

# Parties seek one or two-phase Bengal polls; CEC warns of zero tolerance for violence

**KOLKATA:** Several political parties in West Bengal on Monday suggested that the upcoming assembly polls be held in one or two phases, as the Election Commission warned of strict action against any lapse in law and order and asserted zero tolerance towards poll-related violence.

The suggestion on the phases was made during a meeting between the full bench of the Election Commission and representatives of political parties in Kolkata as part of the poll panel's review of preparedness for the forthcoming assembly polls likely to be held in April.

Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar, accompanied by Election Com-

missioners Sukhbir Singh Sandhu and Vivek Joshi, met representatives of the TMC, BJP, CPI(M), Congress, AAP, National People's Party and the Forward Bloc, among others.

"A wide range of issues concerning the conduct of elections in the state were discussed. Several parties suggested that the elections be held in one or two phases and assured their cooperation in ensuring that the polls remain peaceful," a senior EC official said.

The parties urged the Commission to take stringent measures to curb intimidation of voters and activities of anti-social elements during the polls.

"They emphasised the need



for strong security arrangements, including deployment of Central Armed Police Forces in adequate numbers, to curb violence and ensure that voters can cast their ballots without fear," the official said.

Some parties also raised concerns about the possible use of crude bombs, illegal firearms and the influence of money and muscle power during the elections.

Responding to the concerns,

Kumar assured them that elections in India are conducted strictly in accordance with the law and that all necessary steps would be taken to ensure a free, fair and transparent poll in the state.

"The Election Commission has zero tolerance towards violence and intimidation of either electors or election staff. We will not leave any stone unturned in ensuring impartial, transparent and peaceful

elections," he said.

Kumar also reiterated that the special intensive revision (SIR) of electoral rolls had been conducted in a transparent manner and said Forms 6, 7 and 8 can still be filed for inclusion, deletion or correction of entries.

Later, the Commission held a detailed review meeting with divisional commissioners, commissioners of police, district election officers, su-

perintendents of police and nodal officers of enforcement agencies on various aspects of election preparedness, including law and order, election logistics, EVM management, voter awareness and seizure of illegal inducements.

The Commission directed enforcement agencies to act with complete impartiality and clamp down firmly on all inducement-related activities.

During the review meeting, the CEC warned that any negligence in maintaining law and order or monitoring illegal activities in the run-up to the polls would invite strict action, officials said.

According to officials, Kumar also questioned the absence

of a Narcotics Advisory Committee in West Bengal and asked an explanation from the state police.

When Director General (Law and Order) Vineet Goyal attempted to respond, he was asked to ensure immediate corrective steps, they said.

The Commission also pulled up several enforcement agencies, including the excise department, the narcotics authorities, the Airports Authority of India and the Reserve Bank of India, over alleged lapses.

Officials said the excise department was asked to ensure that the production and distribution of intoxicants do not increase in the run-up to the polls and to prevent illegal liquor production in border

areas.

The RBI was also asked to keep a strict vigil on financial transactions across districts to ensure that unaccounted cash is not used to influence voters during the election period.

District election officers and superintendents of police from various districts also made presentations on election preparedness and challenges in their jurisdictions, particularly in districts sharing borders with other states and neighbouring countries.

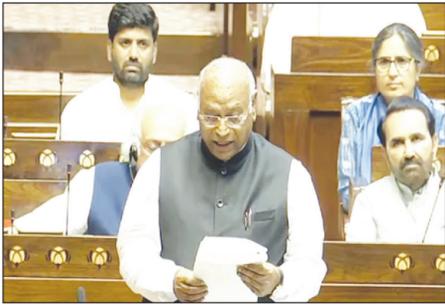
The Commission also directed officials to ensure assured minimum facilities such as ramps, wheelchairs and drinking water at all polling stations for the convenience of voters.

## Kharge demands discussion on India's energy security

**NEW DELHI:** Congress President and Leader of the Opposition in the Rajya Sabha Mallikarjun Kharge on Monday demanded a short-duration discussion in the Upper House on emerging challenges to India's energy security amid the West Asia conflict.

When the House met for the day, Kharge mentioned the Rs 60 per cylinder hike in domestic cooking gas LPG prices and the Rs 115 increase in commercial gas rates, among the justifications he gave for admission of his notice under rule 176.

The cooking gas price increase has burdened the poor, he said. "Therefore, I urge you to please allow a short-duration discussion on this important



subject."

