

## Rupee falls 9 paise to close at 86.64 against US dollar

**Mumbai:** The rupee depreciated 9 paise to close at 86.64 (provisional) against the US dollar on Thursday, weighed down by a strong US dollar amid a hawkish tone of the US Federal Reserve. Forex traders said the rupee continued to face pressure due to sustained foreign fund outflows and the broad strength of the American currency in the overseas markets.

At the interbank foreign exchange, the rupee opened on a weak note at 86.58 and touched a high of 86.56 and a low of 86.65 against the American currency during the session. The local unit settled at 86.64 (provisional), registering a fall of 9 paise over its previous close.

On Wednesday, the rupee pared its initial losses to settle on a positive note, higher by 2 paise to close at 86.55 against the US dollar. Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading 0.02 per cent lower at 107.98.

"US Dollar gained on the hawkish tone of the US Federal Reserve. Fed kept interest



rates unchanged at 4.25-4.5 per cent at its Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) meeting on Wednesday," said Anuj Choudhary – Research Analyst at Mirae Asset Sharekhan. The US Fed kept rates on hold but was hawkish in its outlook as it said rates would be held higher for a longer period, downplaying expectations for future rate cuts.

"We expect the rupee to trade with negative bias on strength in the US Dollar and selling pressure from FIIs. Month-end Dollar demand from importers may also weigh on the rupee," Choudhary added. There is uncertainty over tariffs by the US administration, which may further pressure the rupee. However, any central bank intervention may support the rupee.

Traders may take cues from GDP and weekly unemployment claims data from the US. Investors may remain cautious ahead of the Union Budget of February 1 and the RBI's bond buying on Friday, which may lead to volatility, Choudhary added. Brent crude, the global oil benchmark, fell 0.64 per cent to USD 76.09 per barrel in futures trade.

In the domestic equity market, the 30-share BSE Sensex settled 226.85 points, or 0.30 per cent, up at 76,759.81 points, while the Nifty rose 86.40 points, or 0.37 per cent, to close at 23,249.50 points. Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth Rs 2,586.43 crore in the capital markets on a net basis on Wednesday, according to exchange data.(PTI)

## Digital payments record double digit jump year-on-year: RBI

**Mumbai:** Digital payments across India recorded a double-digit jump of 11.1 per cent year-on-year (YoY) as on September 2024, according to the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) index that measures the adoption of online transactions, according to a Central Bank statement. The RBI's Digital Payments Index (RBI-DPI) for September 2024 stands at 465.33 up from 445.5 for March 2024. The increase in the RBI-DPI index was driven by growth in payment infrastructure and payment performance across the country over the period, the RBI said.

The RBI has been publishing a composite RBI-DPI since January 1, 2021 with March 2018 as the base to capture the extent of digitisation of payments across the country. The index is published on a semi-annual basis. The index comprises five parameters that enable the measurement of the deepening and penetration of digital payments in the country over different periods. These parameters are Payment Enablers (weightage 25 per cent); Payment Infrastructure - Demand-side factors (10 per cent); Payment Infrastructure - Supply-side factors (15 per cent); Payment Performance (45 per cent); and Consumer Centricity (5 per cent).



The RBI had highlighted in a report earlier this week that UPI has been the most significant contributor to the growth of digital payments in India due to its usefulness and ease of use. According to the report, the share of the Unified Payments Interface (UPI) in the country's digital payments has surged from 34 per cent in 2019 to an impressive 83 per cent in 2024, with a remarkable CAGR (cumulative average growth rate) of 74 per cent over the last five years.

In contrast, the share of other payment systems like RTGS, NEFT, IMPS, credit cards, debit cards, etc. in digital payments volume declined from 66 per cent to 17 per cent during the same period, the report states. At a macro level, the volume of UPI transactions increased from 375 crore in 2018 to 17,221 crore in 2024, whereas the total value of transactions surged from ₹5.86 lakh crore in 2018 to ₹246.83 lakh crore in 2024.

