

## Karnataka CM Siddaramaiah accuses EC of 'bias', defends state guarantee schemes ahead of bypolls

**BENGALURU:** Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah has accused the EC of "double standards" and "bias" after it sought details on the state's guarantee schemes in Davanagere and Bagalkot districts, where bypolls are scheduled for Thursday.

In a post on 'X' on Wednesday, Siddaramaiah said the Election Commission of India had asked the Karnataka government for information on fund releases under five ongoing guarantee schemes in the constituencies going to polls.

The polls were necessitated following the deaths of senior Congress MLAs Shamanur Shivashankarappa and H Y Meti, respectively.

The schemes are Gruha Jyothi, which provides 200 units of free electricity to every household; Gruha Lakshmi, offering Rs 2,000 to women heading families; and Anna Bhagya, supplying 10 kg of rice per month to each member of BPL



families.

In addition, Yuva Nidhi grants Rs 3,000 to unemployed graduates and Rs 1,500 to unemployed diploma holders aged 18-25 for two years, while Shakti enables women to travel free of charge within Karnataka on government non-luxury buses.

Siddaramaiah alleged that the ECI had remained silent when similar cash transfer schemes were announced in Maharashtra and Bihar ahead of elections, calling the scrutiny of Karnataka's schemes a "clear case of bias".

"In states like Maharashtra and Bihar, cash transfer schemes were announced or fast-tracked just before elections, directly benefiting voters. Yet the ECI remained silent. This is not neutrality—it is complicity," he said.

The CM accused the BJP and NDA governments of "a double standard", noting that when they act, the ECI "looks the other way", but when Karnataka fulfils its promises, it faces "intense scrutiny".

He added that targeting the state's guarantee schemes is "not just political

but anti-poor, anti-women, and anti-Karnataka."

Siddaramaiah clarified that these schemes were not launched in connection with the bypolls but are ongoing programmes implemented as part of the Congress government's commitments from the 2023 Assembly elections.

Funds are transferred regularly to beneficiaries in a transparent and structured manner, he added.

"The guarantees are part of governance—a direct investment in human dignity, household stability, and economic participation, not inducement," he said.

He also accused the BJP of "hypocrisy", saying that while it criticises Karnataka's schemes as "freebies", it rolls out similar programmes in states it governs.

"The Karnataka model has set a benchmark for the country. What is deeply concerning, however, is the ECI's selective approach," Siddaramaiah added.

## CB arrest ATM fraud kingpin linked to over 50 cheating cases across Delhi

**NEW DELHI:** Delhi Police's Crime Branch has arrested the kingpin of an inter-state ATM fraud gang allegedly involved in more than 50 cases of cheating and attempted fraud across the city, an officer said today.

According to the police, the said kingpin of the gang, who has been identified as a 36-year-old man, Ravi Kumar Bharti, a native of Bihar's Gaya district, was apprehended by the Inter State Cell (ISC) following surveillance and technical analysis.

"He was the mastermind of the syndicate that was targeting ATM users, particularly the elderly," an officer said.

The case came to light after a complaint was filed by a Paschim Vihar resident who was allegedly duped of Rs 35,000 at an ATM in September last year.

"During the initial probe, two accused, Raushan Kumar and Pintu Kumar, were arrested, who later revealed Bharti's role as the kingpin orchestrating the fraud network," said Aditya Gautam, Deputy Commissioner of Police (Crime Branch).

The investigators in this case said that the gang employed a calculated modus operandi. "They would apply adhesive inside ATM card slots to trap cards and paste fake customer care numbers at kiosks," an officer said.

"When victims sought help, the accused would impersonate bank officials, trick them into revealing their PINs, and later retrieve the cards to withdraw money fraudulently," the officer added.

The DCP mentioned that the Crime Branch team tracked down Bharti's location to Chhattar-



pur's Rajpur Khurd, where they got their hands on him, following a targeted raid.

