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MARKETING CAMPAIGNS DRIVE
TOURISM GROWTH IN 2024

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Delhi Govt depts disown AAP's Mahila Samman Yojana, Sanjeevani schemes

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

In an unprecedented move, two departments of Delhi Government have released public notices and disowned the registration process started by Chief Minister Atishi and former Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal for two schemes announced by the ruling Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in the National Capital. The Delhi government's Health and Family Welfare department and Women and Child Development department on Wednesday issued public notices disowning the existence of schemes, Mahila Samman Yojana and Sanjeevani Yojana and cautioned citizens against falling for "misleading schemes" launched by the AAP.

Meanwhile, Chief Minister Atishi has stated that strict administrative action will be taken against two officers who released public notices to disown the registration process started by her and former chief minister Arvind Kejriwal for two schemes. The officers in question are a joint director of the Department of Woman and Child Development and the special secretary of the Health and Family Welfare Department.

Atishi, addressing a press conference at the AAP headquarters, strongly condemned the notices, claiming that the officers were under pressure from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). She insisted that the public notices were false and part of a larger conspiracy by the BJP to undermine the AAP's initiatives, which had gained significant public support. She added that the party would take legal action, including a Delhi Police inquiry, against the officers for issuing misleading statements. During the press conference, Atishi also shared an official notification from the Cabinet that approved the Rs 1,000 allowance for women under the Mahila Samman



Delhi Chief Minister Atishi and AAP National Convener Arvind Kejriwal during a press conference. Photo: Ranjan Dimri/The Pioneer

Yojana, reaffirming the legitimacy of the scheme. The fresh controversy will add another dimension to the ongoing tussle between the AAP and the bureaucracy, with accusations flying between parties. The move underlines the tenuous relationship between the bureaucracy and the elected Delhi Government after an amendment to the Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi (GNCTD) Act, the services department comes under the control of the Lieutenant Governor.

The latest flashpoint, which comes weeks ahead of the Delhi Assembly polls, sparked a slugfest between the AAP and BJP leaders. The BJP has accused the ruling party of duping people, since the two schemes have not been approved yet. The Department of Women and Child Development (WCD), in a public notice in newspapers, has said the Mukhyamantri Mahila Samman Yojana does not exist and has not been approved by the Delhi government. It has urged

citizens to refrain from sharing personal information with individuals or groups claiming association with this "fake scheme," as it could result in identity theft or financial fraud. "As, if and when such a scheme is notified, the Department of Women and Child Development (WCD), GNCTD, will launch a digital portal for eligible individuals to submit their applications online as per the approved guidelines. The eligibility conditions and modalities will be clearly notified by the department as and when it happens. It is emphasised that since no such scheme exists, the question of physical forms / applications for the registration under this non-existent scheme does not arise," it said, adding that any individual collecting forms or information in the name of this scheme is "fraudulent and without any authority." The department has warned that sharing personal information in the public domain may lead to people falling prey to cybercrime.

Vajpayee's Ken-Betwa interlinking vision sees light on his centenary

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI/KHAJURAHO (MP)

The ambitious first of its kind interlinking of the Ken-Betwa River as desired by former Prime Minister late Atal Bihari Vajpayee two decades ago, finally kick started with the foundation stone laying by PM Narendra Modi on Wednesday which also marked the birth anniversary of the political stalwart Bharat Ratna Vajpayee.

The Vajpayee government had proposed river linking as a solution for irrigation needs as well as for dealing with floods. Modi laid the foundation stone of the Rs 44,600 crore Ken-Betwa River Link Project at Khajuraho in Madhya Pradesh and said the river linking will open new doors of prosperity and happiness in the Bundelkhand region.

Union Water Resources Minister C R Patil and Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Mohan Yadav handed over two kalash (urns) containing water from Betwa and Ken rivers, respectively, to Modi, who poured it over a model of the project to launch the river linking work.

As per the initial estimation of the project, nearly 44 lakh people in 10 districts of Madhya Pradesh and 21 lakh in Uttar Pradesh will get drinking water under the project. Nearly 7.18 lakh agricultural families in 2,000 villages will benefit from the project, which will also generate 103 MW of



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Union Minister CR Patil during the foundation stone laying ceremony of Ken-Betwa River Linking Project, in Khajuraho, Madhya Pradesh. PTI

hydropower and 27 MW of solar energy, officials involved in the project said. Addressing the event Modi said that in the 21st century, only the nations with adequate and well-managed water resources can advance. "The major challenge of the 21st century is water security. In the 21st century only those countries who have adequate water resources with proper management will move forward," he said. The PM also released a commemorative stamp and a coin in the memory of Vajpayee. Modi also performed 'bhumi puja' or

ground-breaking ceremony for the construction of 1,153 Atal Gram Sewa Sadans costing Rs 437 crore at the Khajuraho program. Under the Ken Betwa project, a 77-metre high and 2.13 kilometres long Daudhan dam and two tunnels (upper level 1.9 km and lower level 1.1 km) will be constructed on the Ken river in the Panna Tiger Reserve. The dam will store 2,853 million cubic metres of water, the chief minister said.

The surplus Ken water will be transferred to the Betwa river through the 221-km-long link canal from Daudhan dam, providing irrigation and drinking water facilities in both the states, he said. With the project, 8.11 lakh hectare area can be irrigated in 2,000 villages of 10 districts - Panna, Damoh, Chhatarpur, Tikamgarh, Niwari, Sagar, Raisen, Vidisha, Shivpuri and Datia. Nearly seven lakh farmer families will be benefited from this, the Chief Minister said.

The Ken-Betwa project will provide an annual irrigation facility in 59,000 hectare area in Uttar Pradesh and stabilisation of the existing irrigation in 1.92 lakh-hectare area, which will provide irrigation facilities in Mahoba, Jhansi, Lalitpur and Banda districts of UP, he said. The project also includes the work of saving the historical Chandela era heritage ponds in Chhatarpur, Tikamgarh and Niwari districts of MP, where water can be stored during the rainy season.

CM launches 1,542 new MPACS



77 PACS to be developed as model ones

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi launched 1,542 new Multipurpose Primary Agriculture Cooperative Societies (MPACS) in the State at a function here on Wednesday. Notably, there are a total of 2,711 PACS in the State. With the addition of the 1,542 new MPACS, the total number of PACS in the State has increased to 4,253.

The Chief Minister said that to make the cooperative movement people-oriented, his government is giving priority to implementing various new programmes in accordance with the Cooperation Department of the Central Government.

A total of 54 programmes have been taken up in this. The CM announced that the State Government has decided to develop 77 PACS as model

In BBSR 5 guns, ammo, car seized during Nakabandi

5 notorious criminals held

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

The Special Squad of the Commissionerate police on Tuesday night busted an illegal firearm trader gang by arresting five persons in this connection.

According to sources, the arrests were made during a frisking of vehicles. The arrested persons have previous criminal records in Bhubaneswar, Puri, Cuttack, Khordha and Jagatsinghpur. Several cases are pending against the five history-sheeters at different police stations.

During the interception, the police team seized five pistols, 15 rounds of live bullets, Rs 84,000 in cash and a car from the possession of the arrested persons. The apprehended individuals included notorious criminal Chandan Pradhan and four of his aides from Khordha district.



"Police have been striving to crack down on criminal activities in the city. In this effort, police successfully nabbed a gang during a 'Nakabandi' late last night. The police team seized at least five firearms including two revolvers and three country-made guns," Commissioner of Police Suresh Dev Datt Singh said on Wednesday.

"The gang was planning to commit a crime when the accused were intercepted by the police team, leading to their arrests. As criminal cases are still pending against five accused, we will pray the court for cancellation of bails of those who are on bail," Singh added.

Over 30 dead in Azerbaijani airliner crash

AP ■ MOSCOW

An Azerbaijani airliner with 67 people onboard crashed Wednesday in the Kazakhstani city of Aktau, leaving at least 32 survivors, according to officials. More than 30 people are likely dead. Kazakhstan's Emergency Ministry said in a Telegram statement that those on board included five crew. At least 29 have been hospitalised, the ministry told Russia's state news agency RIA Novosti. Russian news agency Interfax quoted medical workers as saying that four bodies have been recovered and emergency workers at the scene as saying that both pilots, according to a preliminary assessment, died in the crash. The Embraer 190 aircraft made an emergency landing three kilometres from the city, Azerbaijan Airlines said earlier.

Kazakhstan's Emergency Ministry initially said 25 people survived the crash, later revising that number to 27, 28, and then 29 as the search and rescue operation continued at the site of the crash, bringing the supposed death toll down. The Prosecutor General's Office in Azerbaijan later reported that at least 32 people survived the crash, adding that the number wasn't final. The number of



The wreckage of Azerbaijan Airlines Embraer 190 on the ground near the airport of Aktau, Kazakhstan. AP/PTI

survivors could mean that over 30 people may be dead. The plane was originally scheduled to travel from the Azerbaijani capital of Baku to the Russian city of Grozny in the North Caucasus. According to Azerbaijan Airlines, 37 passengers were Azerbaijani citizens. There were also 16 Russian nationals, six Kazakhstan and three Kyrgyzstan citizens, it said. RIA Novosti quoted Russia's civil aviation authority, Rosaviatsia, as saying that preliminary information showed that the pilot had chosen to divert to Aktau after a bird strike on the aircraft led to "an emergency situation on board." Mobile phone footage circulating online appeared to show the aircraft making a steep descent before smashing into the ground in a fireball. Other footage showed part of its fuselage ripped away from the wings and the rest of the aircraft, lying upside down in the grass. The footage corresponded to the plane's colors and its registration number. Some of the videos posted on social media showed survivors dragging fellow passengers away from the wreckage of the plane. Flight-tracking data from FlightRadar24.Com showed the aircraft making what appeared to be a figure-eight once near the airport in Aktau, its altitude moving up and down substantially over the last minutes of the flight before impacting the ground.

'Instal CCTVs in all PSs by Mar next'

HC directs police

PNS ■ CUTTACK

The Orissa High Court has directed that all police stations in the State must be equipped with CCTV surveillance systems by March 31, 2025.

The direction was in response to a public interest litigation (PIL) concerning the misconduct towards an Army Major and his woman friend at the Bharatpur police station in Bhubaneswar which had sparked public outrage.

The High Court has ordered that these CCTVs must be integrated into a central monitoring system within the stipulated deadline. The move aims to ensure transparency and accountability in policing.

The High Court has also stressed on strict adherence to the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) prepared by the State Government regarding how to deal with and appropriate behaviour towards Army personnel at police stations. It is mandated that all officers be apprised of these procedures and that the SOP be widely publicised in Odia at every station and outpost.

An affidavit from ADG Dayal Gangwar was duly considered in the court's decision. There is an expectation of rigorous compliance from both the government and the police headquarters based on the contents of the affidavit.

Abrupt end of Raghubar's term ignites debates

NALINI SAHU ■ BHUBANESWAR

The unexpected resignation of Odisha Governor Raghubar Das has ignited intense debates about the reasons behind his abrupt departure. While some view this development as a routine reshuffle orchestrated by the Centre, others see it as a strategic move tied to unfolding political calculations, particularly in Jharkhand.

Das' resignation comes amidst a backdrop of the BJP's efforts to regain its foothold in Jharkhand after a lacklustre performance in the recent Assembly elections. Interestingly, during these elections, Das, a former Chief Minister of

Jharkhand, was kept away from the political forefront. The BJP had instead relied on leaders like Babulal Marandi and Arjun Munda to challenge Jharkhand Chief Minister Hemant Soren. However, their campaign failed to make a significant impact. Some political analysts suggest that Das's removal from Odisha may signal his redeployment to Jharkhand, where his leadership experience could play a crucial role in reshaping the BJP's strategy.

Adding to the intrigue, another perspective links Das' premature exit to controversies that marred his tenure as Governor. The most significant



Dr Hari Babu Kambhampati

of these controversies was the allegation against his son, accused of assaulting a Raj Bhavan employee. This incident gave the opposition Biju Janata Dal (BJD) ammunition to attack Das, questioning his ability to uphold the dignity of the Governor's office.



Raghubar Das

Das' appointment as Odisha's 26th Governor on October 18, 2023 was initially seen as an opportunity to bolster the BJP's election prospects in the State. However, his tenure was marked by a mix of controversies and proactive initiatives. Shortly after assum-

ing office on October 31, he visited the then Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik at his residence, a move criticised as a breach of protocol. Although Das defended the visit as a "courtesy call", it triggered a heated political debate.

Despite the early controversies, Das' tenure was characterised by significant grassroots engagements. He embarked on extensive tours across Odisha interacting directly with people and addressing grievances such as drinking water shortage, poor road infrastructure and alleged discrimination in the allocation of houses under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana by the BJD government. These initiatives energised the BJP's grassroots cadres, who had long struggled against the BJD's well-entrenched organisational network. Das' efforts also provided a platform for the BJP's central leadership, including Prime Minister Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah, to launch a robust campaign in Odisha. Analysts credit his groundwork with helping the BJP challenge Naveen Patnaik's 24-year reign more effectively than ever before. On December 24, Das was replaced by Dr Hari Babu Kambhampati as the Governor, a move that has only deepened the speculation around his exit.

Thinkers' Club webinar 'India well on its way to be a superpower'

PNS ■ CUTTACK
The 'Thinkers' Club organised its 109th webinar on topic 'India and Super Powers' over the Zoom Platform. Former bureaucrat Vivek Pattanaik was the chief guest of the meeting. Dr Malay Mishra, who was in the Indian Foreign Service for a considerable time, was the chief speaker.

He said a country can be considered a super power based upon certain basic factors like financial, military and diplomatic credentials. He opined that India can be classified as a Super Power, given that its GDP is improving every year. The country is military-wise stronger. It has nuclear war heads, latest planes and other equipment to boost the military power. The present Government is in a relatively stable state. PM Narendra Modi is having good rapport and access to all the world leaders. He is cordial to Trump and Putin. However, India has to emphasize on poverty eradication

programme and improve per capita income, he added. Chief speaker Mishra said India is in a unique position. Though Russia and USA are in opposite ideologies and the global powers have stuck to either USA or Russia, India is neutral and having good access to both the countries. The G20 is now G21, courtesy PM Modi. South Africa is admitted by effort of Modi. NATO is still continuing. Countries like UK, Germany, Japan, Canada and Brazil can not leave USA even USA does a wrong thing. China is emerging as a super power and it is making its entry to the world politics from different angles. The approach is

very often not ethical. India has to stride with due caution. At present, India can be labeled as the 5th Global power, he said. Dr Nanda Nandan Das gave his opinion on the ongoing wars and how are the super powers related to them. Pratap Rout, Binode Mohanty, Prof Umasankar Misra, Prof Dhanushdhar Mishra, Balmiki Nayak and Sudarshan Nayak were present in the meeting and they took active part in the discussion. Club president Barada Das presided and offered vote of thanks, while Bibhu Dutta Mohanty managed the technical aspects.

In Baleswar Cop axed after youth lynched on theft suspicion

PNS ■ BALESWAR
Two days after a youth was thrashed to death on theft suspicion, in-charge of the local Sartha police outpost in Baleswar district Chandrashekhar Mohanty was suspended on Wednesday for dereliction of duty. The incident took place on Monday about 500 meter from the police outpost. The deceased was identified as Trilochan Pradhan (32). The sequence of events that led to Trilochan's death began with a theft at a garment shop at Sartha village under Singla tehsil a few days ago. Upset over alleged police inaction in the case, the owner of the shop, Ajay, along with his family

members picked up Trilochan and three others, Satish Singh (35), Tapua Mahanti (31) and Tapan Pradhan (19) on Monday morning, suspecting their involvement in the theft. They then tied the four to an electric pole at Odishala Square and thrashed them with iron rods and sticks. It was alleged that Mohanty ignored the pleas of the victims' family members, who approached him for help. Trilochan later died on the spot while the other three with critical injuries were hospitalised. A video of the incident also went viral on the social media. On December 22, the accused were arrested and forwarded to court.