## Stock market continues winning streak ahead of Union Budget

**Mumbai:** The Indian stock market on Thursday continued its upward journey for the third consecutive session, with both the Sensex and the Nifty closing in the positive territory, as all eyes are now on the Union Budget 2025-26. At the closing bell, the BSE Sensex gained 226.85 points or 0.3 per cent to end the day at 76,759.81. During the session, the index touched a high of 76,898.63 and a low of 76,401.13.

The Nifty climbed 86.40 points or 0.37 per cent to settle at 23,249.50. The index moved between 23,311.15 and 23,139.20 throughout the trading day. On Nifty, 35 stocks closed in the green. The top performers included Bharat Electronics, Power Grid Corporation, Cipla, Hero Moto-Corp, and Bharti Airtel which went up to 4.87 per cent.

## Fiscal deficit for FY25 at 4.8% of GDP; 4.4% for FY26: Finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman



The fiscal deficit for FY25 has been pegged at 4.8 per cent of GDP and at 4.4 per cent for FY26, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said on Saturday.

Presenting the Budget 2025-26, she said net market borrowings are estimated at Rs 11.54 lakh crore for next fiscal year.

The finance minister also said the government will set up a high-level committee for regulatory reforms on all non-financial sectors.

She also said NaBFID (National Bank for Financing Infrastructure and Development) will set up partial credit enhancement facility for corporate bonds.

Investment friendliness index of states will be launched this year, Sitharaman further said.

## Commercial LPG rate down Rs 7 per cylinder, aviation turbine fuel price hiked by 5.6%

**Mumbai:** The price of Jet fuel, or ATF, on Saturday was hiked by a steep 5.6 per cent while the rate of commercial LPG that is used in hotels and restaurants was cut by Rs 7 per 19-kg cylinder in the monthly revision done in line with the benchmark international prices.

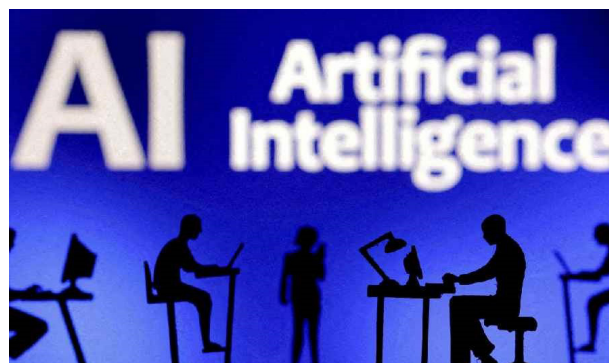
The aviation turbine fuel (ATF) price was increased by Rs 5,078.25 per kilolitre, or 5.6 per cent, to Rs 95,533.72 per kl in the national capital - home to one of the busiest airports in the country, according to state-owned fuel retailers. The hike follows a reduction in rates by 1.5 per cent in the previous revision on January 1.

Prior to that, prices were increased twice - Rs 2,941.5 per kl (3.3 per cent) on November 1, and by Rs 1,318.12 per kl (1.45 per cent) on December 1, 2024. The ATF price in Mumbai was increased to Rs 89,318.90 on Saturday, from Rs 84,511.93 per kl previously.

The price was cut by Rs 14.5 per 19-kg cylinder at the last revision on January 1, 2024. In five price hikes prior to the two rounds of cuts this year, commercial LPG rate had been hiked by Rs 172.5 per 19-kg cylinder.

Commercial LPG now costs Rs 1,749.50 per 19-kg cylinder in Mumbai, Rs 1,907 in Kolkata and Rs 1,959.50 in Chennai. Prices of ATF and LPG differ from state to state depending on the incidence of local taxes including VAT. Prices of petrol and diesel continue to remain frozen. Rates had been cut by Rs 2 per litre in mid-March ahead of the general elections. Petrol costs Rs 94.72 a litre in Delhi, while diesel is priced at Rs 87.62. (PTI)

## AI poses threat to jobs: Economic Survey warns corporates of taxation to offset employment decline



**Mumbai:** The Economic Survey 2024-25 has raised concerns over the disruptive impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on jobs, warning that unchecked automation could exacerbate inequality and strain public finances.

