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Photo: PTI

One Nation, One Election Bills in Parliament today

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

The Narendra Modi-led Government is likely to introduce two Bills in the Lok Sabha paving way for simultaneous elections 'One Nation, One Election', on Tuesday. The Constitution (One Hundred and Twenty-Ninth Amendment) Bill, 2024, the legislation seeks to synchronise elections for the Lok Sabha, State Assemblies, and possibly local bodies. While the Union Territories Laws (Amendment) Bill 2024, is to amend the Government of Union Territories Act, 1963, the Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi Act, 1991 and the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act, 2019. Union Law Minister Arjun Ram Meghwal will introduce the Bills in the Parliament. The BJP has issued a three-line whip to all its Lok Sabha MPs to be present in the

house on December 17, 2024. The Union Cabinet has already approved two Bills to facilitate simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies, though the decision on local body polls has been deferred for now. According to the statement of objects and reasons of the Constitution ((One Hundred and Twenty-Ninth Amendment) Bill, 2024), the Bill proposes to insert a new article 82A (Simultaneous elections to the House of the People and all Legislative Assemblies) and to amend article 83 (Duration of Houses of Parliament), article 172 (Duration of State Legislatures) and article 327 (Power of Parliament to make provision with respect to elections to Legislatures). According to Section 2 sub clause 5 of the Constitution (129th) Amendment Bill, "If the Election Commission is of the opinion that the

elections to any Legislative Assembly cannot be conducted along with the general election to the House of the People, it may make a recommendation to the President, to declare by an order, that the election to that Legislative Assembly may be conducted at a later date." The General Elections to the House of the People and all State Legislative Assemblies were held simultaneously in the years 1951-52, 1957, 1962 and 1967. However, due to premature dissolution of some Legislative Assemblies in 1968 and 1969, the cycle of holding Polls simultaneously with the House of the People got disrupted. The Law Commission of India in its 170th report, on "Reform of the Electoral Laws", inter alia, suggested that holding separate elections for State Legislative Assemblies should be an exception rather than the rule.

Gear up NCR, GRAP-IV is back

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

As Delhi's average AQI rose to 399 at 9 AM on Monday, and breached the 400 mark at 10 PM, the Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM) on Monday invoked Stage IV of the Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP) to curb air pollution.

As a result, entry of truck traffic into Delhi (except for trucks carrying essential commodities/ providing essential services) banned. All LNG/CNG/Electric/BS-VI Diesel trucks shall however be permitted to enter Delhi and NCR. Light Commercial Vehicles registered outside Delhi, other than EVs/CNG/BS-VI diesel, can't enter Delhi, except those carrying essential commodities/ providing essential services.

Delhi-registered BS-IV and below diesel-operated medium and heavy goods vehicles will be prohibited from operating, except for those carrying essential services. The NCR State Governments/Delhi government will decide whether to permit 50 per cent. of employees in Government, municipal, and private offices to work from home.

All construction activities, including highways, roads, flyovers, power lines, pipelines and other public projects, have been suspended. Schools are closed. Employees are asked to work from home. "Considering the steep rise in the AQI of Delhi owing to highly unfavourable meteorological conditions and absolute calm wind conditions, the CAQM Sub-Committee on GRAP called for an emergency meeting. The Sub-Committee decided to impose Stage-IV ('Severe+' Air Quality) of the GRAP schedule (issued on 13.12.2024) in the entire NCR, with immediate effect", the CAQM said in its order. The GRAP-IV is the highest level of restrictions and is intended to reduce the public health impact of hazardous air quality. "Considering the highly unfavourable meteorological conditions including calm winds and very low mixing height leading the AQI of Delhi into the higher end of the very poor category, the panel's sub-



Photo: Ranjan Dimri/The Pioneer

Coldwave conditions sweep across NCR

SAUMYA SHUKLA ■ NEW DELHI

Coldwave conditions swept several parts of the national Capital for a second consecutive day on Monday as the minimum temperature dropped to 4.5 degrees Celsius, four degrees below normal. This is the joint lowest minimum temperature so far this season after the city recorded 4.5 degree Celsius on December 12 as well. In the coming days, Delhi may witness a further increase in the coldwave with shallow fog in various parts due to calm winds and high humidity. In its weather bulletin, the India Meteorological Department (IMD) has also issued a cold wave warning for certain states of northern India, including Jammu and Kashmir, Punjab, Haryana, and western Uttar Pradesh, among other states that would persist till Saturday in Delhi and several other states. The temperature in certain areas of Delhi went even below 4.5 degrees Celsius. The minimum temperature in Pusa was recorded at 3.5 degrees Celsius, while in Ayanagar, the minimum temperature was recorded at 4 degrees Celsius.

committee on Graded Response Action Plan decides to impose Stage 3 of the revised GRAP schedule (issued on Friday) in the entire NCR, with immediate effect," an official order said. According to the revised GRAP plan, non-essential diesel light commercial vehicles of BS-IV or older standards, registered outside Delhi, are also not allowed to enter the city. Construction and demolition activities which generate dust leading to air pollution are restricted. Additionally, the ban on construction work extends to all non-essential projects, though exceptions are made for national security, healthcare, and specific public infrastructure projects. To further combat the pollution, the authorities have ramped up efforts to suppress dust by deploying mechanised road-sweeping and water-sprinkling machines across the city. As a result, schools and colleges in Delhi, Gurugram, Faridabad, Ghaziabad, and Gautam Budh Nagar are mandatorily required to shift classes up to Class V to hybrid mode under GRAP Stage III. Students and parents will have the option to choose online education wherever it is available. Diesel generator sets, another significant contributor to air pollution, will be restricted to emergency use only during this phase.



Yes. I am upset: Chhagan Bhujbal

T N RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

Making no bones about his displeasure over his exclusion from the Maharashtra Cabinet, a miffed The Nationalist Congress Party (NCP-AP) leader and a popular Other Backward Classes (OBC) face in the State, Chhagan Bhujbal said on Monday that he would decide on his next move after talking to his constituents and members of a Phule organisation of which he is the president.

"Yes. I am upset... I may or may not have been given a ministerial post but Chhagan Bhujbal is not finished," Bhujbal said, when media persons button-holed him for comment on his exclusion from the State Cabinet. Talking to media persons on the first day of the Winter Session of the State Legislature in Nagpur, Bhujbal said, "I will take a call on my future course of action after consulting the people in the constituency and also the members of the Samata Parishad". Seventy-seven-year-old Bhujbal, who is an influential leader from OBC's Mali community, is the founder-president of the Akhil Bharatiya Mahatma Phule Samata Parishad.

'Stay one step ahead of criminals'



CM advises police

Criminals are devising new modus operandi. So, police should remain one step ahead of the criminals, said Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi at the valedictory function of the 69th Police Duty Meet at Cuttack on Monday.

He directed the police to take stringent action against those who commit crimes against women and the cyber fraudsters. Majhi said the government is determined for the modernisation of the police. He further said that in the districts where there are no cyber police stations, new

cyber police stations would be set up and an exclusive cyber wing would be set up to tackle cyber frauds. Majhi said four districts would have courts for women soon. On the occasion, the CM inaugurated new buildings of Astarang, Delanga and Balanaga police stations in Puri district in virtual mode.

Bribery case Bishnupada yet to appear before CBI

CBI Joint Director arrives to oversee probe

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

The joint Director of the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) reached Bhubaneswar on Monday to take stock of the investigation process into the Rs 10-lakh bribery case allegedly involving IAS officer Bishnupada Sethi. It is learnt that the case is being investigated under the direct supervision of the CBI Joint Director.

Contractor Santosh Moharana, who has been arrested and taken into remand in connection with the case as the main accused, became sick before the completion of the remand period on Monday. He has been admitted to the

Capital Hospital after suffering from diarrhoea. On the other hand, Bishnupada Sethi is yet to appear before the CBI despite repeated summons. Security around the government quarters of Sethi has been reportedly tightened. B&R Company General Manager (East Coast) BK Singh said, "CBI inquiry into the matter is going on and I will not give any comment about it. Everything will be clear after CBI report comes out. CBI has got all the documents and some of our officials are questioned. We are fully cooperating with the CBI in the investigation process." "We have been working on various projects of the State Government for the last eight to 10 years. No tender-fixing has been done," he added.

CM hears 1,000 complaints at grievance cell



PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi on Monday heard the complaints of around 1,000 people at his grievance cell here. It was the sixth hearing by Majhi since he came to power. The CM initially attended to the complaints of Divyangs. Around 30 differently-abled people from across the State

had turned up to submit their grievances. He personally went to each of them and patiently heard their problems. Most of the complaints related to housing, government allowances and other basic problems of the people. Majhi directed officials of the concerned departments to immediately solve the problems at the grassroots level. Several ministers including

Mukesh Mahaling, Krushna Chandra Patra, Pradip Balsamant, Ganeshram Khuntia and Rabi Narayan Nayak were present during the grievance hearing. It may be noted the Chief Minister's grievance cell is opened every Monday. But it had remained closed for last several weeks due to pressing engagements of the Chief Minister.

Subhadra 4th phase on hold till E-KYC process over

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

The fourth phase of the first installment of the Subhadra Yojana, which was scheduled to be disbursed on December 25 on the occasion of Christmas, has been put on hold for the time being, informed Deputy Chief Minister Pravati Parida on Monday. With over 5 lakh women beneficiaries still on the waiting/process list, the government has decided to postpone the payment of the fourth phase until the verification and E-KYC process is completed. With an aim to cover all eligible beneficiaries, as this is the last phase, the government has decided to postpone it until the verification process is over. "Over 20L women beneficiaries will benefit from the fourth or the last phase of the



first installment of the Subhadra Yojana. So, applicants who are facing problems in E-KYC process must update their biometrics. Moreover, those who have done their E-KYC through mobile OTP have to do it once again through biometrics. For that, they can visit Jana Seva Kendra or Mo Seva Kendra. Currently, around 5 lakh people are in the waiting/under process list," the Deputy CM informed. "We have also set up helpdesks comprising

Anganwadi Workers and CDPOs. They will visit every village with the help of people's representatives and assist applicants facing problems. RIs have also been advised for field visits and resolve any land-related issues," Parida said. She advised applicants to put up their grievances in the Subhadra portal or visit the block office. Should problems arise, the Deputy CM also encouraged applicants to reach out to the block office, local sarpanch or Anganwadi Workers with their grievances. "The next course of action will be taken after the verification process is completed. We will talk to the CM and fix the new date of disbursement. Our government's aim is to include every single eligible beneficiary. So, I request everyone to take benefit of the ambitious scheme," Parida added.

Demo against Bishnupada Sethi Bees turn violent after attack on their hive, chase protestors

NALINI SAHU ■ BHUBANESWAR

A protest rally organised here by Odisha Chhatra Congress and Yuva Congress workers turned chaotic on Monday when a swarm of honeybees attacked the demonstrators, journalists and police personnel outside the residence of Principal Secretary to the government Bishnupada Sethi. The protest was aimed at pressuring authorities to arrest Sethi in connection with a Rs 10-lakh bribery case. However, the situation escalated when someone inadvertently disturbed a beehive situated in a tree near the protest site, leading to a frenzy of angry bees. Those attending the rally, including journalists, were caught off guard and sought refuge lying on the ground and shielding their faces as the bees descended upon them.



"Protesters were tossing tomatoes and eggs at the walls of Sethi's residence and nearby trees, which likely led to the disturbance of the beehive," noted Sukanta Kumar Mohanty, a journalist present at the scene. After approximately 30 minutes of chaos, the bees eventually dispersed, allowing the Congress workers to resume their demonstration. They resumed their chants calling for Sethi's arrest, alleging he had attempted to accept bribes through his drivers to favour certain contractors. As tensions mounted, some protestors attempted to

Bridge & Roof director wants to meet Sethi Move raises several questions

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Amid a Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) probe involving senior controversial bureaucrat Bishnupada Sethi, a request by top officials of Bridge & Roof Company to meet him has drawn scrutiny and raised several questions. Bishnupada Sethi, Principal Secretary of the ST & SC Development, Minorities and Backward Classes Welfare Department, is suspected of having met Chanchal Mukherjee, Director of Bridge & Roof Company, just two days before the CBI conducted a raid on December 7. A letter dated December 5, 2023 has surfaced, revealing that the company had sought a meeting with Sethi. The letter, signed by Mukherjee, stated: "Dear Sir, we would like to inform you that the following officials, C.K. Mukherjee

and B.K. Singh, GM, East Coast, request to meet the Honorable Principal Secretary in connection with various projects executed by us in different districts in Odisha." While the sequence of events has raised suspicions, no concrete evidence has emerged to confirm whether the meeting between Sethi and Mukherjee actually took place. The timing is particularly noteworthy as records indicate that on October 19, Sethi approved a contract awarding the upgradation of Ashram Schools and High Schools to Bridge & Roof Company. This contract, coupled with the meeting request and the subsequent CBI raid, has prompted speculations about the nature of their interactions. Authorities are now delving deeper into the matter to determine if the meeting occurred and whether it holds any relevance to the ongoing investigation.



Mega solar plant to be built in Dhenkanal

Rs 25,000 cr to be invested; to create 14,000 jobs
To generate 6 GW of electricity

PNS ■ DHENKANAL

Food Supplies and Consumer Welfare Minister Krushna Chandra Patra conducted the groundbreaking ceremony for a mega solar power plant at Neulpoi



in Dhenkanal district on Monday. The project, initiated by the WAREE Energies Limited, will be constructed over an area of 595

acres with an investment of Rs 25,000 crore. It will have a production capacity of 6 gigawatts (GW) of solar energy, significantly boosting the region's as well as Odisha's growing energy demands.

The plant will manufacture solar panels, modules and related components. The project is expected to create around 14,000 job opportunities.

Speaking at the event, Patra, who also holds the Science and Technology portfolio, emphasised that the

project would be transformative to the development of Dhenkanal. "This project marks the foundation of Dhenkanal's progress," he said. The factory's director Hitesh Mehta stated that the plant would begin electricity production within the next nine months.

The mega-solar power plant will be the largest of its kind in Odisha and will massively influence the State's energy production as well as its shift to green and renewable energy.

'Bishnupada Sethi is habitually corrupt'



Alleges Youth Congress, holds demo

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Members of the Pradesh Youth Congress led by its president Ranjit Patra attempted to gherao the residence of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe Welfare Department Principal Secretary Bishnupada Sethi on Monday alleging his involvement in the Bridge and Roof Corporation scam.

The Youth Congress members, who were marching towards Sethi's residence in a procession, were intercepted by police near Sishu Bhawan Square here, following which a scuffle ensued. Many of the agitators were rounded up by police.

Patra said that as Bishnupada Sethi is directly involved in the Bridge and Roof Corporation scam, stringent action should be taken against him and he should be arrested. Besides, action should be taken against the politicians and officers who are involved in the scam.

Former Youth Congress president Yasir Nawaj alleged that Sethi commits massive corruption in whatever department he is posted. When he had worked in the Higher Education Department, he committed many scams. The CBI has proof of Sethi's involvement directly in the Bridge and Roof Corporation scam, for which the Central agency has summoned him. A probe should be conducted into all the departments in which he has been posted, said Nawaj.

G Udaygiri coldest in State at 6.6 deg



BBSR 13 deg; Cuttack 11.5 deg

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

The Regional Office of the India Meteorological Department (IMD) here on Monday issued a warning of a further drop in temperature and continuation of the cold wave in the State for another 24 hours.

Besides, it also issued a Yellow warning for potentially severe cold wave conditions for the districts of Jharsuguda, Sundargarh and Angul. The lowest temperature in the State was recorded at G Udaygiri at 6.6 degrees Celsius. Jharsuguda and Rourkela also saw mercury plummet to 6.8 degrees.

The steel city also had the lowest visibility at 50 meters with dense fog prevailing.

The capital city of Bhubaneswar recorded a minimum temperature of 13 degrees while Cuttack shivered at 11.5 degrees.

The IMD also said that there is a possibility of light rainfall at a few isolated places across Puri, Ganjam, Gajapati, Rayagada and Koraput districts on Tuesday.

The weather office also added that no large change in minimum temperature would be observed over the next two days, giving people no respite from the cold wave. However, mercury may see a rise of 3 to 5 degrees Celsius after that in several districts of the State.

'Odisha's forest cover to increase considerably in 45 yrs'



Union Min Pradhan calls for use of tech for forest conservation

NIRMAL CHARAN SAHU ■ BHUBANESWAR

Forests are the backbone of Odisha's economy and play a vital role in maintaining ecological balance, said Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan at the Odisha Non-Gazetted Forest Service Association's Conference.

He began his speech saying Odisha is second in the whole nation in forest coverage, and Sambalpur is one among the districts having the largest forest coverage.