"Bharti is linked to at least 22 victims through technical evidence, with nine victims identified so far in four First Information Reports and five complaints registered across multiple police stations.

He was also previously involved in seven criminal cases," DCP Gautam added in his statement further.

A mobile phone and clothes used during the commission of the crimes have been confiscated, and further inquiry is ongoing to identify if any other gang members are involved in this case.

## Assam CM Himanta using police to intimidate rather than replying to charges on wife: Khera

**GUWAHATI:** Congress leader Pawan Khera on Wednesday accused Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma of "unleashing" the state police on him instead of addressing the opposition party's questions on multiple passports and foreign investments linked to the CM's wife.

In a recorded video addressed to the CM from an undisclosed location, Khera said, "Our party had only asked you some questions. Why do you want to silence us? We have asked questions; give us the replies."

He added, "Instead of replying, you are hurling abuses at everyone, you have put police behind me. I am not afraid of them. But I am avoiding them as I have more questions to ask."

Khera reiterated questions regarding a purported company registered in the US state of Wyoming in the name of Sarma's wife, Rini Bhuyan Sarma, claiming that the official company website lists a London address as primary and two other addresses in Dubai



and Dhaka.

He said the London address is also linked with 'Bhuyan Properties Ltd', according to UK government records.

Referring to his previous charge of Bhuyan Sarma possessing passports of Egypt and Antigua and Barbuda, and the golden visa of the UAE, Khera asked, "Did you or your agent or one of your family members use fake KYC documents to open these shell companies, buy properties?"

"It can be known only through investigation. You are in government, and you should probe these rather than trying to intimidate

us," Khera added.

Khera had brought the accusations against Bhuyan Sarma of possessing multiple passports and properties in foreign countries on April 5, which have been dismissed by the CM and his wife as false.

Bhuyan Sarma has also registered a police complaint here, based on which an Assam Police team had gone to Khera's New Delhi residence on Tuesday for questioning, but could not find him.

The Congress leader's charges surfaced ahead of the Assam Assembly elections scheduled for Thursday.

## Jaishankar to visit Mauritius for 9th Indian Ocean Conference

**NEW DELHI:** External Affairs Minister (EAM) Dr. S. Jaishankar will undertake an official visit to Mauritius to participate in the 9th Indian Ocean Conference, highlighting India's commitment to regional cooperation and strategic partnerships in the Indian Ocean region.

The EAM will be in the Republic of Mauritius on April 9-10 to take part in the conference. During the visit, he will meet with Mauritian leaders and review the entire spectrum of bilateral ties. He will also deliver the keynote address at the 9th Indian Ocean Conference.

## BJP rejects resignation demand of Arunachal CM over SC ordering CBI probe into award of contracts

**ITANAGAR:** The BJP in Arunachal Pradesh on Wednesday dismissed the Congress' demand for Chief Minister Pema Khandu's resignation, calling it premature and not grounded in any established legal principle.

The Congress raised the demand after the Supreme Court ordered a preliminary inquiry by the CBI into allegations surrounding the award of contracts to the CM's family members.

The state president of the ruling BJP, Kaling Moyong, said that the court's direction is part of the due judicial process and asserted that accountability must be determined through established legal procedures.

"No public functionary can be presumed culpable in the absence of established findings," Moyong said in a statement.

He said that the state government remains committed to extending full

cooperation to the agency tasked with conducting the inquiry.

The BJP leader also cautioned against drawing conclusions or attributing motives before the completion of the legal process, stating that such actions could undermine institutional integrity.

The party also defended Khandu's leadership, stating that he has consistently discharged his duties in accordance with the Constitution and law.

Moyong highlighted the government's efforts over the years to enhance transparency, streamline public procurement systems, and improve governance standards.

Terminating attempts to politicise the issue as "unfortunate", the party said converting an ongoing legal process into political insinuation does not contribute to fair and responsible democratic engagement.