The report argues that businesses must integrate AI with sensitivity, or face the prospect of taxation on AI-driven corporate profits

to offset job losses. The demand for policy intervention and fiscal support to compensate will be irresistible," the Survey said.

Citing an International Monetary Fund (IMF) study, the survey suggests that governments may be compelled to impose taxes on corporate profits derived from AI-driven labour replacement. Such a move, it warns, could ultimately stifle economic growth and productivity.

The Survey points to AI's rapid progress in decision-making capabilities across fields such as law, education, criminal justice and business analytics. Major AI developers, including OpenAI, anticipate office-ready AI workers by 2025, further intensifying fears of job displacement.

"If companies do not optimise the introduction of AI over a longer horizon and do not handle it with sensitivity,

## HIT Anti-Roach Gel Pack launches by Godrej Consumer Products Limited

**Guwahati:** Despite 93% of Indian households cleaning daily, cockroach infestations persist in 65% of urban homes, with over half reporting medium to high infestation levels. Cockroaches, known carriers of harmful bacteria and allergens, pose significant health risks, including respiratory issues and foodborne illnesses. Addressing this persistent challenge, Godrej Consumer Products Limited (GCPL), under its brand Godrej HIT, has introduced HIT Anti-Roach Gel—a compact, affordable (INR 99), and effective addition to its market-leading household insecticide portfolio.



HIT is one of the market leaders, extensively used by consumers to tackle cockroach infestations. Building on the success of its HIT Anti-Roach Gel, GCPL identified an opportunity to enhance accessibility with a smaller, more

cost-effective variant that maintains its effectiveness. Commenting on the launch, Shilpa Suresh, Head of Marketing—Home Care, Godrej Consumer Products Ltd. (GCPL), said, “We are aware of the serious health risks posed by mosquito-borne diseases, which remain a major public health concern.” The market for gel-based anti-cockroach products in India, valued at nearly INR 100 crore, is growing at over 25% year-on-year. The new variant of HIT Anti-Roach Gel pack provides the same level of protection and is priced at just INR 99 for 15g.

### Godrej Agrovet launches ArgoRid to combat fish lice in aquaculture

**Guwahati:** Godrej Agrovet Limited (Godrej Agrovet), in collaboration with the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) – Central Institute of Fisheries Education (CIFE), has unveiled ArgoRid, an innovative fish lice controller. Designed to address Argulus infections, which impact 48% of Indian aquaculture ponds and result in annual losses of USD 62.5 million, ArgoRid promises a farmer-friendly, easy-to-use solution that enhances fish health and productivity.

Balram Singh Yadav, Managing Director of Godrej Agrovet, emphasized the product's role in empowering fish farmers. “ArgoRid is a reliable, research-driven solution to one of the aquaculture industry's biggest challenges. This public-private partnership with ICAR-CIFE will strengthen India's fisheries sector and contribute to the nation's Blue Revolution,” he stated.

Dr. Mohammad Aklakur of ICAR-CIFE hailed ArgoRid as a scientific breakthrough, highlighting its dual benefits of eliminating fish lice and boosting immunity.

The product's launch is expected to benefit fish farmers in Guwahati and across Assam, where aquaculture is integral to local economies. By enhancing fish survival rates and productivity, ArgoRid could boost incomes and strengthen Guwahati's fish market, a critical hub for regional trade.

## DGT and BITS Pilani join forces to boost entrepreneurship and skilling

**Guwahati:** The Directorate General of Training (DGT), under the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (MSDE), has partnered with Pilani Innovation & Entrepreneurship Development Society (PIEDS) of BITS Pilani to launch incubation programs aimed at fostering entrepreneurship among National Skill Training Institute (NSTI) students. The initiative combines BITS Pilani's academic excellence with DGT's robust training ecosystem to create a future-ready workforce and support start-ups.

The collaboration introduces the Innovation Challenge and the Open Incubation Program, focusing on nurturing entrepreneurial talent. The Innovation Challenge includes a Women NSTI Track to bridge the gender gap in innovation, while the Open Incubation Program offers a six-month grant-based

initiative covering ideation, mentorship, and funding.