The Minister said, "In the upcoming 45 years, between 2025 and 2070, there is an aim to increase the forest coverage. There are four sanctuaries in Sambalpur out of a total of 19 sanctuaries in the State. Hence, there should be efforts for sustainable development of all the jungle products, livelihoods, wildlife, and economy in coordination."

He further directed the development of ponds, forest land rights, and proper implementation of PESA law. There should be continuous efforts from the govern-

ment to reduce the human-animal conflict, besides promoting the use of advanced technology for the development and conservation of forests, he added.

"We have taken an oath to bring the carbon emissions to net zero by 2070 as per the direction of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Following mission LiFE, PM's 'Ek Ped Maa k Naam' (One tree in the name of mother) movement was launched by the PM," Pradhan stated.

Coming down to the inclusion of forests in the education curriculum of schools, the Minister said the government of Odisha has decided to implement the New Education Policy in the State. There will be a new syllabus as per the policy, which will include forest-centric culture, history of forest conservation movements, and education of new possibilities in the forest.

Development is not just the development of the capital city Bhubaneswar; success of development should reach every region in the State. Through new technology, the forest staff can be empowered and make Odisha the No. 1 State in forest force, which will help in fulfilling PM's dream of forming a developed nation by 2047, opined Pradhan.

'Disability a mere thought, not physical deficiency'



CM distributes 500 e-rickshaws to PWDs

NIRMAL CHARAN SAHU ■ SAMBALPUR

Disability is just a thought, not a physical deficiency, said Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi in a programme organised by the Social Security and Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (SSEPD) Department to distribute 500 e-rickshaws to persons with disabilities (PWD) across the State at Mandlia ground in Sambalpur city.

Majhi said, "The differently abled don't need our mercy but a right to live a life with respect. Our government is giving importance to PWD's safety and to include them in the mainstream society. The SSEPD Department is continuously working to facilitate them with a life of self-respect."

CM further added, "Today the differently-abled are showing their unique talents in government ser-

vice, art, sports, and business. Shrikanta Bolla could get an education from America's MIT and has employed 100s of differently-abled. In the recent Paris Olympics, the PWD athletes have won many medals. We are emphasising how the differently-abled people can reach out to us directly."

He concluded by thanking the officials of Mahanadi Coalfield Limited (MCL).

The 500 e-rickshaws were funded by the MCL. The differently-abled people across the State received keys to the vehicles. The MCL funded Rs 7.5 crore for the e-rickshaws.

Apart from this, prosthetic limbs and hearing aids were also distributed to the deaf and marriage aids to the poor families. PWD students received scholarships, and senior PWDs received pensions in the programme, which was attended by Sambalpur MLA Jay Narayan Mishra and Collector SB Bondar among other dignitaries.

Interview of the week

Industrial growth can be aligned with sustainable practices



SUGYAN CHOUDHURY



ER BIJAYA KUMAR BEHERA

Humility is the hallmark of wisdom. Er Bijaya Kumar Behera is currently working as the Chief Environmental Engineer (CEE) of the State Pollution Control Board (SPCB). He keeps a low profile while having his Nelson eye over the vicious syndrome of current pollution by industrial establishments and other agents of pollution. He has contributed substantially to multiple key divisions, including consent to establish CTE, Consent to Operate (CTO), Hazardous Waste Management and Biomedical Waste Management in the course of his career. His expertise spans over critical areas of environmental regulation and compliance. Currently, Behera heads the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Cell, where he is responsible for evaluating projects for environmental clearance and ensuring adherence to sustainable practices. Besides, he oversees public hearing processes, facilitating transparent engagement between stakeholders, the public and regulatory authorities.

In an interview to *The Pioneer*, Er Behera spoke to Sugyan Choudhury on many aspects of the environmental hazards and their remedial measures.

What are your plans for containing air and water pollution in the State?

Addressing air and water pollution in Odisha requires a multifaceted approach, integrating scientific methodologies, regulatory measures and community-driven initiatives. The SPCB has devised a multipronged approach to address air and water pollution, combining scientific innovation, regulatory measures and stakeholder collaboration.

Our plans to control air pollution are by adopting latest emission control technologies, promoting cleaner energy sources, vehicular emission reduction, greenbelt development, data-driven regulation, regional action plans under NCAP, promoting electric vehicles (EVs) and cleaner fuels.

Similarly, our water pollution control strategies are treatment of industrial effluents by mandatory installation of Effluent Treatment Plants (ETPs) giving emphasis on the Zero Liquid Discharge (ZLD) concept, urban waste water management by establishing and upgrading Sewage Treatment Plants (STPs) in urban centres to prevent untreated sewage discharge into rivers.

It is alleged that many heavy industries are not effectively undertaking treatment of their indus-

trial wastes. How are you going to tackle such a syndrome?

It is not a fact that many heavy industries are not effectively undertaking treatment of their wastes. Most of the heavy industries are having treatment facilities for their wastes. However, addressing the failure of heavy industries to effectively treat industrial wastes requires a robust and scientific strategy focused on enforcement, monitoring and technological solutions. The SPCB is tackling such situation through (i) strengthening enforcement mechanisms such as conducting frequent inspections, action against the violators issuing show-cause notices followed by closure directions and legal action, penalty provision for the violators, monitoring and data-driven governance such as mandatory installation of real-time monitoring systems. By combining strict enforcement, technological advancements, stakeholder collaboration, and community engagement, the issue of untreated industrial wastes can be effectively mitigated. Odisha's industrial growth can be aligned with sustainable practices, ensuring both environmental protection and economic development.

What are the ultramodern techniques prescribed by SPCB to be followed by industries for effective control of pollution?

The SPCB recommends a combination of traditional and ultramodern pollution control techniques to industries for effective environmental management. Prescribed Ultra-Modern Techniques for (i) Air Pollution Control: Flue Gas Desulfurization (FGD) to remove sulfur dioxide (SO₂), Electrostatic Precipitators (ESPs) to capture fine particulate matter (PM_{2.5} and PM₁₀), Selective Catalytic Reduction (SCR) to reduce Nitrogen Oxides (NO_x) by converting them into harmless nitrogen and water, Bag Filters and Cyclone Separators to capture coarse and fine particles, Low-NO_x Burners to reduce NO_x emissions, (ii) Water Pollution Control: Treatment of waste water by use of advanced treatment technologies like Reverse Osmosis (RO), Nano bubble filtration technology and Membrane Bioreactors (MBR), Zero Liquid Discharge (ZLD), Oil-Water Separators for separation of oil from industrial waste water, Activated Carbon Filters for removal of residual organic pollutants and toxins from treated effluents, (iii) Solid and Hazardous Waste Management: Co-Processing of Hazardous and non-recyclable industrial wastes in ce-

ment kilns, Integrated Solid Waste Management (ISWM), which focuses on reducing, reusing and recycling solid waste, Circular Economy Practices i.e. waste or by-products from one industry serve as raw material for another, (iv) Monitoring Technologies: Continuous Emission Monitoring Systems (CEMS), which tracks air pollution in real-time by monitoring gases like SO₂, NO_x and PM, Continuous Effluent Quality Monitoring Systems (CEQMS), which tracks water quality at the point of discharge, Continuous Ambient Air Quality Monitoring System (CAAQMS), which tracks Ambient Air Quality.

How is SPCB going to achieve resilience by tackling climate changes?

The SPCB can enhance resilience to climate change by integrating mitigation and adaptation strategies within its regulatory, monitoring, and policy frameworks by adopting certain points such as (i) Strengthening Climate-Resilient Policies: Incorporating Climate Change in Environmental Clearance, Carbon Budgeting for Industries, Green Infrastructure Development, (ii) Promoting Renewable Energy Transition: Scaling Renewable Energy Deployment, Electrification of Industrial Processes, Off-Grid Renewable Solutions, (iii) Enhancing Monitoring Systems: Climate-Integrated Environmental Monitoring, Satellite-Based Monitoring, Early Warning Systems (EWS), (iv) Improving Waste Management for GHG Reduction: Circular Economy Models, Methane Capture from Landfills, Biochar Production, (v) Natural Resource Management for Climate Resilience: Afforestation and Reforestation, Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM), Soil Carbon Sequestration, (vi) Capacity Building and Awareness: Training Programs, Public Awareness Campaigns, (vii) Encouraging Innovation and R&D: Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS), Hydrogen-Based Economy, Nature-Based Solutions.

By integrating climate resilience into its policies and enforcing cutting-edge solutions, the SPCB can position Odisha as a leader in tackling climate change while ensuring sustainable industrial and community development. Collaboration among industries, government agencies and local communities is essential to achieve this vision.

How has SPCB enhanced its capabilities for confronting and containing emerging environmental challenges?

To address emerging environmental challenges more effectively, the SPCBs can adopt next-generation scientific approaches and state-of-the-art technologies with advanced and scientifically robust strategies that can be implemented for superior environmental management. Integrating innovation, multi-stakeholder collaboration and robust regulatory systems will not only address immediate environmental challenges but also create a sustainable framework for future resilience.

'Odisha needs robust healthcare infrastructures'

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Speaker of the Odisha Legislative Assembly Surama Padhy emphasised the need to build robust healthcare infrastructures across the State and up-skill human resources in the sector during a Vision Odisha Healthcare Conclave 2024 here on Sunday.

The event, jointly organised by English newspaper Indus Valley Times and New Delhi's research body Centre for Socio-Economic Studies (CSES), was inaugurated by the Speaker.

Highlighting existing gaps, Padhy noted that many Primary Health Centres (PHCs) and Community Health Centres (CHCs) in Odisha continue to lack adequate numbers of doctors, paramedics and other skilled personnel to operate modern healthcare equipments.



"Without skilled human resources, delivering quality healthcare services remains a challenge. Many hospitals, particularly in rural areas, still struggle with insufficient manpower to effectively use available technology," she stated.

Chief guest Health Minister Dr Mukesh Mahaling outlined the government's efforts to strengthen healthcare infrastructures. He announced plans to significantly increase the number of medical seats in Odisha from the current 2,500 to 31,000 and to establish medical colleges in all 30 districts.

"Our government, under the leadership of Chief Minister Mohan Majhi, is committed to ad-

ressing the healthcare needs of the State. These initiatives will go a long way in improving access to healthcare for all," he said.

Former Health and Finance Minister Prafulla Chandra Ghadai delivered an in-depth presentation on Odisha's current health infrastructures. He urged the government to focus on modern training for paramedics, who form the backbone of the healthcare system.

Professor Dr Ashok Acharya underscored the importance of preventive care and strengthening wellness centres to reduce the burden on hospitals. He also advocated for a robust trauma care system to save lives in critical situations.

Renowned childcare expert and director of Hi-Tech Group Dr Rakesh Panigrahi called for healthcare services to be made more affordable and accessible to all sections of society.

Almost all the speakers reiterated the importance of establishing medical colleges in every district to improve access to healthcare and education. They lauded government initiatives such as Ayushman Bharat and Gopabandhu Jana Arogya Yojana aimed at expanding healthcare coverage for underserved communities.

The event, held under the theme "Making Healthcare Accessible, Affordable and Equitable for All," brought together policymakers, healthcare professionals and thought leaders to discuss innovative solutions for Odisha's healthcare challenges.

Ayushman Bharat in Odisha in 2024-25

Old health cards to be replaced: Minister

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

The Ayushman Bharat healthcare scheme is on track to be rolled out in Odisha in the financial year 2024-25. Alongside this, the Gopabandhu Arogya Yojana health insurance cards would be introduced, bringing promising benefits to citizens across the State, said Health Minister Dr Mukesh Mahaling on Monday.



He indicated that in its initial rollout, approximately 3.5 crore people would benefit from this health insurance scheme. A budgetary allocation of around Rs 3.5 thousand crore has been earmarked to support the initiative. The 'Head of Account' has under-

gone revisions, and previous health cards would be replaced.

The scheme is expected to be implemented in about 27,000 medical facilities with a specific emphasis on benefiting migrant workers, said the minister.

"The 27,000 health facilities across the country exclude Delhi and West Bengal since those two have not yet implemented Ayushman Bharat Yojana. However, we will empanel some of the major hospitals in Delhi and West Bengal for the purpose," Dr Mahaling stated.

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Turmoil in Paradip Port Banik Sangha

A few persons forcibly take control of union office

PRASANT ROUT ■ PARADIP
The Paradip Port Banik Sangha, a prominent merchant association in Paradip, has been embroiled in a controversy since the BJP came to power in Odisha. For over 50 years, the Sangha had been electing its office bearers through consensus every three years, maintaining a peaceful democratic process. In August 2023, this tradition continued with the election of prominent labour leader Santosh Kumar Pattnaik as president, Debabrata Sahu as

general secretary, and Pramod Kumar Mahapatra as treasurer.

However, tensions erupted on June 24 this year, when alleged supporters of the BJP, reportedly instigated by local politicians and accompanied by anti-social elements, forcibly entered the Sangha office and created a disturbance. The act led to chaos within the association.

General secretary Sahu filed a complaint at the Paradip Model Police Station in this regard. However, the complaint was reportedly not accepted by the police. Consequently, Sahu filed a civil suit (Civil Suit No-223/2024 / A No-167/2024) in the Civil Court Junior Division,

Kujang.

The court intervened, ordering the Sangha to maintain the status quo indefinitely. Despite this, reports emerged that the accused individuals identified as Khirod Swain, Amiya Pani, Galekha Chandra Sahu and Sambunath Khuntia, among others violated the court order. Armed with deadly weapons, they allegedly attacked elected office bearers, broke the lock of the Sangha office, and forcibly took control of the premises. They have since declared themselves the new leadership of the union, claiming dominance over the association.

Sangha vice president Ayash Kant Samal expressed deep concern over the unpre-

cedented events, stating, "Such lawlessness has never occurred in the union's history. Violating court orders and forcibly seizing control with weapons is not only unconstitutional but also deeply troubling."

The situation highlights growing concerns about law and order under the current administration. Traders and members of the Sangha are now anxiously awaiting the court's judgment to restore order and uphold justice.

The incident marks a dark chapter in the history of the Paradip Port Banik Sangha, raising questions about the enforcement of law and respect for judicial authority in the region.

In Bhadrak Cash, jewellery looted from ex-IAS officer's house

PNS ■ BHADRAK

Burglars broke into the ancestral house of a former IAS officer and decamped with valuables, including a TV set, an inverter, gold jewellery and cash in Bhadrak district.

Reports said the miscreants entered the house through a window and looted the house of former IAS officer Bijay Nayak in the Haladharbindha area of Budanga village under the Tihidi police station.

The occupants of the house were not at home during the time of burglary.

"Gold worth Rs 1.5 lakh and cash of Rs 20,000 are stolen. The thieves broke into the house after twisting open



metal grills of the gate," said a tenant of the house.

Later, a complaint was lodged with police, following which authorities roped in a forensic team and started an investigation into the matter.

"Today they have looted

gold and valuables from this house. Tomorrow such miscreants may target my property and someone else will fall victim on the day after. Repeated incidents of burglary are occurring and the authorities need to take action," said a local resident.

Earlier on December 5, a group of masked robbers had attacked a family in Napanga village of the district and injured four, including three women. Using sharp weapons, they terrorised the family members and looted cash and gold worth Rs 6 lakh.

'Gender Sensitisation' workshop at Gopalpur College



PNS ■ BRAHMAPUR

An awareness programme on 'Gender Sensitisation' was organised at Gopalpur College by the IQAC on Saturday where Principal Dr Ram Prasad Panda presided.

Associate Professor of Berhampur University Dr Sasmata Behera as chief guest addressed the students and staff emphasising the human psychology on gender sensitisation and the par value system of men and women in the society while guest of honour former Reader in Eco-

nomics, Gopalpur College, Dr Purushottam Sahu delivered a thought-provoking talk on the existing social setup in relation to gender system and its implications in future.

IQAC coordinator Dr Manoj Patnaik introduced the guests with warm welcome and faculty, IR and PM, Aparajita Pandey invited the guests to the dais. The faculties present were Laxmam Palo, Dr Girish Chandra Behera, S Rupa Laxmi and Dr Pradeepa Patnaik. At the concluding event, faculty, Education Department, Ipsita Das offered a vote of thanks.

In Balangir Maoist dump unearthed; arms seized



PNS ■ BALANGIR

A team of the District Voluntary Force (DVF) on Monday unearthed a major Maoist dump in the Chhatradandi forest area, a search operation was launched on December 14 by the Balangir DVF team led by Turekela police station in Balangir district, said North-ern Range IGP Himanshu Lal

Based on intelligence inputs about Maoist arms and ammunition being stockpiled in the Chhatradandi forest area, a search operation was launched on December 14 by the Balangir DVF team led by Turekela PS OIC RK Sahu, said Balangir SP Rishikesh Khilari. Rifles, ammunitions, Maoist

literature and banners and other items were recovered from the dump. The busting of Maoist dump would deal a blow to the supply chain of the Maoists. "Anti-Maoist operations are going on. We will intensify it and make the Gandmardan area free from Maoist activity," said the SP further.

