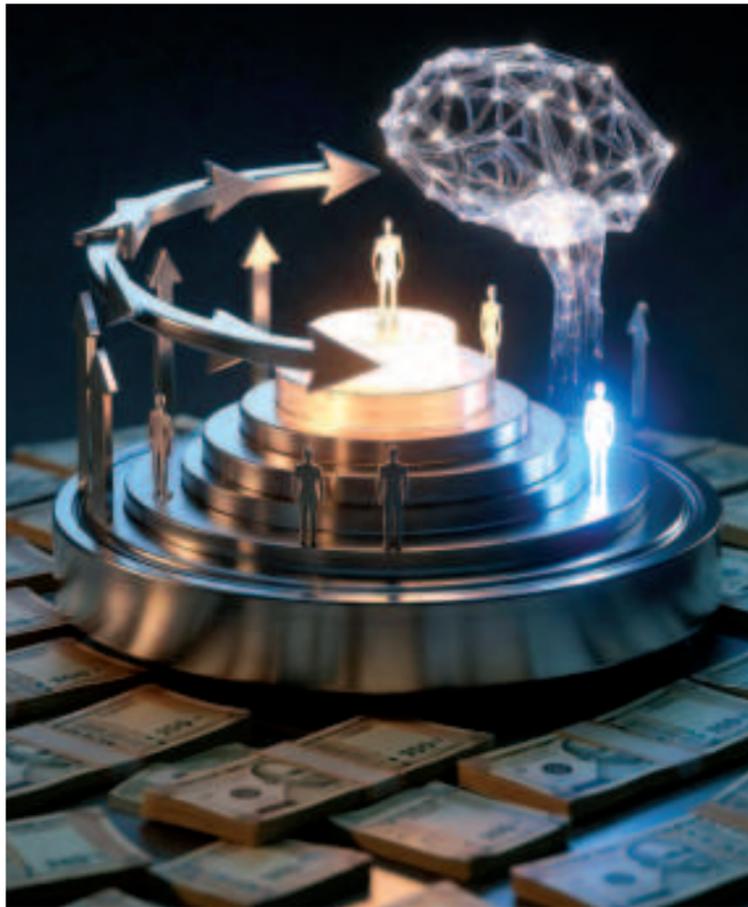
Long-term incentives have become essential for retaining high-impact talent. Employee stock ownership plan (ESOP) adoption has risen to roughly 78 per cent, and more organisations now operate multiple long-term incentive (LTI) plans to balance retention, ownership and performance alignment.

Time-bound allowances and differentiated long-term incentives are becoming preferred mechanisms to attract and retain critical digital and AI-led skills without permanently inflating fixed pay, representing a more deliberate approach to attrition and retention management.

Stabilisation of talent movement

Attrition is gradually normalising, declining to 16.4 per cent in 2025, yet voluntary exits still exceed 80 per cent. Even in a cooled market, employees continue to make intentional choices about their careers, prioritising growth, flexibility and cultures that feel fair and inclusive. Leaders are responding with stronger internal mobility, clearer career paths and targeted retention levers that balance cost discipline with capability preservation.

Total rewards reimagined: Flexibility and personalisation are an-



Time-bound allowances and differentiated long-term incentives are becoming preferred mechanisms to attract and retain critical digital and AI-led skills without permanently inflating fixed pay, representing a more deliberate approach to attrition and retention management

choring experiences.

The EY Future of Pay report suggests that hybrid work is now the operating baseline for 52 per cent of organisations, but execution gaps persist – from productivity expectations to perceived fairness.

At the same time, the benefits landscape is diversifying. Personalised, life-stage-aware benefits – such as mental health support, financial wellbeing and inclusive healthcare – are reshaping the employee value equation.

Employees today evaluate organisations not only by their pay but also by the experience, balance and support embedded in the broader rewards ecosystem.

92 per cent	78 per cent	3-4x	65 per cent	2.3x
Employers offering mental health support	Employees prefer personalized benefits	Wellness program ROI reported	Employers offering flexible benefits	Higher satisfaction with flexible benefits

Looking ahead: Pay becomes strategic

2026 challenges leaders to rethink compensation not as a cost but as capital, deployed deliberately to build capability, inspire performance and shape culture. The organisations that lead will be those that treat rewards as a strategic system: transparent in design, dynamic in execution and deeply aligned with purpose and long-term value. **BI**

The author is Partner, People Advisory Services, EY India



Warner Bros set to go to Paramount

Netflix withdraws its bid as the deal valuation ascends to a staggering \$111 bn



Blitz BUREAU

Netflix has backed away from its proposal to buy Warner Bros Discovery, clearing the way for Paramount Skydance to win a months-long battle for one of Hollywood's most storied studios in a deal worth around \$111bn (£82.2bn), according to a BBC report.

