

# NATIONAL/INTERNATIONAL

## Sonam Wangchuk Begins Hunger Strike At Jantar Mantar, Joins CJP Protest Over Exam Accountability



**NEW DELHI, JUN 28:** Climate activist Sonam Wangchuk on Sunday began a hunger strike at Jantar Mantar, joining the Cockroach Janata Party (CJP) protest demanding accountability over alleged irregularities in examinations and seeking the resignation of Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan.

Before sitting on the fast, Wangchuk, along with CJP founder Abhijeet Dipke, visited Rajghat and paid tribute to Mahatma Gandhi. The protest began with the gathering observing a two-minute silence.

Hundreds of protesters, mostly youth and students, gathered at Jantar Mantar as Wangchuk started his hunger strike. Several farmer leaders were also present at the protest site.

Explaining his decision to join the protest, Wangchuk said education had been close to his heart for the last 40 years and that he could not remain silent when young people raised concerns over the education system.

"I have been forced to sit here, I am not doing this happily. I am sitting on a fast in support of both issues. Many people ask me, you were doing a movement in Ladakh, why are you with CJP now. Education, which is the issue here, has been close to my heart for the last 40 years,

since I was a student," he said. City & Local Guides

"I did engineering, but never took a job because I felt the key to all generations is in education. When some youth raise their voices on issues with the education system, how could I have remained silent? It was natural for me to support them," Wangchuk added.

He said the focus should be on using education to "build children's lives and give direction to the nation".

Referring to his work in Ladakh, Wangchuk said protecting the Himalayas was everyone's responsibility as billions of people depend on water originating in the region.

"I wish the government had shown sensitivity, we would not have had to go through this and sit here in such heat," he said.

Wangchuk said that in the absence of accountability, peaceful protest was the only option available in a democracy. "When there is no accountability, we are forced to take the only way possible in a democracy -- peaceful protest, and we will do that," he said.

He also praised the protesters, saying that many youths were observing hunger strikes despite the heat, and appealed to people to make it a community hunger strike and observe at least a day-long fast.

Wangchuk was released from Jodhpur prison in March 2026, after spending nearly six months in detention under the National Security Act for his involvement in the Ladakh statehood protest that had turned violent.

Earlier, Dipke had appealed to farmers, students and organisations to join the protest and support the call for accountability.

On Sunday morning, he said on X that several farmers' leaders from Uttar Pradesh, Haryana and Punjab were being placed under house arrest to prevent them from reaching Jantar Mantar. The protest also turned into a platform for other grievances involving students and educational institutions, with the family of Amaira, a Class 6 student who died last year after falling from the fourth floor of Neerja Modi School in Jaipur in an alleged suicide case, joining the agitation seeking justice for their daughter.

Amaira's parents alleged that no action had been taken against the school or teacher and that police had not filed a chargesheet so far. "We send our children to school with some trust. It was not negligence, it was murder by the school. She was very kind and spread goodness in the world. Today would have been her 10th

birthday," her mother said.

Dipke said the incident needed to remain in public memory, alleging that the police and school had tried to suppress the matter when it happened.

He said the issue was not limited to a single case and alleged that there were several such incidents involving students.

Representatives of the Sarv Khap Panchayat also joined the protest. Khap representatives tied a pagdi on Dipke, with coordinator Omprakash Dhankar saying the gesture represented a responsibility being handed over to him.

"This pagdi is a responsibility. With this, we are handing over the responsibility to him," Dhankar said.

The khap representatives alleged that around 500 farmer leaders and members of organisations had been stopped from coming to Delhi. Dipke had earlier made a similar allegation.

Farmer leader Akshay Kumar from Odisha, the home state of Pradhan, said the minister would face political consequences if he did not resign. Politics

"If Pradhan does not resign, he will be defeated in the next polls," he said.

Pradhan is a Lok Sabha MP from the Sambalpur constituency in Odisha.

Farmer leader Attar Singh Kadian criticised the BJP, saying that it was not capable of running the government and should step down.

Dhankar also accused the BJP of coming to power based on promises that were not fulfilled.