In Guwahati, a growing hub for skilled professionals in Northeast India, this initiative is expected to catalyze start-up opportunities. With its thriving local markets and demand for innovative solutions, Guwahati provides an ideal platform for aspiring entrepreneurs to leverage mentorship and funding support under the program.

“The partnership bridges the gap between education and industry, creating opportunities for youth to innovate and succeed,” said Trishaljit Sethi, Director General Training, MSDE. This initiative aligns with India's broader skilling overhaul, driven by a ₹60,000 crore investment, to equip students with industry-relevant skills and drive economic growth.

## Royal Enfield Roadster Hunter 350 crosses the 500,000 sales milestone

**Shillong:** Royal Enfield, the global leader in the midsize motorcycle segment (250cc-750cc) proudly announces that its compact and stylish roadster Hunter 350 has crossed the 500,000 sales milestone. Introduced in August 2022, the Hunter is one of the fastest growing motorcycle models, boasting of half a million happy owners across the globe.

Crafted for urban explorers and new-age riders, the Hunter 350 blends agility, style, and fun with Royal Enfield's DNA. With its cool styling, dynamic performance and modern-retro charm, the Hunter 350 is the preferred choice for young riders today.

Whether navigating tight spots within the urban maze, or just hanging out at the coolest neighbourhoods in the city, or zipping through open roads, young riders are choosing the Hunter 350 for its swift agility and confident manoeuvrability. On this momentous occasion, Yadvinder Singh Guleria, Chief Commercial Officer, Royal Enfield said, “The Hunter 350 has truly redefined what it means to ride in urban and dynamic environments.” The Hunter 350's popularity is a testament to Royal Enfield's mission of delivering motorcycles that are innovative, stylish, and powerful.

## NSDC, CoLLearn and DA One Sports launch cricket coach skilling program



**Guwahati:** The National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC), in partnership with ed-tech platform CoLLearn and ShikharDhawan's DA One Sports, has launched the Cricket Coach Education Programme to upskill coaches across India. The initiative aims to elevate coaching standards and meet the growing demand for skilled trainers in the sports industry.

Under this collaboration, NSDC will facilitate awareness workshops and provide skill loans, CoLLearn will organize classes and placement support, while DA One Sports will handle student assessments and on-field training. The program covers modern coaching techniques, player analytics, and injury prevention strategies to enhance player performance and team dynamics.

With cricket gaining popularity in Assam and the Northeast, Guwahati is poised to benefit from this initiative. Local cricket academies and training centers can leverage the program to hire certified coaches, improving grassroots development and creating new opportunities for aspiring professionals in the region.

CoLLearn's Srishty Jain called the initiative a “game-changer”, while ShikharDhawan emphasized its role in shaping future cricketer talent. The program also offers career development support, ensuring trained coaches are well-prepared to thrive in India's expanding sports ecosystem.

### ‘The One and Only’: Blenders Pride Fashion Tour unveils its most iconic edition

**Shillong:** Blenders Pride Fashion Tour has unveiled its most iconic edition yet, creating ‘The One and Only’ world where fashion is just the beginning. The tour's 2025 edition will unleash a cutting-edge avatar that transcends into the extraordinary, bringing stellar showcases across global fashion, music, and entertainment that inspire pure awe. Joining forces once again with Fashion Design Council of India (FDCI), the Fashion Tour will celebrate its glamorous and indulgent essence, with some of India's most sought-after voices in fashion, together with India's most desirable style icons, that will undoubtedly get the country talking.

Take its alluring world to boom town cities of Chandigarh, Guwahati, and Vizag, the tour will turn each destination into a groundbreaking milestone that sets the ultimate benchmark for the future of fashion. Kartik Mohindra, Chief Marketing Officer, Pernod Ricard India, said, “This year's edition of Blenders Pride Fashion Tour marks yet another bold step in our vision to become ‘The One and Only’ gateway into our iconic and en vogue world.” Sunil Sethi, Chairman, FDCI, expressed, “We're creating an impressive new edition that will catch the ever-evolving pulse of global fashion and will fascinate audiences nationwide.”