Chairman CP Radhakrishnan said he will come back after giving due consideration to the notice.

Kharge said the fast-evolving geopolitical situation in West Asia is no longer confined to the region, and its impact is clearly visible on India's energy security

as well.

The conflict is now impacting India's image and prestige, he said, adding that the country imports about 55 per cent of its crude oil needs from the region.

"The conflict is now directly impacting the country's economic stability," he

said. Importantly, about 1 crore Indians work in the region, and there are reports of some Indians being killed or missing in the ongoing conflict, he said.

"India received about USD 51 billion in remittances from Gulf countries," Kharge made the submission just before External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar made a suo motu statement on the evolving situation in West Asia.

The Congress and other opposition parties protested against him making the statement, saying a short-duration discussion should precede such a move.

They shouted slogans during Jaishankar's statement before staging a walkout at the end of the statement.

## 'First Announce, Subsequently Think': Cong's swipe at govt on VB G RAM G Act

**NEW DELHI:** The Congress on Monday took a swipe at the government over the implementation of the new VB G RAM G Act, saying details were still being worked out and this was a perfect example of the Modi government's 'FAST' approach to governance -- 'First Announce, Subsequently Think'.

Congress general secretary in-charge communications Jairam Ramesh shared on X a media report which claimed that the Viksit Bharat - Guarantee for Rozgar and Aajeevika Mission (Gramin) Bill, 2025 -- passed by Parliament within two days of its introduction on December 16 last year -- has several steps to clear before it can be implemented.

The new rural employment legislation replaces the Congress-led UPA government's flagship scheme, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 (MGNREGA).

In a post on X, Ramesh said, "In December, 2025, in just two days, the Modi government bulldozed the repeal of MGNREGA through the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha. No consultations with states took place. No legislative scrutiny by the Standing Committee concerned took place."

"It was said that extreme urgency for the repeal and its substitution by the Viksit Bharat Grameen Rozgar and Aajeevika Mission Guarantee Act was because the new law was to be implemented from April 1, 2026," he said.

It turns out that the consultations that should have happened earlier are taking place now, Ramesh said, adding that details are still being worked out.

"A perfect example of the Modi Government's FAST approach to governance -- First Announce, Subsequently Think!" Ramesh said.

## 'Saffron crowd' wants to swallow TN, DMK won't allow it: Stalin



**TIRUCHIRAPPALLI:** Ruling DMK president and Chief Minister M K Stalin on Monday alleged that a "saffron crowd" wanted to "swallow" the southern state, but asserted his party would not allow that. Addressing a mega party conference here, he also launched a scathing attack against his rival, AIADMK chief Edappadi K Palaniswami, accusing him of becoming a "slave" to the BJP in order to become CM.

Further, with Bihar CM Nitish Kumar set to step down, he said that state never had a BJP CM, and that after winning polls by showcasing the JD (U) veteran, "now they have sidelined him".

A 'Saffron crowd,' an obvious reference to the BJP, wants to "swallow Tamil Nadu". DMK will not allow it to happen, the CM asserted. To win over the state, BJP was gradually "swallowing" AIADMK, he alleged.

## No framework or parameter to designate any city as 'heritage city' in India: Govt

**NEW DELHI:** There is "no framework or parameter" to designate any city as a 'heritage city' in India, the government informed the Parliament on Monday.

Union Culture Minister Gajendra Singh Shekhawat said this in a written response to a query in Lok Sabha.

Jhunjhunu MP Brijendra Singh Ola asked him whether the government has designated any 'town/city in Jhunjhunu parliamentary constituency of Rajasthan as a heritage city'.

Rajasthan's Jhunjhunu district is located in the Shekhawati region, known for its old havelis, carrying murals and frescoes which attract a lot of tourists.

The Union culture minister in his response further said the Archaeological Survey of India is mandated to protect and maintain the monuments and archaeological sites of national importance as per the AMSAR (Ancient Monuments and

Archaeological Sites and Remains) Act, 1958.

"Government of India has not designated any town/city in Jhunjhunu Parliamentary Constituency as a heritage city," he said.

Shekhawat was also asked whether the government, UNESCO or any other international organisation has laid down any criteria or parameters for designating a city as a heritage city.

"No, sir. There are no criteria/parameters for designating a city as a heritage city. either by the government or by UNESCO," he said.

Shekhawat added, "There is no framework/parameters to designate any city as Heritage City in India."