The party expressed confidence

that the process initiated under the Supreme Court's directions will bring clarity to the matter.

The Supreme Court on Monday directed the CBI to register a preliminary inquiry within two weeks into the award of contracts for public works in Arunachal Pradesh to firms allegedly owned by family members of the CM. A bench headed by Justice Vikram Nath said the inquiry and consequential investigation, if any, shall cover the award and execution of public works, contracts and work orders in the state for the period from January 1, 2015, to December 31, 2025.

The Congress has demanded that the chief minister resign on moral grounds to pave the way for a fair, impartial and transparent inquiry into the matter.

Welcoming the order, the CM has said his government has nothing to hide.

## No forced purchases, cap on fee hike at 7.23 pc; uniform change barred for 5 yrs in Noida schools

**NOIDA:** Private schools in Gautam Buddha Nagar cannot compel students to purchase books, uniforms, shoes or other items from specific vendors and have to limit fee hikes to 7.23 per cent for the 2026-27 academic session, according to an official statement issued after a review meeting of the District Fee Regulatory Committee.

The decisions were taken at a meeting chaired by District Magistrate Medha Roopam on Tuesday under provisions of the Uttar Pradesh Self-Financed Independent Schools (Fee Regulation) Act, 2018, the statement said.

It said schools will not compel students to purchase books, uniforms, shoes or other items from specific vendors, and should encourage



the use of NCERT books for teaching and learning.

The administration has also prohibited schools from changing uniforms within a continuous period of five academic years. Any proposed change will require prior approval from the District Fee Regulatory

Committee, it added.

Schools have also been directed not to alter prescribed textbooks every year and to upload details of fee hikes on their official websites.

The statement said a fee increase equivalent to Consumer Price Index (CPI) plus 5 per cent has been approved, fixing the hike at 7.23 per cent for the 2026-27 session.

To facilitate complaints, a dedicated email ID -- feecommittee@gn@gmail.com -- has been issued, allowing parents and stakeholders to report violations related to fee hikes or other irregularities.

The committee has outlined pen-

alties for violations, including a fine of up to Rs 1 lakh and refund of excess fees for the first offence, a fine of Rs 5 lakh for the second offence, and for a third violation, recommendation for withdrawal of school recognition along with other punitive measures. The statement further said schools operating swimming pools must obtain necessary permissions, no-objection certificates and annual registrations from competent authorities. Institutions must also appoint male coaches for boys and female coaches for girls where such facilities exist.

All schools in the district have been directed to ensure strict compliance with these guidelines, failing which strict action will be taken and the management will be held responsible, it added.

## Delhi Mayor refutes allegations on standing committee tenure

**NEW DELHI:** Delhi Mayor Sardar Raja Iqbal Singh on Wednesday categorically dismissed allegations made by the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) concerning the tenure and functioning of the Standing Committee of the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD), calling them baseless and misleading.

Addressing the media, the Mayor emphasised that the Standing Committee has neither been dissolved nor has its functioning been affected.

He accused the AAP of attempting to mislead the public after failing to constitute the committee during its tenure, which, he claimed, hindered several developmental works and adversely affected the corporation's operations.

"Due to the non-constitution of the Standing Committee during the AAP's tenure, the corporation faced significant administrative challenges. Now, the same party is spreading rumours about the dissolution of the committee, creating unnecessary confusion," the Mayor said.

Clarifying the legal framework, the Mayor cited Section 45(3) of the Delhi Municipal Corporation Act, explaining that 50 per cent of the Standing Committee members retire after completing one year.

The committee, he said, consists of 18 members, of which nine retire annually. Of these retiring members, three are re-elected during the mayoral elections, while six are elected through ward committee elections, making the process fully lawful and transparent.

"The retirement of members after one year is a regular constitutional process, and the Standing Committee continues to function smoothly under the leadership of its chairman.

All related works are being carried out effectively in accordance with the rules," he added.