In Rayagada Smugglers fire at forest staffs during raid

PNS ■ RAYAGADA

A gang of ivory smugglers opened fire at forest officials, who conducted a raid in a forest area of Rayagada district on Sunday and tried to nab them.

As per sources, the forest officials conducted the raid near the Muniguda area based on a tipoff regarding the alleged smuggling of elephant tusks for ivory.

The officials subsequently located the smugglers near the Jarapa area adjoining the Rayagada Forest range. Upon spotting the forest department vehicle, the smugglers opened fire.

The forest officials who were



unarmed were forced to retreat after coming under heavy fire. Their vehicle was riddled with several bullets while its windows and rear windshield were completely shattered.

The forest officials had earlier arrested five wildlife smug-

glers involved in the illegal sale of elephant tusks for ivory. Following this, a team of forest officials went to the villages of Malimunda and Jarapa in Muniguda for further investigation when the incident occurred.

Adani Fdn holds Soil Day near Dhamra



PNS ■ DHARMA

The Adani Foundation, a CSR unit of Adani Group Dhamra unit, celebrated the World Soil Day with a grand celebration at Kuamara village of Karanapali Gram Panchayat.

The event witnessed enthusiastic participation from 120 farmers and women SHG members representing nine core Gram Panchayats.

The programme commenced with a vibrant Prabhak Pheri, where participants toured nearby villages carrying flags and raising awareness about soil health. The rally concluded at the Adani Skill Development Center (ASDC), Kuamara, where

a meeting was held. Associate Director of Research at RRTTS, Ranital,

Dr Umasankar Nayak graced the occasion as the chief guest. Addressing the gathering, Dr Nayak emphasized the critical role of soil care, fertility, and health management in achieving sustainable agricultural development. He underscored the importance of preserving healthy soils for ensuring long-term productivity and environmental balance.

The event concluded with a vote of thanks to all participants, farmers, guests, delegates and stakeholders, reaffirming the collective resolve to protect and nurture soil, a fundamental resource for the future of agriculture.

Juvenile assaulted, tied to tree for stealing in K'pada

Police register case against people for such street justice

RAJESH BEHERA ■ KEDNRPADA

Town police here rescued a Jharkhand-based juvenile from the wrath of the locals after he was caught by public while attempting to steal a mobile phone from a person at the busy Keshpur Bazar's weekly vegetable haat.

According to police sources, the 13 years old boy

on Sunday morning was caught while stealing a mobile phone from a person near Santasahi bridge. The locals later went on assaulting him, undressed him and tied him to a drumstick tree.

Acting on information, Kendrapada Town police rushed to the spot and rescued the juvenile. During interrogation, the juvenile confessed to the crime. He informed that he came with his grand mother to have a darshan of Lord Jagannath at Puri. But he went on missing midway. In order to reach at

his native people, he attempted to steal a mobile with an intention to sell the same for some money, with which he could return to his village.

The juvenile was later produced before the chairperson of CWC.

Meanwhile, police have registered a case against the people who assaulted him and tried to subject him to street justice. Police have started an investigation by collecting video footages and CCTV footages of the nearby location to identify and nab the people involved in taking law into their hands.

Colourful NIST Alumni Meet held



35 past students join

PNS ■ BRAHMAPUR

The NIST Alumni Association, in collaboration with the Bhubaneswar Chapter, organised the Alumni Meet on Sunday at Bhubaneswar.

The event brought together over 35 alumni of the institute. The meet was graced by president of NIST University Dr Sukant K Mohapatra, along with Vice Chancellor Dr

Priyadarsan Patra, Registrar In-Charge Dr Bishnukar Nayak, Associate Dean of Student Welfare Dr Preeti Ranjan Sahu and PIC of Alumni Relations Prof Mitu Baral.

Dr Mohapatra in his address highlighted the vital role of alumni in supporting NIST through diverse initiatives like research, workshops, and placements, emphasizing the enduring bond between alumni and their alma mater. Dr Patra described alumni as

the institution's brand ambassadors, while Dr Nayak encouraged leveraging the vast alumni network of 18,000 members all over the globe. The evening featured a soulful performance by Jaswinder Singh (B'Tech 3rd year) and a book presentation by Niladri Bihari Nayak (2010 batch). The alumni received mementos in recognition of their contributions. The event concluded with a vote of thanks by Dr Preeti Ranjan Sahu.

Is Habalikhathi Nature Camp safe after cyclone Dana?



Online booking started without repair of damaged cottages

PNS ■ KENDRAPADA

Though the guesthouse at Habalikhathi beach under Rajnagar block within Bhitarkanika National Park in Kendrapara district has been substantially damaged by Cyclone Dana, the Forest Department has started online booking of those cottages. As a result, questions have now been raised over the safety and security of the visitors.

High tidal waves formed due to the impact of Cyclone Dana left the seaside guesthouse at Habalikhathi beach severely damaged.

Habalikhathi attracts many tourists round the year. However, days after churning in the Bay of Bengal, the cyclone storm made a landfall at Habalikhathi beach on October 25 midnight submerging the nine-room guesthouse.

Though the Forest Department has already started online booking of the cottages at Habalikhathi beach for the tourists from November 16 for their overnight stays from

December 1, those have suffered extensive damages and become a kind of threat to the lives of the tourists.

As per reports, the sea has been gradually engulfing the cottages. Hundreds of trees were uprooted in the effect of the storm. Due to the high tidal wave, the pillars of the cottages have got substantially damaged and rods have come out of the concrete structures. Under the circumstances, considering the safety and security of the tourists, questions have been raised over the Forest Department's move to start booking of the cottages.

BU JMC Dept sets benchmark for media edu in State

Holds Golden Jubilee fest

RAJEEV RATHAN ■ BRAHMAPUR

The Department of Journalism and Mass Communication at Berhampur University celebrated its 50th anniversary on Saturday with a grand Golden Jubilee event. Alumni from across the globe, now holding prominent positions in the corporate and media sectors as well as academia, gathered to commemorate the department's illustrious legacy. The celebrations highlighted its remarkable journey as a trailblazer in journalism education, producing leaders across diverse fields over five decades.

Established in 1974, the department holds the distinction of being Odisha's first formal journalism course. At the time, prominent newspapers like Asha (1913) and Samaj (1919) were thriving in the State, yet there was no structured journalism education. Berhampur University took the pioneering step by launching the Bachelor of Journal-



ism and Mass Communication (BJMC) programme, just seven years after the university's inception.

introduced practical skills like typewriting and print production. Students visited local newspapers like Asha to observe the letterpress printing process and learn about lead typesetting, galleys, and imagery. This hands-on training became the cornerstone of the department's approach, preparing students for the evolving media industry.

By 1986, the undergraduate programme transitioned to a postgraduate course, attracting students aspiring to specialize in journalism and mass communication. Esteemed faculty members like Dr Dasharathi Mishra, Dr Sunil Kant Behera and Dr Pradeep Mahapatra further enriched the academic environment. Alumni such as MP Dr Pradeep Kumar Panigrahi, MP Manas Mangaraj, environmentalist Prafulla Samantra and senior journalist Rajaram Satpathy reflect the department's legacy of excellence.

The department also pioneered innovative journalism practices in Odisha. It introduced real-time news training

with a teleprinter installed by PTI and published a departmental newspaper, Bhanjbihar. Today, the department is equipped with modern infrastructure, 50 seats, and a dedicated faculty led by Head of Department Prof Bandita Panda.

Journalism education in Odisha has expanded substantially since the department's inception. Institutions like Utkal University, Fakir Mohan University, and the Indian Institute of Mass Communication (IIMC) in Dhenkanal now offer robust courses. However, Berhampur University's Department of Journalism and Mass Communication remains the pioneer, having set the benchmark for journalism education in the State.

The Golden Jubilee celebrated more than a milestone; they are a reflection of the department's unwavering commitment to nurturing media professionals who shape public discourse, advocate for social change, and contribute to the dynamic world of journalism.

PM Modi holds talks with Sri Lankan President

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

India and Sri Lanka on Monday here adopted a futuristic vision to expand their partnership, resolved to soon conclude a defence cooperation pact and decided to ramp up energy ties by establishing electricity grid connectivity and multi-product petroleum pipelines. The decisions were taken during wide-ranging talks between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Dissanayaka. Modi said both sides decided to emphasise investment-led growth and connectivity for the India-Sri Lanka economic partnership, and it was decided that physical, digital and energy connectivity will be key pillars of the cooperation. Work will be done to establish electricity grid connectivity and multi-product petroleum pipelines, Modi said, adding India will supply liquefied natural gas to the island nation's power plants. The prime minister also announced that a ferry service will be started between



Rameshwaram and Talaimanar to boost connectivity between the two nations.

"We both agree that our security interests are interconnected. We have decided to soon finalise the defence cooperation agreement. There has also been an agreement for cooperation on hydrography," Modi said. The vexed fishermen issue also figured in the talks. "We also discussed issues related to the livelihood of fishermen. We agree that we must proceed with a humanitarian approach

to this matter," Modi said. Referring to the Tamil issue, the Prime Minister said India hopes that the Sri Lankan government will fulfil the aspirations of the community. The prime minister also noted that India has so far provided Lines of Credit and grant assistance worth USD 5 billion to Sri Lanka. "We have cooperation in all 25 districts of Sri Lanka and selection of our projects is always based on priorities of our partner countries," he said.

Why Govt not acting against SEBI chief, asks Congress

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Congress on Monday levelled conflict of interest allegations against the SEBI chairperson Madhabi Buch and claimed that Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman's "failure" to act decisively on it has not only tarnished the credibility of the government but also jeopardised the financial governance framework. Attacking the government over the Adani issue during the discussion on the supplementary demands for grants in Lok Sabha, Congress MP KC Venugopal said a joint parliamentary committee must probe the entire matter. He alleged it is a government "by Adani, of Adani, for Adani".

Venugopal said between 2017-2024, Buch allegedly received over Rs 16.4 crore from ICICI bank while serving as a Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) official regulating that bank. "This was five times her salary from SEBI, presenting a blatant conflict of interest," he said. She received rental income from entities linked to a firm under SEBI investigation, said Venugopal, who also heads the Public Accounts Committee (PAC).



"What does it mean sir, SEBI is investigating the company and the chairperson is renting out property to entity linked to that company," he said. Venugopal also alleged that the SEBI chairperson traded in securities worth of Rs 36.9 crore while holding access to unpublished price-sensitive information which he said was a direct violation of SEBI code of ethics. She failed to disclose assets in Singapore and the US between 2017-21 despite being obligated to do

so, Venugopal said. Despite these allegations, the finance minister neither initiated an independent inquiry nor has taken any disciplinary action, Venugopal said. "Inaction undermines the government's claim of transparency and commitment to investor confidence," he said. Posing questions to the Finance Minister, Venugopal asked why has the Finance Ministry not initiated any disciplinary and legal proceedings against the SEBI

chairperson despite clear evidence of conflicts of interest that undermines the integrity of the regulatory body. "Doesn't the finance minister take note, acknowledge and take responsibility for the damage to investor confidence, both domestic and foreign, due to the lack of timely action against SEBI chairperson?" he said. Can the Finance Minister clarify whether the government is willing to accept responsibility for the uncertainty and

volatility of stock market, stemming from the conflict of interest involving the SEBI chairperson, he said. What steps does the finance minister intend to take to ensure transparency and accountability in SEBI leadership especially in the light of the allegations, Venugopal asked. "Does the Ministry believe that retaining the chairperson under such circumstances send a wrong signal to India's commitment to corporate governance and regulatory transparency?" he said. "The Finance Minister's failure to act decisively not only tarnished the credibility of the government but also jeopardised the national financial governance framework. What is the complicit interest of the government and the SEBI chairperson?" Venugopal said. Why the Government is not taking any action, he asked. He alleged that the name of Adani group figured in stock manipulation and questioned how the SEBI chairperson can investigate that when "she is part of the scandal". He demanded that a JPC inquiry be initiated in the entire matter. In the country, 11 crore people are dependent on stock markets, most of them from middle income groups, he said.

Debate on Glorious Journey of 75 Years of Constitution of India: Treasury, Opp benches trade charges

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Rajya Sabha on Monday saw treasury and opposition benches trading charges during the discussion on the 'Glorious Journey of 75 Years of the Constitution of India.' Initiating the debate, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said the Congress party carried out major amendments to the Constitution to brazenly help the "family" and the "dynasty". Leader of Opposition in the Rajya Sabha and Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge accused Prime Minister Narendra Modi of misleading the country by "twisting facts" about Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru's letter on reservation to states and demanded an apology. The Upper House will debate on the issue on Monday and Tuesday. Sitharaman also termed the Congress party as "anti-women" for not passing the Women's Reservation Bill under pressure of its coalition partners. The senior BJP leader said the economic policies of the previous Congress governments for about 50 years did not strengthen the Indian economy. "Each time the Congress brazenly (amended Constitution)... Only to help the family, the dynasty... Kept

amending the Constitution," she said. Citing various amendments, including the 42nd Constitutional Amendment and one related to the Shah Bano case, the Finance Minister said none of the amendments passed the test of four criteria -- economic good, social intent, due process, and constitutional spirit. She said the amendments were not to strengthen democracy but to protect those in power and strengthen the family. In her speech, she said renowned lyricist Majrooh Sultanpuri and actor Balraj Sahni were both jailed in 1949. Congress' record of curtailing freedom of speech was not just confined to Sultanpuri and Sahni, she said and highlighted many more instances, including banning of a film called 'Kissa Kursi Ka' just because it questioned the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and her son. Sitharaman further said the spree of curtailing the freedom of expression and freedom of press had happened before 1949 and thereafter also during the Congress rule. The Minister said India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru adopted the Soviet Model and was carried forward by Indira Gandhi, but

the socialist model did not benefit India. She said the economic policies followed by the Congress governments for 50 years did not strengthen the economy. Referring to the women reservation in Parliament and state assemblies, Sitharaman said a bill regarding it was passed in the Rajya Sabha in 2008, but the ruling Congress did not take it to the Lok Sabha, as its alliance partners were not in favour of the legislation. She said Congress is "anti-women" as it did not pass the Women's Reservation Bill to save "Kursi" (power). Rajiv Gandhi had 426 members in Lok Sabha and 159 members in the Rajya Sabha, they did not have the conviction to pass the Women's Reservation Bill at that time. Very clearly, they have always been anti-women. Shah Bano case is a very clear example, she said. The Congress Party, she said passed the Muslim Women Protection of Rights on Divorce Act, 1986 which denied Muslim women their right to alimony. On the other hand, the Modi government brought the 'Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam' in the first session, which was held in the new building of the Parliament. On the contrary, she said her party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), has always been



committed to women's reservation and increasing women participation in politics. "I myself am a beneficiary of this," the Finance Minister said. At the start of her speech, she paid homage to the 389 members of the Constituent Assembly, including 15 women, who took up the arduous challenge and prepared the Constitution for India in a very challenging environment. The Constitution of India "has stood the test of time," she said. "Today we are extremely proud of the way India's democracy is growing." Stating that India and its Constitution stands out in a separate league of its own, Sitharaman said post the second World War, over 50 countries had become independent

and they had their constitution written. While accusing Prime Minister Modi of misleading the country by "twisting facts" about Pandit Nehru, Kharge also charged the BJP leaders of indulging in 'bhakti' of Prime Minister Modi, asserting that it was leading the country towards dictatorship. The Congress President cited Nehru's speech in which he had said there was no elected government between 1947-1952 and the Congress had illegally amended the Constitution. Kharge said the first amendment was carried out by the Constituent Assembly members which included Syama Prasad Mookerjee and was undertaken to provide reservation to Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribes, fix problems related to education,

employment and abolish Zamindari system. "I want to inform the House that the Supreme Court had rejected Madras state's decision on reservation." He said the other aspect of this amendment was to stop communal propaganda and Sardar Patel in a letter on July three, 1950 had suggested to Nehru that constitutional amendment was the only remedy for this problem. "Therefore, Nehru wrote a letter to chief ministers. This has been mentioned in PM's speech after twisting facts to defame Nehru for which he should apologise to the nation. This is my demand. If you twist the facts before the nation and attempt to defame, then you should apologise in this House and other House and before people of this country," Kharge said. He said the prime minister lives in past, not in present and it would have been better had he listed present achievements that strengthened democracy. Kharge claimed erstwhile leaders of RSS were against the Constitution. "In 1949, the entire country knew that RSS leaders opposed the Constitution because it was not based on Manusmriti. RSS mouthpiece Organiser in the edition of November 30, 1949 had written about it," he said.