Warner Bros, which put itself up for sale last year, last week said Paramount's latest bid was "superior" to the one from Netflix, which in turn refused to raise its offer.

Netflix executives say they have declined to match Paramount's bid as "the deal is no longer financially attractive" at that price.

The buyer would gain control of the iconic studio along with its films and media networks - a takeover that could significantly reshape the media landscape.

Last December, Warner Bros agreed to a takeover offer from Netflix for some of its assets, in a deal worth roughly \$82bn (£61bn) including debt.

Paramount then made a rival proposal, which was rebuffed by Warner Bros, but an increased offer was made earlier last week, boosted by \$1 per share.

"The transaction we negotiated would have created shareholder value with a clear path to regulatory approval," Netflix co-chief executives Ted Sarandos and Greg Peters said in a statement. "However, we've always been disciplined."

"This transaction was always a 'nice to have' at the right price, not a 'must have' at any price," the Netflix executives added.

The announcement came just hours after Sarandos had visited the White House on February 25.

It caps off a dramatic months-long saga that - if approved by regulators - is likely to reshape Hollywood.

But according to California Attorney General Rob Bonta, the potential merger "is not a done deal".

"These two Hollywood titans have not cleared regula-

tory scrutiny - the California Department of Justice has an open investigation, and we intend to be vigorous in our review," he wrote in a social media post.

Bonta had said earlier in February that his office would review any deal involving Warner Bros as the entertainment industry represents a "critical sector" for California's economy.

Paramount would also need approval from the US Department of Justice as well as European regulators.

A deal between Paramount and Warner Bros could hold serious ramifications for the future of one of the US's biggest news brands - CNN. Warner Bros is the network's parent company.

Paramount, which is looking to transform itself into a Hollywood heavyweight, is backed by tech billionaire Larry Ellison and led by his son David.

The funding of Paramount's offer has drawn scrutiny, in part over the close ties between US President Donald Trump and Larry Ellison, a major Republican donor.

Trump has frequently attacked the news network over its reporting of his policies. He said in December that he believed CNN should be sold as part of any Warner Bros deal. He called the people running CNN "corrupt or incompetent" and said they should not be entrusted to run the network.

CNN head Mark Thompson sent an email to employees as news spread of the all-but-assured Paramount deal, telling workers

to not "jump to conclusions about the future until we know more", US media reported.

Paramount's initial hostile bid was also supported by Trump's son-in-law and adviser Jared Kushner through his investment firm, raising concerns about the President's influence over the deal.

Kushner's firm, Affinity Partners, backed away in December amid scrutiny over the deal.

Paramount's 2025 merger with Skydance also led to scrutiny amid negotiations with the Trump administration's Federal Communications Commission, which had to sign off on the deal.

Among the concessions made was Paramount's \$16m settlement on behalf of CBS News. Trump had sued the network over a "60 Minutes" interview with former vice president Kamala Harris, claiming that the network had engaged in election interference in the way the programme was edited.

The two studio's merger later resulted in leadership shakeups and layoffs at CBS News.

Last week, chief executive David Ellison welcomed the Warner Bros board's decision in favour of Paramount's sweetened offer. The proposal, he said in a statement, offers Warner Bros shareholders "superior value, certainty and speed to closing".

If Paramount's deal is approved by regulators, the company would fold Warner Bros' HBO Max streaming customers into its portfolio. It would also take ownership of CNN, the Food Network and a range of sports offerings.

Paramount's traditional networks already include brands such as Nickelodeon, CBS and Comedy Central.

Many in Hollywood have viewed the bidding war between Netflix and Paramount as a battle with no good winner.

Critics of a deal with Netflix voiced concern that the storied movie studio would be lost to the Silicon Valley streaming titan, paving the way for the depletion of cinema.

But a merger with Paramount, which has touted itself among the last standing movie studios in Hollywood, also left critics unnerved over the company's perceived political connections to the Trump administration - a concern that has also riled the media landscape over the future of CNN.