The CJP protest began at Jantar Mantar on June 20 amid allegations of irregularities in the examination system, including NEET. The movement has been demanding accountability and action from the government. (Agencies)

## BJP has turned Ram Mandir into a 'shop', betrayed Hindutva, alleges Uddhav Thackeray

**PARBHANI, JUNE 28:**

Shiv Sena (UBT) chief Uddhav Thackeray on Sunday accused the BJP of "commercialising" the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya and "betraying" the ideology of Hindutva, comments coming in the backdrop of allegations of embezzlement of donations at the shrine in Uttar Pradesh.

Stepping up his attack on the BJP-led ruling alliance in Maharashtra, he asserted the time had come to "strike at the roots of traitors", an apparent reference to rebel Shiv Sena (UBT) Lok Sabha MPs who have joined the ruling Shiv Sena.

Talking to reporters in Parbhani in central Maharashtra, the former CM, a BJP ally-turned-critic, asserted the Ram Mandir was "a source of inspiration for Hindus", but questioned what he described as its commercialisation.

Thackeray and other senior leaders of his party are touring the Lok Sabha constituencies of 6 rebel Shiv Sena (UBT) MPs who joined the Eknath Shinde-led Shiv Sena on June 22. Sanjay Jadhav, the Lok Sabha MP from Parbhani, was among the lawmakers who joined the party led by Deputy Chief Minister Shinde, an arch rival of Thackeray. Executive



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"The Ram Mandir is a source of inspiration for Hindus. My question is why they have turned the temple into a shop. This temple is the outcome of a long struggle. Earlier, the BJP gave the slogan 'Mandir Vahi Banayenge' (Temple will be built at same spot in Ayodhya). Now, we know why they wanted to build this temple. They have betrayed the ideology of Hindutva," Thackeray alleged.

A controversy over the alleged embezzlement of donations at the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya surfaced on June 7. Following a request from the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust, the Uttar Pradesh government constituted a Special Inves-

tigation Team (SIT) on June 13. Based on the SIT's preliminary findings, an FIR was registered on June 25 and police have so far arrested eight people in connection with the case.

Targeting the ruling Mahayuti alliance, Thackeray said the time had come to "strike at the roots of traitors" and appealed to voters to defeat candidates belonging to the Shinde-led Shiv Sena in the future polls.

"To save the state, people should come together and defeat the candidates of the Eknath Shinde camp. Those who switched sides did so for their personal gain," he claimed. Dismissing speculation about internal differences within the Shiv Sena (UBT), Thackeray empha-

sised groupism existed in every political party, but denied it was an issue in his organisation.

"I do not believe there is internal groupism in our party. Like I said earlier, 'Operation Tiger' could actually be 'Operation Devendra'. It could be an internal exercise to stop (Chief Minister) Devendra Fadnavis from going to Delhi (for a national role) and instead stopping him in Maharashtra itself," he asserted.

Operation Tiger was the name given to the political mission to secure defections of MPs from the Shiv Sena (UBT) and facilitate their entry into the Shinde-led party. Politics

Accusing the ruling parties of pursuing divisive politics, Thackeray claimed they deliberately created rifts among communities to retain power.

"The ruling parties have a strategy of keeping people fighting. They create rifts among communities and enjoy power. That is their secret of ruling. There is anarchy and no one is looking at it," he said.

Referring to the alleged Teacher Eligibility Test (TET) paper leak case, the former CM said it was "shameful" that Maharashtra had emerged as its centre. (PTI)

## Openly support movement for 'liberation' of Krishna Janambhoomi: Adityanath

**HATHRAS (UP), June 28:** Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on Sunday challenged Samajwadi Party president Akhilesh Yadav to openly support a movement for the "liberation" of the Krishna Janambhoomi on the lines of the Ram Janmabhoomi campaign, while attacking him over his remarks on Ayodhya. Executive Branch

Adityanath's remarks came a day after Yadav said that people's faith has been played with in view of the alleged embezzlement of donations received at the Ram temple in Ayodhya, and if his party is voted to power, they would develop Ayodhya into an "inimitable" sacred city.

Addressing a public meeting here, Adityanath said, "Akhileshji, Ayodhya has already been transformed by Lord Ram's devotees. Don't worry about it. Repent, visit Ram Lalla once, at least that will bring you some wisdom. Now prepare so that we can



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also do something for Lord Krishna."