## Truecaller announces the biggest-ever update for iPhone

**Guwahati:** Truecaller, the leading global communications platform, has announced the biggest-ever update for iPhone. The new update now offers the entire might of Truecaller's spam and scam-blocking abilities to iPhone users everywhere! It now has the ability to identify all types of calls, making it at

par with its Android counterpart. This is made possible by Apple's Live Caller ID Lookup framework, developed especially for apps like Truecaller to provide live caller ID in a privacy-preserving way. This API uses state-of-the-art homomorphic encryption, and Truecaller is the first in the world to

deploy this at scale for Caller ID.

Truecaller has now been in the business of filtering unwanted communication for 15 years. This update can leverage Truecaller's latest AI capabilities and global database to identify as many calls as possible. It can ensure that no call goes unidentified

on iOS as long as Truecaller has any information about it. Rishit Jhunjhunwala, CEO, Truecaller, said, “We are excited to bring the full power of Truecaller to iPhone.” Free users on iOS will continue to enjoy ad-supported number search and caller ID of verified businesses.

## Eat almonds every day for 8 lesser-known health benefits

**Guwahati:** National Almond Day, celebrated annually on January 23, has highlighted the importance of incorporating almonds into our daily lives. From childhood, our mothers and grandmothers have encouraged us to include almonds in our morning routine or at least once

a day. Now, over 200 published scientific studies reinforce this age-old wisdom. On this special day, Sheela Krishnaswamy, Nutrition and Wellness Consultant, shares some lesser-known health benefits of including almonds in your daily diet. California Almonds are a source of 15 essential nutrients, including magnesium, protein, riboflavin, zinc, fibre, healthy fats, and more. Almonds are a rich source of vitamin E (alpha-tocopherol), a powerful antioxidant known for its anti-aging properties that help promote healthy, glowing skin.



Almonds are packed with essential nutrients like vitamin B2, magnesium, and phosphorus, which play a vital role in converting food into energy, helping to keep you active and energized. A handful of almonds can help promote feelings of fullness, thanks to their satiating properties, making them a smart choice for supporting weight management. Almonds, when included in a balanced diet, have been shown to lower total and LDL cholesterol levels. Almonds may help reduce the blood sugar spike from carbohydrate-rich foods when consumed together, improving fasting insulin levels and supporting better blood sugar management. Including almonds regularly in a balanced diet can significantly boost immunity, as highlighted by the FS-SAI, thanks to their powerful blend of nutrients that promote optimal health and well-being.

## LIC Mutual Fund launches multi asset allocation fund for diversified investment strategy



**Guwahati:** LIC Mutual Fund has launched its new scheme, the LIC MF Multi Asset Allocation Fund, aiming to offer investors a diversified investment option across equity, debt, and gold. The open-ended fund will be available for subscription through a New Fund Offer (NFO) from January 24 to February 7, 2025.

The primary objective of the scheme is to generate long-term capital appreciation by investing in a mix of equity and equity-related instruments, debt and money market instruments, and units of gold Exchange Traded Funds (ETFs). The benchmark for the scheme combines 65% Nifty 500 TRI, 25% Nifty Composite Debt Index, and 10% domestic gold prices. The fund will reopen for continuous sale and repurchase on February 18, 2025.

Mr. R.K. Jha, MD & CEO of LIC Mutual Fund Asset Management Ltd., highlighted the growing popularity of multi-asset allocation funds, which provide better diversification and reduce concentration risks. The hybrid mutual fund category saw a significant 27% surge in assets under management (AUM) in 2024, indicating investor interest in such products.

Guwahati has shown increasing awareness of hybrid funds, with many investors seeking safer and diversified options in the current volatile market. This trend is expected to align well with the launch of LIC's new fund, which offers balanced exposure to equities, debt, and gold.

## JSW MG Motor India launches next-gen models at Bharat Mobility Expo 2025

**Guwahati:** JSW MG Motor India showcased its next-gen models at the Bharat Mobility Global Expo 2025, unveiling nine global models, including the MG MAJESTOR, India's first D+ segment SUV. The company demonstrated its prowess in CASE (Connected, Autonomous, Shared, and Electric) technologies, reaffirming its commitment to sustainable and innovative mobility.