In Koraput Stray dogs maul 6-yr-old girl to death

PNS ■ KORAPUT
Incident highlights increasing dog bite cases in State



A six-year-old girl was mauled to death by a pack of stray dogs in Phuggaon village in the Borigumma region of Koraput district on Tuesday. The girl was identified as Chandini Harijan. Chandini, who had been staying at her maternal grandparents' house in Phuggaon, was playing in a nearby field with her brother when at least five stray dogs attacked them. Chandini's brother attempted to rescue her from the dogs but failed and then fled from the spot to call for others' help. By the time locals arrived and drove the dogs away, the girl was found severely injured and covered in blood. She was rushed to the Kumuli Medical Centre, where doctors declared her dead on arrival. The heartrending incident cast a pall of gloom over the village and has once again highlighted the alarming

number of dog bite cases in the State. In a similar tragedy, on November 13, an elderly woman in Jayanarayanpur village under Bhogra block in Baleswar district was mauled to death by dogs while sitting outside her home. On December 4, Minister of Fisheries and Animal Resources Development Gokulananda Mallik informed the State Assembly that the stray dog problem is worsening in the State with over 500,000 people being bitten in the past two years. Additionally, in the last ten months alone, over 243,565 individuals have been bitten by dogs. In the previous year, more than 260,000 people suffered similar incidents. The minister also mentioned that approximately 17 lakh stray dogs are currently roaming across the State, highlighting a grave concern.

INTUC demands 8th pay panel appointment



PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR
While addressing the INTUC Working Committee meeting held at New Delhi, former MP and national president of INTUC Dr G Sanjeeva Reddy in his inaugural remark condemned the anti-labour attitude of the BJP Government at the Centre. He said that the Government should accept the demands of all central trade

unions including withdrawal of the 4 Labour Codes. He also emphasised that the Government should immediately call the Indian Labour Conference and convene a meeting of the Standing Committee of Labour. Speaking on the occasion, former MP and national vice president and State president INTUC, Odisha Branch Dr RC Khuntia demanded declaration of Central Government's

8th Pay Commission, revival of old pension scheme, minimum Rs 9,000 for EPF pension holders, regularisation all contractual workers, casual workers, outsourcing and schematic employees including Anganwadi, Midday Meal, CSR, Asha Karmi, allocation of adequate fund for creation employment and income for 15 crore NREGS workers and 10 crores construction workers in the country.

BJP vows quick return of chit fund money

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR
Show it action soon, says BJD

Efforts are underway to ensure a refund of money to the duped investors in various chit fund scams in Odisha, informed Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) State president Manmohan Samal on Wednesday. While talking to reporters here, Samal said that the ruling BJP is actively considering a process of reimbursing money to the people who became victim to chit fund scams. He stated that a policy decision is imminent, which would enable the initiation of this



process. The government is currently evaluating to make the concerned commission's report public and ensure transparency. "Efforts are on to ensure that things reach their logical end in an appropriate legal manner at the earliest," said Samal. Samal criticised the previ-

ous BJD government for not fulfilling its task to execute these refunds. He assured that the new BJP government is taking all necessary steps to facilitate the reimbursement of funds to investors through appropriate mechanisms. In response, Deputy Leader of the Opposition Prasanna Acharya (BJD) stated that concrete action is yet to be seen by the present government even though it claims to be contemplating a lot of things. "The BJP government claims that it is considering all aspects, but it is not taking any steps. Duty doesn't end by making statements only," said Acharya.

Subhadra 2nd instalment in March next: CM

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR
The second instalment of financial assistance under the Subhadra Yojana would be disbursed to eligible persons in March 2025 and this is expected to benefit around 1 crore beneficiaries throughout the State, Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi said on Wednesday. The Subhadra scheme aims to provide financial support to underprivileged sections of society, helping to alleviate some of the economic burdens faced by many families. The scheme has been instrumental in improving the livelihoods of needy households. The distribution through Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) mode to beneficiaries' bank accounts ensures that all qualified

women receive their due assistance in a timely and efficient manner. The first instalment of Rs 5,000 has been delivered to around 80 lakh beneficiaries in three phases. Now, officials are gearing up for the fourth-phase transfer of the first instalment by January 2025. As of December 1, a total of 1,05,36,612 women have applied under the Subhadra scheme. "All eligible beneficiaries, now in the rejection list, will be included in the upcoming fourth phase of the first instalment," Deputy CM Pravati Parida had earlier said. "The government is committed to locating all the eligible beneficiaries, who have been rejected due to various reasons, and is adding them to the scheme," she had added.

Lions Club of BBSR Bankers holds Charter Night

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR
The Lions Club of Bhubaneswar Bankers celebrated its 4th Charter Night and District Governor's official visit at Lions Bhawan here on Tuesday. While Saraswati Patro, District Governor of Lion District 322C4, was chief guest, the other dignitaries present were Dr Hemanta Kumar Khuntia, VDG-I, Er Purna Chandra Padhy, PDG, and Dr Manoranjan Bhuyan, Zone Chairperson. In her address, Saraswati Patro lauded the activities of the club encompassing all aspects in conformity with Lion International's professed objectives of serving the society and promoting the fellowship. She urged the members of the



club to serve humanity selflessly with passion and smile. Padhy, PDG, while inducting five new members into the club, explained the history and sublime principles of Lionism. Dr Khuntia and Dr Bhuyan extolled the virtue of Lionism and underlined the need for assimilating the same in the members' conduct while serving the Society. Club President Banambar

Sahoo delivered the welcome address while Secretary Srihasha Sahoo read out the report of the club's activities. Vice President - I Avay Kumar Mohapatra gave a vote of thanks. Raghunath Prusty conducted the proceedings as Master of Ceremony. In the cultural programme that followed the meeting, Lady Lions staged a dance performance under direction of

Dr Susmita Rout. MK Satpathy, Nandini Behera, Sanjay Mohanty, Swapan Dutta, Nirmal Kr Behera and KB Bhuyan enthralled the audience with their mellifluous songs. Earlier on the day, the District Governor visited the 'Shelter Home for Homeless' at Niladri Vihar and distributed blankets and sarees to women inmates and winter jackets to children.

AIIMS observes Good Governance Day



PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR
Tributes paid to Atal Bihari Vajpayee

The AIIMS Bhubaneswar observed the Good Governance Day on Wednesday in celebration of the 100th birth anniversary of the late former Prime Minister Bharat Ratna Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Homage was paid to the visionary leader, who founded the AIIMS Bhubaneswar, revolutionising healthcare in Odisha. In his address, AIIMS Bhubaneswar Executive Director Dr Ashutosh Biswas expressed profound respect for Vajpayee's contributions, highlighting his instrumental role in the development of the institution. The event included a commemorative meeting held at

the AIIMS Bhubaneswar campus. Distinguished attendees included Dean (Exam) Dr Soubhagya Kumar Jena, MS Dr Dillip Kumar Parida, Deputy Director (Administration) Abhijeet Sarkar, SAO Rasmi Ranjan Sethy, and Dr Ashok Kumar Jena along with faculty members, students and staffs. Floral tributes were offered at the statue of Vajpayee in the campus. Notably, the foundation-stone of the institute had been laid by Vajpayee on July 15, 2003. The AIIMS Bhubaneswar is noteworthy as the second AIIMS established in the country and the only one inaugurated by the former Prime Minister himself. The ceremony served as a poignant reminder of Vajpayee's enduring contributions to India's healthcare system and governance.

HITTING THE BULL'S EYE Amusing events in Odisha at the close of the year

People of Odisha are happy that Raghubar Das has been withdrawn from the august office of Governor. Right from the day one, he had conducted himself as a crude politician rather than an impartial Constitutional functionary. A couple of months before the elections, he had set out on a campaigning adventure to help the BJP become more popular than the BJD. He moved across the State, mostly distant nooks and corners, as the topmost State functionary to collect public grievances and oversee development work everywhere just the way ministers and legislators are expected to do. But actually, he was doing his best to show the BJD in very poor light. He succeeded in his attempt as by then the BJD had also lost the trust of the masses due to several other reasons. After the BJP came to power in June 2024, Raghubar perhaps imagined he was enormously instrumental in the party's unexpected victory. The world-famous Car Festival



BISWARAJ PATNAIK

happened in July and his uneducated, violently arrogant son Lalit Kumar beat up a government employee so badly as to seek medical help for not organising a top quality sedan to pick his criminal-minded friends at the rail station or somewhere. The rattled employee's wife lodged a criminal complaint with the local police only after satiating herself that the Governor would do nothing to have his hooligan son fixed or brought to book.

Raghubar, most ridiculously, ordered an ordinary enquiry by the local district Collector, which meant clearly that he was frantic to shield his brutish son, no matter what. Lalit along with his criminal friends was allowed to flee. The news spread like wildfire and the people everywhere in India condemned Raghubar Das for having no respect for the rule of law. There was mass agitation all over the State and elsewhere to exert pressure on the son-crazy Governor to take some strong action if not exemplary. Still, Raghubar Das did precious little to ensure that law took its own course. Such shameful things never happened during the BJD rule as boss Naveen was very intolerant about crime and ruthless to criminals. Despite the hue and cry nearly all over the country, the national BJP masters never bothered to make a strong comment against Raghubar nor dislodged him. The people of Odisha, particularly the ones who brought the BJP to power, are also heaving a sigh of relief. Chief Minis-

ter Mohan Majhi too chose to look away. He neither condemned the unacceptable stand taken by the Governor nor ordered a thorough enquiry by the police. The Collector's findings are also not available for public consumption. The people suspect that the BJP government in Odisha is being controlled by the top bosses in Delhi. Ruben Bannerjee is most certainly a renowned journalist. His track records are pretty much impressive. He cannot be dismissed as nobody. Yet, a few BJD guys and girls have begun condemning Ruben for his revised 2018 book on Naveen, released only a few days ago. Arun Sahoo and SulataDeo have caused bigger damage to Naveen, the party and a few more characters than author Bannerjee. Perhaps they never read the book in 2018. That a few syncretic soothsayers around Naveen had kept misguiding him on all fronts is believable information. It is absolutely not untrue that Naveen Patnaik was and is a most popular political figure of Odisha.

He had materialised like a gush of fresh air after the long misrule by the JB Patnaik government. Naveen, by and large a 'happy go lucky' and easygoing individual, was of course a political novice only at the beginning. But he always had a big heart for the poor. He keeps expressing invariably great concern for the underprivileged sections as he did sincerely during his stint as a Union Minister under Vajpayee and later when he became Chief Minister. He has kept the noble spirit high even after the BJD's defeat. From 2004 onwards, he loved to be guided by a few trusted ones including the unforgettable Pyari Mohapatra brought in as advisor mainly on the insistence of his personal aide Debashish Nayak. Later, Naveen chose a young bureaucrat to assist him on all fronts. Ruben's book has only added a chapter on this bureaucrat called VK Pandian, who became so trusted as to grab all powers to literally rule Odisha. Naveen had done fairly well until 2009 for which the masses be-

gan to believe a messiah was in sight. However, he never cared to learn the beautiful Odia language, which the people would have appreciated. Irrespective of that fact, Naveen became highly adorable as he never once uttered a bitter word even against his detractors and critics. He loved to remain reticent and look simple, which pleased the masses immensely and they began to consider him demigod. In the first decade of the coalition government, Naveen, the high-class socialite that he used to be, enjoyed mingling with eminent personalities from all domains including journalists. Ruben Bannerjee is one of them whom Naveen loved to meet and consult on quite a few critical issues. Even some press releases were modified by Ruben as some close people say today. Whether or not Ruben has been truly objective and impartial in his text will be known soon after many sensible people read the book and react. The 2018 version, though dis-

cussed publicly, was not popularly read for the simple reason that the BJD had organised a big book on Biju Patnaik by one nondescript Sundar Ganesan. But Ruben, who was once very close to Naveen, could not have done injustice to the biography. It also appears as if Ruben fell from Naveen's grace for some reason, good or silly, because he wrote the book when Naveen was not meeting him anymore. For sure, the book is not an eulogy in any manner, but it makes interesting reading as many would say emphatically. All the same, there are many anecdotes to indicate Naveen is an adorable mass leader with a very few personal traits that people may not have known or habits which are not exactly admirable. After all, a book, no matter in what form, needs to be read and evaluated. But the way some BJD leaders keep condemning the author, only speaks lowly of them. Ruben only stands to gain as more and more people are likely to buy the book and read.

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Pradhan unveils Atal bust, vows to make S'pur TB-free

NIMAI CHARAN SAHU
SAMBALPUR

Union Education Minister and Sambalpur MP Dharmendra Pradhan marked the 100th birth anniversary of former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee by unveiling his statue at Golgunda Chowk of Burla on Wednesday. The event coincided with Good Governance Day and Christmas.

The Minister, in his daylong visit to the Sambalpur district, also distributed nutrition kits to the tuberculosis (TB) patients at the district auditorium of Sambalpur, besides visiting the farm equipment fair at the PHD ground in Ainthapali.

Early on the day, Pradhan inaugurated 'Atal Udyan' and announced the renaming of Golgunda Square to 'Atal Square'. Recalling Vajpayee's connection with Odisha, he stated that Atalji visited Kalahandi and Balangir districts during a drought in



western Odisha, portraying his dedication to the State. He further asserted that Atal also had a contribution to bringing the BJP government to Odisha and lauded Prime Minister Narendra Modi's efforts in advancing his development vision.

Pradhan expressed gratitude to the district administration and the Atal Bihari Vajpayee Smurti Samiti for their contributions. Later in Sambalpur, the Union Minister distributed monthly nutrition kits to tuberculosis (TB) patients under the 'TB-Free India Campaign.' In a programme

organised by district administration, he pledged to make Sambalpur TB-free by December 2025.

Notably, there are 1,435 officially registered TB patients in Sambalpur, out of which 1,185 patients are undergoing treatment, and the additional 250 patients are recently added to the list.

In his final programme in the district, Pradhan attended the 'District-Level Agricultural Equipment Fair' at the PHD ground of Ainthapali in the city. He distributed modern farming tools to farmers and awarded individuals and organisations excelling in agriculture. He said the input subsidy of Rs 800 being added to the minimum support price of Rs 2,300, making it a total of Rs 3,100, was started by the BJP government to benefit the farmers.

Panchayati Raj and Water Resources Minister Rabi Narayan Naik and Sambalpur MLA Jay Narayan Mishra were present on the occasion.

Land feud in K'pada 3 of family held for assaulting woman



PNS ■ KENDRAPADA

The Town police in on Tuesday arrested three women, including two sisters, for allegedly attempting to murder another woman over a land dispute on December 23 in Kendrapada town.

The arrested were identified as Susama Mohanty (53), her 50-year-old sister Pravati alias Jhunbala Mohanty and their relative Monalisha Mohanty (19). The arrested trio are natives of Gopa village, said Town police station IIC Dillip Kumar Sahoo.

While Susma Mohanty was working as a teacher in

Sailendra Narayan UP School under Rajnagar block, her sister Pravati was a teacher in Itipur UP School.