Yadav is yet to visit the Ram temple in Ayodhya.

Adityanath further challenged the SP chief, saying, "Akhileshji, now talk about Mathura. If you are truly trying to present yourself as religious, then speak openly about Mathura, Vrindavan and Krishna Janmabhoomi. Say that, just like the Ram Janmabhoomi liberation movement, a campaign should also be launched for the liberation of Krishna Janmabhoomi."

Adityanath asserted that

"Lord Krishna's birthplace also deserves respect" and alleged that the opposition lacked the courage to speak on the issue.

There is a legal dispute concerning the Krishna Janambhoomi. Hindus claim that the Shahi Idgah mosque at Mathura has been built after demolishing a temple at the birthplace of Lord Krishna.

The chief minister also criticised Yadav's statement on Ayodhya, saying, "You say your government will make Ayodhya a religious city. What religious city will you

make? Look at your own history. It was your party's government that fired on Ram devotees."

He added that Ayodhya had regained its identity under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi through the efforts of Ram devotees and said the city did not need the Samajwadi Party's endorsement.

The SP chief and former Uttar Pradesh chief minister had alleged financial irregularities in the handling of donations received by the Ram Janambhoomi trust in Ayodhya, triggering a political row. Politics

The Trust denied the allegations, asserting that its accounts are transparent and regularly audited.

The Uttar Pradesh Government subsequently constituted a Special Investigation Team (SIT) to examine the allegations. Based on the SIT's findings, an FIR was registered, and several people have been arrested.

## Trump presses Syria to take on Hezbollah, raising alarm in Lebanon and Israel

**BEIRUT, JUNE 28:** As the White House has soured on Israel's war with Hezbollah in Lebanon, US President Donald Trump has shocked many in the region by pushing an alternative: Let Syria fight the Iran-backed militant group instead.

He has suggested that the battle-hardened and Islamist-led insurgents who overthrew Syria's autocratic President Bashar Assad a year and a half ago and formed a new government would do a better job of rooting out Hezbollah than the Israeli army.

Syrian President Ahmad al-Sharaa has said he has no interest in doing so, and has asserted that Trump's comments were misconstrued. But Trump has doubled down on the idea.

Although it remains unclear how serious the White House is about the proposal, the prospect of a Syrian invasion has raised alarms in Lebanon - and also in Israel, which regards al-Sharaa's Islamist-led government with suspicion and has seized control of a strip of southern Syria since he took power.

Syria has also become the site of rising tensions between Israel and Turkey - a main backer of al-Sharaa's government - with each seeking to limit the other's influence in the neighbouring country.

Top Israeli security officials convened a meeting on the subject on Wednesday, according to an official who spoke on the condition of

anonymity because they were not authorised to speak to the media.

On the sidelines of the G7 summit earlier this month, Trump complained that Israel's war with Hezbollah is dragging on too long and "too many people are being killed."

More than 4,000 people have been killed by Israeli strikes in Lebanon since Hezbollah joined the wider Iran war with a March 2 attack on Israel, including hundreds of women and children. Israel says its strikes target Hezbollah and that it takes measures to protect civilians.

"You don't have to knock down an apartment house every time you're looking for somebody, because there are a lot of people in those apartment houses and they're not all Hezbollah," Trump said.

"I suggested to Israel to let Syria take care of Hezbollah. Cause to be honest with you, I think they'd do a better job."

Days later, on the first day of US-Iran talks in Switzerland, Fox News' Trey Yingst said that, during an interview, Trump had expressed disappointment that Israel can't "put Hezbollah away" and said that he is "close to giving it to Syria" because he thinks al-Sharaa would be more precise.

The White House declined to comment and referred to Trump's previous statements.

Syrian officials scrambled to do damage control.

In a speech in Damascus

on June 13, al-Sharaa said, "There are people spreading rumours that Syria will intervene in Lebanon. This is not true. We are calling for a permanent end to the war and the strengthening of institutions, and for there to be economic ties and a calming of the situation in Lebanon."

In a June 21 interview with the Emirati network Al Mashhad, al-Sharaa said Trump's remarks had been misunderstood.