The diverse lineup featured Hybrid Electric Vehicles (HEVs), Plug-in Hybrid Electric Vehicles (PHEVs), Battery Electric Vehicles (BEVs), and Internal Combustion Engine (ICE) models. Highlights included the luxury sedan IM5, the all-electric SUV IM6, the versatile MG HS PHEV, and the sleek MG7 Trophy Edition. CEO Emeritus Rajeev Chaba said, "Through our Drive.Future vision, we are transforming mobility with practical, sustainable solutions that enhance driving experiences."

In Guwahati, the MG MAJESTOR and EV models are expected to resonate with urban and adventure enthusiasts, thanks to their innovative designs and focus on sustainability. MG's commitment to building a robust EV infrastructure, including its Battery-as-a-Service model, aligns with the city's increasing demand for electric mobility solutions.

MG's EV Ecosystem Zone at the expo showcased initiatives like Project REVIVE and EV-PEDIA, positioning JSW MG Motor India as a leader in the country's EV transition.

## Lenovo expands retail network with over 25 new stores in North and East India

**Guwahati:** Lenovo, a global technology leader, has strengthened its retail footprint in India by opening over 25 exclusive stores across North and East India, bringing its total to 480+ outlets nationwide. This expansion targets Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities, including Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Bihar, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, and Haryana, aiming to make advanced technology more accessible.

The new stores offer a wide range of AI-enabled devices, including gaming, consumer, and commercial products. A standout addition is a hybrid store in Faridabad, Haryana, featuring a dedicated gaming zone for an immersive experience. Raghavendra Araveeti, Sales Head, North and East –



Consumer Business, Lenovo India, emphasized, "Expanding our retail footprint reinforces our commitment to bringing smarter technology closer to consumers – from metros to smaller towns."

In Guwahati, Lenovo's growing presence aligns with the city's increasing demand for high-tech solutions. The store is designed to serve professionals,

students, and gamers, providing access to Lenovo's innovative products and services, including express delivery options.

With interactive displays, personalized assistance, and faster delivery times, Lenovo's expansion solidifies its position as a market leader while addressing the growing tech needs of consumers in smaller towns and cities across India.

## Maharashtra's Skill India Digital Hub goes Marathi, boost digital skilling across the state

**Guwahati:** Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis unveiled the Marathi version of Skill India Digital Hub (SIDH) at the Vishwa Marathi Sammelan 2025, held at Fergusson College in Pune. The platform, launched with the support of Deputy Chief Ministers Shri Eknath Shinde and Shri Ajit Pawar, aims to make skilling opportunities more accessible to the state's youth by offering content in Marathi, in line with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020.

SIDH provides over 7,000 courses in sectors like Artificial Intelligence, Machine Learning, and Drone Technology. It has already seen tremendous success nationwide, with Maharashtra among the top five states in terms of registrations and user traffic. Shri Ved Mani Tiwari, CEO of NSDC, highlighted the platform's role in bridging skill gaps and creating job-ready youth, with more than 1.26 crore registrations across India.

In Guwahati, there is a growing demand



for digital skilling platforms, especially in fields like IT and electronics. Local professionals and students are increasingly turning to online courses to enhance their skills and remain competitive in emerging sectors. The introduction of SIDH's Marathi version is expected to inspire similar digital initiatives in the northeastern market, further propelling regional growth in the tech and industrial sectors.

## Minister Pabitra Margarita's historic visit strengthens Indo-Pacific ties

**Guwahati:** Minister of State for External Affairs Pabitra Margarita wrapped up an eight-day official visit to the Philippines, the Republic of Palau, and the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), focusing on strengthening economic and diplomatic partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region.

The visit, commencing on January 14, included high-level engagements aimed at boosting trade and investment opportunities. Margarita's historic visit to Micronesia marked the first ministerial-level visit from

India, where discussions with President Wesley W. Simina and Vice President Aren B. Palik highlighted potential collaborations in sustainable development and resource management.