Complainant Mita Swain alleged that the trio assaulted her with iron rods and tried to strangle her over the land dispute. But when she tried to escape from the spot, they pelted stones at her, for which she suffered severe head injuries. Based on the complainant, the accused were arrested after a probe and the weapon of offence was seized. Later, the trio were forwarded to court; but as their bail plea was rejected, they were sent to jail, said the IIC.

In Joda Youth who kills friend over petty issue held

PNS ■ KEONJHAR

The Keonjhar police arrested Durga Naik (24), who allegedly killed his friend by sheltering him in his own house. The murder took place in Bachu Hutting, under Joda police station on Tuesday.

After the incident, Naik escaped from the spot, though later police managed to arrest him. The deceased was identified as Bhagat Besra (25).

According to sources, deceased Besra left his house after a quarrel with his wife two weeks ago and was living in the house of Naik. On Tuesday, Naik killed him and absconded from the scene. After receiving complaint, Joda police arrived at the spot, seized the body and started investigating the incident.

According to the police, a conflict arose between the duo over cooking food. Everyday Naik went outside to earn and Besra cooked food for both. However, they often picked up fight over cooking food as Besra insisted that Naik too should prepare food by taking turn.

On Tuesday, Besra had not prepared food and Naik upon returning home asked him why he did not ready meal. Soon, both started quarrelling over the issue and Naik in a fit of rage attacked Besra with a hammer, leading to the latter's instant death and fled from the spot.

Next morning his body was recovered by the neighbours who informed the police. Joda police station IIC Lokeswar Sahu said the accused had confessed to the crime.

2 die as bikes collide in Baleswar

PNS ■ BALESWAR

Two persons were killed and another was critically injured following a head-on collision between two bikes near Simulia Chhak in the Nilgiri area of Baleswar district on Tuesday. The deceased were identified as Chandra Sekhar Patra of the Nilagiri NAC area

and Akshya Jena of Remuna. Following the accident, locals rushed to the spot and sent the three injured in an ambulance to the Nilgiri Sub-Divisional Hospital. But the doctors declared two of them brought dead. The third injured was shifted to the District Headquarters Hospital as his condition worsened.

Vedanta's 'Swarna Prashan' covers 17K school kids



PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Since the launching of its ambitious 'Swarna Prashan' healthcare initiative in partnership with the Ministry of AYUSH in September, the Vedanta Aluminium has successfully completed the 4th phase by reaching to more than 6,400 students, while its latest phase has positively impacted more than 17,000 students in Odisha. The campaign was rolled out in 15 government schools in tribal-dominant Rayagada and Kalahandi districts.

District Administrative Medical Officer, Kalahandi, Dr Meenakshi Bedbak commented, "The Swarna Prashan programme is a significant initiative in promoting Ayurvedic health practices for children's well-being. I appreciate Vedanta Aluminium's collaboration with the gov-

ernment and community stakeholders to nurture a healthier future for the next generation."

In his reactions, COO - Vedanta Aluminium, Sunil Gupta said, "The programme, rooted in Ayurvedic wisdom, ensures that children receive the necessary support for cognitive and physical development. We are proud to support the Ministry of AYUSH in extending the initiative to remote corners of Odisha."

CEO - Bauxite Mines, Vedanta Aluminium, Nitin Kumar Tiwari added, "The Swarna Prashan initiative has been warmly received by the community, benefitting students across 40 government schools. With plans to extend the programme to Koraput district, we aim to reach more than 30,000 children, from infants to 16-year-olds, by the end of the year."

Saint Goswami visits Aghori Mutt Jagannath shrine

KRUSHNA CHANDRA PANDA
BRAHMAPUR

Taking an initiative for renovation of the ancient Jagannath Temple located in the premises of Aghori Mutt of Sukunda village surrounded by hills/mountains on the outskirts of the city here, noted saint and spiritual figure Bishnu Goswami Maharaj paid a visit to the temple last week.

President of Sri Jagannath Temple Development Committee and noted social worker Trinath Maharana informed that Maharaj interacted with the temple priests and the locals and inquired



about the timings of day-to-day performance of rituals, besides the temple's requirements and the type of renovation required.

Mention may be made that with the cooperation of locals and under the personal initiation and supervision of Maharana, a new temporary temple for Lord Jagannath is currently under construction in the premises of the Aghori

Mutt. Maharana earlier also had drawn the attention of the chief of International Krishna Chaitanya Mission of Puri Acharya Tridandi Swami Bhakti Bichar Goswami Maharaj to the poor condition of the temple. The latter had visited the temple soon after.

Maharana explained to Maharaj the historical significance of the temple and contributions of late Mahuri Raja

(King) to the temple's development.

The premises of the temple were used for the king's summer camp which also include an ancient Siva Temple known as "Gokaneswar Mahadev Mandir". The villagers felicitated Maharaj for his visit to the temple who reportedly assured the villagers to render necessary assistance for its all-round development.

Among others, Arun K Samal, Raj Purohit, Gourishankar Pattnaik, Abhimanyu Rout, Jitendra Maharana, Babaji Trinath Das, Sanjay Kumar Panda, Ramakrushna Padhi and Tapan Kumar Padhi were present.

Gajapati farmers meet DM with soaked paddy

DEMAND compensation
TARINI PRASAD PANDA
PARALAKHEMUNDI

Due to repeated unseasonal rains in Gajapati district, the paddy crop has been severely damaged. Farmers who have grown paddy on loans are desperate as to how they will feed their families and repay loan. Even though the government has instructed officials to assess the damage to the paddy crop, no official has visited the field yet.

A farmer reached the office of the district Collector with paddy soaked in the recent



rains to register his grievances. Due to the unseasonal rains, a large amount of paddy crop has been damaged in Gosani block of the district.

Although the government has promised compensation, no government official has visited the field so far, he alleged. Meanwhile, farmers from

different parts of the district have met District Collector Vijay Kumar Dash and demanded compensation for the loss.

According to sources, due to the unseasonal rains, the paddy fields got flooded. No official has come to understand the problems of the farmers.

The government has said that the Agriculture Department and the Revenue Department will jointly survey the loss and compensate them, but nothing tangible has happened. Similarly, the farmers demanded to relax the FAQ policy in the purchase of paddy for Gajapati farmers.

On the other hand, the district administration was preparing to open the Mandi on December 30, but till now the tokens have not been issued, which has increased the farmers' concerns. Similarly, although insurance has been done, the insurance companies have not started the survey yet.

On 5th evening DM's, SP's spouses sing at G'pati Utsav



PNS ■ PARALAKHEMUNDI

On the 5th evening of the Gajapati Utsav held at Gajapati stadium, a colourful cultural programme was held.

Collector Bijay Kumar Dash, his wife Alakananda, SP Jatindra Kumar Panda and his wife were present on the occasion, besides other dignitaries. Collector's wife Alakananda sang on the stage enthralled the audience. Similarly, the SP and his wife sang a duet song which too attracted a massive crowd.

Among others, ADM Rajendra Kumar Minz, CDO

of Zilla Parishad Dr Gunanidhi Nayak, Sub Collector Anup Panda, APD Pruthwiraj Mandal were also present.

11 successful youths of Odisha Civil Services Examination of the district (among them 3 women), besides others who excelled in various fields, were honoured by the guests.

Artists from Odisha and other States performed. While Archana Mangaraj proposed a vote of thanks, Sulata Subhadarshini and Shyamsundar Gantayat compered the programme.

In Nuapada NREGS a beacon of hope for thousands of migrant workers

The scheme not only ensures livelihood but secures future
AJIT PANDA ■ NUAPADA

Hundreds of workers in Mandosil Gram Panchayat, located in the Khariar block of Nuapada district, are now experiencing relief and happiness thanks to the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS).

Among them is Radheshyam, a farmer who has been grappling with the burden of repaying a loan he took years ago to build a house for his parents. Until last week, Radheshyam was contemplating migrating to Mumbai for the judgement after hearing twenty witnesses and the police report. The court also ordered the District Legal Services Authority to pay a Rs 10-lakh compensation to the victim, Special Public Prosecutor Ganesh Prasad Mohapatra said.

MGNREGS' land development programme changed his plans.

"I am unable to repay the loan, so I was thinking of migrating," said Radheshyam. Now, however, he, his wife, and his mother are working on their land instead. "The earnings from MGNREGS are helping us manage our household. It would be more than what I alone would have earned by migrating," he added.

Neither Radheshyam nor his family owns a house under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY). His father, Gurbaru, shared the struggles of constructing a house without government support. "The loan my son took has become a great burden for us," Gurbaru said.

Despite the challenges, Radheshyam has shown resilience. Last Kharif season, he cultivated five acres of land - two acres of his family's land and three acres through



sharecropping. His share of the harvest, 25 quintals, will fetch around Rs 75,000, which he plans to use entirely to repay his loan. "The wages from the land development programme will support our household expenses," he said. Mandosil is not an isolated example. Across several Gram Panchayats, hundreds of residents have found new hope in MGNREGS. According to Subasini Pan, the Sarpanch of Mandosil Gram Panchayat, 406 people are currently engaged in 18 ongoing MGNREGS projects.

"If not for these projects, they would have migrated to

urban centers in search of work," she said. The Mandosil panchayat, which has 557 active job cards and around 1,003 registered workers, has committed to providing work to all job seekers. Regular and timely payment of wages has become a game-changer. "We receive our wages regularly in our bank accounts now," said Gurbaru Jued, a participant in a Muringa plantation project.

The transformation in the situation is the result of close monitoring and dedicated efforts by the district administration. District Collector Madhusudan Dash explained the strategy: "We have taken this mission on priority. Panchayat-level grievance camps are held to address workers' issues and encourage them to stay in the village for work."

The administration also facilitates workers who have completed 300 days and 200 days of work, showcasing the programme's positive impact. Regular site visits by the Collector, coupled with meetings with project staff, have ensured transparency and efficiency.

The results speak for themselves. The daily engagement of workers in MGNREGS projects has seen a dramatic increase, rising from a daily attendance of 12,000 persons in September 20 to more than 43,000 currently. A total of 11,254 workers have already crossed the mark of 100 days of work. The remarkable performance in the generation of person days for the year 2024-25 has put Nuapada in first position in National Ranking. It secured first rank by gen-

erating 37.18 lakh person days of employment, achieving approximately 95% of the target of 39.03 lakh person days set by the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD). The district attained second position in achieving the target set by the State, accomplishing 58.97% of the target.

The performance underscores the district's commitment to providing employment opportunities and highlights its effectiveness in implementing employment schemes.

For people like Radheshyam and countless workers in Nuapada district, who constitute about 50 percent of the total main workers, MGNREGS has become a beacon of hope. By addressing migration, ensuring timely wages, and providing meaningful employment, the scheme is not only helping families sustain their livelihoods but also empowering them to dream of a more secure future.

In Keonjhar Man gets 20-yr RI for raping minor

PNS ■ KEONJHAR

Special Judge, POCSO, Monalisa Mohanty on Tuesday convicted a person for raping a minor girl in Keonjhar district and sentenced him to undergo 20 years' rigorous imprisonment (RI)

The convict, identified as Rajendra Barik (41), a resident of 'Trat area under the Salepur police station area in Cuttack district, was also directed to pay a fine of Rs 5,000. The incident came to light

after the 12-year-old victim informed her mother and the Child Welfare Committee about the incident. Later, a case was lodged with the Town police who arrested Rajendra and forwarded him to court.

PM Modi, President Murmu join prayer ceremony to pay tributes to Vajpayee on birth centenary

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI /IMPHAL
/BHUBANESWAR/LUCKNOW

President Droupadi Murmu and Prime Minister Narendra Modi were among the dignitaries who joined a prayer ceremony at the memorial of former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee on Wednesday to pay tributes to him on his birth centenary. Union ministers, including Amit Shah and J P Nadda, besides BJP allies such as Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu and Union ministers Lalan Singh of the JD(U) and Jitendra Ram Manjhi of HAM(S) paid homage to the BJP stalwart at 'Sadaiv Atal'.

Vice President Jagdeep Dhankar and Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla besides the members of Vajpayee's adopted family were also present. Prime Minister Modi said in a social media post the impact

of how Vajpayee preserved constitutional values and gave new direction and momentum to the country will remain forever. Union Home Minister Shah in his tributes said his dedication towards good governance and public welfare will continue to guide future generations. After paying tributes to Vajpayee at his memorial, 'Sadaiv Atal', here, Shah said Vajpayee ushered in a new era of development and good governance in the country with his dedication towards ideology and value-based politics. "Atal ji's dedication towards good governance and public welfare will continue to guide future generations," the minister said in a social media post in Hindi. He said Vajpayee made cultural nationalism a work culture and always kept the country's security and public welfare paramount. "Atal ji

will continue to guide the countrymen on the path of national service till eternity like the Pole Star," Shah said. In his tributes, Manipur Chief Minister N Biren Singh said the former Prime Minister's principles and teachings have inspired the building of a robust economy for this nation. Singh said in a social media post "Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee ji has been a pivotal figure in shaping India's diplomacy and national security, while continuing to serve as a source of guidance and wisdom to all of us.. "His principles and teachings have inspired the building of a robust economy for this nation, serving as an enduring source of motivation for the generations to come" Singh added.. Singh in another post also extended his greetings on the occasion of Good Governance Day.



He said "This day, observed in honour of the birth anniversary of former PM and Bharat Ratna Atal Bihari Vajpayee Ji, reminds us of the importance of transparent, accountable, and people-centric governance. Let us reaffirm our dedication to building a state where governance empowers every citizen and paves the way for a brighter future."

Odisha Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi and his predecessor and BJD leader Naveen Patnaik on Wednesday paid tributes to former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. The Odisha government's Information and Public Relations (I&PR) Department, in a message, termed Vajpayee as 'Vikas Purush' and said the state

scaled new heights under his leadership. The government recounted some major developmental projects, including the establishment of AIIMS Bhubaneswar, an oil refinery at Paradip and creation of the East Coast Railway (ECoR) division with its headquarters in Bhubaneswar, undertaken during the tenure of the former Prime Minister. The construction of 400 km of highways in Odisha under the Golden Quadrilateral project, and road network of more than 18,000 km (PMSY) to connect the unconnected stand testament to the eponym 'Vikas Purush', it said. On the occasion of Good Governance Day, the people of Odisha pay heartfelt tribute to Vajpayee, the architect of administrative excellence, it added. In a social media, Chief Minister Majhi paid tributes

to the former prime minister and extended heartfelt congratulations and best wishes to everyone on the occasion of Good Governance Day. Several senior political leaders from Odisha, including Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan, Union Minister for Tribal Affairs Jual Oram, and state BJP president Manmohan Samal paid respects to Vajpayee on his birth centenary. "Humble tributes to former Prime Minister of India, #AtalBihariVajpayee on his birth anniversary. #Atal ji was a distinguished statesman, outstanding parliamentarian, a renowned poet and orator. His contribution to the nation building will continue to inspire," former chief minister Naveen Patnaik wrote in a social media post. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh said Vajpayee's good governance and foresight gave India a new direction in the

field of roads, telecom and rural development. Elaborating on the definition of good governance, Rajnath Singh said it is one where every person's needs are fulfilled, he feels safe and has the opportunity to express his views. "This was Atal ji's vision, which is being carried forward by Prime Minister Narendra Modi today," Singh said addressing the birth centenary celebrations of Vajpayee with Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath in Lucknow. The leaders paid floral tributes to the statue of the former prime minister in Lok Bhavan. Vajpayee's birth anniversary is observed as 'Good Governance' Day. The defence minister also praised Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on the issue of law and order and the implementation of welfare schemes.