Across the board, the selling of Warner Bros will have massive ramifications across tinsel town, with all but assured cuts to staff in a city that has been marred by continued production cuts.

In December, Warner Bros said it had agreed to sell its film and streaming divisions, including HBO, to Netflix in a deal worth \$27.75 per share or roughly \$82bn (£61bn), including debt.

Warner Bros said it would spin-off the remainder of its business, including traditional television networks and the news channel CNN, as an independent company.

But in a last-ditch push, Paramount last week agreed to pay more for a Warner Bros takeover. The company offered \$31 per share in cash, up from \$30 per share to take over the entire company.

It also agreed to pay \$7bn should the deal fall through and cover the \$2.8bn fee Warner Bros had agreed to pay Netflix in the event of a break-up of the merger plan. **B**

Warner Bros, which put itself up for sale last year, last week said Paramount's latest bid was "superior" to the one from Netflix, which in turn refused to raise its offer



Promote mediation: CJJ

It has emerged as a preferred mode of dispute resolution'

Blitz BUREAU

Chief Justice of India Justice Surya Kant on March 1 called on the judiciary to promote mediation, saying it is gaining wider acceptance as an effective tool for resolution of disputes, reported IANS.

Underlining the need for building a "mediation culture", he stated mediation was no longer an alternative method but has emerged as a preferred mode of dispute resolution.

He was delivering the keynote address at a State-level symposium on 'Mediation: Dialogue as Cornerstone of Justice', organised by the AP State Legal Services Authority (APSLA), in Vijayawada.

He noted the process of mediation had a statutory backup in the Mediation Act of 2023, and the resolutions passed by the mediators were enforceable decrees.

The CJJ said that mediation is an excellent way to reduce the caseload in the courts and resolve disputes quickly and in a friendly environment.

He said mediation had become ex-



tremely popular in foreign countries as the method was less costly and less time-consuming compared to arbitration.

He also urged the Bar Associa-

tions to make people adopt mediation as a means to settling their disputes.

The CJJ said that people in dispute should have complete faith in

the mediator. Due to the trust people have in the judiciary, mediation through the courts has high priority.

"Mediation is present in every aspect of our lives. Even major problems are being solved through mediation," he said, adding that commercial problems are also being solved through this process.

Stating that temperament, conduct and integrity of mediators play a crucial role in the outcomes, the CJJ underscored the importance of professional mediators learning the nuances of the whole process of mediation for achieving the desired results.

He noted that mediation has been used in India since ancient times to resolve problems. He believes that mediation is in the DNA of India and has a history of thousands of years. He cited the attempt made by Lord Krishna to bring about peace between the Pandavas and the Kauravas as the first formal mediation.

Supreme Court judge Justice Jitendra Kumar Maheshwari said relations can be preserved by resolving disputes through negotiations and mutual consent, not through courts. He said that mediation has been given legality through the 'Mediation Act - 2023', which will reduce the burden on the judiciary. **B**

SC flags use of AI-generated 'non-existent' judgments

Blitz BUREAU

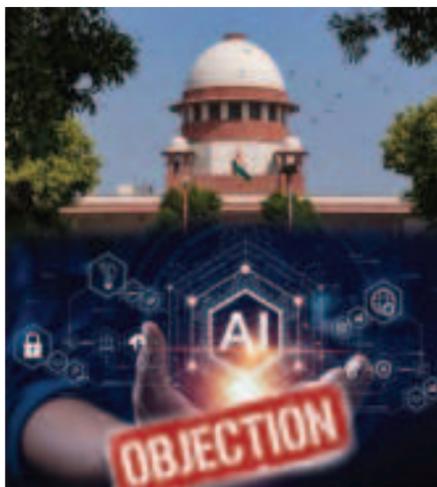
The Supreme Court has taken serious note of a trial court allegedly relying on Artificial Intelligence (AI)-generated "non-existent and fake" judgments while deciding a civil dispute, observing that such conduct has a direct bearing on the integrity of the adjudicatory process and may amount to misconduct.

A Bench comprising Justices PS Narasimha and Alok Aradhe said the matter raised "considerable institutional concern, not because of the decision that was taken on the merits of the case, but about the process of adjudication and determination".

The court was hearing a special leave petition (SLP) challenging a judgment of the Andhra Pradesh High Court, which had upheld a trial court order in a property dispute involving a suit for injunction.