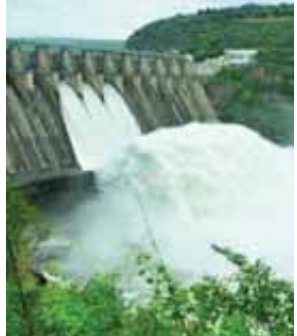
Kharge said it is clear from debates of the Constituent Assembly that erstwhile leaders of RSS were against the Constitution. Those who hated the flag, Ashok Chakra and the Constitution are today giving lessons to us on the Constitution." He said even when many powerful countries were not practising universal adult franchise, women and all sections of societies in India were given the right to vote during the Congress regime through the Constitution. He said that government leaders cut-paste information and present them as per their convenience to twist facts. "Those who did not fight for the country, how will they know the importance of freedom, Constitution?" Kharge asked. BJP has been giving 'jumlas' and befooling people of the country and questioned promises made by Modi to pay Rs 15 lakh, he said adding people are still waiting for the money as well as two crore jobs and doubling of farmers' income. Kharge said that BJP is against reservation and that is why the party is against caste census. He further said the Congress government will implement women reservation faster than BJP. He also raised the issue of

Manipur, which is suffering from ethnic violence for the last one-and-half years. He said the prime minister travels everywhere but has no time to visit the strife-torn state. Some other Opposition MPs accused the government of attacking the federal structure and undermining constitutional bodies while claiming that an Emergency-like situation exists in the country. Debashish Samantary, whose party Biju Janata Dal (BJD) is not a part of either the ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA) or opposition's Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA), alleged that Constitutional watchdogs have been converted into "pet-dogs". "What is the situation today, anyone can be sent to jail, chief ministers were put in jail, denied bail. There is definitely an Emergency in the country, I will say it openly," he said. Trinamool Congress Rajya Sabha MP Saket Gokhale alleged that justice is being denied to people under the NDA government and accused it of destroying the Constitution. He alleged that minorities are being subjected to "atrocities every day". DMK's Tiruchi Siva accused the Union government of undermining the federal structure of the country.

224 big dams in country over century old, Minister tells RS

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

India has 1,065 large dams that are between 50 and 100 years old while 224 are over a century old, the Union Jal Shakti Ministry said on Monday. There are a total of 6,138 constructed and 143 under-construction dams in the country. Responding to a question in the Rajya Sabha, Minister of State for Jal Shakti Raj Bhushan Choudhary said the government enacted the Dam Safety Act, 2021 to address the challenges posed by ageing dams and to prevent disasters arising from dam failures. He said dams, apart from serving irrigation and power generation purposes, play a significant role in mitigating floods. According to the National Register of Large Dams (NRLD-2023 edition), compiled jointly by the National Dam Safety Authority (NDSA) and CWC, there are 6,138 constructed and 143 under construction dams which aggregate to a total of 6,281 large dams. Of these numbers, only 224 dams are more than 100 years old and there are 1065 large dams which are 50 to 100 years old. Choudhary said the govern-



ment enacted the Dam Safety Act and is also implementing the Dam Rehabilitation and Improvement Project (DRIP) Phase II and III, aimed at rehabilitating 736 dams across 19 states and three central agencies. After China and America, India ranks third in the world in terms of the number of dams. In August, the Government had told Parliament that at least 47 dams—38 commissioned and 9 under construction—have been identified by the Central Electricity Authority as potentially affected by Glacial Lake Outburst Floods (GLOFs) from glacial lakes in India. GLOF studies have been completed for 31 of these projects, the Government said. A glacial lake outburst flood (GLOF) is a type of outburst flood caused by the failure of a dam containing a glacial lake.

Delhi's groundwater resources heavily strained, says Jalshakti Minister

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi's groundwater resources are heavily strained, with the overall extraction rate at 99.13 per cent, categorised as "critical", while the situation in Bengaluru is even more alarming with the overall groundwater extraction rate at 150.84 per cent, the Union Jal Shakti ministry said on Monday. Responding to a question in the Rajya Sabha, Minister of State for Jal Shakti, Raj Bhushan Choudhary, said that while desalination technology using reject heat from nuclear reactors is operational at Kalpakkam, Tamil Nadu, it is not widely applicable. Instead, the reverse osmosis (RO) membrane technology is deemed suitable for treating groundwater, the minister said. The government has also assessed groundwater dynamics in urban areas like Delhi and Bengaluru, but similar data for Mumbai is unavailable due to insufficient data collection. Delhi's groundwater resources are heavily strained, with the overall extraction rate at 99.13 per cent, which is categorised as "critical", Choudhary informed. Areas like Vasant Vihar, Mehrauli, and Saket are in



dire straits, recording extraction levels of 153.13 per cent, 117.9 per cent, and 116.31 per cent, respectively. Vasant Vihar topped the chart for overextraction, drawing more than 1.6 times the available resource, he said. The critical zones in Delhi include central and south regions like Karol Bagh (114.47 per cent), Chanakyapuri (131.45 per cent), and Dwarka (99.83 per cent). Shahdara and south-west districts also reported concerning levels, with overextraction exacerbating water stress. The situation in Bengaluru is even more alarming, with the overall groundwater extrac-

tion rate at 150.84 per cent, the minister said. Yelahanka emerged as the most stressed region, extracting over 225 per cent of its available groundwater resource. Other urban areas, including Bangalore North, East, and South, recorded over extraction rates exceeding 200 per cent. Bangalore City itself reported an extraction rate of 217.4 per cent. The minister also emphasised that advanced desalination and groundwater recharge technologies could play a role in water conservation, but their scalability is constrained by infrastructure and feasibility challenges.

Only 28 per cent of urban wastewater undergoes treatment in India: CSE report

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Just 28 per cent of about 20,236 million liters per day urban wastewater generated in India undergoes treatment, leaving the remaining i.e. 72 per cent untreated and flowing into rivers, lakes, and land, a report by the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) has revealed. The largest gap in wastewater treatment is seen in states like Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Delhi, and Haryana. The untreated water not only causes environmental damage but also presents an opportunity to tackle India's growing urban water crisis due to rapid urbanization, industrial growth, population expansion, and climate change, says the report 'Waste to Worth: Managing India's urban water crisis through wastewater reuse'. It was released recently at a national workshop organized jointly by CSE and the National Mission for Clean Ganga (NMCG), under the Union Ministry of Jal Shakti. Speaking on the occasion, Sunita Narain, director general, CSE said: "India faces significant water scarcity challenges due to rapid urbanisation, industrial growth, population expansion – and most importantly – climate change. Wastewater reuse can be a key part of the strategy to address these concerns and promote



water circularity and sustainability." Rajiv Kumar Mital, director general, NMCG echoed similar views and said that "Using and disposing treated water, without harnessing its potential, means we are losing out on utilising an important resource. The challenge is to scale up and ensure that the work we do in this sector is impactful." The Jal Shakti Ministry has mandated that cities must recycle and reuse at least 20 per cent of the water they consume. The report also highlights good examples -- cases of states that have introduced policies to encourage treated wastewater reuse." Maharashtra, for instance, mandates industries in urban areas to use treated wastewater. Gujarat targets 100 per cent reuse with applications in agriculture and industry, and Tamil Nadu promotes reuse for industrial and urban greening projects. At the national level, the National Urban Sanitation

Policy (NUSP) and the Namami Gange Programme emphasise wastewater management and reuse as key components of water security initiatives. Cities like Nagpur, Bengaluru and Chennai have taken the lead in implementing wastewater reuse practices. Nagpur supplies treated wastewater to power plants, significantly reducing freshwater usage, while Bengaluru utilises it for agriculture, lake revival and groundwater recharge. Chennai has adopted treated wastewater for industrial applications, urban landscaping and groundwater recharge. While advancements in decentralised and cost-effective treatment technologies can address infrastructure deficits, the report also calls for public-private partnerships that can help mobilise investments for scaling up reuse projects, and capacity-building initiatives to improve awareness and acceptance among urban managers and communities.

Sambhal violence: Yogi accuses Opp of 'misleading' Assembly

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ LUCKNOW

Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath fiercely defended his government's handling of the recent Sambhal violence during a charged assembly session, accusing the opposition of shedding "crocodile tears" while ignoring past communal killings involving Hindus.

"Since Independence, 209 Hindus have been killed in Sambhal during communal riots, but not a single opposition leader ever spoke out," Adityanath claimed, referencing historical riots that scarred the state.

Leader of Opposition Mata Prasad Pandey hit back, accusing the CM of evading

accountability. "Instead of answering the real issue, the Chief Minister has tried to mislead the House by dragging in unrelated historical events," Pandey said. He urged the government to focus on present challenges rather than deflecting responsibility through historical narratives.

Adityanath questioned why Hindu religious processions face restrictions in Muslim-majority areas, while Muslim processions proceed freely in Hindu-dominated regions. "This discrimination will not be tolerated," he declared, announcing a judicial inquiry into the Sambhal violence to uncover the facts.

Recalling past communal clashes, Adityanath listed violent incidents from the 1970s



in cities like Agra, Azamgarh, Gonda, Prayagraj, Meerut, and Pilibhit. He contrasted this with his administration's record, claiming a 97% reduction in communal riots under BJP rule, citing National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data.

"How can chanting 'Ram Ram,' a cultural tradition, be communal?" the CM asked, accusing the opposition of undermining India's religious heritage. He also cited historical texts like "Babar Nama" to assert that several mosques were built by demolishing temples, linking Friday prayers to recent violent clashes. "We have historical evidence supporting our claims," he asserted.

Backing the implementation of

a Uniform Civil Code, Adityanath argued that it reflects the people's will and accused the opposition of resisting court-backed reforms for vote-bank politics. "Our Constitution guarantees equality for all. Why should anyone oppose a law ensuring uniform personal rights?" he questioned.

Reaffirming his government's strict stance against violence, he promised harsh legal action against anyone found involved in riots. "We have zero tolerance for lawlessness," he said, pointing to video evidence showing rioters pelting stones and wielding weapons. "No culprit will escape justice," he added.

The Chief Minister framed recent electoral victories in

constituencies like Kundarki and Phulpur as symbolic wins for "Sanatan Dharma" over divisive politics. He stressed that festivals such as Navratri and processions like Shobha Yatra are central to India's cultural identity.

Adityanath also warned the opposition against inciting communal tension through inflammatory speeches. "If anyone creates anarchy, they will face strict action under the law," he emphasized.

Concluding his speech, Adityanath pledged unwavering commitment to preserving India's religious heritage while maintaining law and order. "We will not allow history to repeat itself. Peace and justice will prevail in Uttar Pradesh," he affirmed.

Himachal Government exploring proposal to build underwater tunnel

PTI ■ BILASPUR (HP)

The Himachal Pradesh government is exploring a proposal for building an underwater tunnel in Gobind Sagar Lake to connect Bilaspur city to four-lane road between Kiratpur and Manali, said Technical Education Minister Rajesh Dharmani on Monday.

Interacting with a group of reporters here, he said the tunnel will be built from Luhnai Maidan to the four-lane road. If the plan becomes fruitful, it will not only prove to be a life-saver for Bilaspur city but will also be the first bridge in the country to be built inside a lake.

Govind Sagar Lake reservoir in Una and Bilaspur districts of Himachal Pradesh is about 56 km in length and 3 km in breadth.

After the construction of Kiratpur-Manali four-lane road, Bilaspur city has lost its connection with the main road. This has resulted in the slowing down of economic activities here. Construction of the bridge will also provide a new path to traders and industrialists.

The underwater tunnel bridge will not only connect the city



directly to the four-lane road but it will also become a centre of attraction for tourists. If there are possibilities of bridge construction, experts and consultants from Germany will be hired for the ambitious project, he said.

"The bridge will be constructed using Germany's advanced immersion tunnel technology and tunnel boring machine. In immersion tunnel technology, parts of the tunnel will be built on land and installed under the lake.

"It will be made safe and durable by digging below the lake bed with a tunnel boring machine," he said.

A team of experts will be formed to assess the possibilities of the project. If the plan is found to be feasible, it will be proposed for budget under the Setu Bharatam scheme of the central government. Several hundred crore rupees are estimated to be spent on the project, the minister said.

Keeping in mind the environmental balance, advanced and sustainable German technology will be used in this project which will write the story of the revival of Bilaspur, Dharmani. If this project comes to fruition, it will become an example not only for the state but also for the entire country, he added.

BPSC cancels its preliminary examination held at centre in Patna

PTI ■ PATNA

The Bihar Public Service Commission (BPSC) on Monday cancelled its preliminary examination held at one of the centres in Patna, where an official on duty died of heart attack following a ruckus created by "unruly" candidates on December 13.

The incident took place at the Babu Pariksha Parisar in Patna's Kumhrar locality, which was one of the more than 900 centres for the Combined (Preliminary) Competitive Examination (CCE). Nearly 5 lakh candidates appeared for the exam held for hiring people in Group A and B posts.

"The BPSC has decided to cancel its preliminary examination held at Babu Pariksha Parisar examination centre due to disruption created by a group of unruly aspirants as part of a conspiracy to disrupt the exam," BPSC Chairman Parmar Ravi Manubhai told reporters.

The Commission will soon announce a fresh date for the examination for that particular centre. Around 6,500 students, who had appeared for the exam on December 13, will be able to



write the papers again, he said. However, those who created trouble at the centre on Friday would be debarred, Manubhai said.

"The commission has identified 30-40 aspirants - who can be described as anti-social elements. They created disruption in the examination process at the centre. More such candidates are being identified by the police. They all will be debarred from appearing in the BPSC exam," the chairman said.

On the date of the exam, a group of candidates at Babu Pariksha Parisar stormed out of their examination halls, alleging that question papers were leaked on social media before the exam started.

A huge crowd had gathered outside the centre as well and the situation was brought under control through police

intervention.

The Patna district administration on Sunday recommended slapping of murder charges on those who had tried to disrupt a recent examination.

Following the ruckus, an additional examination superintendent, Ram Iqbal Singh, died of cardiac arrest and a woman candidate fell unconscious.

The BPSC chairman on Monday said, "The CCE 70th preliminary examination was held in a single shift from noon to 2 pm. The examination was held in 912 centres across the state, and of those, free and fair exams were held in 911 centres," he said.

"CCTV footage of Babu Pariksha Parisar has revealed that some of the candidates snatched question papers from the invigilators and stormed out of the examination hall screaming that the paper had been leaked.

"Snatching question papers from invigilators and showing those to outsiders are tantamount to looting public property. Police action will be initiated against these persons who seem to have acted as a part of a conspiracy," Manubhai said.

Telangana Assembly adjourned without completing debate on tourism

PTI ■ HYDERABAD

Amid sloganeering by opposition BRS MLAs against the Congress government, the Telangana Assembly was adjourned for the day on Monday without completing a debate on tourism policy.

When the House resumed after a tea break, Speaker G Prasad Kumar took up a short discussion on 'Telangana State Tourism Policy', but the opposition party members kept raising slogans against the Congress dispensation. Taking exception to the BRS legislators allegedly not following the rules and traditions of the House, Legislative Affairs Minister D Sridhar Babu said the government is ready to respond to any issue raised by the opposition members.

The Speaker directed BRS MLAs to hand over the pamphlets to the marshals and disapproved of them raising slogans and displaying placards inside the House. Tourism Minister Jupally Krishna Rao began his speech on Tourism sector, but the BRS MLAs continued to raise slogans. The Speaker promised to provide opportunity to BRS MLA T Harish Rao to speak and

urged the main opposition members to return to their seats. As the slogan shouting continued, he adjourned the House for the day. Addressing reporters after the adjournment of the House, BRS Working President K T Rama Rao hit out at the ruling Congress for not taking up debate on the arrest of "farmers" over the November 11 attack on government officials during a public hearing for land acquisition at Lagacharla village in Kodangal assembly segment, represented by CM A Revanth Reddy. Congress whip Adi Srinivas told media that the BRS was not sincere in raising people's issues in the Assembly and was only wasting the precious time of the House. The BRS is raising a hue and cry about the arrest of farmers in connection with the attack on government officials, but peasants were handcuffed during the previous BRS regime in Khammam, he alleged. Later, the BRS members held a protest at the assembly entrance in the legislature premises against the Congress government and held placards condemning a farmer being taken to hospital in handcuffs last week.

Miscreants target parked car over minor dispute under Shivaji Nagar Police Station

STAFF REPORTER ■ GURUGRAM

Few miscreants targeted a parked car near an old jail complex over a minor dispute under the Shivaji Nagar police station area on Monday around 12.00 noon. The parked Maruti Eco car was set ablaze which was parked at old jail complex on Monday. However, in connection with the incident no complaint was filed in the matter. Meanwhile, the Gurugram police has started initial investigation into the matter.

After the incident, locals rushed to pacify fire but by then the car was completely engulfed in fire by the miscreants, however police is looking for the suspects who set ablaze vehicle in the area. It is being said that a minor fight that took place between the two groups on Sunday night of the area which was resulting this incident. On Sunday night the miscreants had also broke widow pain of a swift car.