Row over Waqf land: Karnataka State officials to appear before Parliamentary Panel

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Amid a row over Waqf land in Karnataka, officials from the state government are scheduled to appear before the parliamentary panel examining the Waqf Amendment Bill on Thursday. The Joint Committee on the Waqf Amendment Bill, chaired by BJP member Jagadambika Pal, is scheduled to hear views from representatives of the governments of Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Odisha and Delhi in sittings spread over two days beginning Thursday. Delhi's Food and Supply Minister Imran Hussain is also scheduled to address the committee on Friday, followed by the recording of evidence by the representatives of the Delhi government. The deposition of officials from the Congress-led Karnataka government comes in the wake of a row over claims by BJP leaders that over 1,500 acres of land belonging to farmers in the state were being taken over by



the Waqf board. Pal had visited Karnataka and interacted with the farmers who had received notices from the state government regarding encroachment over properties belonging to the Waqf Board. The committee had also written to state governments seeking details of Waqf properties occupied by them in an unauthorised manner as per the Sachar panel report. The UPA government constituted the Sachar Committee in 2005 to study the social, economic and educational

status of the Muslim community in India. The parliamentary panel was constituted on August 8, soon after the Waqf (Amendment) Bill was introduced in Lok Sabha. Opposition parties have stridently criticised the amendments proposed by the bill in the existing Waqf Act, alleging that they violate the religious rights of Muslims. The ruling BJP has asserted that the amendments will bring transparency in the functioning of the Waqf boards and make them accountable.

CRPF has done a commendable job in tackling Naxalism, says Shah

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Wednesday said the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) has done a commendable job in tackling Naxalism and restoring peace and stability in the Northeastern states and Jammu and Kashmir. Shah also said the CRPF is playing an important role in ensuring internal security and peace in the country, according to an official statement. The home minister said this while visiting the CRPF headquarters where he met senior officers of the force, including its Director General Anish Dayal Singh, it said. During the visit, Shah had a comprehensive review of the operations and administrative efficiency of the world's largest paramilitary force. The CRPF has done a commendable job in tackling Naxalism and restoring peace and stability in the Northeastern states and Jammu and Kashmir, he said. The CRPF chief apprised the



home minister about the various welfare schemes being implemented for the families of martyred jawans of the force, including compassionate appointments in the CRPF. Shah emphasised the importance of promoting Hindi in the daily functioning of the force to strengthen linguistic unity. Along with emphasising the use of more and more 'Shri Ann' (Millets) for better health of the soldiers, the home minister also called upon the soldiers to extract the benefits of Ayurveda and

participate in 'Prakriti Parikshan Abhiyan' to get health insights as per individual's Prakriti, fostering wellbeing and better health. The visit of the home minister underlines the government's recognition of the CRPF's commitment to national security and its multifaceted contribution to nation-building, the statement said. Several senior officials of the Ministry of Home Affairs, including Union Home Secretary Govind Mohan, were present at the meeting.

PM Modi greets people on Christmas

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI



Prime Minister Narendra Modi greeted people on Christmas on Wednesday. He said in a social media post, "Wishing you all a Merry Christmas. May the teachings of Lord Jesus Christ show everyone the path of peace and prosperity." Nadda added that he prayed for happiness and wellbeing of all fellow countrymen. He said, "May our nation continue to progress on the path of development, guided by the mantra of Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas, Sabka Prayas, and reach our destination of Viksit Bharat 2047 with the contribution of all Indians. Wishing you all a Merry Christmas!"

Bishop's Conference of India headquarters and the Sacred Heart Cathedral Church here on Christmas. He said in a social media post, "As we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, let us also celebrate the spirit of giving, the pursuit of peace, the power of hope, and how we as a nation can embrace and amplify the values of love, compassion and harmony." Nadda added that he prayed for happiness and wellbeing of all fellow countrymen. He said, "May our nation continue to progress on the path of development, guided by the mantra of Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas, Sabka Prayas, and reach our destination of Viksit Bharat 2047 with the contribution of all Indians. Wishing you all a Merry Christmas!"

Governance reforms must begin at grassroots level to bring about lasting change, says Jitendra

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Union Minister Jitendra Singh on Wednesday said that the governance reforms must begin at the grassroots level to bring about long-lasting and meaningful change. In a significant step towards strengthening grassroots governance, he launched the 'Viksit Panchayat Karmayogi' initiative on Good Governance Day, celebrated every year to mark birth anniversary of former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. The initiative, which is part of the broader 'Prashasan Gaon Ki Aur' campaign, aims to enhance the capacity and competence of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) by equipping elected representatives and officials with the tools and knowledge required for effective governance and par-

ticipatory planning, said Singh, the Minister of State for Personnel. He emphasised "that governance reforms must begin at the grassroots to bring about long-lasting and meaningful change as well as to fill up the capacity gaps". Piloted in Odisha, Assam, Gujarat, and Andhra Pradesh, the initiative leverages e-learning platforms, AI-powered chatbots, and mobile apps to bridge knowledge gaps and enhance service delivery, Singh said. He said that this program aligns with the government's broader mission to decentralise governance and foster participatory decision-making at the grassroots level. The initiative is expected to create scalable models of citizen-centric governance, enabling PRIs to drive equitable and sustainable development across rural India, according to a Personnel

Ministry statement. The minister also launched a series of transformative initiatives on the occasion of the Good Governance Day. The first initiative unveiled by Singh was the launch of a new dashboard on the iGOT (integrated government online training) Karmayogi platform, along with the milestone introduction of the 1600th e-learning course. The enhanced dashboard is designed to empower ministries, departments, and state administrators with advanced tools to monitor user registrations, course completions, and overall progress in capacity-building efforts. With customisable views and robust data filtration capabilities, the dashboard provides detailed insights to improve decision-making and optimize training initiatives, the statement said. Additionally, the introduction

of the 1600th course on the platform underscores the government's commitment to fostering a diverse and comprehensive learning ecosystem, it said. The minister also launched CPGRAMS (Centralised Public Grievance Redress and Monitoring System) Annual Report 2024. As the world's largest citizen interface platform, CPGRAMS has redefined grievance redressal by integrating advanced technologies, multilingual support, and comprehensive tracking mechanisms. The CPGRAMS allows citizens to raise grievances against government departments online. The report showcases key achievements, including the resolution of over 25 lakh grievances annually and the implementation of the Grievance Redressal Assessment and Index (GRAI), the statement said.

Potato plants naturally produce SGAs, which are harmful if humans consume them

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Did you know that potato plants naturally produce chemicals called steroidal glycoalkaloids (SGAs), which are found in high quantities in the green parts of the potato peels and in the sprouting areas? While these compounds help the plants protect themselves from insects, these are harmful in case consumed by humans. Now, scientists have discovered a way to remove these toxic compounds from potatoes, making them safer to eat and easier to store. This breakthrough could reduce food waste and enhance crop farming in space and other extreme environments. "These compounds are critical for plants to ward off insects, but they make certain parts of these crops inedible," said Adam Jozwiak, a UCR molec-



ular biochemist who led the study. "Now that we've uncovered the biosynthetic pathway, we can potentially create plants that produce these compounds only in the leaves while keeping the edible parts safe." Sunlight can induce the production of SGAs in potato tubers—the part of the potato plant that is eaten—even after they've been harvested. By identifying a key genetic mechanism in SGA production, UC Riverside researchers may be able to reduce potatoes' toxic-

ity while preserving the plants' natural defenses. Removing SGAs from potatoes will also make them easier to store and transport in open air. The research, published in Science, focuses on a protein called "GAME15," which plays a key role in directing the plant's production of SGAs. This protein acts both as an enzyme and a scaffold, organizing other enzymes into a "conversion factory" that efficiently produces SGAs while preventing toxic compounds from leaking into other parts of plant cells, where they would cause damage. By engineering plants to control when and where SGAs are produced—such as in the leaves but not in the potatoes themselves—the researchers envision crops that can be stored without the risk of toxicity from sunlight exposure. "You could store the potatoes in

your kitchen and not worry about exposure to the sun, which makes them produce more SGAs. Then, you could eat them whenever you want, reducing food waste," Jozwiak said. Additionally, the findings could enable the use of other plant parts, such as leaves, for food in limited-space environments like space missions or vertical farming systems. "For space farming, where every part of a plant may need to be edible, these findings are especially promising," Jozwiak added. "Our work demonstrates that plants have evolved ingenious ways to balance growth, reproduction, and defense," Jozwiak said. This research involved scientists from the Weizmann Institute of Science in Israel, as well as Kobe University, the RIKEN Center for Sustainable Resource Science, and Osaka University in Japan.

NDA leaders meet at BJP president Nadda's residence

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Amid heightened attacks from the Congress and the INDIA bloc over Union Home Minister Amit Shah's remarks on B.R. Ambedkar, National Democratic Alliance (NDA) leaders met here at BJP president J P Nadda's residence on Wednesday on the birth centenary of former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. According to sources, Home Minister Amit Shah and BJP president J P Nadda discussed the constitutional issues raised by the Congress party in detail during the meeting with NDA leaders. Sources said the BJP's central message to its allies was clear: the NDA must present a unified front to neutralise the Opposition's attacks effectively. Notably absent from the meeting were Bihar Chief

Minister Nitish Kumar and Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Eknath Shinde. The JD(U) was represented by Union Minister Rajiv Ranjan, also known as Lalan Singh, while the Shiv Sena sent Union MoS Prataprao Ganpatrao Jadhav. Union Home Minister Amit Shah, Telugu Desam Party (TDP) president and Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu, Union Civil Aviation Minister Ram Mohan Naidu Kinjarapu, and Union ministers from various NDA constituents such as Apna Dal (S) president Anupriya Patel, and JD(S) leader H D Kumaraswamy, were present. Bihar's Hindustani Awam Morcha (S) leader Jitan Ram Manjhi, also a minister in the Modi government, Rashtriya Lok Morcha (RLM) president Upendra Kushwaha, a Rajya Sabha MP, and Thushar



Vellappally, president of Bharath Dharmha Jana Sena, were also present at the meeting.

"Attended the NDA leaders' meeting in New Delhi today. Under the visionary leadership of PM Narendra Modi,

India is achieving unprecedented milestones and has positioned itself as a global superpower," Nadda said in a

post on X after the meeting. "The NDA government remains steadfast in its pursuit of the vision of 'Viksit Bharat@2047', ensuring a brighter and more prosperous future for all," he added. During the discussions, Shah reportedly reflected on recent political developments, particularly lessons drawn from the Winter Session of Parliament. He accused the Congress of historically disregarding Ambedkar's legacy while now attempting to appropriate it for political gain. He underscored the need for the BJP and its allies to respond robustly and in unison to such manoeuvres. Uttar Pradesh's NISHAD Party chief Sanjay Nishad said it was an "informal" meeting of the NDA leaders on the occasion of the birth centenary of Vajpayee. "Our future strategy is to move for-

ward together. We have to show unity in all the upcoming elections... Everyone congratulated (the BJP leaders) in the meeting for the victory in Haryana and Maharashtra assembly polls," he told reporters when asked about the meeting. Nishad said the meeting also discussed coalition strategy to ensure that "all the work" done by Prime Minister Modi reaches the ground and "promises made to people during elections" are fulfilled. The issue of giving reservation to the fishing community was also raised at the meeting, he said. "I gave 30-37 page evidence on the issue of giving reservation to the fishing community since it was a poll promise. They will call (us) after a week and discuss it," Nishad said. Asked if issue of Shah's remarks on Ambedkar

came up at the meeting, the NISHAD Party chief said, "... We have come for people's welfare. How to get success in that, energy needs to be spent on that." "There is no need to respond to their narrative and negative thoughts," he added in an apparent reference to the Congress and other opposition parties who are up in arms against Shah over his remarks. Though there was no official word on the agenda of the meeting, sources said good governance and political issues were discussed. The NDA meeting comes amid the alliance's focus on simultaneous elections, with all constituents lending support to the proposal. A Joint Committee of Parliament, constituted to scrutinise two bills for simultaneous polls, is expected to meet on January 8.

Suspense grips as unidentified vehicle rams ambulance carrying suspected terrorists' bodies

BISWAJEET BANERJEE
RAMPUR

Suspense looms large over a mysterious accident late Tuesday night on the Rampur bypass, where an unidentified vehicle rammed into an ambulance transporting the bodies of three suspected terrorists of the 'Khalistan Zindabad Force'. The terrorists had been killed in a dramatic encounter in Pilibhit just days earlier.

The collision occurred as the ambulance was en route to Punjab with the bodies of the suspected militants, who were allegedly involved in a grenade attack on a police post in Gurdaspur. While no injuries were reported, the ambulance sustained significant damage, forcing the authorities to transfer the bodies to another vehicle. Rampur Superintendent of Police Vidyasagar Mishra described the incident as "highly unusual" and said the circumstances are being closely investigated. "As soon as we received information



about the accident, our teams rushed to the site. The damaged ambulance was removed, and the bodies were safely shifted to another vehicle," Mishra stated. The police remain perplexed about the motive behind the collision, with no clear leads on the identity of the vehicle or its driver. Officers on the case have not ruled out the possibility of sabotage. "We cannot ignore any angle,

including deliberate interference by elements seeking to disrupt the transportation process. Given the high-profile nature of the deceased, the possibility of a planned attempt to tamper with evidence or create chaos cannot be dismissed," said a senior police officer on condition of anonymity. The Punjab Police, which had collaborated with Uttar

Pradesh Police in neutralizing the suspected terrorists in Pilibhit's Purnapur, is now coordinating on the investigation into this incident. Sources suggest the possibility of local sympathizers of the 'Khalistan Zindabad Force' being involved, though no concrete evidence has yet emerged. The three militants killed in the encounter had been wanted for orchestrating the grenade attack in Gurdaspur, which left the security establishment on high alert. Their deaths had been seen as a major breakthrough, but this accident has cast a shadow of doubt over what should have been a straightforward process. Witnesses have reported conflicting accounts of the collision, further deepening the mystery. "It happened so suddenly. The vehicle came out of nowhere and hit the ambulance before speeding

away. It didn't seem like an accident," said one eyewitness who was near the scene. Both Rampur Police and Punjab Police have launched separate inquiries, but the lack of CCTV footage on the bypass and the absence of a vehicle registration number are hampering progress. "This incident raises more questions than answers," admitted a senior investigator. "Was it a coincidence, or was it a calculated move to unsettle the ongoing case? The answers will determine whether we are dealing with a road accident or something far more sinister." As the investigation unfolds, the police are tightening security around the transportation of high-profile detainees and evidence. Meanwhile, the incident has left locals and officials on edge, with fears that the shadow of Khalistani extremism could once again be looming in the region.