Mayor Singh also launched a sharp attack on the AAP, accusing it of deliberately spreading misinformation to divert attention from its own administrative failures.

"It is unfortunate that those who weakened the corporation's institutions during their tenure are now questioning established processes. Their politics has been reduced to mere allegations and misinformation," he said.

Highlighting the current administration's focus, the Mayor reiterated that the corporation is committed to transparency, accountability, and public welfare.

## Women employees of Nashik MNC allege sexual harassment, 6 arrested

**NASHIK:** At least six persons have been arrested after women employees at a Multi-National Company here filed complaints of mental and sexual harassment, police said on Wednesday.

A total of nine First Information Reports have been registered in this connection, officials said, without disclosing the MNC's name.

Five of the accused, arrested on Tuesday, were produced in a local court on

Wednesday and the court remanded them in police custody till April 10. One of the accused is already in judicial custody, said an official. A Special Investigation Team (SIT) led by ACP (Crime) Sandeep Mitke has been formed to probe the cases on the instructions of police commissioner Sandeep Karnik, he said.

The development follows the arrest of self-styled godman Ashok Kharat, who was patronised by prominent Maharashtra poli-

ticians over the years, on rape and sexual exploitation charges by Nashik Police last month.

The police commissioner, meanwhile, has issued an appeal stating that if any woman has any complaint about molestation or sexual assault, she can send a message on WhatsApp number 9923323311, or contact control room on 112.

The identity of the complainant woman and institution will be kept confidential, he said.

## Scheduled Caste Buddhism converts should be listed under SC category in Census: Athawale

**MUMBAI:** Union Minister Ramdas Athawale on Wednesday demanded that people who converted to Buddhism from the Scheduled Castes in Maharashtra be recorded as "Buddhist" by religion during the ongoing Census exercise, but their caste should continue to be listed under the SC category.

"This would ensure accurate representation," he said, noting that if "neo-Buddhists" are recorded only under religion as "Buddhists", their population may be counted under the general category, leading to a reduction in the Scheduled Caste population figures in the state.

Athawale raised this demand during a meeting with Maharashtra Governor Jishnu Dev Varma at Raj Bhavan, where he submitted a memorandum seeking specific directions to the state government on the issue.

The Census kickstarted on April 1 in eight states and Union Territories, including Delhi, with the opening of a 15-day self-enumeration window, where citizens can exercise the option to provide information about themselves on the web portal, developed by the government.

Census 2027 is being conducted in two phases — the first stage is known as house listing and housing census, and the second stage is the population census.

Scheduled Caste people who had converted to Buddhism should be recorded as "Buddhist" under religion during the enumeration exercise, but their caste should continue to be listed under the SC category along with the original caste serial number, Athawale said.

"This would ensure that neo-Buddhists in Maharashtra are not excluded

from SC population data," he said in a statement issued after meeting the Governor.

Referring to the mass conversion led by Dr B R Ambedkar on October 14, 1956, Athawale stated that a large section of the Scheduled Caste people in Maharashtra had adopted Buddhism.

He noted that neo-Buddhists were included in the SC category following a Constitutional amendment during the tenure of then Prime Minister V P Singh in 1990.

The RPI (A) chief expressed concern that if neo-Buddhists are recorded only under religion as Buddhists in the Census, their population may be counted under the general category, leading to a reduction in the Scheduled Caste population figures in Maharashtra.

Athawale urged the Governor to direct the state



government to ensure that Census forms allow proper classification, with religion marked as Buddhism and caste as Scheduled Caste, along with the relevant caste code listed by the Government of India.

Notably, the apex court had last month said that no person professing a religion other than Hinduism, Sikhism, or Buddhism can be regarded as a member of a Scheduled Caste.

The minister also raised other issues during the meeting, including a demand to increase the size of houses provided under slum rehabilitation schemes from 300 sq ft to at least 500 sq ft.

He further sought implementation of reservation in promotions for government employees, citing Supreme Court clearance and its adoption in other states.