Trump "spoke about Syria's role in finding a safe and peaceful solution, but the statement was misinterpreted as if Syria were going to invade Lebanon tomorrow morning," al-Sharaa said.

He said Syria had "presented our vision for a solution to the United States, which is to stop the war and address the negative effects on Lebanon and Syria, and to find different economic, political and social solutions." Politics

Hezbollah, along with Iran, intervened on the side of Assad during Syria's 14-year civil war, while al-Sharaa was the leader of an insurgent group seeking to overthrow him.

But the new leaders in Damascus have said since taking power in December 2024 that they are focused on rebuilding the country, are not seeking to settle scores, and want to remain outside of any regional conflict.

After Israel and the US launched their war against

Iran - which triggered a wider regional conflict - Syria made a point of remaining on the sidelines.

In the first weeks of the war, the Syrian military sent reinforcements to the border with Lebanon, which officials said aimed to stop cross-border weapons smuggling or any spillover of the conflict. At one point in March, Syria accused Hezbollah of launching artillery shells across the border toward Syrian army positions, which Hezbollah denied. The escalation stopped there.

Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan told The Associated Press in March that Turkey had interceded to defuse the tensions.

Al-Sharaa told Al Mashhad that "the decision of (Hezbollah) to enter into the Syrian conflict was wrong," but that he was willing to hold a "dialogue" with the militant group and even to mediate between different Lebanese factions as they debate the future of Hezbollah's weapons.

In March, US envoy to Syria Tom Barrack denied reports that Washington had floated the idea of Syria intervening against Hezbollah.

But since then, Trump has begun to make the call openly.

Randa Slim, director of the Middle East Program at the Washington-based Stimson Centre, said Trump's proposal is, "at best, driven by a profound ignorance of the dynamics on the ground."

**WASHINGTON, JUNE 28:**

Thousands turned up at the Dupont Circle in downtown Washington to get a taste of Indian mangoes and scrumptious biryani as the Embassy of India hosted a tasting session. History

Indian-Americans came to the Dupont Circle roundabout from neighbouring Virginia and Maryland to relive the memories of yesteryears and relish the juiciest of mango varieties - Kesar, Langra, Malda and many more that were on offer.

"I have memories of my grandmother serving us mangoes during the summers. I came here just to get a taste of Indian mangoes," Disha, a US citizen born to Indian immigrant parents, said, relishing a plate of Kesar.

"This is the yummiest of the mangoes I have ever had," said Andrew, who is touring the US to watch the World Cup football.

The 'Taste the Tropical Magic' event has been an annual affair in the Washington



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summer calendar for the past several years and has grown bigger every passing year.

"It's not just a slice of mango or a slice of India, but the flavours of India that are on offer here," Vinay Mohan Kwatra, India's ambassador to the US, said here.

Last year, the Embassy put up one tasting booth, which drew massive crowds, prompting a much scaled-up event on Saturday.

Mango aficionados queued up at the five tasting booths set up in the Dupont Circle that offered not just mangoes, but also tastings of

lassi, succulent biryani, mango halwa and Indian tea and coffee.

Over 8,000 people had signed up to attend the event, and the queues were endless even as the event drew to a close after about three hours.

Kwatra said, given the response to the tasting event, the embassy was planning to host food promotion events more frequently.

"Mango is a delicate fruit, and we have been able to manage superfast logistics to ensure that the Indian diaspora in the US gets the best value for their money," Kaushal Khakar, CEO of Kay

Bee Exports, said.

Agriculture and Processed Food Products Export Promotion Authority (APEDA) Chairman Abhishek Dev said export of mangoes to the US has been increasing.

"Last year, we exported 2300 tonnes of mangoes to the US. This year, we surpassed that figure a month back," Dev said. Multilateral Organizations

The story of Indian mangoes in the US dates back to 2006, when then US President George W Bush cleared the way for shipping the fruit to American shores - news welcomed as enthusiastically as the marquee announcement of working toward the India-US civil nuclear deal.

The US had banned mango imports from India due to the presence of the mango seed weevil, a pest absent in North America.

A solution emerged in January 2006, when the Agriculture Department allowed the imports of produce treated with low doses of irradiation.