During the pendency of the suit, the trial court had appointed an Advocate Commissioner to record the physical features of the property. The petitioners had objected to the Commissioner's report, but the trial court rejected their objections while relying on several Supreme Court precedents.

Before the Andhra Pradesh HC, the petitioners contended that the judgments cited and relied upon by the trial court were "non-existent and fake orders".



The HC noted that the cited decisions were AI-generated and issued a word of caution, but proceeded to decide the matter on the merits and dismissed the civil revision petition.

Taking cognisance of the issue, the Supreme Court expressed concern over the reliance on "non-existent and fake" judgments by the trial court in judicial decision-making.

"We take cognisance of the Trial Court deploying AI-generated non-existing, fake or synthetic alleged judgments and seek to examine its consequences and accountability as it has a direct bearing on the integrity of the adjudicatory process," the Bench said.

"At the outset, we must declare that a decision based on such non-existent and fake alleged judgments is not an error in the decision-making. It would be a misconduct, and legal consequence shall follow," the apex court added. **B**

'Dr' for physiotherapists: Kerala HC admits appeals

Blitz BUREAU

The Kerala High Court has admitted appeals filed by the Indian Medical Association (IMA) and the Indian Association of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation (IAPMR) challenging a recent Single Bench ruling that permitted physiotherapists, along with medical practitioners, to use the prefix "Dr." before their names, reported IANS.

A Division Bench comprising Justice Sushrut Arvind Dharmadhikari and Justice PV Balakrishnan issued notice to the respondents after hearing preliminary submissions and decided that the matter warrants detailed consideration.

The controversy stems from a Single Bench decision that allowed physiotherapists to use the "Dr." prefix, a move opposed by sections of the medical fraternity.

The IMA and IAPMR have contended that the usage of the title by non-MBBS practitioners could lead to confusion among patients and blur professional distinctions in clinical settings.

When the appeals were taken up, the Division Bench had orally observed that determining who is

entitled to use the prefix "Dr." may not fall strictly within the judiciary's domain.

The Bench remarked that such a policy decision ought to be considered by the government or the legislature, which can lay down clear regulatory norms after examining professional qualifications and statutory frameworks.

The matter was adjourned at that



stage to enable senior counsel appearing for the appellants to obtain instructions on whether to press the appeals in light of the court's observations.

On March 2, the counsel informed the Bench that the appellants wished to proceed on merits, raising all legal and regulatory grounds available to them.

Taking note of the submission, the court concluded that the issues involved require comprehensive arguments and formal adjudication. **B**

Blitz BUREAU

The US-Israeli campaign against Iran entered its sixth day on March 5 with what residents described as even more intensive bombing, while Iran vowed to retaliate anywhere for a US attack on a ship thousands of miles from the battle zone.

Inside Iran, the abrupt postponement of a planned three days of mourning for Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei who was killed on February 28 interrupted plans to swiftly anoint the hard-liner's son as his successor.

"Today is worse than yesterday. They are striking northern Tehran. We have nowhere to go. It is like a war zone. Help us," said Mohammadreza, 36, by phone from Tehran, with a shaky voice as explosions rang out from what Israel described as its latest wave of strikes on Iranian government targets.

The economic fallout of the campaign intensified, with countries around the world cut off from a fifth of global supplies of oil and liquefied natural gas.

Iran vowed to take revenge for a U.S. torpedo attack on an Iranian warship off

Engulfed in war

- US-Israel continue pounding Iran
- Iran targets Israel, Gulf states
- Khamenei's son identified successor



the coast of Sri Lanka, which killed more than 80 sailors thousands of miles from the battle zone.

Iran's Foreign Minister said the ship

had been struck without warning in international waters.

The body of Khamenei had been due to lie in state in a Tehran prayer

hall from March 4 evening to launch three days of mourning.

But the memorial, expected to draw many thousands of mourners to the streets, was abruptly and indefinitely postponed shortly before it was due to begin.

In the hours before announcing the delay, Iranian officials had said they were close to naming Khamenei's successor, and that the leading candidate was his son Mojtaba, a powerful hard-liner whose selection would be a strong gesture of defiance.

The postponement of the memorial was said to be motivated in part by fear of assassination of those attending the event while Israeli and U.S. warplanes remain in the skies.

Israel has said it would consider any replacement for Khamenei who continued hostile policies an immediate target to be killed.

