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NATIONAL NEWS

Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY) Completes 9 Years

The Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY) completed nine years of implementation on 1st January 2026, marking a significant milestone in India's efforts to strengthen maternal health, nutrition, and women's welfare.

PMMVY was launched on 1st January 2017 as a Centrally Sponsored Scheme (CSS) by the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MoWCD).

The scheme is implemented in accordance with Section 4 of the National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013, which mandates maternity benefits for eligible women.

The primary objective of PMMVY is to provide partial wage compensation to pregnant women and lactating mothers and to promote safe pregnancy and institutional childbirth.

The scheme aims to reduce maternal and infant malnutrition and improve overall maternal and child health outcomes.

PMMVY also envisages the provision of free, nutritious meals through Anganwadi Centres during pregnancy and for six months after childbirth, as per prescribed nutritional norms.

In 2022, PMMVY was brought under Mission Shakti, an umbrella initiative for women's safety, security, and empowerment.

Under Mission Shakti, PMMVY is part of the Samarthya component, which focuses on economic empowerment and financial inclusion of women.

This integration improved scheme convergence, monitoring efficiency, and targeted delivery of benefits at the grassroots level.

Under PMMVY, benefits are provided for the first two living children, with the condition that the second child must be a girl, promoting gender equity and the value of the girl child.

Karnataka Records First Sighting of Rare 'Sandalwood Leopard'

Karnataka has recorded its first-ever sighting of an ultra-rare strawberry-coloured leopard, popularly named the "Sandalwood Leopard", drawing national and global attention.

This is only the second recorded sighting in India, with the earlier instance reported from Ranakpur, Rajasthan, in 2021.

Leopards usually have a tawny-yellow coat with black rosettes, whereas the Sandalwood Leopard displays a pale reddish-pink or strawberry-coloured coat with light-brown rosettes.

Internationally, such leopards are referred to as “strawberry leopards”.

Scientists attribute this rare coloration to unusual genetic conditions such as hypomelanism (reduced dark pigmentation) or erythrism (excess red pigmentation), making the animal extremely rare.

The leopard was documented in Vijayanagara district, Karnataka, using camera traps.

The discovery was made by conservation scientist Sanjay Gubbi and his team from the Holematthi Nature Foundation.

The animal is believed to be a seven-year-old female, and one camera trap image captured her along with a cub of normal coat colour.

At the global level, this colour morph has been documented only five times: twice in South Africa, once in Tanzania, and twice in India.

Naming the animal the “Sandalwood Leopard” reflects Karnataka’s cultural and ecological association with sandalwood forests.

Karnataka is already known for having one of the highest densities of melanistic leopards, commonly called black panthers.

INTERNATIONAL NEWS

European Union Leaders Likely to Be Chief Guests at India’s Republic Day 2026

India’s Republic Day celebrations on 26th January 2026 are expected to have strong diplomatic significance, with European Union (EU) leaders likely to attend as chief guests.

As per media reports, the European Union has officially accepted India’s invitation, highlighting the growing importance of the India–EU Strategic Partnership amid changing global economic and geopolitical conditions.

The expected chief guests include Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, and António Costa, President of the European Council.

Their joint presence reflects the EU’s identity as a unified political and economic bloc, rather than representation by individual member countries.

Ursula von der Leyen has led major EU initiatives such as the European Green Deal and the Competitiveness Compass, aimed at enhancing the EU’s economic resilience in the face of

competition from the United States and China.

António Costa, who assumed office as President of the European Council in 2024, plays a central role in coordinating EU summits and building diplomatic consensus among member states, drawing on his experience as former Prime Minister of Portugal.

The visit of EU leaders is expected to coincide with the India–EU Summit, tentatively scheduled for 27th January 2026, though official confirmation is awaited.

The summit would come at a crucial time as India–EU Free Trade Agreement (FTA) negotiations have resumed after a prolonged pause.

The renewed FTA talks focus on market access, services, investment, and supply-chain resilience.

EU Trade and Economic Security Commissioner Maroš Šefčovič, who visited India in December 2025, played a key role in reviving and accelerating negotiations.

The presence of top EU leadership during Republic Day could act as a political push toward a breakthrough in FTA talks.

China Commissions Upgraded Guided Missile Destroyer

China has commissioned a new upgraded guided missile destroyer as part of its rapid naval expansion to narrow the gap with United States maritime power.

The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) inducted the Type 052D destroyer "Loudi", reflecting China's focus on enhancing blue-water combat capabilities amid strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific.

The Type 052D class is considered the backbone of China's modern surface fleet, with the "Loudi" entering active service to strengthen naval modernization.

The destroyer incorporates a new system architecture with upgrades in radar, weapons, and networking capabilities, enhancing air defence, anti-surface warfare, and task force coordination.

Type 052D destroyers are central to China's plan to operate carrier strike groups and conduct sustained operations far from its coastline.

The warships are equipped with phased-array radar, vertical launch systems, and can deploy surface-to-air, anti-ship, and land-attack missiles.

The induction of upgraded variants indicates continuous design refinement based on operational experience.

China's accelerating shipbuilding programme aims to match and challenge the United States Navy, emphasizing network-centric warfare, fleet integration, and high-intensity maritime operations.

The commissioning of "Loudi" highlights Beijing's priority on advanced surface combatants and influences the regional balance of power in Asian and global waters.

BANKING

RBI Conducts Inaugural Payments Regulatory Board Meeting in Mumbai

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) held the first meeting of the Payments Regulatory Board (PRB) in Mumbai, chaired by Governor Sanjay Malhotra.

The Payments Regulatory Board (PRB) was constituted following an amendment to the Payment and Settlement Systems Act, 2007, which came into force on 9 May 2025.