However, the historic city of Ahmadabad (in 2017) and Walled City of Jaipur in Rajasthan (in 2019) have been inscribed on the List of World Heritage Sites, under the UNESCO's World Heritage Convention, 1972, he said.

## Tech, policy, human behaviour to shape India's mobility future: NITI Aayog member V K Saraswat

**BENGALURU:** NITI Aayog member V K Saraswat on Monday emphasised that India's future mobility landscape will be shaped by a combination of technology, policy, economics, environmental considerations, and human behaviour.

He also highlighted the role of digital innovation in India's mobility transformation.

Speaking at the Japan-India Mobility Summit 2026 here, Saraswat said India and Japan bring deeply complementary strengths to the future of mobility.

While India offers scale, market growth and expanding capabilities in software and AI, Japan contributes advanced technological depth, engineering excellence and global leadership in safety and mobility systems.

"The next phase of our partnership should move beyond infrastructure towards technology co-creation - from hydrogen mobility and smart transport systems to next-generation vehicles and integrated mobility plat-

forms," he said.

Saraswat stressed that mobility transformation today is not merely a sectoral reform; it represents a structural redesign of energy, infrastructure, data and industry.

"Through pragmatic pathways and sustained collaboration, India and Japan can together build scalable solutions that accelerate decarbonisation while setting a global benchmark for sustainable mobility," he said.

Saraswat also underscored that India's mobility transition must address the needs of 1.4 billion people, while reducing logistics costs--which currently account for 13-14 per cent of GDP--and supporting rapid urbanisation.

He stressed that no single technology or fuel can meet the mobility needs of a country on India's scale.

"India has therefore adopted a diversified and technology-neutral strategy that includes battery electric vehicles, strong and plug-in hybrids, ethanol blending, compressed biogas, LNG, green



hydrogen for heavy mobility, and sustainable aviation fuels," Saraswat said.

He noted that electrification is already gaining momentum in India, with electric vehicles accounting for approximately 8 per cent of total vehicle sales in 2025. Electric three-wheelers represent about 16 per cent of the segment, while electric buses account for around 7 per cent of annual bus sales.

Saraswat said that initiatives such as intelligent transport systems, digital traffic management, unified digital payment systems,

and the FASTag electronic toll collection system--which has achieved nearly 98 per cent penetration--are enabling seamless and efficient mobility across the country.

According to an official statement, the summit brought together policymakers, industry leaders, and technology innovators to advance collaboration in building the future of sustainable mobility.

The Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) of Japan, the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO), and the New Energy and Industrial Technology Development Organization (NEDO), in close collaboration with NITI Aayog and key industry players underscored how the two countries' complementary strengths - India's scale, growing digital capabilities and manufacturing ambition, and Japan's technological depth and engineering excellence, can accelerate innovation across mobility systems.

Speaking at the summit, Keisuke

Hosonuma, Director for Automotive International Trade Policy, METI said, The transition to carbon neutrality in mobility will not follow a single pathway. Different markets require different solutions based on their economic realities, policy environments and consumer preferences.

"Japan's multipathway strategy therefore, combines electrification, hybrid technologies and next-generation energy solutions while strengthening international collaboration. India is a critical partner in this journey, offering immense opportunities for innovation, scale and sustainable mobility development," he added.

The summit focused on strengthening cooperation across advanced mobility technologies, energy transition pathways, intelligent transport systems, and next-generation mobility while exploring new opportunities in hydrogen mobility, smart urban transport networks, and integrated multimodal infrastructure, the statement said.

## BJP claims it helps OBCs but its govt has given nothing to backward classes: Rahul

**NEW DELHI:** Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Monday said the BJP claims that it helps the OBCs but in reality, their government has given nothing to the backward classes, urging women workers of his party's OBC Department to take this message to the people.

Gandhi also said the caste census is a critical issue and has to be done in the right manner.

Addressing the OBC Congress Women's National Wing Convention at the party's Indira Bhawan headquarters here, Gandhi, Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha, alleged that Prime Minister Narendra Modi is 100 per cent "compromised" and he is being "blackmailed" by the US.

"Modi has struck a deal with America and opened up India's market for them. America has large farms where work is done on a massive scale with machines.

"In such a scenario, will India's farmers be able to compete with America's farmers? It is the government's job to protect the country's farmers, but Modi promised Trump that we will buy American goods worth 9 lakh crore rupees every year," he said.

If this happens, what will become of India's farmers and traders, Gandhi asked.