The war has had global economic impact, above all from the interruption to tanker traffic through the Strait of Hormuz, where a fifth of global oil and liquefied natural gas flows along Iran's coast.

Iran's Revolutionary Guards said they had hit a US tanker in the northern part of the Gulf and the vessel was on fire, the latest of numerous reports of Iranian attacks on ships. Passage through the Strait of Hormuz would be under the control of the Islamic Republic in time of war, the Guards said.

In Washington late on March 4, Republican senators blocked a motion aimed at stopping the U.S. air campaign against Iran and requiring that military action be authorized by the Congress. **BI**

UN for diplomacy

Blitz BUREAU

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has carried out a round of diplomacy with leaders in the Gulf region as the world organisation expressed concern over the

global economic fallout of the Iran war.

The UN is "worried about the negative impacts that the military activities in the region as a whole could have on the world economy", Guterres' Spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on March 2.



"Those impacts, as they often do, hit the most vulnerable the hardest", he said. Oil prices, most sensi-

tive to instability in the Gulf region, rose by 5.63 per cent on March 2, and a closure of navigation in the Gulf of Hormuz could further impact energy prices.

Guterres is "particularly worried" about "the expansion of attacks to countries that were not involved in the initial attacks", Dujarric said. **BI**

Men in charge Interim Council to run govt

Blitz BUREAU

Iranian authorities have announced a three-member interim leadership council to run the government after the killing of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in Israeli-United States strikes.

Iran's government pledged to avenge the killing on February 28 of Khamenei, who had been in power for nearly four decades. Tehran has since targeted Israeli and US assets located across Gulf countries in retaliatory strikes.

While US President Donald Trump has said he wants a change in Iran's government, the religious leaders of Iran moved on March 1 to start the process of choosing Khamenei's successor.

Article 111 of Iran's Constitution authorises a temporary leadership council to assume the supreme leader's duties until a successor is elected. That council will consist of President Masoud Pezeshkian; the chief justice of the Supreme Court, Gholam-Hossein Mohseni-Ejei; and a member of the Guardian Council,



Ayatollah Alireza Araf.

Araf has been a member of the Guardian Council since 2019. Its members are appointed by the supreme leader. It is an Islamic legal authority that vets Iran's laws and policies to make sure they conform to Islamic principles.

Araf also serves as the deputy chairman of the Assembly of Experts, the body responsible for overseeing the selection of the supreme leader.

Pezeshkian, 71, is a reformist politician and heart surgeon who served in the army during the Iran-Iraq War. He was elected president in the 2024 elections.

Mohseni-Ejei is a senior religious leader and has headed the judiciary since Khamenei appointed him to the post in July 2021. **BI**

Agony and ecstasy Celebrations, protests in Iran

Blitz BUREAU

Iranians woke up on March 1 to confirm that Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei - who ruled Iran for more than 36 years - was killed in US and Israeli strikes launched a day ago.

"I can't believe it. It's like when they give you such good news that you don't even know what to do,"

one person in the capital Tehran told BBC Persian.

A video clip shows teenagers at a school dancing and chanting that the strikes have happened, adding, "I love Trump."

In the town of Galleh Dar in southern Iran, people knocked down a monument commemorating Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who founded the Islamic Republic in 1979.

Others, however, fear that air strikes alone may not bring about the regime's collapse. They worry it could survive and, in response, become even more brutal towards its own people.

Many Iranians reacted with anger after state media reported that an Israeli strike on a girls' school killed dozens of people.

At a rally mourning Khamenei's death in Tehran, one man said the news had filled him with hatred "towards Israel and America. We must avenge the blood of the leader."

Some Iranians also grieved over the death of Khamenei.

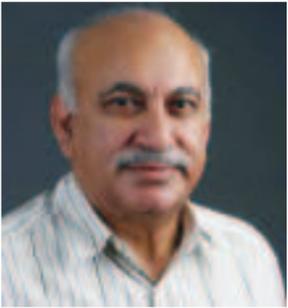


Atousa Mirzade, a primary school teacher, said she could not be happy about the country's leader being killed by a foreign power.

Videos circulating on social media show people in Iran near the blast sites running in panic, with the sounds of screams and crying in the background. **BI**

INSIGHT

SPECIAL



MJ Akbar

Pakistan's Prisoner

The descent and despair of Imran Khan

Honesty is not quite the best policy in high society. It prefers scepticism. For the local Anglophiles whose day began in the evenings of Lahore, the classical city where Imran Ahmed Khan Niazi grew up, honesty was gauche, and naive. That made Imran Khan a paradox.