The PRB reviewed the functions of the Department of Payment and Settlement Systems (DPSS) and examined key focus areas of domestic and global payment systems.

The Draft Payments Vision 2028 was presented before the Board, and strategic guidance was provided to strengthen and advance India's payment ecosystem.

The RBI shared findings from its Survey on Digital Payments, highlighting emerging trends and developments in digital transactions.

Members who attended the meeting included Krishnan, Secretary, Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, Nagaraju Maddirala, Secretary, Department of Financial Services, Aruna Sundararajan (IAS Retd.), T. Rabi Sankar, Deputy Governor, RBI, and Vivek Deep, Executive Director, RBI.

RBI Signs Agreement with Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi

Reserve Bank of India (RBI) signed an agreement with the Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi (GNCTD) under Section 21A(1) of the RBI Act, 1934.

From 9 January 2026, RBI will manage the banking operations and rupee public debt of GNCTD, marking a major financial reform for Delhi.

The agreement was formalised through an MoU at the Delhi Secretariat, chaired by Chief Minister Rekha Gupta, who also holds the Finance portfolio.

Under the new arrangement, Delhi will raise funds through State Development Loans (SDLs) at lower interest rates of around 7%, replacing earlier high borrowing costs of 12–13%, thereby improving fiscal efficiency.

RBI oversight will strengthen cash management, enabling automatic investment of surplus funds, and providing access to Ways and Means Advances (WMA) and Special Drawing Facilities (SDF) for temporary cash requirements.

A Central Government notification dated 2 January has formally separated Delhi's public accounts from the Government of India, granting Delhi an independent banking and borrowing structure for

the first time, with support from the Union Government and Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Tamilnad Mercantile Bank Ties Up with TechFini to Strengthen UPI Infrastructure

Tamilnad Mercantile Bank (TMB) entered into a strategic partnership with TechFini, a Unified Payments Interface (UPI) infrastructure and fintech solutions provider, to strengthen its UPI acquiring and issuing capabilities.

Under the collaboration, TechFini (provided by Fin Meadows Technologies) will act as a Technology Service Provider (TSP) for TMB, managing UPI switching operations through the TechFini UPI Switch.

The partnership aims to create a faster, secure, and scalable UPI infrastructure to support Payment Aggregators (PAs), Non-Banking Financial Companies (NBFCs), merchants, and fintech partners across India.

A key focus of the collaboration is lending automation, expanding UPI-based use cases in loan disbursements, collections, and repayments.

Through UPI Autopay, the partnership will enable automated Equated Monthly Instalment (EMI) payments and loan repayments directly from customers' UPI handles.

The TechFini UPI Platform is a cloud-native solution offering Third-Party Application Provider (TPAP) services, UPI Plugin Software Development Kit (SDK), and end-to-end acquiring and issuing infrastructure.

The platform is designed to handle up to 10,000 transactions per second (TPS), ensuring high scalability and future-readiness for upcoming UPI innovations.

DEFENCE

Defence Research and Development Organisation Develops 'SWaDeS' Portable

The Defence Laboratory Jodhpur (DLJ), under the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), developed a portable water purification system named Sea Water Desalination System (SWaDeS) to provide safe drinking water to soldiers deployed in remote, coastal, and water-scarce regions.

SWaDeS is available in manual-operated and engine-driven variants, offering flexibility for deployment in diverse and challenging terrains.

The engine-operated variant can desalinate seawater with Total Dissolved Solids (TDS) up to ~35,000 mg/L to below 500 mg/L, sufficient to meet the needs of 20–25 soldiers.

The manual-operated unit is lightweight and portable, designed to support 10–12 personnel,

especially in power-scarce and remote locations.

The engine-operated SWaDeS can be set up within 2–3 minutes, enabling rapid deployment during operations, while manual units are suited for long-range patrols.

Both variants have successfully passed Acceptance Test Procedures (ATPs), confirming their field reliability and operational readiness.

SWaDeS is suitable for naval operations, coastal installations, inland saline water bodies such as Pangong Tso, and long-range military patrols.

The system is equipped with a Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear (CBRN) water purification module, ensuring safe drinking water even in contaminated and high-risk environments.

APPOINTMENTS & RESIGNATIONS

24th Chief Justice of Sikkim High Court

Justice A. Muhamed Mustaque Ayumantakatha, the senior-most Judge of the Kerala High Court (HC), was sworn in as the 24th Chief Justice (CJ) of the Sikkim High Court.

The oath of office was administered by Om Prakash Mathur, the Governor of Sikkim, at Lok Bhawan, Gangtok, Sikkim.

The swearing-in ceremony was attended by Sikkim Chief Minister Prem Singh Tamang, his council of ministers, and senior state officials.

Justice Mustaque succeeded Justice Biswanath Somadder, who retired as Chief Justice of the Sikkim High Court on 14 December 2025.

The appointment of Justice A. Muhamed Mustaque was recommended by the Supreme Court Collegium, headed by Chief Justice of India (CJI) Justice Surya Kant.

Following the recommendation, the Department of Justice (DoJ) under the Ministry of Law and Justice (MoL&J) announced that the President of India, Droupadi Murmu, approved his appointment under Article 217(1) of the Constitution of India.

At present, Justice Meenakshi Madan Rai is serving as the Acting Chief Justice of the Sikkim High Court.

Justice A. Muhamed Mustaque was enrolled as an advocate in 1989 and primarily practised in Kannur, appearing before various courts and statutory authorities.

He was appointed as an Additional Judge of the Kerala High Court in 2014 and became a Permanent Judge in 2016.

He served as the Acting Chief Justice of the Kerala High Court from July 2024 to September 2024.

Justice Mustaque also served as the Chairman of the Kerala High Court Computerisation Committee

from 18 September 2019 until his elevation as Chief Justice, highlighting his role in judicial digitalisation.