"A group of few suspects who arrived in the morning created a lot of ruckus and set the vehicle on fire. They also broke a



road side Dhaba and fled the spot," a police officer privy to the matter said. Meanwhile soon after the incident panic prevailed in the area on Monday after parked car was torched by miscreants damaging it badly. The victim however failed to pacify fire after he found that car was set ablaze. Police said they are investigating the matter.

"The investigation teams are scanning the CCTV camera

installed in the area which could help in revealing the details of the miscreants involved in the incident," Sandeep Kumar, spokesperson of the Gurugram police said. During the investigation, locals revealed car was torched due to a fight between two groups but they failed to disclose the motive behind the incident but they suspect that the fight broke out over on food at the Dhaba

on Sunday night. On Monday morning on receiving the information of fire police team reached the spot and along with the locals pacified and controlled the fire. The CCTV cameras at the squares and roundabouts would be investigated. Based on the details provided by the victim the case would be registered. The matter is underway.

Winter Session in MP Assembly begins with tributes to Tata, other departed leaders

PTI ■ BHOPAL

The Winter Session of the Madhya Pradesh assembly began on Monday with the House paying rich tributes to industrialist Ratan Tata, former Union ministers Natwar Singh and SM Krishna and other leaders who died recently. Speaker Narendra Singh Tomar administered oath to newly elected MLAs Kamlash Pratap Shah from the Amarwada (ST) seat and Ramakant Bhargava from the Budhni constituency. Tomar later mentioned the deaths of industrialist Ratan Tata, former union ministers Prabhath Jha and others and recalled their contributions to the country and the state.

Chief Minister Mohan Yadav said Tata was a simple and decent man. He was not only a renowned industrialist but also a social worker and a nationalist who served humanity. Remembering Jha, Yadav said



the BJP leader was a man of the organisation and a renowned writer and journalist. He was a member of the Rajya Sabha, served as the state BJP president and was a good social worker.

He also paid rich tributes to Natwar Singh and SM Krishna and recalled their contributions.

Yadav condoled the death of Baiga tribal artist and Padma Shri recipient Jodhaiya Bai, who passed away on Sunday. He said Jodhaiya Bai's creative works on clay and wood were exhibited in Milan and Paris. Leader of Opposition Umang Singhar paid tribute to Arif

Aqueel, saying the former minister was known for his simplicity and straightforwardness. He wore rubber slippers his entire life and served people without any discrimination. Speaking about Natwar Singh, Singhar said that as the external affairs minister, he took bilateral relations between nations to a new height and was a renowned diplomat.

The LoP lauded Ratan Tata's efforts in giving a new direction to the corporate social responsibility (CSR) sector and setting an example to show how an industrialist can serve society by forming different trusts to help weaker sections and

youth. The House also paid tribute to soldiers who lost their lives in a road accident in Sikkim and noted Saint Siyaram Baba, who passed away recently. A two-minute silence was observed as a mark of respect to the departed souls, following which the Speaker adjourned the House for 10 minutes.

After Question Hour, the Opposition Congress raised the issue of the shortage of fertilisers and problems faced by farmers across the state and sought a reply from the government.

The Speaker said the government would respond when the House takes up the matter for discussion. However, Congress members insisted on it and staged a walkout when the chair did not relent.

Later, State Urban Administration and Parliamentary Affairs Minister Kailash Vijaywargiya moved a resolution to congratulate the Indian Army for its valour during the war that led to the creation of Bangladesh on December 16, 1971.

Amid freezing cold, Ayodhya ensures special winter wear for Lord Ramlala

BISWAJEET BANERJEE/KAMLESH SRIVASTAVA ■ AYODHYA

Ayodhya is shivering under an intense cold wave, with temperatures plunging to a biting 3°C, six degrees below normal. As residents bundle up with layers of warm clothing, even Lord Ramlala at the Ram Janmabhoomi temple is being dressed in special woolen attire to shield Him from the harsh winter.

To combat the freezing temperatures, Ramlala will don a woolen dhoti made from Kullu wool and an Angavastru crafted from Ladakh's Pashmina wool. These meticulously designed garments were sent from Delhi and have already reached Ayodhya.

"The clothes have been designed with intricate patterns keeping in mind the sanctity and tradition," said Manish Tripathi, designer of Ramlala's attire. "As the cold intensifies, we will adjust the fabric and design accordingly."

Currently, Ramlala is adorned in a Pashmina shawl and silk garments. With winter tightening its grip, these new woolen outfits will provide additional warmth. Two Angavastras—one draped over His shoulder and the other in His hand—will also be made from fine Pashmina wool.

The temple priests are ensuring Ramlala's well-being with meticulous care. "Ramlala is treated like a child," said Santosh Kumar Tiwari, assis-



tant priest of the Ram Mandir. "In the morning, His Abhishek (ritual bath) is done with lukewarm water, and heaters have been installed in the sanctum sanctorum."

The deity's daily offerings also reflect winter's demands. Before the Mangala Aarti in the early morning, peda and dry fruits are offered. At 7:30 a.m., during the Shringar Aarti, fruits and more dry fruits are presented. Later, poha or desi ghee halwa is served at 9:00 a.m., followed by Rajbhog, a full meal including kheer, at noon.

After a mid-day rest, sweets and water are offered at 1:30 p.m. At 4:00 p.m., various snacks and coconut water or fruit juice are presented in turn.

Pilgrims visiting Ayodhya

expressed awe at the elaborate winter care arrangements for Ramlala. "It feels heartwarming to see how the Lord is being taken care of with so much devotion," said Poonam Sharma, a devotee from Kanpur. "This level of dedication makes us feel spiritually connected despite the cold."

Vijay Singh, a pilgrim from Varanasi, shared, "I have visited many temples, but the detailed care here during winter is unmatched. Seeing Ramlala wrapped in warm woolen clothes makes us feel He is among us as family."

Ayodhya has emerged as the coldest district in Uttar Pradesh over the past three days, with temperatures dipping below 5°C consistently.

On Friday-Saturday night, the mercury hit a freezing 3°C.

The Meteorological Department at Acharya Narendra Agricultural Technology University attributed the icy conditions to continuous snowfall in the Himalayas and the chilly western winds blowing across the plains. "This pattern is likely to persist for about a week," a department official said. "However, daytime sunshine will provide some relief."

Amid these frigid conditions, residents are relying on bonfires and heaters to stay warm. As the cold wave continues, Ayodhya's spiritual and human lives intertwine, reflecting resilience in the face of winter's icy grip.



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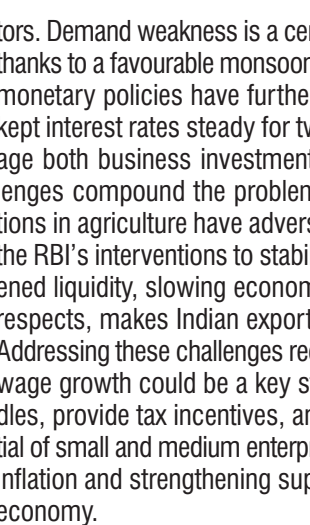
PAPER WITH PASSION

Economy slowing down

India, celebrated as the fastest-growing economy in the world, is showing signs of slowdown

India is facing a pivotal moment as it navigates a notable slowdown. Between July and September 2024, the country's GDP growth rate fell to 5.4 per cent, its lowest in seven quarters and well below the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) forecast of 7 per cent. While this growth rate remains enviable compared to developed economies, it highlights significant structural challenges that could impede India's long-term economic ambitions. The implications of this slowdown are multifaceted. A decline in consumer demand and muted private investment have curtailed economic momentum. Sales of fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) have dropped, wage bills of publicly traded firms have shrunk, and urban spending has softened. In November alone, car sales plunged by 14 per cent, underscoring the waning strength of urban consumption. Rising inflation adds another layer of complexity. In October 2024, inflation surged to 6.2 per cent, exceeding the RBI's target ceiling of 4 per cent. Escalating food prices, driven by climate disruptions and inefficiencies in supply chains, have inflated costs across sectors, further squeezing disposable incomes.

The slowdown has also placed pressure on India's exports, which account for just 2 per cent of global goods trade. A stronger dollar and rising tariffs have eroded the competitiveness of Indian products in international markets. Compounding the issue is stagnant job creation, particularly in agriculture, manufacturing, and small-scale industries. Collectively, these factors are eroding confidence in India's growth narrative, despite the government's optimistic outlook. The roots of this economic deceleration lie in several factors. Demand weakness is a central issue. While rural demand remains relatively resilient thanks to a favourable monsoon, it alone cannot offset the broader slowdown. Restrictive monetary policies have further constrained growth. To combat inflation, the RBI has kept interest rates steady for two years, leading to high borrowing costs that discourage both business investment and consumer spending. Global and domestic challenges compound the problem. Slowing global demand and climate-related disruptions in agriculture have adversely affected exports and food production. Additionally, the RBI's interventions to stabilise the rupee by selling dollars have inadvertently tightened liquidity, slowing economic growth. A stronger rupee, while stabilising in some respects, makes Indian exports more expensive and less competitive internationally. Addressing these challenges requires targeted solutions. Boosting consumption through wage growth could be a key strategy. Policy measures that reduce bureaucratic hurdles, provide tax incentives, and simplify labour and land laws can unlock the potential of small and medium enterprises, which form the backbone of the economy. Tackling inflation and strengthening supply chains will also play a critical role in stabilising the economy.



PICTALK



An artist paints a wall at Lodhi Road area, in New Delhi

South Asia: Two decades of turmoil



SANTOSH MATHEW

December marks two pivotal anniversaries — Soviet intervention in Afghanistan and Kandhar Hijacking — that changed South Asia's geopolitics

December marks two pivotal anniversaries that significantly influenced South Asia's geopolitical landscape: 45 years since the Soviet Union's intervention in Afghanistan and 25 years since the hijacking of Indian Airlines Flight IC-814 from Kathmandu to Kandahar. Despite occurring two decades apart, these events underscore the fragility of South Asia and the profound influence of external powers and non-state actors in shaping the region's trajectory.

On December 24, 1979, Soviet troops entered Afghanistan to support the struggling communist regime in Kabul, led by Babrak Karmal. This intervention, ostensibly aimed at stabilising Afghanistan, set off a decade-long occupation and transformed the country into one of the Cold War's fiercest battlegrounds. The repercussions extended far beyond Afghanistan, triggering global, regional and internal upheavals that persist to this day. The Soviet invasion catalysed a chain of events that hastened the disintegration of the Soviet Union and radicalised South Asia. The mujahideen-fighters armed and financed by the United States, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and other allies-became a formidable force against the Soviets. This external patronage laid the groundwork for militant extremism, which would later engulf the region.

The Soviet intervention underscored Afghanistan's strategic importance as the fulcrum of great power politics. Pakistan emerged as a critical player, acting as a frontline state in the anti-Soviet effort. Two decades later, on December 24, 1999, South Asia faced another defining moment when Indian Airlines Flight IC-814 was hijacked en route from Kathmandu to Delhi. Five armed men commandeered the aircraft, eventually forcing it to land in Kandahar, then under Taliban control. What ensued was a week-long standoff that exposed the vulnerabilities of regional counter-terrorism strategies and marked a turning point in how nations approached security and terrorism.



The Kandahar hijacking exposed the evolving nexus between terrorism and geopolitics in South Asia. The Taliban's willingness to shelter the hijackers highlighted its transition into a state sponsor of terrorism. For India, this incident was a stark reminder of the threats posed by cross-border terrorism, often enabled by Pakistan's support for extremist proxies in Afghanistan and Kashmir. The release of Masood Azhar not only emboldened groups like JeM but also underscored the growing influence of non-state actors in undermining regional stability.

Although the Soviet intervention and the Kandahar hijacking may seem unrelated, they are deeply interconnected in shaping South Asia's trajectory. The destabilisation of Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation created fertile ground for militancy, enabling the rise of networks that facilitated events like the Kandahar hijacking. Pakistan's role as a key US ally during the Soviet-Afghan war empowered its military-intelligence complex, which later exploited jihadist networks to further strategic objectives in Kashmir and Afghanistan. These same networks became instrumental in orchestrating attacks against India, exemplified by the IC-814 hijacking.



ADDRESSING SOUTH ASIA'S FRACTURED SECURITY LANDSCAPE REQUIRES COLLECTIVE ACTION. COUNTRIES IN THE REGION MUST TRANSCEND HISTORICAL ANIMOSITIES TO COMBAT TERRORISM AND ADDRESS SHARED CHALLENGES LIKE EXTREMISM AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC DISPARITIES

Both events marked the ascendancy of non-state actors in South Asia's security dynamics. The mujahideen's success against the Soviets emboldened militant groups across the region, while the Kandahar hijacking demonstrated their ability to exploit state vulnerabilities for political gains. The Kandahar episode underscored the inadequacy of India's counter-terrorism infrastructure at the time. It led to significant reforms, including the establishment of specialised counter-terrorism units like the National Security Guard (NSG) and the strengthening of aviation security protocols. Pakistan's dual role in these episodes-as a US ally during the Soviet-Afghan war and as a sanctuary for groups like JeM-has perpetuated instability in the region. Its support for extremist proxies has strained relations with India and exacerbated internal security challenges. Addressing South Asia's fractured security landscape requires collective action. Countries in the region must transcend historical animosities to combat terrorism and address shared challenges like extremism and socio-economic disparities. Both the Soviet intervention and the Kandahar hijacking highlight the need

for strong democratic institutions and accountable governance. Weak states are particularly susceptible to external manipulation and internal subversion, further destabilising the region. The lessons from these pivotal episodes remain crucial as South Asia navigates the 21st century. The radicalisation fueling terrorism often stems from socio-economic deprivation. Investments in education, healthcare, and employment can help counter extremist ideologies. Strengthened regional cooperation and robust international partnerships are essential to addressing the complex interplay of geopolitics and terrorism. Much like the Grand Trunk Road connecting distant regions and histories, these events remind us of the intersecting paths of interventionism and terrorism in shaping modern South Asia. They were not mere crises but turning points that redefined the region's political, social, and economic trajectories. As South Asia confronts new challenges, the enduring lessons of these anniversaries emphasize the importance of resilience, cooperation, and proactive governance in securing a stable future. (The writer is an associate professor; views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

DEBATE ON CONSTITUTION

Madam —The two-day debate on the Constitution, which began on 13th December, has seen heated discussion on the historical and contemporary significance of the Constitution. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh initiated the debate, emphasising the collective efforts behind the creation of the Constitution. Though he accused Congress and Indira Gandhi for imposing an emergency and supersession of Supreme Court judges to charge Congress with violating constitutional principles, he lauded the progressive and transformative nature of the Constitution that allows individuals from humble backgrounds to rise to the highest positions of power in India. The newly elected MP, Priyanka Gandhi, an articulate and combative speaker, accused the government of undermining the constitutional promises of social, economic and political justice over the past decade. Without mentioning the name of Jawaharlal Nehru, she lauded his contribution in creating so many public sector as well as government firms. She also warned the present government that his role in the freedom struggle and Independent India could never be erased from Indian history. Concluding the debate, Prime Minister Narendra Modi hailed the role of women members of the constituent Assembly in making the Indian Constitution. He also hailed Indian democracy and reminded the journey of the Constitution.