Snowfall closes 226 roads in Himachal Pradesh, disrupts power supply amid freezing temperatures

PTI ■ SHIMLA

A total of 226 roads, including three national highways, were closed in Himachal Pradesh following snowfall in several districts, officials said on Wednesday. People shivered under piercing cold wave conditions as minimum temperatures dropped by a few notches in Jot, which received 10 cm of snow in the past 24 hours, followed by Khadralla (5 cm), Pooh (2 cm), Sangla (1.2 cm) and Keylong (1 cm). Tabo in the Lahaul and Spiti district was the coldest place in Himachal Pradesh, recording a night temperature of minus 10.6 degrees Celsius. A total of 226 roads, including three national highways including Attari and Leh, Sanj to Aut in Kullu district, Khab Sangam in Kinnaur district, and Gramphoo in Lahaul and Spiti district were closed for traffic, officials said. According to the state emergency operation center, a maximum of 123 roads were closed in Shimla district, 36 in Lahaul and Spiti and 25 in Kullu. Additionally, 173



transformers were disrupted, affecting power supply across the state. The hopes of locals and tourists to experience a white Christmas in the Queen of Hills, Shimla, were dashed as the city was greeted by bright sunshine on Wednesday morning. Bhuntar received 9.7 mm of rain, Rampur 9.4 mm, Shimla 8.4 mm, Bajaura 8 mm, Seobagh 7.2 mm, Manali 7 mm, Gohar 6 mm, Mandi 5.4 mm, and Jubbarhatti 3.8 mm, the Met office reported. The Met office has predicted rain and snow at isolated places in some parts of the state, particularly in Shimla, from Friday evening to Sunday

afternoon, with precipitation expected to peak on Saturday. An intense cold wave persisted in Mandi, Manali, Chamba, Una, Hamirpur, and Sundernagar, while dense and moderate fog was observed in Sundernagar and Mandi, respectively, the Met office said. The weather office has issued an 'orange' warning for severe cold in Bilaspur, Una, Hamirpur, and Mandi on Wednesday and a 'yellow' warning for dense fog over parts of the Bhakra Dam reservoir area and the Balh Valley in Mandi on Thursday and Sunday.

UP to soon unveil new five-year export policy: UP industrial development minister Nand Gopal Gupta



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
LUCKNOW/NEW DELHI

The Yogi Adityanath-led Uttar Pradesh government will soon unveil a new export policy for 2025-30 as the State aims to significantly increase its share in India's outward shipments and create more employment opportunities. Under the 2020-2025 export policy, the state government provides comprehensive hand-holding support to the exporters. In an interview to The Pioneer, Uttar Pradesh minister for industrial development, export

promotion, NRI, and investment promotion Nand Gopal Gupta 'Nandi' informed that the state government is working on a new five-year export policy and extensive consultations with different stakeholders are being held. "We are working on unveiling an ambitious Export Policy for 2025-30 to boost the state's contribution to India's exports," the Minister said. In FY 2023-24 state's share in India's total export was 4.71 per cent. In the first two quarters (April-September) of the current financial year, Uttar Pradesh's share in country's total export was estimated at 4.89 per cent. "Our focus on enhancing export capabilities will propel UP towards becoming a USD 1 trillion economy, driving revenue and fostering development. The Yogi government remains committed to transforming Uttar Pradesh into India's most prosperous state," Gupta said. He said

operationalisation of the Jewar Airport will further help exports from the state. It will save time and save expenditure on freight charges. To promote export-oriented industries, the Government of Uttar Pradesh has ensured development of adequate infrastructural facilities in the state. It is to be noted here that the state has the largest rail network in the country, 38 per cent of the expressways, 4 international airports, 9 domestic airports and 7 under-construction airports along with Jewar Airport which is due to be operational very soon. The Minister informed that the government is providing financial assistance to the exporters through various schemes, including Marketing Development Assistance, Gateway Port Scheme and Air Freight rationalization schemes. Uttar Pradesh has also started organising International Trade Show (UPITS) since 2023 through

which it is providing global marketing exposure and business to the exporters by conducting B2B sessions. Besides the government is also providing international marketing exposure to exporters from the state by participating in various international trade shows organised by the central government like IITF and Bharat Tex. Minister Gupta emphasised the state government has adopted export as well as investment friendly policies along with a focus on the development of better logistics facilities in the state. All these initiatives will help in increasing exports from the state and help Uttar Pradesh become a USD One trillion economy. India's total exports (merchandise and services combined) during April-November 2024 was estimated at USD 536.25 billion, a growth of 7.61 per cent from USD 498.33 billion in the year ago period.

Giriraj Singh bats for Bharat Ratna for Bihar CM Nitish Kumaran and Odisha CM Naveen Patnaik

PTI ■ BEGUSARAI/PATNA

Union minister Giriraj Singh on Wednesday said the highest civilian honour, Bharat Ratna, should be conferred upon Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar and former CM of Odisha, Naveen Patnaik. The outspoken BJP leader expressed the sentiment in Begusarai, his Lok Sabha constituency, lavishing praise on Kumar, a current ally, and Patnaik, a former alliance partner whom the saffron party ousted from power earlier this year. "Bihar was known for decrepit roads, schools and buildings until the ascent to power of Nitish Kumar, who took the state to new heights. Likewise, Naveen Patnaik served Odisha for so many years. Leaders like them deserve the highest honour, like Bharat Ratna," he said. Widely perceived as a detractor of Kumar in Bihar's political circles, Singh also asserted that "mischief" of RJD supreme Lalu Prasad notwithstanding, the NDA was looking forward



to contesting the upcoming assembly polls under the JD(U) supremo's leadership. Notably, the averment comes in the backdrop of attempts by the RJD, which has aligned with the JD(U) twice, to fish in the NDA's troubled waters. On Tuesday, Prasad's son and heir apparent Tejashwi Yadav had alleged, "The BJP has assumed control of the chief minister's office. Four close aides of Kumar, of whom two are in Delhi, are in touch with the BJP leadership. Amit Shah is clearly at work." The young leader had made the remark in the backdrop of Shah's reluctance to affirm, at an event hosted by a private

news channel, that Kumar will be the NDA's face for assembly polls in Bihar. This has led to speculations in a section of the media that the BJP might push for a strategy in Bihar, where assembly polls are due in less than a year, similar to the one adopted in Maharashtra. In the Maharashtra assembly polls held last month, Chief Minister Eknath Shinde was not projected as the NDA's face. After the NDA's landslide victory, the BJP, which emerged as the largest constituent, muscled its way through and Devendra Fadnis became the new chief minister.

Security agencies hunt for local helpers of Khalistani terrorists in Terai region

PTI ■ BAREILLY/UP

Following the encounter of three Khalistan Zindabad Force (KZF) terrorists in Pilibhit, security agencies are intensifying their search for their local helpers in the Terai region. Three suspected Khalistani terrorists allegedly involved in the grenade attack in Gurdaspur were killed in an encounter with police in Pilibhit early Monday, with Punjab's Director General of Police Gaurav Yadav terming it as a major breakthrough against a Pakistan-sponsored terror module. Bareilly Range IG Rakesh Singh said the police and intelligence agencies are on high alert following the threats. "Investigations are underway, and security measures have been intensified in the border areas. "Action will be taken against anyone who is found to have helped the terror elements," he said. The success in Pilibhit comes after three blasts which took place in different districts of Punjab this month. The gunfight between members of the KZF and a joint team of Uttar Pradesh Police and Punjab Police took place in Purnapur area of Pilibhit after three module members opened fire at the police party. Following the encounter, a police case was filed here on Tuesday after a video turned up on X showing a person making threats to spread terror during the Maha Kumbh in Prayagraj, an officer said. "On December 24, a video was shared on various handles on social media platform (X) in which a person was using objectionable words against Hindu religion.

Mandala pooja at Sabarimala Temple to take place on December 26

PTI ■ KOTTAYAM

The mandala pooja, a key ritual marking the conclusion of the first phase of the annual pilgrimage to the Sabarimala Lord Ayyappa Temple, will take place on December 26. The ritual will be carried out between noon and 12.30 pm on the day by temple tantri (head priest) Kandararu Rajeevaru, Travancore Devaswom Board (TDB) President P S Prasanth said in a press conference here on Tuesday. The ceremonial "thanka anki" procession, commenced from the Aranmula Parthasarathi Temple in Pathanamthitta on

Sunday, would reach Pamba by Wednesday afternoon, he said. The procession will first be welcomed by Devaswom Minister V N Vasavan at Pamba, and then received by the TDB President and members at the Sannidhanam (temple complex) in the evening. Later, the "thanka anki," the sacred attire, would be draped on the idol of the presiding deity before the 'aarathi'. After the mandala pooja and the "neyyabhishekam," the portals of the Lord Ayyappa temple would be closed by 11 pm on December 26, marking the culmination of the first leg of the annual pilgrimage, he said.

The Sabarimala would be reopened on December 30 evening for Makaravilakku festivities, Prashant said, adding, the ritual would be held on January 14. As part of crowd management, the virtual queue bookings have been limited to 50,000 and 60,000 for events on December 25 and 26. The cap is also in line with a high court directive, according to which, the spot bookings must be limited to 5,000 on both days, the TDB president said. The number of virtual queue bookings on January 13 and 14 as part of the Makaravilakku festivities has been fixed at 50,000 and 40,000, he said.

Tsunami survivor Sowmya finds new joy 20 years later, becomes mother after overcoming unimaginable loss

PTI ■ CHENNAI

The inextinguishable scars of the tragic loss of their close blood relations still haunt the survivors 20 years after the tsunami struck on the fateful morning of December 26, 2004. Sowmya, one of the survivors, who was rescued in Nagapattinam district that bore the brunt of the giant tidal wave killing 6,065 people, has become a mother of a girl child now. Like several other children orphaned by the tsunami, she accepted the harsh reality and showed resilience to overcome the crisis and live. She was four years old when

the tsunami hit the coast, massively destroying property and lives. Sowmya later became the goddaughter of IAS official Dr J Radhakrishnan and completed her BA in Economics. Radhakrishnan solemnised her marriage with K Subash, a technician, in 2022. In October this year, she became a mother of a girl child. "It is heartwarming to see our goddaughter grow up and become a mother. Our family felt blessed," Radhakrishnan, currently Additional Chief Secretary, Cooperative Department said.

He was joined by his wife Krithika and son Dr R Arvind and Nagapattinam district collector P Akash, in showering blessings and gifts on Sowmya at her foster home in the district. Meena, rescued as a toddler, and Sowmya were among the 40 child survivors who grew up in the Annai Sathya Government Children's Home. They came together and celebrated their reunion on December 22, ahead of the 20th anniversary of the tsunami. Among them, Tamilarsi Vijayabalan, now 35, who is BSc in IT, and also holds MCA degree, is working as a teacher at the

Annai Sathya Government Children's Home established post-tsunami to take care of 100 children. The home located in Samanthanpettai near Nagapattinam now takes care of victims of abuse and child marriage. Radhakrishnan was then posted as collector to oversee the relief and rehabilitation activities in Nagapattinam district. Apart from Radhakrishnan and his family, Collector Akash, district Child Protection Officer V Ezhilarasi and Juvenile Justice Board member M Malarvizhi too lauded the survivors who displayed resilience.

Survey report on Sambhal's Jama Masjid-Harihar Mandir dispute likely to be submitted in January

BISWAJEET BANERJEE
SAMBHAL

The Court Commissioner, Ramesh Singh Raghav, is expected to submit the survey report concerning the claim that Sambhal's Jama Masjid was originally the Harihar Mandir. The report will likely be filed in a sealed envelope in the first week of January 2025, according to sources. The survey report, which is said to be nearly complete, is expected to be submitted on either January 2 or 3. The matter came to light after a lawsuit was filed on November 19, 2024, in the court of Civil Judge (Senior Division), Sambhal, by Kaila Devi Temple's Mahant Rishiraj Giri, advocate Harishankar Jain, and six



other petitioners. The suit claimed that the Shahi Jama Masjid was originally the Harihar Mandir. On the same day, advocate Ramesh Singh Raghav was appointed as the Court Commissioner and directed to conduct a survey of the site under heavy security and in the presence of senior district officials. On

November 24, when the Court Commissioner attempted to conduct a second survey under the protection of the District Magistrate and Superintendent of Police, violent clashes erupted, resulting in the deaths of five individuals and injuries to several police personnel. Following the incident, the report, initially due on November 29, was delayed, and a 10-day extension was granted by the court. The submission was further postponed to December 9 due to the Court Commissioner citing health issues and requesting additional time to finalize the report. This led to objections from the Jama Masjid's legal

counsel, Shakeel Warsi, who opposed the repeated extensions. Court Commissioner Raghav stated that with the court scheduled to reopen on January 1, the survey report is nearly ready and will be submitted in a sealed envelope by January 2 or 3, 2025. "The report is almost complete. Once the court resumes after its week-long recess, we plan to submit it promptly," said Raghav. The case, which has already seen significant tension and loss of life, is being closely monitored for its potential to further escalate communal sensitivities in the region. Authorities are maintaining heightened security as the legal process unfolds.

Haryana CM Nayab Singh Saini stresses importance of sensitivity and empathy in governance on Atal Bihari Vajpayee's birth anniversary

PARVESH SHARMA
GURUGRAM

On the occasion of the birth anniversary of Bharat Ratna awardee and former Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Haryana Chief Minister, Nayab Singh Saini, addressed the State-level Governance Day programme in Gurugram on Wednesday. During the event, Saini emphasized the importance of sensitivity and empathy in government administration, urging officers to view their roles as an opportunity to uplift society and ease the hardships of the common people. The Chief Minister urged the officers to view each case with compassion, stating that when someone approaches their office with a problem,

they should not simply see it as a piece of paper. Instead, they should recognize it as a symbol of the individual's pain and hardship. He said that if we can understand the story behind that paper, we will have truly succeeded in our efforts towards good governance. The Chief Minister also paid tribute to Bharat Ratna awardees Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya and Atal Bihari Vajpayee on their birth anniversaries, reflecting on their monumental contributions to the nation. He said that today's day is not only a memorable occasion for all of us, but it also inspires us to strengthen our commitment towards building a better and more empowered nation. He said that Atal Bihari

Vajpayee's leadership was truly transformative for India. His vision and policies were pivotal in shaping the country's progress on both domestic and international fronts. His leadership laid the foundation for the India we see today, and it is this vision of a 'Viksit Bharat' that Prime Minister Sh. Narendra Modi is dedicated to realizing. The Chief Minister said that when our government assumed the responsibility of public service in 2014, we launched a campaign of governance reform, transitioning from good governance (Sushasan) to service (Sewa). He said that the success of such a campaign depends on Niyat (intent), Nishtha (commitment), and Niti (policy). For good

governance, he said, there must be a genuine intention to serve, and the policies must be designed in a way that leaves no room for corruption. On the strength of Niyat, Nishtha, and Niti, our government is successfully realizing the true essence of good governance, said Nayab Singh Saini. Government has successfully completed the journey toward good governance by embracing various e-governance initiatives. The Chief Minister said that in a bid to curb irregularities in land registration, the government has introduced the online issuance of No Objection Certificates (NOCs) from various departments, boards, and corporations, which are required during registration.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Extradition dilemma

Bangladesh's request to extradite Sheikh Hasina raises critical questions about India's role as a key player in South Asian politics

Bangladesh has formally requested India to extradite former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who fled to India following her ouster on August 5, 2024. The request, conveyed through a diplomatic "note verbale," places India in a delicate position, requiring a careful balancing of international law, bilateral relations, and regional stability. This article explores the background of the situation, the implications of such an extradition, and the options available to India. Sheikh Hasina, a towering figure in Bangladeshi politics and leader of the Awami League, was ousted from power after a student-led movement erupted into nationwide protests. Despite the government meeting the protesters' demands, unrest persisted, which Hasina claims was orchestrated by Muhammad Yunus, Chief Adviser to Bangladesh's interim government. The protests culminated in her removal from power, prompting her to flee to India. The diplomatic note issued by Bangladesh's interim government reflects its intention to bring Sheikh Hasina back to face accountability or to address the political turmoil she left behind.