Born into privilege but deeply rooted in a Pashto culture inherited from his Niazi tribe, where honour is a defining virtue, he was temperamentally transparent. He had nothing to hide. Deceit invited disdain. The cultural affinities of the English-speaking elite, he said, had created a distance between the ruling class and the people. His presence was always in competitive demand at parties held on the snob heights of Lahore's high society, but he was never quite 'one of us'. He remained an outsider with an entrance ticket to the inside.

Imran means exalted, and that was his destiny. Success was in his genes. He was a star of his school cricket team at Lahore's Aitchison College and then a Blue at Keble College Oxford. He was named captain of Oxford in 1974. Despite family wealth, looks and talent, cricket in the blood, and a cousin Javed Burki who scored a Test century against England, fluttering hearts on the sofa wherever he went, he forgot to learn snobbery.

Always the cynosure

It was not unusual to hear, as I once did at a party in Lahore, a young lady with flickering eyelids put it about that she had just sniffed away an offer of marriage from Pakistan's most eligible bachelor. There were oohs and aahs, and many a well-done. The Khan might rule the playing fields across the British sports empire, but he was always kept at a fling distance in romance, never close enough for marriage. This young lady became a trifle invisible when Imran arrived later. The gossip reached him. He replied with a bemused smile. Imran was ever bemused and benign, never mean or malign. He was always happy to move away from the central whirl for a quiet chat, all too often interrupted by a socialite seeking his attention.

He was confidently sober at a time when high society was very high indeed and affability was measured in pegs or puffs. Imran Khan,



He was confidently sober at a time when high society was very high indeed and affability was measured in pegs or puffs. Imran Khan, always the cynosure, lived by his own rules

always the cynosure, lived by his own rules. He never drank alcohol or did drugs. He did not consider religion a weakness of proles; he was a believer, and proud to be so. As he writes in his memoir, his parents were "easy-going Muslims".

His father took him to the mosque every Friday. They fasted during Ramadan. The family joined the annual urs to the shrine of a mystic Sufi pir, Mian Mir Sahib, legendary for both Muslims and Sikhs, where music and dancing were part of devotion.

"That is the kind of Islam that the austere Wahhabi branch, which has influenced the Taliban, opposes," writes Imran in *Pakistan: A Personal History*. The young Imran had two questions about paradise: "Would I be able to play cricket in heaven? And would I be able to shoot?"

An alternative career

Public life was an alternative career path after his stupendous success as a cricketer and captain. If the ascent was glorious, the peak was heroic. He was nearly 40 when in 1992 he led Pakistan to an impossible victory in the cricket World Cup.

What the world did not know was that he played the tournament with a ruptured cartilage in his shoulder. For six months after that tour he could not lift a glass with his right hand without numbing pain.

His second life began with fund-raising for the construction of the Shaukat Khanum Memorial Hospital, named after his beloved mother, who had died of cancer. His close friend Princess Diana would later visit the hospital, which became functional in 1994. The next year he married Jemima Goldsmith. It was a brave decision, given the hardline attitude of fundamentalists, for Jemima was Jewish, daughter of Sir James Goldsmith. (London's most exclusive nightclub Annabel's was named after her mother.)

Imran Khan was a man of deep convictions. That was a year in which nothing could go wrong. In November 1995 Ian Botham sued Imran for libel for allegedly calling him and Allan Lamb "uneducated racists". The trial came up before a biased judge.

The cost of failure was bankruptcy, given legal fees in London. As Imran Khan has written, defeat would have forced him to ask his father-in-law for money, a prospect he hated. Imran Khan won.

I first met Imran in the 1980s, and we kept in touch. Imran Khan had an obvious interest in politics and wanted to understand power from a nonpartisan perspective. He had seen the beginning of military dictatorship under General Ayub Khan; the drunken disaster of his successor General Yahya Khan; the meteoric streak and burnout of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto; the steely decade of General Zia-ul-Haq; and the turbulent tenures of the next generation, Nawaz Sharif and Bhutto's daughter, his Oxford contemporary Benazir. Imran Khan believed that he could save the country he loved through the institutionalisation of democracy and he was the right person to deliver the change. **B**

(To be continued)

(The writer is a veteran journalist, author of several books, and a former minister in the Indian Government)

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