In Palau, Margarita attended the swearing-in of President Surangel Whipps Jr. and discussed bilateral trade expansion with Foreign Minister Kaleb Udoi Jr. Talks in the Philippines with President Bongbong Marcos explored avenues for enhancing trade ties, particularly in technology



and infrastructure sectors.

The visit's emphasis on strengthening Indo-Pacific trade could bring new opportunities for regions like Guwahati. With its rich array of textiles, tea, and agro-products,

Guwahati is well-positioned to benefit from enhanced export channels to Southeast Asia and the Pacific. Entrepreneurs anticipate increased demand for Assam's signature products in these emerging markets.

# Virat Kohli's Return Boosts Ranji Trophy as Delhi Aims for a Strong Finish

**New Delhi:** Virat Kohli's much-anticipated return to the Ranji Trophy has not only elevated the tournament's profile but also rejuvenated the Delhi team's morale as they prepare for their final Group D match against Railways, starting Thursday. Despite a lackluster campaign, Delhi hopes to end on a high note with Kohli's presence adding a spark to their lineup.

Railways, with 17 points from six games, have a strong chance of advancing to the knockout stages if they secure a bonus-point victory over Del-

hi, which would take their tally to 24 points. Delhi, with 14 points from six matches, faces a mathematical improbability of qualifying, but the expected crowd of around 10,000 is more focused on witnessing Kohli's return than the match outcome.

Tamil Nadu (25 points), Chandigarh (19 points), and Saurashtra (18 points) are in better positions to qualify compared to Delhi and Railways. However, the spotlight remains firmly on Kohli, whose first Ranji Trophy appearance in over 12 years has generated unprecedented excitement. If



Delhi bats first, fans are likely to cheer for early dismissals of other batsmen to make way for Kohli's entry. But if the star bat-

ter falls early, the match could quickly revert to being a low-key affair, with only a handful of journalists and a few hun-

dred spectators remaining engaged. The Feroz Shah Kotla ground is set to witness a rare buzz, with broadcasters preparing for a live stream of the match, a testament to Kohli's star power. Delhi captain Ayush Badoni expressed his excitement about leading Kohli, calling it an honor to captain both Kohli and Rishabh Pant in consecutive matches. Kohli is expected to replace Jonty Sidhu in the lineup, with Badoni vacating his batting slot to accommodate Kohli at his preferred No. 4 position.

## Spin-Heavy Australia Wins Toss, Elects to Bat in First Test Against Sri Lanka



**Galle:** Australia has won the toss and opted to bat first in the opening Test against Sri Lanka, banking on a spin-heavy attack on a Galle pitch expected to favor slow bowlers. Josh Inglis is making his Test debut for Australia, while the visitors have gone with three frontline spinners—left-arm twicker Matt Kuhnemann and off-spinner Todd Murphy joining veteran Nathan Lyon. Allrounder Beau Webster is set to share the new ball with Mitchell Starc. With Sam Konstas out, Travis Head has been promoted to open the batting, while Steve Smith leads the side in the absence of regular skipper Pat Cummins, who is on paternity leave.

Sri Lanka has also leaned into spin, naming three spinners, including leg-spinner Jeffrey Vandersay, who joins off-spinner Nishan Peiris and left-arm spinner Prabath Jayasuriya. Vandersay and Peiris have only one Test cap each. In another change, Oshada Fernando has been drafted into the XI in place of injured opener Pathum Nis-sanka. The second and final Test of the series will also be played in Galle, starting on February 6.

## Tata Steel Masters: Gukesh Claims Sole Lead with Victory Over Mendonca



**Wijk Aan Zee:** Indian Grandmaster D Gukesh surged into sole lead at the Tata Steel Masters after a commanding win over compatriot Leon Luke Mendonca in the ninth round of the tournament. On a day of mixed fortunes for Indian players, R Praggnanandhaa suffered his first defeat of the event against Dutch GM Anish Giri, while veteran P Harikrishna fell to Russian-turned-Slovenian GM Vladimir Fedoseev.