India and Bangladesh share a complex relationship shaped by historical ties, mutual interests, and occasional tensions. Extraditing Sheikh Hasina could be seen as India's support for the interim government, potentially straining ties with the Awami League, one of Bangladesh's major political forces. The political crisis in Bangladesh has already created ripples in South Asia. Any decision by India regarding the extradition could influence the region's political dynamics, including relations with other South Asian nations. Sheikh Hasina's safety and the fairness of any trial

are also suspect as she might face attrition upon her return. India would need to weigh these concerns against its international obligations under extradition treaties and agreements. How India handles this case may affect India's stance as a regional power and its commitment to democratic principles. India could provide asylum to Sheikh Hasina, citing humanitarian grounds or concerns about the fairness of legal proceedings in Bangladesh. This would align with India's historical role as a refuge for political exiles but might antagonise the interim Bangladeshi government. India could agree to extradite Hasina with conditions ensuring her safety, fair trial, and adherence to international legal norms. Such a move might help India maintain its relations with both the interim government and Hasina's supporters. India can also delay the extradition while engaging diplomatically with Bangladesh to seek a mutually acceptable solution. This would allow India to assess the evolving political situation and minimize potential fallout. While India's decision will undoubtedly influence India-Bangladesh relations, its impact will also resonate across the region. India must weigh its options carefully, prioritising both the immediate political implications and its long-term vision for South Asian stability.

PICTALK



The Jakhu Temple and its premises covered with snow after fresh snowfall, in Shimla

ONOP: A bold reform or a political gamble?

As Prime Minister Narendra Modi pushes forward with his vision of 'One Nation, One Poll' the nation waits to see whether this proposal will unite or divide



KALYANI SHANKAR

The introduction of a controversial bill, 'One Nation One Poll,' has created more controversy than acceptance. The BJP has been talking about it but introduced it, which has been sent to the joint select committee of the Parliament. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is in a hurry to fulfil the BJP's unfinished agenda. He had already opened the Ayodhya temple and got the revocation of Article 370 of the Constitution, which gave special status to Jammu and Kashmir. This long-awaited bill aims to streamline the electoral process for 28 states and eight union territories, with an electorate of nearly a billion voters. The bill has triggered widespread debate, significant interest, and Opposition from various parties.

Though momentum is building for simultaneous elections, some questions need answers. They include whether Modi has the required two-thirds majority to pass the bill in Parliament. Is there a political consensus? Will the Opposition come on board? Is the timing of the bill right? Most Opposition parties reject the idea of simultaneous polls. They include the Congress, the Left parties, the Trinamool Congress, and regional and smaller parties. They reject it mainly to settle political scores and apprehension that they may benefit the BJP. Former President Ram Nath Kovind chaired a nine-member committee recommending simultaneous polls last year, labelling it a 'game changer'. Thirty-two parties supported the concept, and 15 rejected it. The panel also advised that the Centre form a panel to oversee the implementation of this proposal. Also, there should be a joint electoral roll for all elections so that voters will use the same list for national, state, and local polls. Over the years, elections have become a standard feature, but the 'One Nation, One Poll' bill has the potential to reshape our election process. Proponents of the bill argue that it could



significantly reduce campaign costs, alleviate the strain on administrative resources, and streamline governance. This could ultimately benefit the public by reducing the frequency of elections, a prospect that should inspire optimism. Elections in India are held at different levels. The first is panchayat, followed by the district level, the state assembly level, and finally, the national level. They happen at different times, and the government wants to streamline the system. Interestingly, the idea of simultaneous polls is not new. Historically, it was a synchronised poll from 1952 to 1967. The premature dismissal of various governments and the consequential dissolution of Assemblies led to staggered polls. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi dismissed many Opposition-ruled state governments. The most important thing is that the BJP needs the support of the allies and friendly parties. In the recent 2024 polls, the BJP was 40 short of a majority in the house and could form the government only with the help of JD (U) and Telugu Desam. Most opposing parties reject simultaneous polls, including Congress, the Left parties,



HISTORICALLY, IT WAS A SYNCHRONISED POLL FROM 1952 TO 1967. THE PREMATURE DISMISSAL OF VARIOUS GOVERNMENTS AND THE CONSEQUENTIAL DISSOLUTION OF ASSEMBLIES LED TO STAGGARD POLLS

the Trinamool Congress, and regional and smaller parties. Even in the BJP, 20 MPs were absent while the bill was introduced. The Kovind panel also suggested having the votes in two parts. The first will be for Lok Sabha and Assembly votes, and the second for local groups. The bill faces significant constitutional, legal, and political challenges. The Kovind panel suggests amending Articles 83 and 172 to allow simultaneous elections. However, the BJP lacks the two-thirds majority for this amendment, and the Constitution needs clarification on concurrent polls. The potential impact on the federal structure of the country and the logistical challenges of conducting simultaneous elections for a billion voters are crucial factors to consider. Prime Minister Modi's main challenge is to gather enough support in Parliament. At the same time, the government must build political consensus and persuade the Opposition to agree. The Opposition has rejected simultaneous polls, fearing it might benefit the BJP. The 15 opposing parties hold 205 MPs, while Modi needs 362 votes to proceed.

A legal framework for simultaneous elections is essential to address mid-term government collapses and central political manoeuvring. The one nation, one poll approach reduces waste and election frequency, so the Opposition should consider it carefully and present any alternative proposals for public discussion. The One Nation One poll has been one of the poll promises of the BJP. Some core issues have already been addressed, such as the revocation of Article 370 and the building of the Ram temple in Ayodhya. In his third term, Modi wants to finish the unfinished agenda. Modi presents this legislation with a clear strategy: Whether he succeeds or not, he benefits. If the bill gets passed, it will be an advantage for the BJP government. If it fails, he can claim that he tried to enact reform but faced Opposition obstruction. Despite potential delays, it's important to debate the bill, as election spending ultimately comes from taxpayers' money. Now that the bill has been sent to a joint select committee, we must wait for its report. (The writer is a popular columnist; views are personal)

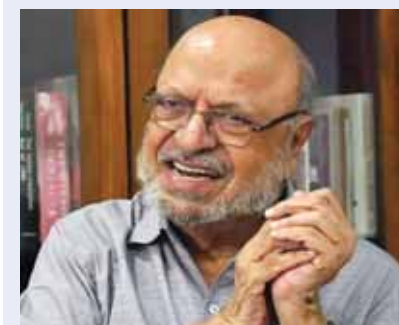
LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

TRUMP'S ACQUISITION PLANS

Madam — Trump is on a shopping spree to buy Canada, the Panama Canal and Greenland, desiring to make Canada its 51st state with Trudeau as its governor. He wants the gifted Panama Canal back to his country. The Panama president has, however, expressed his disagreement with both his conditions, thereby creating another contentious issue ready to be dealt with in the near future. He is also eyeing Greenland to gain its strategic advantage for monitoring the missiles launched from Russia and China on the US and alternatively using it as a launching pad for the US missiles on them. Greenland being rich in minerals like uranium is another factor for its advantage to the US. More so, the greatest island on this planet is not green but mostly ice-filled, comprising glaciers that create many new waterways on its melting due to global warming each year, giving a wider area for its exploration. He is also creating a powerful force by enriching it with the recruitment of capitalists like Elon Musk and AI experts in his cabinet to act as resources for implementing his future plans. Indian brain drain forms a substantial part of his team, like Sriram Ramakrishnan, the AI expert, and such other talents that India has lost to another country at its cost for its inability to identify and hold them at the appropriate time. If this happens, the demography will start taking a new shape, and interrelation equations of friends and foes will change. India needs to withhold its talent by stopping its brain drain at any cost by providing them better than what they get abroad to discourage their move to foreign lands. However, the unpredictable nature of Donald Trump will keep the world guessing with fingers crossed till it actually happens in reality after he takes over as president, as for all you know, he may suddenly say one day "I was just joking."

R S Narula | Patiala

Shyam Benegal passes away at 90



The sad demise of legendary filmmaker and stalwart of Indian cinema Shyam Benegal at the age of 90 is an irreparable loss for both the cinema and the society. His historic contribution to parallel cinema will be written in golden words in the history of Indian cinema. He was the vanguard of the movement

of realistic and issue-based filmmaking, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s. His directorial debut movie, 'Ankur,' in 1974 itself was a landmark in Indian cinema. Along with his timeless movies, he launched the careers of many highly accomplished actors, including Smita Patil, Naseeruddin Shah and Shabana Azmi. Besides his contribution to cinema, Shyam Benegal was a man of great values who never hesitated to speak his mind. Despite his ideological differences with the right wing and the Modi government, he opposed returning national awards as a mark of protest against the alleged increase in intolerance in India. He, himself a two-time chairman of FTII, did not support the strike of students of the institute against the appointment of TV actor Gajendra Chauhan as its chairman.

Manoj Parashar | Ghaziabad

PRITHVI SHAW'S FUTURE IN DOUBT

Madam — Ravi Shastri once saw Sachin Tendulkar, Brian Lara and Virender Sehwag in Prithvi Shaw. He was a player "born to play cricket," Shastri had said of Shaw. A ton on test debut against the West Indies in 2018 and a blistering 52-ball 70 in the next announced Shaw's arrival on the big stage. But Shaw played his last test for the country in 2020. He was part of the Indian ODI team for a little more than a year. Now at 25, he has not only been left out of the Indian team, but he does not find a place in the Mumbai side as well. His exclusion from the state team for the Vijay Hazare Trophy has effectively rendered all chances of Shaw making a comeback to the Indian team extremely slim because Indian cricket is bristling with talent and perseverance, hard to replace. Indiscipline, antics, and arrogance reportedly caused his downfall. Shaw was embroiled in frequent off-field controversies. While those could have been shrugged off, through his poor fitness and casual approach, he was apparently becoming a liability for teams. As rightly put by an

office bearer of the Mumbai Cricket Association, "Shaw is his own enemy"

Ganapathi Bhat | Akola

CONCERN OVER SHAMI'S FITNESS

Madam — The team India has been endeavouring for over a period to gain the ground, where it's seen the bowlers and batters are totally at sea. Then, everyone wishing for Shami's comeback, which can drastically strengthen the tie of the team, especially the bowling attack, as he showcased his back-to-back top-notch performance in the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy, leading bowling length effectively. But once again, BCCI's update about his fitness, that he has been deemed not fit for selection in the remaining two tests due to concern over left knee swelling, has ruined countless hopes. Our wishes for his speedy recovery and the team's unparalleled persistence to heal up the millions' fresh wounded hearts.

Jakir Hussain | Kanpur

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Lessons from yesterday: Reflections that shape a lifetime

The past is a treasure trove of memories and lessons, each shaping who we are and guiding us into the future

The past shapes our present. The present is past the next moment, to make way for the future. We are left with fond memories. These memories also teach us invaluable lessons. I was prone to my share of mischief as a child for which I would get scolded by my parents. At such times, I was assured of a haven hiding behind my grandmother. She was impartial to both sides as she counselled my parents to be more indulgent and taught us to be well-behaved. I remember another afternoon. I returned from school excited about my outstanding results in the examinations. Unmindful of my mother's much-needed siesta, I woke her up. Still groggy, she hugged and blessed me, before continuing with her interrupted sleep. That one spontaneous gesture was my reward which would continue to inspire me throughout my life. My father usually rested and slept on Sunday afternoons. We tried not to disturb his sleep. One day, we might have been noisier than usual and ended up soundly thrashed by our father. I wit-



nessed a different facet of my father's personality later in the evening, as he gently expressed his regret for the outburst. I would remember in times to come that there was no shame in accepting if I was wrong. I remember the day I met the young girl who became my wife and life partner in the next few months. After the initial heady days, we buckled up to the serious business of making a life together. We have been married for 40 years. These have not been easy decades faced with the harsh realities of life. We never give up, whatever the setbacks. We continue to strive towards the common goal of leading a happy and contented life together. It is easier to face challenges and find solutions as a team. Another nostalgic memory is

from a long-ago holiday to the beach town of Puri. Our guest house was a couple of hundred meters from the beach. Our daughters were much younger. I was, and continue to be, a protective father, worrying about their safety. That one day, I sat on the veranda, fondly looking at the two children playing with sand on the beach. Their innocent efforts, many of which were unsuccessful, to mould a work of art out of the slippery sand, taught me not to give up. My mother kept a copy of Ramcharitmanas in her prayer corner. I read somewhere that you could find a solution to any problem in the epic. All you had to do was open any page, and the top line would help you find ways to tackle your most pressing



SANJAY CHANDRA

issue. I also tried it sometimes. I remember that a simple reading of the lines was not enough. What mattered was the action plan that I arrived at based on my interpretation, and the determination with which I pursued. Fair play, guiding the team members, impartiality, giving undivided time to team members however busy one might be, empathy, working for the team, pride in the performance of the team members, and out-of-box thinking, were only a few of the invaluable lessons that my experiences taught me. They have stood me in good stead through the rough and tumble of life. The words of psychiatrist, Abraham Twerski would resonate with many, "Ruminating about the past will get you nowhere. So go ahead and learn from the past whatever you can, and then put it behind you. Remember, there is nothing you can do to change it, but you can use its lessons to improve your future." (The author is an electrical engineer with the Indian Railways and conducts classes in creative writing; views are personal)



FIRST COLUMN

THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF MANTRAS

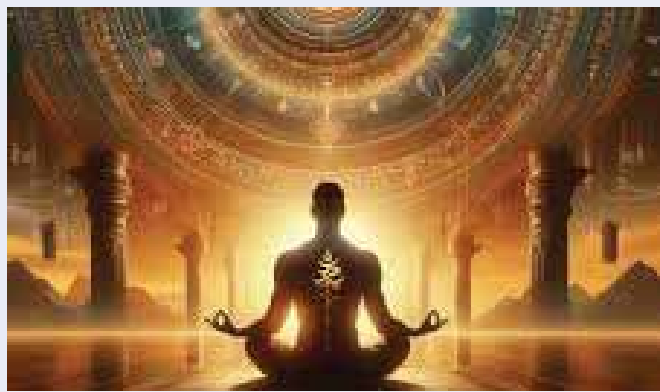
The Divya Chikitsa Mantras stand out as a remarkable system for channelising divine energy



ASHWANI GURU JI

You might have heard of Sanjeevani Vidya given by Guru Shukracharya, which could bring back the dead to life, or of a certain herb called Sanjeevani buti, which brought back Lakshman to life. You may have also heard of the Madhu Vidya or Brahmadeviya as possessed by Sage Dadhichi which could enable one to attain immortality, or the Chyawanprasha prepared by the Ashvini Kumars to restore the youth of Sage Chyawan.

These are not tales or works of fiction, the Vedic rishis were masters of Creation, the human body being a microscopic part of that. The proof that these were not fiction lies in the fact that most of the modern scientific discoveries have come from the Vedic shastras. You may visit www.dhyanfoundation.com to know which scientific discovery has come from which shastra. While most of the ancient Vedic healing sciences are lost in the dust of kaliyuga and most herbs have become extinct, a fraction of them still can be accessed and even that fraction is enough



to achieve amazing results. Divya Chikitsa Mantras as detailed in Sanatan Kriya is one such gem from the treasure trove of Vedic gyan. Divya Chikitsa Mantras use sound and vibrations to bring about the desired effect and changes in your body.