P Victor Selvaraj | Tirunelveli

INDIA'S GDP RISES

Madam — Forbes India estimates India's GDP to be \$3.94 trillion in 2024. Prime Minister Narendra Modi said India rose to the 11th largest economy in the world in seven decades of independence, but in just the last decade, India has risen to the 5th largest economy while addressing a gathering at the Jaipur Exhibition and Convention Centre after the inauguration of the Rising Rajasthan Global Investment Summit 2024. He attributed this growth

Tabla maestro Zakir Hussain passes away



The four-time Grammy Award winner, Indian tabla maestro and an innovative music fusion creator, Zakir Hussain is no more with us. The silence on his tabla is a huge loss for Hindustani classical music and jazz fusion. Zakir was truly an indelible gem in the world of music. The list of his national and international accolades is really long, as he had always made India proud with his tireless contribution in

taking Hindustani classical music to collaborate and fuse with world music. Like his father, Ustad Alha Rakha, Zakir always attempted to proceed to the legacy footprint of his father. His tabla virtuoso legacy had been curated in the golden letters in the history of Indian music because of his glorious contribution to music. Taking an Indian, 18th-century membranophone percussion instrument (tabla) to the world stage is truly an incredible achievement, and history will credit this legendary maestro, Zakir Hussain, for his pertinacious contribution towards Hindustani classical music. He will always stay alive in our hearts and continue to inspire the upcoming generations of music and instrument lovers. Kirti Wadhawan | Kanpur

to the exceptional efficiency of his government. Nevertheless, the story would be incomplete without a mention of the economic growth across different regions. Southern states, which occupy 19.34 per cent of India's land area and 20.76 per cent of its population, contributed about 30.5 per cent of the GDP. Western states of Maharashtra and Gujarat, which together occupy 15.32 per cent of India's land area and 14.27 per cent of its population, added another 21.4 per cent. On the contrary, the NDA-BJP-ruled states of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, which cover 34.09 per cent of the area and have 38.95 per cent of the population, together contributed only 22.4 per cent to the GDP. This is despite the fact that the five BJP states received a significantly higher share of funds from the central divisible revenue pool. They received a 45.29 per cent share, whereas the five southern states got only 15.81 per cent. Further, according to the IMF World Economic Outlook

(October 2024), India is currently ranked 144th among 194 economies in terms of GDP (nominal) per capita at \$2698 at current prices. This suggests that the standard of living and quality of life in much of India improved at a snail's pace, even though the economy expanded rapidly. Haridasan Rajan | Kozhikode

PM MODI SLAMS CONGRESS

Madam — Modi lambasted the first pravar as the killers of the constitution during the debate on the constitution in parliament. Right from Nehru's letter in 1951 to the state CM's, Indira's emergency, Rajiv's dealing with the Shah Bano case, and Rahul's tearing of an ordinance, Modi spoke the truth. It is a big blow to the Congress since they were at fault in their earlier tenure. It should introspect. Secondly, Modi has drawn up an 11-point Sankalp like the 20-point programme of Indira Gandhi. N R Ramachandran | Chennai

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Overcoming fear to unlock limitless possibilities

Embracing the unknown is essential for innovation, resilience and realising our true potential



SANJAY CHANDRA

Humans possess four basic emotions — happiness, sadness, anger and fear. Each has a unique place in our lives and shapes much of our responses to situations. The unknown is probably one entity that invokes all four emotions and spurs us into action. However, it is the fear of what we project onto the unknown that often paralyses us into inaction. Action is built into our psyche. We must necessarily move, even though we do not know the results of our endeavours. Instead of focusing on the happiness we will derive from success, we let this uncertainty bog us down. We procrastinate terrified of failure and refuse to take the next step. This is an all too familiar phenomenon that we encounter every day of our lives. As we start going up the professional ladder, many of us follow time-tested formulae, handed down to us by predecessors. We hesitate to make decisions contrary to the established norms, even though such decisions may result in sub-



stantial gains, within the framework of certain acceptable risks. All our efforts are guided by that one decision in 10 which did not click. We do not look at the nine that did. We forget that as a child we had no fears when we started exploring the universe around us. We fell, as we tried to get on our two feet, but were encouraged, or even forced, to keep trying till we mastered the art of walking; or for that matter everything. We also forget that we were not scared to take up a job after college, even though we knew nothing about the work we had to do. We learned from our mistakes. The worst was that we failed the first time, and the best

was that we succeeded eventually. Ah! The joy of success! We forget that humans evolved due to an inherent desire to explore the unknown, without a care for failure or success. New worlds were found, and new inventions and scientific discoveries were made. All because a few dared to venture into the unknown. We deny ourselves the endless new opportunities that each new day brings. It is not that we do not possess this spirit. It is just that generations of conditioning have made it dormant, till we are in a situation with our backs to the wall. Nowhere is it more in evidence, than in jugaad, the flexible approach to solve a problem innovatively when one has limited resources. In our personal lives, we are told to pursue our dreams but are often guided towards the more tried and safer options. We do not even try to think of the endless possibilities and the heights that society can reach if everyone is encouraged not to fear the failure of the unknown, but

to think about success, and is free to follow his or her heart! This is the contradiction that most of us from the earlier generation, specifically from the middle class, face when teaching the young. Fortunately for our race, the young of today are better prepared for the unknown with the availability of much better sources of information which were also created by a few who dared to dream. We should teach the young to step out in the rain without an umbrella and get drenched. Let the sky be the roof. They should not regret that they might have led a better life if they had not feared the unknown. Esmeralda Santiago sums it up so well. "How can you know what you are capable of, if you do not embrace the unknown?" (The writer is an author, speaker, coach, arbitrator and strategy consultant. He conducts workshops on creative writing for young adults and corporate executives. The views expressed are personal)



FIRST COLUMN

WORKPLACE SURVEILLANCE

As remote work redefine workplaces, businesses are increasingly turning to employee monitoring



SHAINY SHARMA

In the modern workplace, the rise of remote and hybrid work has led to significant shifts in how businesses operate, manage and monitor their employees. Among the most controversial developments is the growing use of tattleware or brassware, the common nicknames of software applications that monitor employees' activities during work hours.

With the advent of normalised remote work, employer surveillance of workers has accelerated. Today, such tools can track a wide range of data, including keystrokes, mouse movements, screenshots, and even video or audio feeds from an employee's device. Not only this, but the much-advanced systems may also use artificial intelligence to analyse patterns, flag unproductive behaviour, or even detect potential security breaches. Employers claim these tools provide valuable insights into work habits, protect sensitive data, and improve overall efficiency. It allows businesses to track productivity metrics thereby ensuring that the employees meet deadlines and work efficiently, especially in remote setups where physical supervision is absent.

Also, such surveillance tools help prevent data breaches or intellectual property theft by monitoring unauthorised activities. Moreover, these wares provide evidence in disputes about working hours or performance, thereby offering an objective record of employee activity. When implemented transparently and ethically, these tools even foster accountability and help underperforming employees improve. Despite the above-mentioned benefits, the use of tattleware raises significant ethical concerns wherein the most



common one talked about is privacy. Employees believe that privacy is a fundamental right, and excessive surveillance can infringe upon it. A survey conducted recently found that nearly 78 per cent of employers use monitoring software to track employee performance or online activity.

When employees are monitored constantly, they often feel dehumanised, as though they are untrusted or reduced to mere data points resulting in eroding trust between employers and their teams, making it harder to foster collaboration and loyalty. Additionally, the psychological impact often leads them to stress, anxiety, and burnout. Employees may feel pressured to overwork or engage in performative productivity - appearing busy rather than genuinely contributing. Over time, this can harm creativity, innovation, and overall job satisfaction. Not only these, but the use of tattleware has also resulted in legal challenges, including claims of unpaid wages for work performed away from computers or intrusion upon privacy. Some employers face allegations of unfair labour practices if monitoring interferes with protected activities, such as union organising? To adhere to the challenges posed by tattleware, businesses must strive to balance productivity goals with respect for employees' rights. As rightly said transparency is the key to success.

Only when employees are informed about them being monitored, the necessities for the use of such tattleware or how the data will be used can help build trust and foster a sense of shared responsibility. As businesses navigate the complexities of remote and hybrid work, they must adopt a thoughtful and balanced approach to workplace monitoring. Only by prioritising transparency, fairness, and respect for individual rights, companies and business organisations can create an environment that values both productivity and human dignity.

(The writer is an educator; views are personal)

Call for fast-tracking WTO agricultural negotiations



UTTAM GUPTA

In a recent WTO meeting, India urges prioritisation of issues, including a permanent solution for public stockholding and special safeguard mechanism



In a meeting of the Committee on Agriculture (CoA) of the World Trade Organization (WTO) held in Geneva on December 4, 2024, India insisted that negotiations on unresolved/previously mandated issues in agriculture, including a permanent solution to public stockholding, special safeguard mechanism (SSM) and elimination of trade-distorting cotton subsidies by rich countries etc, be 'prioritised' and 'fast-tracked' by treating them as standalone issues instead of clubbing them with other issues.

The US, on the other hand, criticised the prioritisation of certain issues over others, stating that this was the primary cause of the longstanding stalemate in agriculture. India also rejected a new proposal presented by Guyana to advance agricultural negotiations ahead of the WTO's 14th Ministerial Conference (MC14 tentatively scheduled to take place in Cameroon in 2026) by adopting a so-called 'non-traditional approach based on convergence'. India reiterated that any facilitator-led process should be 'consensus-based' and respect WTO's multilateral principles. It emphasised on Text-based negotiation (TBN). TBN refers to the process of working up the text of an agreement that all parties are willing to accept and sign. Negotiating parties may begin with a draft text prepared by the Chair of the particular committee dealing with the subject.

The draft is based on discussions amongst the member countries and is fine-tuned till all the nations are in agreement with it. This is in sharp contrast to a convergence-based approach that involves superimposition of non-multilateral trade regimes on the multilateral trading system (MTS). The theorists dealing with international trade in particular, WTO-related issues describe it as a process of 'gradually aligning different trade regimes, in particular preferential trade agreements (PTAs) and the MTS'. Others define convergence as requiring 'greater coherence between trade rules and policies, norms and standards in other areas of international cooperation'. Shorn of jargon, this is a well-orchestrated attempt by the developed countries - the US, the European



THE DRAFT IS BASED ON DISCUSSIONS AMONGST THE MEMBER COUNTRIES AND IS FINE-TUNED TILL ALL THE NATIONS ARE IN AGREEMENT WITH IT. THIS IS IN SHARP CONTRAST TO A CONVERGENCE-BASED APPROACH THAT INVOLVES SUPER-IMPOSITION OF NON-MULTILATERAL TRADE

Union (EU), the UK, Australia, etc (they exercise disproportionately greater influence during actual confabulations at the WTO, set the agenda of meetings, float proposals more often through small countries such as Guyana and get away with what they want) to scuttle the standard practice of taking decisions by consensus where every member country has an equal voice.

Therefore, India has rejected this approach, rightly so. But, what happens to India's demand for 'prioritising' and 'fast-tracking' negotiations? In a meeting of the CoA held on October 2, 2023, in Geneva, the EU agreed to consider India's demand for a permanent solution to the public stock-holding (PSH) program for food security. Accordingly, India had urged WTO members to start TBN on the issue as soon as possible and get this deliberated at the WTO MC-13 slated to be held in Abu Dhabi from February 26-29, 2024. But, that was not to be. The Ministerial Conference ended in a deadlock. On the issue of finding a permanent solution to the (PSH) for food security, India's stance was vehemently opposed by the USA/EU. Earlier attempts by India also met with the same fate. At the Trade Policy Review (TPR) meeting held at WTO in January 2021, India insisted that the three issues should be taken up on a priority basis at the MC-12. But, in that Ministerial Conference held in Geneva on June 12-17, 2022, the issues were not even put on the table. The deadlock has existed for more than two decades despite India taking up these issues at WTO under what has come to be known as the Doha Development Agenda (DDA). Developed countries had junked DDA at MC-10 held in Nairobi (2015). On the most contentious issue of a permanent solution for PSH, a ray of hope emerged when in the WTO-General Council (GC) meeting in Geneva (July 31, 2014),

India insisted on a time-bound action plan on the subject matter to be executed before the end of 2014 co-terminus with approval of Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA) - an area of great interest to developed countries. This was a good strategic move but it was abandoned mid-stream. In December 2014, even as the developed countries got away with the TFA, the developing countries got an "extension of the peace clause till a permanent solution was found." Put simply, India had literally surrendered its right to secure a permanent solution; that it was "Ok" with "the benefit of peace clause."

What is the peace clause?

To understand this, let us look at the Agreement on Agriculture (AoA) of the WTO. Under it, a developing country cannot give aggregate measurement support (AMS) - an acronym for subsidies - over 10 per cent of the value of its farm production.

The AMS includes "product-specific" subsidies and "non-product specific" subsidies on agricultural inputs such as fertilisers, seed, irrigation and power. The "product-specific" subsidy is the excess of the Minimum Support Price (MSP) paid to farmers over the External Reference Price (ERP) multiplied by the quantum of agri-produce. Whereas the MSP is taken for the relevant year, say, 2023-24, the ERP is the average of the global price prevailing during 1986-88 fixed in rupee terms. If the subsidy given by a developing country exceeds 10 per cent, it will be treated as a violation of its WTO commitment. This has been a major worry as India could face action in a situation of AMS exceeding the 10 per cent threshold. In this backdrop, the MC-9 in Bali (2013) had agreed to a "peace clause" under which "if a developing country gives AMS in excess of 10 per cent, no member will challenge this until 2017, when the WTO would look for a permanent

solution to address their food security concerns." It came with several riders such as submission of data on food procurement, stockholding, distribution and subsidies. These also include establishing that subsidies are not "trade distorting." Besides, programs implemented after 2013 are not covered under the ambit of the 'peace clause'. In December 2014, the WTO-GC modified the above decision to provide for "extension of the peace clause till a permanent solution was found". Unfortunately, India concurred with this modification. This took away the sanctity of the 2017 deadline by which time members were to find a permanent solution as per the MC-9 mandate. A decade since then, India is still looking for a solution! In regard to SSM - it allows members to temporarily raise tariffs beyond the "bound levels" (this is the maximum permissible duty that a member country can impose under a bound rate agreement) to counter surges in import or price drops. The 2015 MC-10 in Nairobi recognized that developing countries will have the right to take recourse to SSM as envisaged under the Hong Kong Ministerial Declaration. That was at MC - 6 (December 2005). Since then, it has been almost two decades. Even now, these countries can't take recourse to SSM. They haven't also been able to prompt developed countries to eliminate their cotton subsidies. To conclude, despite the deft handling of negotiations at the WTO and representing the majority of the developing countries (India leads about 80 countries - the G33 including India, African, Caribbean and Pacific countries or ACP) so far, India hasn't succeeded in securing the intended outcomes. Given the intransigence of developed countries and their clout at WTO, there is little hope from the MC - 14.

(The writer is a policy analyst; views are personal)

Persisting Central Information Commission vacancies challenge transparency claims

Eight vacancies of Information Commissioners undermine the cause of transparency and accountability

Recently on December 10, Dr. Jitendra Singh, MoS (Personnel, Public Grievances and Pension) made a pitch for Vikashit Bharat, 2047 while addressing the 16th Annual Convention of Central Information Commission at Bharat Mandapam in Pragati Maidan. Ironically, it was the last date allowed by the Supreme Court for the central government to file a status report on the eight posts of Information Commissioners lying vacant out of a total of ten in the Central Information Commission (CIC) for the last year. It might be remembered in October 2023 Anjali Bhadrawaj had brought to the notice of the Supreme Court that whereas seven posts were already lying vacant in the



PRIYADARSHI DUTTA

CIC, four incumbents were due to retire within a week. Sadly, the situation has worsened over the last year, notwithstanding the government's claim to transparency and accountability. At present, there are two Information Commissioners viz. Anandi Ramalingam and Vinod Kumar Tiwari in addition to Chief Information Commissioner viz. Heeralal

Samariya. As per the Pending Cases Report available on the website of CIC, there were a total of 3134 cases - comprising 2310 second appeals and 824 direct complaints with the Commission as of November 1, 2023. A year later on November 1, 2024, the total number of pendency has risen to 20,437 - comprising 17,717 second appeals and 2720 direct complaints. At the time of writing this piece, the total pendency clocked 22,957. This figure is not quite a compliment to the government's alleged commitment to transparency and accountability. A recent RTI application filed by Commodore Lokesh Batra (Retd) elicited the reply that 161 applications were received for filling eight vacancies in

CIC in response to the DoPT's advertisement dated August 14, 2024. Under Section 12 (3) of the RTI Act, 2005 the appointments are to be made by a committee chaired by the Prime Minister, and comprising the Leader of the Opposition in Lok Sabha and another Union minister nominated by the Prime Minister. Filling these positions before the 16th Annual Convention on the RTI would have been a favourable gesture. However, the government did not prioritize the task. A second appeal from this columnist filed on September 13, 2023, is indicated at no 18162 in the list of pendency. The matter was transferred to IC Vinod Kumar Tiwari, after IC Ms. Saroj Punhani retired on November 11, 2023. The



high amount of pendency incentivizes the CPIOs/Appellate Authorities in the ministries/departments to display a cavalier attitude towards applications filed under the RTI Act, 2005. This columnist, however, was able to obtain the information through a fresh application. Though in both cases, the Appellate Authority within the division, who in an IAS officer colluded with the CPIO,

in one of his decisions he stated that the reason for denying information was that the file was under submission with the Joint Secretary. The columnist filed a third application under the RTI Act, 2005 asking the CPIO whether the Joint Secretary has been 'exempted' from the obligation to provide information under the RTI Act, 2005. If the Joint Secretary had been 'exempted', the CPIO must produce the necessary official order, and further inform who else in the ministry had been similarly 'exempted'. Any claim that a Joint Secretary has been 'exempted' from the obligation to provide information would have become controversial for the government. It could have sullied the service record of the

officer attracting a minor if not major penalty for disregarding a Parliamentary statute. The RTI Act, 2005 provides no authority-wise 'exemption'. Exemption under Section 8 of the Act applies only to certain well-defined matters based on merit like security/diplomatic/trade secrets, matters expressly forbidden by court from publication, or cabinet papers etc. This time the CPIO quickly provided the information. The episode, however, underscores a few grievous lapses. First, had the Central Information Commission (CIC) been working at full strength, the second appeal would have been decided within a few months, and the delinquent CPIO might had to pay the monetary penalty for denying information.