Following his victory, Gukesh expressed satisfaction with his performance. "I'm happy that I played a good game today. There are still four rounds left, so I'm not thinking too much about the standings. I'm just happy with how I am playing," Gukesh said after the match. With this crucial win, Gukesh now leads the standings with 6.5 points out of 9, half a point ahead of Uz-bek GM Nodirbek Abdusattorov and Fedoseev, who both sit at 6 points.

Praggnanandhaa, with 5.5 points, currently shares fourth place, and his upcoming matches will determine whether he can bounce back into contention

## KL Rahul Returns as Karnataka Eyes Crucial Win Against Haryana; Kerala in Quarterfinal Hunt

**Bengaluru:** Karnataka's hopes of securing a Ranji Trophy quarterfinal berth have received a major boost with the return of star batter KL Rahul, as they aim for a must-win clash against Group C leaders Haryana in their final league game, starting Thursday at the M Chinnaswamy Stadium. Locked in a three-way battle for qualification, Karnataka (19 points) must secure a bonus point win (7 points) to reach 26 points, which could see them qualify either as the group toppers or in second place, depending on Kerala's result against Bihar in Thumba, Thiruvananthapuram.

Kerala, currently at 21 points, will progress as Group C leaders if they win their match, even without a bonus point, taking them to 27 points. In this scenario, Haryana, despite their current 26 points, would be eliminated, as Karnataka

holds an advantage in bonus point victories (2) over Haryana (1). This season, the group standings are determined by the number of bonus point wins rather than net run rate or head-to-head records, a departure from previous editions of the tournament.

If Karnataka secures six points from the match, they will finish with 25 points and must rely on Kerala earning no more than a draw against Bihar, who would then cap at 24 points. A draw with a firstinnings lead (3 points) would leave Karnataka at 22 points, forcing them to depend on a Kerala defeat for quarterfinal qualification. Meanwhile, both Haryana and Kerala need only a draw to seal their quarterfinal spots. Rahul's Return Strengthens Karnataka's Chances.

This will be KL Rahul's first Ranji Trophy appearance since 2020, arriving at a crucial jun-



ture for Karnataka. Karnataka coach Yere Goud confirmed that the seasoned batter is set to play at No. 3 against Haryana. "He brings a lot of experience and adds immense value to the team in all aspects of the game. We will finalize the playing eleven based on conditions, but Rahul is likely to bat at No. 3," Goud told reporters.

In another positive development, Karnataka's pace spearhead Vidwath Kaverappa has recovered from a shin injury

and will return to the playing XI. Despite the reinforcements, Goud acknowledged the challenge ahead.

"If you start with the mindset of chasing 7 points, it becomes a difficult task. We need to focus on executing our game plan well in all three departments, just like we did in the last match. Maximizing opportunities and maintaining discipline, especially in the bowling department, will be key," he added.

## SA 20: Capitals down Super Kings to remain in contention for playoffs

**Centurion:** A rejuvenated Pretoria Capitals registered a six-wicket bonus point victory over Joburg Super Kings to remain in the race for the SA20 playoff berth here. The Capitals restricted the Super Kings to a paltry 99 for 9 and then eased past the target losing just four wickets for a crucial win. With this win, the Capitals moved up to 14 points - just one point behind the fourth-placed Super Kings on 15.

The captain's armband was

also passed to Kyle Verreynne after Rilee Rossouw withdrew due to the birth of his child. Knowing that only a victory would keep their hopes of qualifying for the playoffs alive, the Capitals produced their most clinical performance of the season thus far. Will Jacks set the tone with the ball, conceding just two runs from his two overs in the Powerplay, which was just the confidence booster the Capitals required. Super Kings, on

the other hand, were unable to set any form of a platform, especially after the in-form Devon Conway was forced to leave the field in the third over after being hit on the arm.

Debutant Rogers had JSK skipper Faf Du Plessis caught at short fine-leg before fellow newbie Gideon Peters launched his SA20 career in dramatic fashion. The 26-year-old fast bowler fired in a rasping bouncer to Conway upon his return.



The New Zealand international was visibly rushed for pace and only managed

a half-hearted pull which he feathered behind to Verreynne.