When done right their healing and transformational effects are apparent for all to see. A combination of 7 mantras they work to unplug certain nadis (energy channels) and awaken specific centres, to channelise the force of divine energies for a practitioner. It is said that the body of a deva resides in the mantra. This has been practically experienced by each one who has attended a yagya at Dhyan Ashram where complete forms of the deities were invoked through specific chants manifested in the Yagya Agni. For the mantra to bear fruit, it has to be received from a Guru who is Siddha in the mantra, in line with the ancient Guru Shishya Parampara. Guru channelises the force of the respective deity in the mantra and also imparts the dhvani (correct pronunciation) of the mantra. The efficacy of a Vedic mantra depends on the correctness of its chant; faulty pronunciation of even a single syllable changes the entire meaning.

Taittiriya Samhita narrates the story of Tvashta in this regard. Tvashta performed a sacrifice to destroy Indra. He used the mantra, 'indrashatru' to manifest his thought. However, he placed a lofty note on the word 'Indra' instead of 'shatru' because of which the meaning of the word changed from 'slayer of indra' to 'the one who will be slain by indra' and thus the son, Vrutra, so born to him was defeated by Indra, just because of a pronunciation defect. To quote from Panini Shiksha, a mantra devoid of the correct vowels (svar) and consonants (vama) is faulty and does not convey its intended meaning. It is like a verbal thunderbolt that harms the one who is chanting, as had happened in the case of erroneous pronunciation of the word, Indrashatru). The Vedic seers had mastered this incredible science of sound in the form of mantras, they were well aware of the high degree of specificity and precision that is required to harness the power of sound.

Shiksha, one of the six vendangas, deals with the science of proper pronunciation of words and laws of euphony. Volumes have been written on Shiksha by Panini, Yadnyavalkya and Vasishtha. Shatpath Brahman states that every alphabet of a word possesses some kind of strength and explains the secret of every alphabet. Therefore it is important that one partakes the vidya of mantras from a Guru. Reading from books /internet or hearing on television/social media and starting self-practice may have detrimental effects if the chant is not proper.

(The writer is a spiritual Guru; views are personal)

State budgets on the brink: RBI sounds alarm



UTTAM GUPTA

With outstanding debts exceeding the prudential threshold, the RBI urges states to adopt "next-generation" fiscal rules to ensure sustainable financial management

According to a report on 'State Finances: A Study of Budgets of 2024-25' released by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on December 19, 2024, the consolidated gross fiscal deficit (GFD) of all State governments was contained within 3 per cent of their gross domestic product (GDP) during the financial years (FY) 2022-23 and 2023-24. For 2024-25, their GFD has been budgeted at 3.2 per cent of GDP. They have complied with the stipulation under the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) Act, 2003 which requires them to keep it within the 3 per cent cap. But, the good news ends here. The report reveals that the total outstanding liabilities of States were 28.5 per cent of the GDP in March 2024. Though lower than the peak of 31 per cent reached as of March-end 2021, it remained significantly above the prudential debt-GDP ratio of 20 per cent mandated for the states under the Act.

Another measure of how a State government is managing its budget is its revenue expenditure (RE) about capital outlay (CO). While, the RE being on items such as salaries, wages, pension bills, subsidies etc essentially goes towards non-asset creating spending, CO results in the generation of capital assets thereby providing a foundation for income stream over some time. Greater emphasis on the latter is considered fiscally prudent whereas more of the former can lead to fiscal destabilisation. The record of many states on this crucial parameter is disconcerting. For all states, the total expenditure increased from around Rs 3428,000 crore in 2020-21 to Rs 5760,000 crore during 2024-25 (budget estimate). As regards RE, it increased from Rs 3018,000 crore in 2020-21 to Rs 4840,000 crore in 2024-25. The CO increased from Rs 410,000 crore during 2020-21 to Rs 920,000 crore during 2024-25. These numbers yield a ratio of RE to CO or RECO of 5.2 (4840,000/920,000).

In several states, the RECO is much higher than even this national average. For instance, in Punjab, at 17.1 it is more than three times followed by Puducherry (14.1), Kerala (10.6) and Delhi (10.3). There are some better-performing states too such as Manipur having the best ratio (2.4), followed by Gujarat (2.9) and Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh (3.1). However, the abnormally high RECO of other states pushes up the national average. **How does it compare with the Centre?** The total expenditure of the Central Government increased from Rs 3042,000 crore during 2020-21 to Rs 4820,000 crore during 2024-25. Of this, the RE increased from Rs 2603,000 crore during 2020-21 to Rs 3709,000 crore during 2024-25. On the other hand, its CO increased from Rs 439,000 crore during 2020-21 to Rs 1111,000 crore during 2024-25. So, RECO for the Centre is 3.3 in 2024-25 (3709,000/1111000) against 5.2 for the States.

Barring a couple of good performers like Gujarat which is doing even better than the Centre, most of the states have been reckless in their revenue



BARRING A COUPLE OF GOOD PERFORMERS LIKE GUJARAT WHICH IS DOING EVEN BETTER THAN THE CENTRE, MOST OF THE STATES HAVE BEEN RECKLESS IN THEIR REVENUE SPENDING AND THAT INCLUDES A SHARP RISE IN EXPENDITURE ON SUBSIDIES

spending and that includes a sharp rise in expenditure on subsidies. Since 2018-19, subsidies given by the states have grown 2.5 times to over Rs 470,000 crore being the budget estimate for FY 2024-25). The RBI cites farm loan waivers, free or subsidised services like electricity, transport, gas cylinders, and cash transfers to farmers, youth and women as key areas of incipient stress. It suggests that states need to adopt "next-generation" fiscal rules, time-bound glide paths for fiscal consolidation, and rein in subsidies and freebies so that it doesn't crowd out more productive expenditures. Such exhortations have been made umpteen times in the past not just by the RBI but also by several committees set by the government on 'expenditure reforms' from time to time. Now, we have more jargon like "next-generation" fiscal rules to convey the same message with greater intensity.

The RBI posits these rules as "combining the medium-term fiscal sustainability objective with short-term flexibility allowing state governments more maneuverability in dealing with exogenous economic shocks". The banking regulator goes on "these will involve inter alia, the use of data analytics, including machine learning (ML) and artificial intelligence (AI); improved data transparency and disclosure practices; and strengthening the institution of State Finance Commissions to deliver public services more effectively and scale up social and physical infrastructure." Put simply, the RBI expects the State governments to not just bring about policy reforms and refinements to better target welfare schemes - focusing primarily on the poor

sections of the society but also to galvanise the administrative machinery and institutions to deliver benefits efficiently and prevent misuse/diversion by making the best use of technology interventions.

Do the States understand? The answer is a categorical 'no'. Forget a finely crafted system desired by the RBI and government committees, most of the states have put in place crude and non-transparent subsidy regimes call them freebies - a jargon for "something given free of charge" - all aimed at alluring voters and winning elections. The political parties have sought to cover under 'something' literally everything that touches the life of a person. It includes free food, free health, free education, free LPG cylinder, free laptops, free transport, state support for marriage, and pilgrimage for the elderly; it's an unending list.

In the last couple of years, the freebies promised by them have become more brazen with parties coming out with 'cash transfers' to the account of voters. Such schemes mostly directed at women have won elections for the concerned parties in elections held during 2023 and 2024 in Madhya Pradesh (MP), Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, Jharkhand and Haryana. The parties compete with each other in offering more. A common refrain is 'Who will promise more?'

Look at this. In the budget for 2024-25, Delhi finance minister Atishi announced the Mukhyamantri Mahila Samman Yojana (MMSY) under which, the AAP government will give Rs 1000 per month to all the women

above the age of 18 in the national capital. Now, ex-Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal has increased the amount to Rs 2100 per month. In response, the BJP has reportedly promised a still higher cash transfer of Rs 2500 per month. Let us be clear. Unlike 'normal' budget expenses which are planned and backed by well-orchestrated efforts to garner revenue, additional financial liabilities imposed by the freebies promised in the election manifesto affect the budgetary position of the State in a totally 'uncontrolled' and 'unplanned' manner. Moreover, these freebies don't have a sunset date meaning they will continue to be given 'eternally' - no matter which party rules. This is the surest invitation to fiscal catastrophe. Take the case of Delhi.

Already, without the MMSY, the financial position of the Delhi government has come to such a pass that CM Atishi has recently forwarded a request to the Centre seeking a loan of Rs 10,000 crore from the National Small Savings Fund (NSSF). Now, if AAP were to come to power yet again, MMSY @Rs 2100 a month would cost the exchequer an additional Rs 17,000 crore per annum.

Since 2018-19, state subsidies have grown 2.5 times to over Rs 470,000 crore (2024-25), courtesy freebies cult. This will increase exponentially, destabilising State budgets, and making a mockery of the much-touted fiscal consolidation drive. The Supreme Court has on several occasions observed that 'freebies are bad'. Will it force parliamentarians to enact a law to curb them?

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

Festive cheer meets smart choices: Navigating the real estate boom of 2024

By evaluating long-term financial goals, buyers can turn festive opportunities into lasting investments

With the festive season ongoing in full swing, there is a surge in consumer spending. This time is often marked by a flurry of purchases fuelled by tradition and sentiment. While the allure of buying a home can be particularly enticing during this festive period, buyers must approach such decisions with careful consideration. They must look beyond the festive fervour and reflect on key aspects that can guide them to make informed decisions.

Decoding Festive Demand As per a report 'Unravelling the Trends Shaping India's Real Estate Market in 2024' by CBRE, from January to September, the luxury housing category collectively constituted 16 per cent of the overall



RAHUL MEHROTRA

housing demand. This growth has spurred developers to launch new projects, resulting in the category representing 19 per cent of the total new launches during the first nine months of 2024. This trend is only going to grow further spurred by the festive season as buyers are investing in end-products that

offer better amenities such as club-house, larger living spaces, and modern facilities. Metro cities, in particular, have seen a wave of new project launches by developers this year, catering to various buyer segments.

While luxury properties grab headlines, the affordable housing sector remains the backbone of India's real estate market as this is where buyers purchasing their first home find the most value. Having said that, many first-time homebuyers are compelled to buy a property given the abundant promotional offers and incentives provided by realtors. It is so because the festive season spurs confidence as it often coincides with salary increments, bonuses, and a general uptick in economic activity. However, buyers much before they scout for a property, should evaluate the long-term aspects. Questions such as - "Can I support paying the EMI?" or "Is it the right approach" may seem overwhelming at first, but assessing one's worth is very crucial at this stage.

Interest Rate Matters The interest rate set by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) is a huge factor in deciding other crucial interest rates. The repo rate is unchanged for the 10th consecutive time, and this implies that the Equated Monthly Installments (EMIs) are likely to remain manageable. Further to this, I believe there would be a pickup in demand for housing loans as the festive season progresses. Recent data from the RBI

reveals a remarkable 40 per cent increase in home loan deployment, highlighting the diminishing gap between monthly rents and EMIs. Additionally, 80 per cent of aspiring homeowners preferred home loans as the top choice for property acquisition this year. Typically, possessions and property deliveries are scheduled in the latter half of November, aligning perfectly with the festive momentum. In addition to stable interest rates and EMIs, the array of offers and discounts available during the festive season can be another key factor of consid-



erations. However, it's essential to look for transparent offers that can help avoid hidden fees and unexpected costs. One should seek out reduced processing fees, flexible repayment plans, cashback schemes, and opportunities for negotiation that can make the festive season an advantageous time to invest.

What Should Buyers And Investors Do? Investors and buyers must focus on long-term value by evaluating their income and cash flows to ensure manageable EMIs. The festive season can be an opportunity to reduce upfront costs and select properties in developing areas with strong amenities and connectivity for better appreciation. The predictability in EMI

outflows coupled with festive discounts can make the dream of homeownership more achievable. First-time buyers, particularly in the affordable housing segment, must rely on loans to bridge the financial gap as well as look for special offers and discounts.

While festive discounts are great, buyers should align their decisions with pragmatic goals rather than being swayed by just sentiment. Buying a property during a festive season is certainly the start of a prosperous journey, but to truly benefit, one needs to have a stable financial plan - whether it's the first home or adding to one's portfolio. (The writer is MD & CEO, RHD FCL; views are personal)

Israel, Hamas accuse each other of complicating ceasefire efforts as they inch closer to deal

AP ■ JERUSALEM

Israel and Hamas accused each other of complicating ceasefire efforts on Wednesday, as the two sides inch closer to a deal that could wind down the 14-month war in Gaza. The two sides appear closer than they have been in months to reaching an agreement that would bring home dozens of hostages being held in Gaza. However, talks have come close before, only to collapse. Although Israel and Hamas have expressed optimism that progress was being made toward a deal, sticking points remain over the exchange of hostages for Palestinian prisoners and the withdrawal of Israeli troops from Gaza, people involved in the talks say. On Wednesday, Hamas accused Israel of introducing new conditions related to the withdrawal from Gaza, the prisoners and the return of displaced people, which it said was delaying the deal. Israel's government accused Hamas of

renegeing on renegeing on understandings that have already been reached." Still, both sides said discussions are ongoing. Israel's negotiating team, which includes members from its intelligence agencies and the military, returned from Qatar Tuesday evening for internal consultations, following a week of what it called "significant negotiations". During its October 7, 2023, attack on southern Israel, Hamas and other groups took about 250 people hostage and brought them to Gaza. A previous truce in November 2023 freed more than 100 hostages, while others have been rescued or their remains have been recovered over the past year. Israel says about 100 hostages remain in Gaza - at least a third of whom it believes were killed during the October 7 attack or died in captivity. Sporadic talks have taken place for a year, but in recent weeks there's been a renewed push to reach a deal. President-elect

Donald Trump, who takes office next month for his second term, has demanded the immediate release of Israeli hostages, saying on social media that if they're not freed before he is sworn in, there will be "HELL TO PAY". Families of the hostages are becoming increasingly angry, calling on the Israeli government for a ceasefire before Trump is sworn in. After Israel's high-level negotiation team returned from Doha this week, hostage families called an emergency press conference in Tel Aviv, pleading for a ceasefire and a complete end to the war. Shir Siegel, the daughter of Israeli-American Keith Siegel, whose mother was released after more than 50 days in captivity, said every delay could endanger their lives. "There are moments when every second is fateful, and this is one of those moments," she said. The families are planning a special candle lighting ceremony in Hostages

Square Wednesday, marking the first night of Hanukkah. The agreement would take effect in phases and include a halt in fighting, an exchange of Israeli hostages for Palestinian prisoners, and a surge in aid to the besieged Gaza Strip, according to Egyptian, Hamas and American officials. The last phase would include the release of any remaining hostages, an end to the war and talks on reconstruction. Israel's bombardment and ground invasion into Gaza have killed over 45,000 Palestinians in Gaza, more than half of them women and children, according to Gaza's Health Ministry, which does not distinguish between fighters and civilians in its count. The offensive has caused widespread destruction and displaced some 90 per cent of Gaza's 2.3 million people, often multiple times. Hundreds of thousands are packed into squalid tent camps along the coast as the cold, wet winter sets in.