Second, it underscores that Appellate Authorities, who are part of the department, actually help the CPIOs to suppress the information, where it is in their interest. Instead of this obligation, they can manipulate the CPIOs in other matters. The high amount of pendency in CIC could be attributed to the devious behaviour of the Appellate Authorities. The RTI Act, 2005 should have provision to penalize not just the CPIO but also the First Appellate Authority if the Information Commissioner declares him/her guilty of deliberate suppression of information.

(The writer is an author and an independent researcher based in New Delhi. The views expressed are his personal)

Yunus celebrates end of Hasina's 'autocratic govt'

No mention of Mujibur Rahman in his Victory Day address

PTI ■ DHAKA

Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus led Bangladesh Monday in marking the 54th Victory Day, his speech making no mention of founding leader Mujibur Rahman while calling deposed prime minister Sheikh Hasina's administration the "world's worst autocratic government". "Bijoy Dibosh" commemorates the Pakistan military's surrender to Indian forces and the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971. "Bangabandhu" Mujibur Rahman is seen as the independence movement's iconic figure. His daughter Sheikh Hasina fled to India on August 5, after massive student-led protests against her government. Nobel laureate Yunus then took over as head of an interim government. In his televised address to the nation, Yunus indicated that elections might be held by

early 2026. "Broadly speaking, the election can be scheduled between the end of 2025 and the first half of 2026," he said. The country could not build on its achievements because of its own faults and, of late, a "monstrous autocratic government" had grabbed power, he said in an apparent reference to Hasina's Awami league government. He said the ouster of the "world's worst autocratic government" amid a mass upsurge added extra significance to the celebration this year. Yunus and Bangladesh President Mohammed Shahabuddin separately paid tributes to Liberation War martyrs at the National Memorial on the outskirts of the capital. "I recall the millions of martyrs including numerous children and juveniles, youths and the elderly people's sacrifices that made possible the achievement of our independence," he



said. His speech, however, made no mention of the political leadership in 1971 and of Mujibur Rahman -- a sharp departure from previous Victory Day addresses. Critics accuse his interim government of trying to erase

Mujibur Rahman's legacy. The authorities have earlier announced a decision to phase out the currency notes currently in circulation. The new ones will not carry Rahman's image. On Monday, Army bugles played the Last Post, commemorating those killed during the 1971 War. East Timor President Jose Ramos Horta accompanied Yunus at the celebrations. Deviating from tradition, Bangladesh did not stage a Victory Day Parade in the capital. "The army is currently engaged in activities across the country, and organising the parade requires advance preparation, which wasn't feasible this year," Liberation War Affairs Adviser Farook-e-Azam told the Daily Star newspaper. But he said the celebration would be inclusive for all with 'Victory Fairs' across the country featuring art and craft

exhibits and agricultural product displays, and showcasing domestic goods. He said schools were hosting their own events as part of the festivities and cultural programmes would include the participation of children, women and men, making the celebration inclusive for all. "The shift in the celebration format aims to bring more active public involvement and create a festive atmosphere in every part of the country," Azam said. The liberation movement began when the West Pakistan leadership refused to hand over power to the Awami League in line with the 1970 election results. India backed Bengali guerrillas and dealt with mass migration of people from Bangladesh. Eight Indian military veterans of the Liberation War travelled to Dhaka this year to mark Victory Day. Similarly, eight

Bangladesh veterans were in Kolkata to join the Vijay Diwas celebrations. In his speech, Yunus indicated that elections would be held in 2025 or early 2026 after updating the voters' list. "From now on, the responsibility has been entrusted to them to start the process of forming the future government. They have started their preparations. They have a lot of work to do," he told a local news agency, referring to the Election Reforms Commission. "We have to make sure that the names of all those who have become eligible to vote in the last 15 years are included in the voters' list. This is a big task," he said. He said after the student the student uprising there is no room for making any mistakes. Many young people who were deprived of this right in the past will vote for the first time, he added.

Two killed on first day of anti-polio campaign in Pak

PTI ■ PESHAWAR

A polio worker and a police constable were shot dead in separate incidents in Pakistan's restive Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province on Monday as the country began a week-long polio eradication campaign amid tight security. Unidentified assailants opened fire and killed a polio worker in Bannu district on the very first day of the anti-polio drive that commenced across Pakistan on Monday. The incident occurred in Kala Khel Masti Khan and the attackers managed to escape. Police stated that the deceased polio worker was on his way to duty when he was attacked. In a separate incident in Karak district, Constable Ishtiaq Ahmed, escorting a team of polio workers, was killed when unidentified motorcyclists opened fire. The assailants managed to escape. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

Governor Faisal Karim Kundi and Chief Minister Ali Amin Gandapur condemned the attacks on polio teams in the province. A week-long polio eradication campaign across Pakistan began on Monday amid tight security to ensure its smooth sailing against the crippling disease that saw a surge this year with 63 cases reported so far. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), Pakistan and Afghanistan remain the only countries where the paralyzing virus is still rampant. News agency AP reported that authorities deployed thousands of police officers to protect the health workers following intelligence reports that insurgents could target them. Citing health officials and authorities, AP said more than 200 polio workers and police assigned for their protection have been killed since the 1990s.

Amnesty: Serbia spying on political opponents, journalists

AP ■ BELGRADE

Serbia's secret service and police have been spying on journalists and opposition activists by installing a spyware on their mobile phones, Amnesty International said Monday. The watchdog's report, backed by testimonies of those who claim their phones have been hacked in recent months, says the spy software was used to unlock phones to capture covert screenshots and copy contact lists, which were then uploaded to a government-controlled server. The report titled "A Digital Prison: Surveillance and the Suppression of Civil Society in Serbia" said the Serbian police and the Security Information Agency (BIA) used the spyware to infect devices while their owners were detained or interviewed by police. "Our investigation reveals how Serbian authorities have deployed surveillance technology and digital repression tactics as instruments of wider state control and repression directed against civil society," said Dinushika Dissanayake, Amnesty International's deputy regional

director for Europe. Serbia's police did not respond to a request for comment by The Associated Press. Serbia's spy agency said on its website that it "works exclusively in accordance with the laws of the Republic of Serbia." "Therefore, we are not even able to comment on nonsensical allegations from their (Amnesty) text, just as we do not normally comment on similar content," BIA said. The Amnesty report comes as President Aleksandar Vucic is facing one of the biggest challenges to more than a decade of his increasingly autocratic rule, with widening anti-government protests that so far have been largely peaceful. Protests have been led by university students and opposition activists following the collapse last month of a concrete canopy at a railway station in the country's north that killed 15 people on Nov. 1. Many in Serbia believe rampant corruption and nepotism among state officials led to sloppy work on the building reconstruction, which was part of a wider railroad project with Chinese state companies. Vucic has accused Western intel-

ligence services, NGO groups and foreign media of conducting a "hybrid warfare" against him and his country by illegally financing the protests. The Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, an NGO group, strongly condemned the authorities' misuse of digital technologies for surveillance and demanded an immediate, transparent and independent investigation into the allegations reported by Amnesty International. It also called for the prosecution of those responsible within the police and the Security and Information Agency. "In a country where civil protests are growing in scale, and discontent with the regime is becoming louder, these practices represent a direct attack on fundamental freedoms, including the right to peaceful assembly, freedom of expression, and the right of association," the group's statement said. Serbia, which formally seeks European Union membership, has been forging close ties with Russia and China, including their spy agencies in what officials said was a joint action against the so-called "coloured revolutions" -- street protests against repressive regimes.

12 Indians found dead at restaurant in Georgia

PTI ■ TBILISI

Twelve Indian nationals were found dead at a restaurant in Georgia's mountain resort of Gudauri, according to the Indian mission here. Georgia's Ministry of Internal Affairs said in a statement that no signs of injuries or signs of violence were detected in an initial inspection. All victims died from carbon monoxide poisoning, local media reported, citing police. The Indian mission in Tbilisi said that all 12 victims were Indian nationals. However, Georgia's internal affairs ministry statement said 11 were foreigners while one victim was its citizen. It added that the bodies of all victims, employees in the same Indian restaurant, were found in bedrooms on the second floor of the facility. "Mission has just learned about the death of 12 Indian nationals in Gudauri, Georgia. Deepest condolences to the bereaved families. Mission is in touch with the local authorities to get details of the Indian nationals who lost their lives. All possible assistance will be given," the Indian mission here said in a statement. The police started an investigation under Article 116 of the Criminal Code of Georgia, which implies negligent manslaughter. According to the preliminary investigation, a power generator was placed in an indoor area, a closed space near the bedrooms, which was turned on, probably after the power supply was turned off on Friday night. A forensic medical examination has also been appointed to determine the "exact cause of death." Investigative actions are "actively" being carried out, with forensic-criminalistics working on the spot, and interviews of persons related to the case are being conducted.

'Death toll in Gaza Strip from Israel-Hamas war tops 45,000'

AP ■ DEIR AL-BALAH

The death toll in the Gaza Strip from the 14-month war between Israel and Hamas militants has topped 45,000 people, Palestinian health officials said Monday, with 52 dead arriving at hospitals across the bombed-out strip over the past 24 hours. The Gaza Health Ministry does not distinguish between civilians and combatants in its count, but it has said that more than half of the fatalities are women and children. The Israeli military says it has killed more than 17,000 militants, without providing evidence. The Health Ministry said 45,028 people have been killed and 106,962 have been wounded since the start of the war. It has said the real toll is higher because thousands of bodies are still buried under rubble or in areas that medics cannot access. The latest war has been by far the deadliest round of fighting between Israel and Hamas, with the death toll now amounting to roughly 2 per cent of Gaza's entire prewar

population of about 2.3 million. Among the dead reported in the overall toll were 10 people, including a family of four, who were killed in an overnight Israeli strike in Gaza City, Palestinian medics said. The strike late Sunday hit a house in Gaza City's eastern Shijaiyah neighbourhood, according to the Health Ministry's emergency service. Rescuers recovered the bodies of 10 people from under the rubble, including those of two parents and their two children, it said. Israel claims Hamas is responsible for the civilian death toll because it operates from within civilian areas in the densely populated Gaza Strip. Rights groups and Palestinians say Israel has failed to take sufficient precautions to avoid civilian deaths. The war began when Hamas-led militants stormed into southern Israel on October 7, 2023, killing some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and abducting another 250. Israel responded by heavy bombardment and a ground incur-

sion into the Palestinian enclave. Around 100 hostages are still inside Gaza, at least a third of whom are believed to be dead. Most of the rest were released during a cease-fire last year. A separate strike on a school on Sunday in the southern city of Khan Younis killed at least 13 people, including six children and two women, according to Nasser Hospital where the bodies were taken. The hospital initially reported the strike had killed 16 people, but it later revised the death toll as the three other bodies had been from a separate strike that hit a house. The Israeli military said it had "conducted a precise strike on Hamas terrorists who were operating inside a command and control centre embedded within a compound" that had served as a school in Khan Younis. It did not provide evidence. In central Gaza's Nuseirat urban refugee camp, mourners gathered for the funeral of a Palestinian journalist working for the Qatari-based Al Jazeera

TV network who was killed Sunday in a strike on a point for Gaza's civil defence agency. They carried his body through the street from the hospital, his blue bulletproof vest resting atop. The strike also killed three civil defence workers, including the local head of the agency, according to Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital. The civil defence is Gaza's main rescue agency and operates under the Hamas-run government. Al Jazeera said Ahmad Baker Al-Louh, 39, had been covering rescue operations of a family wounded in an earlier bombing when he was killed. The International Federation of Journalists said last week that 104 journalists and media workers have been killed so far in 2024, with more than half of them perishing during the Israel-Hamas war in the Gaza Strip. The group said that since the October 7, 2023, start of the war, at least 138 had been killed, including 55 Palestinian media professionals in the calendar year.

Japanese bank apologises over theft of millions of dollars from safe deposit boxes

AP ■ TOKYO

Japan's biggest bank apologised Monday for the alleged theft by an employee of more than 1 billion yen (USD 6.6 million) from customers' safe deposit boxes. The bank, formally known as Mitsubishi UFJ Financial Group, Inc., said Monday that it was investigating and that verified thefts from about 20 of the 60 clients thought to have been affected amounted to 300 million yen (nearly USD 2 million). Compensation was being worked out, it said. The thefts occurred at two Tokyo branches of the bank, from April 2020 until the end of October this year, when the problem was discovered. MUFG's president and CEO

Junichi Hanzawa told reporters the female employee responsible for managing the safe deposit boxes and their keys is suspected of taking advantage of that position to steal cash and other valuables. "The case has undermined the customers' trust and confidence and shaken the very foundation of our banking business," Hanzawa said. He apologised for causing concern and trouble to MUFG clients. MUFG said the employee admitted taking the money and using it for investments and her personal purposes. She was fired and was cooperating with the bank's internal probe and a police investigation but has not yet been arrested. After news of the thefts sur-

passed, dozens more people came forward with claims of suspected losses that the bank is working to verify, it said. The MUFG case is the second recent one involving criminal activity at a major Japanese financial institution. In November, Nomura Holdings acknowledged that a former employee had been arrested on suspicion of robbery, attempted murder and arson targeting a client in Hiroshima. Asked about the MUFG thefts, the chief government spokesman said Monday that banking operations require high levels of trust and a sense of public service. The case was "extremely regrettable," said Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshimasa Hayashi.

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Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu attends his trial on corruption charges at the district court in Tel Aviv, Israel, on Monday. AP/PTI

Popeye, Tintin enter public domain in 2025 along with novels from Faulkner, Hemingway

AP ■ WASHINGTON

Popeye can punch without permission and Tintin can roam freely starting in 2025. The two classic comic characters who first appeared in 1929 are among the intellectual properties becoming public domain in the United States on Jan. 1. That means they can be used and repurposed without permission or payment to copyright holders. This year's crop of newly public artistic creations lacks the landmark vibes of last year's entrance of into the public domain of Mickey Mouse. But they include a deep well of canonical works whose 95-year copyright maximums will expire. And the Disney icon's public domain presence expands. "It's a move! There are a dozen new Mickey cartoons -- he speaks for the first time and dons the familiar white gloves,"

said Jennifer Jenkins, director of Duke's Center for the Study of the Public Domain. "There are masterpieces from Faulkner and Hemingway, the first sound films from Alfred Hitchcock, Cecil B. DeMille, and John Ford, and amazing music from Fats Waller, Cole Porter, and George Gershwin. Pretty exciting!" Here's a closer look at this year's crop. **Comics characters loom large:** Popeye the Sailor, with his bulging forearms, mealy-mouthed speech, and propensity for fistfights, was created by E.C. Segar and made his first appearance in the newspaper strip "Thimble Theater" in 1929, speaking his first words, "Ja think I'm a cowboy?" when asked if he was a sailor. What was supposed to be a one-off appearance became permanent, and the strip would be renamed "Popeye."

But as with Mickey Mouse last year and Winnie the Pooh in 2022, only the earliest version is free for reuse. The spinach that gave the sailor his super-strength was not there from the start, and is the kind of character element that could spawn legal disputes. And the animated shorts featuring his distinctive mumbly voice didn't begin until 1933 and remain under copyright. As does director Robert Altman's 1980 film, starring Robin Williams as Popeye and Shelley Duvall as his oft-fought-over sweetheart Olive Oyl. That movie was tepidly received initially. So was director Steven Spielberg's "Adventures of Tintin" in 2011. But the comics about the boy reporter that inspired it, the creation of Belgian artist Herge, were among the most popular in Europe for much of the 20th century. The simply drawn teen with

dots for eyes and bangs like an ocean wave first appeared in a supplement to the Belgian newspaper Le Vingtieme Siecle, and became a weekly feature. The comic also first appeared in the US in 1929. Its signature bright colors -- including Tintin's red hair -- didn't appear until years later, and could, like Popeye's spinach, be the subject of legal disputes. And in much of the world, Tintin won't become public property until 70 years after the 1983 death of his creator. **Books show American lit at its height:** The books becoming public this year read like the syllabus for an American literature seminar. "The Sound and the Fury," arguably William Faulkner's quintessential novel with its modernist stream-of-consciousness style, was a sensation after its publication despite being famously difficult for

readers. It uses multiple non-linear narratives to tell the story of a prominent family's ruin in the author's native Mississippi, and would help lead to Faulkner's Nobel Prize. And Ernest Hemingway's "A Farewell to Arms" joins his earlier "The Sun Also Rises" in the public domain. The partly autobiographical story of an ambulance driver in Italy during the First World War cemented Hemingway's status in the American literary canon. It has been frequently adapted for film, TV and radio, which can now be done without permission. John Steinbeck's first novel, "A Cup of Gold," from 1929, will also enter the public domain. The British novelist Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own," an extended essay that would become a landmark in feminism from the modernist literary luminary, is also on the

list. Her novel "Mrs. Dalloway" is already in the US public domain. **Movie legends in the making:** While a host of truly major movies will become public in the coming decade, for now early works by major figures from the not-always-stellar early sound era will have to suffice. A decade before he would move to Hollywood and make films like "Psycho," and "Vertigo," Alfred Hitchcock made "Blackmail" in Britain. The film was begun as a silent but shifted to sound during production, resulting in two different versions, one of them the UK's -- and Hitchcock's -- first sound film. John Ford, whose later Westerns would put him among film's most vaunted directors, also made his first foray into sound with 1929's "The Black Watch," an adventure epic that includes Ford's

future chief collaborator John Wayne as a young extra. Cecil B. DeMille, already a Hollywood bigwig through silents, made his first talkie with the melodrama "Dynamite." Groucho, Harpo and the other Marx Brothers had their first starring movie roles in 1929's "The Cocoanuts," a forerunner to future classics like "Animal Crackers" and "Duck Soup." "The Broadway Melody," the first sound film and the second film ever to win the Oscar for best picture -- known as "outstanding production" at the time -- will also become public, though it's often ranked among the worst of best picture winners. And after "Steamboat Willie" made the earliest Mickey Mouse public, a dozen more of his animations will get the same status, including "The Karnival Kid," where he spoke for the first time.