"Narendra Modi is being blackmailed, which is why he has surrendered before Trump. Cases are



running against Anil Ambani, but he is not being arrested, because he has all the information.

"If Anil Ambani opens his mouth, it will spell trouble for Modi ji. In such a situation, Narendra Modi is very troubled -- he is surrounded by Trump, Hardeep Puri, Anil Ambani, Epstein, Netanyahu," Gandhi said.

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar's speech was held in Parliament House on Monday but he did not even use the word Iran, Gandhi said. Making a suo motu statement in Parliament, Jaishankar told Parliament that New Delhi stood for maintaining the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all states in the region. He defended allowing the Iranian ship to dock at an Indian port as the right decision taken on humanitarian grounds.

Attacking the prime minister, Gandhi said, "America told Narendra

Modi -- we will tell you where to buy your oil from, and Modi said 'Yes, Sir' and agreed."

He alleged that a trade deal happened with America but India got nothing out of it.

"Meanwhile, America told Bangladesh -- if you buy cotton from us, we'll make the tax zero... This decision will destroy India's textile industry. Narendra Modi gives lots of speeches here, but he can't speak up in front of Trump," he alleged.

In his remarks to the women workers, Gandhi said the BJP claims that it helps the OBCs, but in reality, their government has given nothing to the backward classes.

"Therefore, you must take this message to the people. You must work together and organise to raise your voice," he told the women workers.

Further, Gandhi said Artificial Intelligence's fuel is 'data' and "if we want to run AI, it will run on data alone". He said the most essential thing today is 'data'. If America wants to compete with China, it is not possible without India's data, because India's population is very large. "This data is your capital, your future, which Narendra Modi has given away to America for free. So much has happened, but the media has not said a word," he said.

"Narendra Modi talks about AI, but he has handed over all the data to America. He is just fooling the country," he said.

## Rohit Shetty house firing case: Accused seeks bail for attending his marriage



**MUMBAI:** One of the 12 accused arrested in the filmmaker Rohit Shetty's house firing case on Monday sought temporary bail for attending his marriage in Agra, scheduled for March 11.

The accused, Ritik Yadav, requested interim relief after he was remanded to judicial custody by Maharashtra Control of Organised Crime Act (MCOCA) court judge Satyanarayan Navandar.

The plea, filed through advocate Dilip Shukla, stated that Yadav's wedding is scheduled on March 11 at his native place, Agra.

"The matter will be heard on Tuesday," Shukla said.

All 12 accused arrested in connection with the firing incident are currently in judicial custody. Yadav was among the seven accused, including



shooter Deepak Sharma, arrested on February 14 from Haryana and Uttar Pradesh.

At least five rounds were fired at the first floor of Shetty's nine-storey building in Juhu on February 1. One bullet struck the glass of a gym inside the building.

Lawrence Bishnoi gang member Shubham Lonkar has claimed responsibility for the incident in a social media post. Besides this case, he is also wanted in the NCP leader Baba Siddique murder case and the firing at Bollywood actor Salman Khan's residence in Bandra.

Police had invoked the stringent MCOCA against the accused involved in firing at Shetty's house, with the preliminary investigation suggesting that they intended to create terror in the city.

## Patna to get Rs 296-crore ULTraPOD transit system for govt buildings

**PATNA:** A ULTraPOD Personal Rapid Transit (PRT) system will be constructed at a cost of Rs 296 crore to improve connectivity among major government and administrative buildings in Patna, officials said on Monday.

The ULTraPOD (urban light transit pod) is an automated transit network that aims to provide seamless connectivity on a designated route.

According to a statement by the cabinet secretariat department of the Bihar government, Chief Secretary Pratayya Amrit held a key meeting with a team from Larsen & Toubro (L&T), which made a detailed presentation on the proposed system.

"The project will cost around Rs 296 crore, and the ULTraPOD track will stretch nearly 5 km, starting from Visvesvaraya Bhawan, passing through Vikas Bhawan and the Legislative Assembly building, and finally reaching the old Secretariat," it added.

The department aims to complete the construction of the ULTraPODs PRT within 15 months of administrative approval.

As part of the PRT system, the pods will operate without unscheduled halts and carry passengers directly to their destination stations, officials said.

"Under the plan, 59 pods will operate along the track, with each pod accommodating up to six passengers. Pods will be available at stations at an interval of seven seconds," the statement read.

In the initial phase, nine stations will be constructed, two of which will include parking facilities.