Music rings out the 20s: Songs from the last year of the Roaring Twenties are also about to become public property. Cole Porter's compositions "What Is This Thing Called Love?" and "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" are among the highlights, as is the jazz classic "Ain't Misbehavin'," written by Fats Waller and Harry Brooks. "Singin' in the Rain," which would later forever be associated with the 1952 Gene Kelly film, made its debut in the 1929 movie "The Hollywood Revue" and will now be public domain. Different laws regulate sound recordings, and those newly in the public domain date to 1924. They include a recording of "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen" from future star and civil rights icon Marian Anderson, and "Rhapsody in Blue" performed by its composer George Gershwin.

Manchester United stuns Manchester City with 2-1 win

AP ■ MANCHESTER

Amad Diallo struck a 90th-minute winner as Manchester United staged a stunning late comeback to beat Manchester City 2-1 in the Premier League. Four-time defending champion City led the Manchester derby 1-0 going into the 88th minute at the Etihad Stadium. But the game was turned round in dramatic fashion as Bruno Fernandes leveled from the penalty spot and Diallo sealed victory for United — prompting head coach Ruben Amorim to declare “something magic happened.”

“It was a very tough match but we believe until the end. We managed to score. We needed that win. It was important for us and for our fans,” Amorim said. City fans jeered at the final whistle as their once dominant team’s woeful run of form extended to one win and eight losses in 11 games. “I’m the boss, I’m the manager and I’m not good enough. It’s as

simple as that,” Guardiola said. It was a first derby victory for new United head coach Ruben Amorim, who led Sporting Lisbon to a 4-1 win against City in one of his last games in charge of the Portuguese club in November. But for a long time it looked like being a third-straight league loss for United after Josko Gvardiol’s headed goal in the 36th. Fernandes was guilty of missing the target when through on goal in the second half and United struggled to create chances against a City team that rarely looked like adding to its lead. But in a dramatic end to the match, Diallo raced after an underhit backpass from Matheus Nunes. Nunes then brought down the United forward in the box and referee Anthony Taylor pointed to the penalty spot. Fernandes made no mistake this time — sending Ederson the wrong way. Moments later, Diallo ran onto a long pass from Lisandro Martinez, flicked the ball high and past Ederson before rolling it



United is 13th and five points behind fifth-place City, which has seen its title defense unravel during its losing run.

“This is a big club and in a big club when you lose eight in 10 (11) something wrong is happening,” Guardiola said.

Chelsea Challenge Chelsea, in second, closed the gap on Liverpool to two points after a 2-1 win against Brentford. It’s now seven straight wins in all competitions for Enzo Maresca’s team, which is unbeaten in 10. It’s last league defeat was in October — a 2-1 loss to Liverpool. Marc Cucurella scored in the 43rd and Nicolas Jackson made it 2-0 in the 80th for his ninth goal of the season. Bryan Mbeumo scored for Brentford in the 90th and Cucurella was sent off for a second yellow card in added time. Chelsea is four points ahead of third-place Arsenal. MARTIN FIRED Southampton fired manager Russell Martin after being routed 5-0 by Tottenham. Last-place Southampton is nine points from safety and appears to be heading straight back to the second tier after earning promotion to the top flight last season. The decision came on the same day as another relegation-

threatened team, Wolverhampton, fired head coach Gary O’Neil. Wolverhampton is second to last in 19th. Spurs scored all five goals against Southampton before halftime at St Mary’s Stadium, with James Maddison getting two. Son Heung-min, Dejan Kulusevski and Pape Sarr also scored. Tottenham moved up to 10th and is five points off the Champions League places. SARR DOUBLE Ismaila Sarr scored twice as Crystal Palace beat Brighton 3-1 in the Premier League on Sunday. The forward also provided an assist for Trevoh Chalobah in the win at the Amex Stadium, which lifted Palace four points clear of the relegation zone. Brighton is ninth and without a win in four matches. Palace went ahead in the 27th minute through Chalobah, and Sarr doubled the lead for the visitors in the 33rd. Sarr scored his second in the 82nd before Marc Guehi’s own-goal pulled one back for Brighton.

Kerala Blasters sack head coach Mikael Stahre

PTI ■ KOCHI

Kerala Blasters FC on Monday announced the termination of services of their head coach Mikael Stahre with immediate effect after a string of poor performances by the club in the ongoing Indian Super League. Assistant coaches Bjorn Westrom and Frederico Pereira Morais have also left the club, along with Stahre. “The club sincerely thanks Mikael, Bjorn, and Frederico for their contributions throughout their time with Kerala Blasters FC. We wish them nothing but success in their future endeavours,” the club said in a statement. “The new head coach will be announced in due course.” Till the new appointment is confirmed, reserve team head coach and head of youth development, Tomasz Tchorz, and assistant coach TG Purushothaman will take over the responsibility of managing the first team. The 49-year-old Stahre, appointed ahead of the current season, enjoyed a promising



start in the Durand Cup, but the Blasters suffered a last-minute elimination in the quarter-finals against rivals Bengaluru FC. However, Blasters’ ISL campaign under the Swede has been a challenging one. Kerala Blasters currently sit 10th in the table, with just three wins and two draws from their first 12 matches. They are on a three-match losing streak, managing only one win while losing six of their last seven games. Four of their seven defeats have come at home. In total, the Blasters played 16 matches under Stahre (including four non ISL matches), managing only five wins while suffering eight defeats.

‘Completely and utterly blindsided’: Gillespie slams PCB for lack of communication

PTI ■ SYDNEY

Former Australia pacer Jason Gillespie on Monday slammed the PCB, revealing that he stepped down as Pakistan’s Test head coach after being “completely and utterly blindsided” by the country’s cricket board. Gillespie, whose contract was set to expire in 2026, resigned last week and he expressed his frustration over the lack of communication, which led him to feel that the Pakistan Cricket Board no longer wanted him in the role. “There were certainly challenges. I went into the job eyes wide open. I want to make that really clear. I knew that, you know, Pakistan had cycled through a number of coaches in a pretty short space of time. “The straw that broke the camel’s back, I suppose, was, as a head coach, you like to have clear communication with your employer,” Gillespie told ABC Sport. “I was completely and utterly blindsided by a decision to not have a high-performance



coach,” he added. The PCB didn’t review the contract of Tim Nielsen, who was brought in on the recommendation of the former Aussie quick, as the high performance coach of the team. “Tim Nielsen was told that his services were no longer required and I had absolutely zero communication from anyone about that. “And I just thought after a number of other things that had gone on in the previous few months, that was probably the moment where I thought, ‘Well, I’m not

really sure if they actually want me to do this job or not.” Adding to Gillespie’s frustration was the fact that the feedback given to him regarding Nielsen and the team’s performance was positive. “I developed a really close relationship with the Test captain, Shan Masood, and felt we were certainly going in the right direction and things were going really well,” he said. “All the feedback that I’d got or the feedback the PCB got was just how effective, you

know, Tim had been in his role as well and the players were getting a lot out of him.” Gillespie guided Pakistan to a 2-1 win against England in October, after losing the first match by an innings and 47 runs. However after the loss in the first Test, he was informed that a new selection panel would be introduced, and he would not be a part of it. He felt his role as head coach was diminished and even suggested that he often didn’t know the team lineup until the day before a match. This lack of clarity and communication only deepened his frustration with the PCB’s handling of his position. “I felt I was basically hitting catches and that was about it on the morning of a game,” he said. “You want to be able to have clear communication with all stakeholders, with selectors, for instance, knowing what the team is as head coach well before the game, or before at least the day before the game,” he said.



Women’s Champions League to wrap up group stage

AP ■ LONDON

The competitive imbalance in women’s club soccer in Europe will be underscored this week in the final round of Champions League group-stage matches where little is on the line because of the dominance of the continent’s top teams. The eight teams advancing to the quarterfinals have already secured their spots with one round remaining: Lyon and Wolfsburg from Group A; Chelsea and Real Madrid from Group B; Bayern Munich and Arsenal from Group C; and Manchester City and Barcelona from Group D. All are either established clubs in the women’s game — especially Lyon and Wolfsburg, the winners of nine of the 10 Champions League titles from 2011-2020 — or huge European clubs in men’s soccer who have started to really pour money and extra focus into their women’s teams in recent years. Madrid’s women’s team, for example, was only founded in 2020. The only thing needing to be settled across Tuesday and Wednesday is which teams qualify in first place and which progress as group runners-up, though there might not be any huge benefit either way given the high standard of the teams going through. The qualified teams play each other this week, with only Group A fully decided as Lyon is guaranteed to finish in first place with Wolfsburg second. The two meet in France on Tuesday. In Group B on the same night, second-place Madrid hosts first-place Chelsea and can jump above the English team with a win courtesy of a superior goal difference. On Wednesday, Arsenal hosts Bayern and is one point behind the visitors from Germany in Group C. Bayern just needs to avoid defeat to finish top. Also that night, Barcelona is at home to first-place Man City and must beat the English team by two goals or more to win Group D. Growing gap The lopsided results in the fifth round of games highlighted the gap between the so-called bigger and smaller clubs in the Champions League. The eight teams advancing to the knockout stage all won their games, scoring a combined 33 goals and conceding a combined three. On the same night, Chelsea, Lyon and Wolfsburg each scored six goals. Barcelona, the defending champion, has scored 23 goals in its five group games so far — including a 9-0 win over Hammarby and a 7-0 thrashing of St. Polten in its last two outings. Of the teams in third or last place in their groups, only one — Roma — has more than three points. The Champions League will expand next season to 18 teams in a single standings, with UEFA hoping for same uplift that the men’s Champions League has had since increasing to a 36-team league.

FIFA apologises to Ukraine for Crimea map error at 2026 World Cup draw



AP ■ ZURICH

FIFA apologised to the Ukrainian soccer federation for displaying a map during its World Cup qualifying draw that excluded Russia-occupied Crimea from the country’s territory. “We fully understand the delicate sensitivity of this matter and while the incident was unintentional, we sincerely regret any concern it may have caused,” FIFA’s chief member association officer, Elkhan Mammadov, wrote in a letter

published Sunday by the Ukrainian soccer body. Ukraine was one of 54 national teams included in the draw Friday in Zurich for European qualifying groups for the 2026 World Cup. Russia, which has been banned from FIFA competitions because of the military invasion of Ukraine, has illegally occupied Crimea since 2014. The peninsula was not colored as part of Ukrainian territory in a graphic broadcast during the draw event at FIFA headquarters.

“Are you OK, (at)FIFACOM?” Ukraine government spokesman Heorhii Tykhyi wrote Saturday in a post on the social media platform X, adding: “We fixed the map for you and expect a public apology.” Mammadov replied that the map was provided by an outside supplier and FIFA was reviewing how to “ensure such oversights do not recur in future.” Ukraine was drawn into a qualifying group with either France or Croatia, plus Iceland and Azerbaijan. The group winner will advance directly to the World Cup being hosted by the United States, Canada and Mexico, and the runner-up will enter a playoff in March 2026. FIFA and European soccer body UEFA banned Russian teams from international competitions February 2022, citing expected chaos because some European federations refuse to play games against Russia.

Edoardo Bove says he’s ‘feeling good’ as he recovers from on-field collapse

AP ■ FLORENCE

Fiorentina midfielder Edoardo Bove said he is “feeling good” and that the support he received from fans, teammates and opponents helped him recover after being placed in a medically induced coma. Bove collapsed on the field during a game against Inter Milan on Dec. 1. “It’s in moments like these that I understand how genuine this sport truly is and how, beyond the results, competition and rivalries, we are all connected,” Bove posted on Instagram on Monday in his first public comments since the incident. “Connected by a bond that, once created, grows stronger during challenging times becoming almost unbreakable. “I have experienced it firsthand in these last few days: the affection I’ve received, the warmth of the fans, the support from



teammates and opponents and the closeness of the ENTIRE football world gave me incredible strength and courage,” Bove added. “I felt surrounded by positive energy, which helped me stay calm and not feel the loneliness that often comes with situations like this.” The 22-year-old Bove was released from the hospital on Friday but won’t be able to play in Italy again if he needs a defibrillator for his heart. Playing with a defibrillator is

prohibited in Italy. But Bove could follow former Inter Milan midfielder Christian Eriksen, who resumed his career in the English Premier League after he went into cardiac arrest while playing for Denmark at the European Championship in 2021 and had a defibrillator implanted. “I’m feeling good and that’s the most important thing!” Bove said. “See you soon... On the pitch!”

It’s not just about chess, there’s lot of emotional pressure too: Gukesh on world title

PTI ■ CHENNAI

His history-scripting world title was not just a result of good strategy on the chess board, said Indian Grandmaster D Gukesh on Monday, crediting mental conditioning coach Paddy Upton for helping him tame the “emotional pressure” of competing at the biggest stage. The 18-year-old Gukesh, who defeated China’s Ding Liren to become the youngest ever owner of the world title, arrived here on Monday to a rousing welcome from enthusiastic fans and officials. “In a world championship, it’s not only about chess. There is a lot of mental and emotional pressure to deal with. Paddy’s

teachings helped me in that regard,” Gukesh said in a press meet organised by Velammal Vidyalaya, his childhood school. Upton, a renowned mental conditioning coach, worked with Gukesh in the run-up to and during the the 14-game marathon event in Singapore. “The suggestions and the conversations I have had with him, have been very important for me and my development as a player,” he said. Gukesh also detailed how his association started with the South African, who has the experience of working with the 2011 cricket World Cup-winning Indian cricket team and the national men’s hockey team that bagged a bronze at

the Paris Olympics. “Paddy has been a very important part of my team. After I won the Candidates (April), I asked Sandeep sir (Sandeep Singhal) of Westbridge Capital) for a mental trainer,” Gukesh recalled. “He immediately put me in touch with Paddy Upton, who has a lot of experience working with high-performance athletes,” said the youngster. In an interview to PTI a day after Gukesh’s win, Upton had lauded the teenager’s “self-awareness.” “I think that’s the thing that’s really stood out, his ability to recognise his thoughts and manage his mind and his understanding of how to do



so,” Upton said. “...He is a world champion because he was able to manage himself and remain focused and stay in the game even though he’s 0-1 down

right from the beginning. So that really is a mark of a champion,” he had stated. Gukesh also thanked Tamil Nadu Chief Minister MK Stalin and Deputy CM

Udhayanidhi Stalin for supporting him in his chess journey. “Definitely, there was a lot of support from the Tamil Nadu government. Honorable Chief Minister and Deputy Chief Minister invite me home and encourage me whenever I achieve something. “The Tamil Nadu government sponsored me during the Chennai Grandmasters last year. They made all the arrangements. That’s how I won the tournament and qualified for the Candidates. “If we get more support like this, I believe more chess players will come. I am very thankful to the Tamil Nadu government,” he said. Gukesh is only the second Indian after the great

Viswanathan Anand to claim the world title. Anand played a pivotal role in shaping the teenager at his academy here. Accidental chess player Gukesh’s father Dr Rajnikanth, who is an ENT surgeon by profession, said he encouraged his son to join chess sessions in the school as a hobby. “You have to have interest and hard work, otherwise nothing will happen. We did not plan to make him a chess player, but enrolled him in Velammal school chess class as part of the extra-curricular activity. “But we supported him once he showed interest and worked hard. As a parent, we tried to give him as much exposure as possible. That’s

what I can suggest to other parents as well. “We should try to give as much exposure as possible to what your children are interested in,” he added. Rajnikanth said Gukesh likes to continuously play in tournaments to ensure that he always remains in touch with the sport. “Some players play tournaments once in two months — one month preparation and next month playing in tournaments. As far as he (Gukesh) is concerned, games are his practice. “He learns from his losses and wins. If I don’t give him a tournament for a month, he becomes restless. That’s his choice,” he added.