Pakistani airstrikes killed 46 people in eastern Afghanistan: Taliban

AP ■ PESHAWAR

Pakistan's airstrikes on eastern Afghanistan killed 46 people, mostly women and children, a Taliban government official said on Wednesday, raising fears of further straining the relations between the two neighbours. Hamdullah Fitrat, the deputy spokesman for the Afghan government, said those killed in the strikes that targeted four locations in Barmal, a district in the province of Paktika, were refugees, adding that six others were also wounded. This comes a day after Pakistani security officials, speaking on the condition of anonymity in line with regulations, told The Associated Press that Tuesday's operation was to dismantle a training facility and kill insurgents in Paktika in Afghanistan. Earlier Wednesday, Mohammad Khurasani, the spokesman for the Pakistani Taliban or Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, claimed in a statement that 50 people, including 27 women and children, have died in the strikes. He said they were "unarmed refugees" who fled to Afghanistan because of Pakistan's offensive in the northwest. The TTP - a separate group but also a close ally of the Afghan Taliban - also shared photos, alleging they were of children killed during the Pakistani operation. The strikes came hours after Mohammad Sadiq, Pakistan's special representative for Afghanistan, travelled to Kabul to discuss a range of issues. Afghanistan's Foreign Ministry in Kabul summoned the Pakistani envoy and lodged a strong protest over the strikes by Pakistan's army. In a statement, it said while a representative of the civilian government of Pakistan was busy in talks with the Afghan officials, the strikes were carried



out by the Pakistani army to "create mistrust in the relations between the two countries". It said Kabul "will not accept the violation of the country's territory under any circumstances, and the country is ready to defend its independence and territory" and "such irresponsible actions will definitely have consequences". Meanwhile, residents in the area told an AP reporter over the phone that at least 13 people were left dead, adding that the death toll could be higher. They also said the wounded were transported to a local hospital. Pakistan has not commented on the latest strikes. However, the Pakistani military said Wednesday that security forces killed 13 insurgents in an intelligence-based operation in South Waziristan, a district located along eastern Afghanistan's Paktika province. Pakistan's Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi praised "Pakistan's brave security force" in a statement for thwarting "the nefarious designs" of "terrorists". He didn't mention the Pakistani air strikes inside Afghanistan. The Taliban

Defence Ministry denounced the attacks on Tuesday and promised retaliation. On Wednesday, the situation along the shared border seemed to be business as usual. However, security analysts say the TTP could launch retaliatory attacks in Pakistan. Pakistan has seen innumerable militant attacks in the past two decades but there has been an uptick in recent months. The latest was this weekend when at least 16 Pakistani soldiers were killed when the TTP attacked a checkpoint in the country's northwest. Pakistani officials have accused the Taliban of not doing enough to combat militant activity across the border, a charge the Afghan Taliban government denies, saying it does not allow anyone to carry out attacks against any country. North and South Waziristan are former strongholds of Pakistani Taliban, who have fled to Afghanistan. Tensions were at an all-high in March when Pakistan said intelligence-based strikes took place in the border regions inside Afghanistan.

Organiser of Christmas fair in southern Mexico assassinated at his event

AP ■ MEXICO CITY

The organiser of a Christmas fair in southern Mexico was assassinated at his city's holiday event, authorities said late Tuesday. The governor of the southern state of Guerrero said gunmen killed the organiser of the annual Christmas and New Year's fair in the state capital of Chilpancingo. Gov. Evelyn Salgado called the Christmas Eve killing of Martín Ramírez Ruiz "an unacceptable act that will not go unpunished". Salgado wrote on her social media accounts that state prosecutors were investigating the crime. There was no immediate information on the motive, but the gangs gain much of their income extorting money from local businesses and routinely kill those who refuse to pay. In a separate statement, state prosecutors said that another person was killed along with Ramírez Ruiz, and that a third person in the crowd gathered outside a church was wounded in the attack. The gunmen had apparently waded into the crowd and directly targeted Ramírez Ruiz. Ramírez



Ruiz was the head of the civic group that for almost two centuries has organised an arts, food and handicrafts fair that runs from roughly Christmas to January 7. The fair also honors the local patron saint, St. Matthew. Two rival drug gangs, the Tlacos and the Ardillos, are fighting for control of the city of Chilpancingo, and violence against officials and residents there has reached grisly levels. In November, a former prosecutor and local police official was arrested in connection with the grisly decapitation of the city's mayor on October

6. Mayor Alejandro Arcos was killed just a week after he took office as mayor of the state capital. Officials had blamed the killing on one of the gangs. The mayor's body was found in a pickup truck, with his severed head placed on the roof of the vehicle, in an apparent message from the gang. The same gang is thought to be responsible for killing 11 market vendors, including four boys, in late October. The vendors, members of an extended family, were abducted as they travelled to sell their wares. Their bodies were found dumped in the bed of a pickup truck on an avenue in Chilpancingo. Chilpancingo, a city of about 300,000, is so completely dominated by gangs that in 2023, one of them staged a demonstration of hundreds of people, hijacked a government armoured car, blocked a major highway and took police hostage to win the release of arrested suspects. Violence in Guerrero reached such unprecedented levels that earlier this year, Roman Catholic bishops announced they had helped arrange a truce in another part of the state between two warring drug cartels.

Iran restores access to WhatsApp and Google Play

TEHRAN. Iran's government on Tuesday said it had lifted a ban on access to WhatsApp and Google Play after more than two years, the official IRNA news agency reported.

The report said the country's Supreme Council of Cyber Space made the decision in a meeting led by reformist President Masoud Pezeshkian, who has vowed to remove restrictions on social media. Iran's telecommunication minister Sattar Heshemi in a post on X called the decision a "first step" in removing restrictions and said "the path will continue" - indicating the possibility of unblocking other services. Many people reached by The Associated Press across the capital, Tehran, and other cities said they had access to the services on computers but not yet on mobile phones. WhatsApp has been the third most popular messaging platform in Iran after Instagram.

Haiti gang attack journalists covering hospital reopening leaves two dead

AP ■ PORT-AU-PRINCE

Haiti's online media association said two reporters were killed and several others were wounded in a gang attack on Tuesday on the reopening of Port-au-Prince's biggest public hospital. Street gangs have taken over an estimated 85% of Haiti's capital, Port-au-Prince, and they forced the closure of the General Hospital early this year. Authorities had pledged to reopen the facility Tuesday but as journalists gathered to cover the event, suspected gang members opened fire in a vicious Christmas Eve attack. Robest Dimanche, a spokesman for the Online Media Collective, identified the dead journalists as Markenz Nauthou and Jimmy Jean. Dimanche said an unspecified number of reporters had also been wounded in the attack, which he blamed on the Viv Ansanm coalition of gangs. Haiti's interim president, Leslie Voltaire, said in an address to the nation that journalists and police were among the victims of the attack. He did not specify how many casualties there were, or give a breakdown for the dead or wounded. "I send my sympathies to the people who were victims, the national police and the journalists," Voltaire said, pledging

"this crime is not going to go unpunished." A video posted online by the reporters trapped inside the hospital showed what appeared to be two lifeless bodies of men on stretchers, their clothes bloodied. One of the men had a lanyard with a press credential around his neck. Radio Télé Métropole initially reported that seven journalists and two police officers were wounded. Police and officials did not immediately respond to calls for information on the attack. Video posted online earlier showed reporters inside the building and at least three lying on the floor, apparently wounded. That video could also not be immediately verified. Johnson "Izo" André, considered Haiti's most powerful gang leader and part of a gang known as Viv Ansanm, which has taken control of much of Port-au-Prince, posted a video on social media claiming responsibility for the attack. The video said the gang coalition had not authorized the hospital's reopening. Haiti has seen journalists targeted before. In 2023, two local journalists were killed in the space of a couple of weeks - radio reporter Dumesky Kersaint was fatally shot in mid-April that year, while journalist Ricot Jean was found dead later that month.

Striking students demand justice

AP ■ BELGRADE



ing. Serbia's universities have been blockaded for weeks as part of a wider movement demanding accountability over the November 1 tragedy in Novi Sad when a huge concrete construction at the railway station crashed onto the people

below. any in Serbia blame the collapse on widespread corruption and sloppy work on the building renovation, one of a number of questionable infrastructure megaprojects involving Chinese state companies. Prosecutors have arrested 13 people over the Novi Sad tragedy, including a government minister whose release later fuelled public scepticism about the honesty of the investigation. Striking students have received wide support in Serbia from their professors, farmers, actors and others. Tens of thousands joined a student-led protest in Belgrade on Sunday that also

reflected wider discontent with populist President Aleksandar Vucic's rule. Protesting students on Wednesday carried banners featuring red handprints - a protest symbol telling the authorities they have "blood on their hands." In an apparent attempt to defuse the student strikes, Vucic has been advertising what he describes as "favourable" loans for young people to purchase apartments. The increasingly autocratic Serbian leader has faced accusations of curbing democratic freedoms despite formally pursuing European Union membership for the Balkan nation.

UN Sec-General pays tributes to Indian peacekeeper

PTI ■ UNITED NATIONS

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has paid tributes to Brigadier General Amitabh Jha of India, who was serving with the UNDOF at Golan Heights, and said he will be remembered for his "leadership and unwavering commitment to United Nations peacekeeping." Brigadier Jha was serving as Deputy Force Commander of the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) from April 2023 and had recently served as acting Force Commander of UNDOF in complex circumstances, following the fall of the Assad Government in Syria. "He will

be remembered for his leadership and unwavering commitment to United Nations peacekeeping, including in the United Nations Organization Stabilisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) as a Military Observer from 2005 to 2006," a statement by the spokesman for Guterres said late on Tuesday. The Secretary-General extends his heartfelt condolences to Brigadier General Jha's family and to the Government of India for their loss, the statement added. Earlier, the Indian Army while paying tributes to Brigadier Jha in a post on X said, "#GeneralUpendraDwivedi #COAS and All Ranks of #IndianArmy expresses deepest condolences on the untimely

demise of Brigadier Amitabh Jha due to medical reasons. Indian Army stands firm with the bereaved family in this hour of grief." According to the UNDOF website, Brigadier Jha joined the UNDOF Mission on April 14, 2023. He was an Infantry Officer & prior to this deployment to UNDOF, had commanded a Brigade in Glaciated Mountainous terrain of India, and a Specialised unit as Commanding Officer. Jha had a keen interest in reading on "military diplomacy, geopolitics, Indo-Pacific, modern & small wars, sub-conventional warfare & tribes & culture," it said, adding, he was a keen sports enthusiast, who played troop games and enjoyed backpacking in the mountains.

Spice tins honour role of Indian soldiers in WW 2 Christmas truce

PTI ■ LONDON

A UK historian has highlighted further evidence of the widespread contributions made by Indian soldiers to the First World War effort as part of the British empire army with the discovery of spice tins that were used during the Christmas truce in 1914.



Professor Peter Doyle, a military historian at Goldsmiths, University of London, is quoted in 'The Times' on Wednesday to showcase how new research has found that these spice tins ended up in the hands of German soldiers when the Western Front fell silent as soldiers walked across no man's land to exchange handshakes, gifts and a game of football 110 years ago. Doyle organised an exhibition about the truce, including details around these spice tins, at the Great War Huts Museum in Bury St Edmunds, eastern England. "The truce was not just a case of 'Anglo-Saxon' to 'Saxon' fraternisation," Doyle is quoted as saying. "Up until recently, people didn't really believe or expect Indian soldiers took part in the truce, though they may have been observers," he said. The spice tins were part of morale boosting Christmas gifts to soldiers in the war by Princess Mary, the daughter of Britain's King George V. For British soldiers, her gift was made up of a smoking kit, which was deemed inappropriate as many members of the Indian army were non-smokers. Instead, their tins were filled with spice along with a picture of Princess Mary in place of a cigarette card for their UK counterparts. Doyle, the author of 'For Every Sailor Afloat, Every Soldier at the Front: Princess Mary's Christmas Gift 1914', documents how Princess Mary aged just 17 set out to send a Christmas gift to all those on active service. His book is set against the backdrop of

an unofficial "Truce in No Man's Land" during the war and his research led him to the discovery of one of the spice tins - only the second one known to still be in existence. He knew that the 39th Garhwal Rifles were at Givenchy, France, during

the Christmas of 1914, which led him to explore whether the spice tins may have become part of the Christmas truce there, along with the men who carried them. He approached Robin Schafer, a German historian, who went into the archives and found references in German newspapers to men receiving the spice tins as gifts during the brief cessation of hostilities 110 years ago. A soldier named Wilhelm Althoff wrote: "Some Indians gifted us figs [and] a shiny metal box with spices." Doyle and Schafer hope that more of these tins, which Doyle describes as "unprepossessing", may be found by people in Germany and elsewhere if they go looking. They also hold out hope that some photographs of the event may exist, as picture-taking was initially encouraged in German trenches to boost morale. During the First World War (1914-18) India, which at that time included Pakistan and Bangladesh under British colonial rule, sent the largest share of Commonwealth soldiers to the war effort at over 1.4 million. Shrabani Basu, historian-author of 'For King and Another Country: Indian Soldiers on the Western Front, 1914-18' has also documented their immense contributions to the war effort. "Today there are descendants of the soldiers living in Britain who can be proud of what their ancestors achieved," she notes.

Japan's foreign minister seeks 'positive' direction in bilateral ties during China visit

AP ■ BEIJING

Japanese Foreign Minister Takeshi Iwaya met with top Chinese leaders Wednesday during his visit to Beijing, the first since the heads of the two countries met at a summit in Peru last month, in an effort to make positive inroads in the bilateral relationship. The two neighbours have had a tense relationship in recent years. At the top of Iwaya's agenda is China's ban on Japanese seafood in response to the release of treated radioactive wastewater into the sea from the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant, as well as China's increasingly assertive military activity in the East and South China Seas. Iwaya met with China's premier Li Qiang Wednesday as well as Wang Yi, his Chinese counterpart. "Currently the China-Japan relations are at a crit-



ical period of improvement and development," said Li, in his remarks. "China is willing to work together with Japan to move towards the important direction proposed by the leaders of the two countries." "I want to build a relationship where the people of both countries feel that Japan-China

relations have developed and progressed in a positive direction," said Iwaya, ahead of his meeting with Wang. His trip comes just before US President-elect Donald Trump is to take office in January. Tokyo considers the Japan-US alliance the lynchpin of its diplomatic and security poli-

cies, a tone emphasised in the past four years under US President Joe Biden's direction, but it's unclear how Trump will impact the alliance. Japan has revamped its approach to defense in response to Chinese actions in recent years, boosting military spending and shifting away from a principle of self-defense. Earlier this year, Japan protested when a Chinese military plane flew into Japan's airspace, while in the summer, a Chinese survey ship sailed into Japanese territorial waters. While how US-China relations come out under the Trump administration is unclear, Japan is seeking stability in its relationship with its neighbour and hopes to develop ties in areas of mutual interest, including the economy and the elderly care industry. Iwaya told reporters before his departure Tuesday that he will also hold bilateral high-level people and cultural exchange

talks, joined by the education ministers from the two sides. "The relationship with China, our neighbouring country, is one of Japan's most important," Iwaya told reporters Tuesday, he said. "The two countries share important responsibilities for the peace and prosperity of the region and the international society." Iwaya, a security expert, is also expected to reiterate his concern about Japanese nationals detained in alleged spying allegations. Japan maintains that the water discharged from the Fukushima plant is treated and diluted to levels much safer than international standards and adequately monitored, but China calls the water contaminated. Both agreed in September to work toward easing the seafood ban by allowing China in multinational sampling missions under the framework of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

Anupati, Raju emerge winners at Junior National Equestrian Championship

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Young riders Anupati Navyashree Sai and Raju Singh emerged the best performers in the show jumping and dressage categories respectively on the concluding day of the first half of Junior National Equestrian Championships. In the young rider category, Anupati, who was astride Abra ka Dabra, secured 32.60 marks without conceding any penalty in the showjumping two-phase event on Tuesday. She finished ahead of Avik Bhatia, Geetika Tikshetty, and Monu Kumar to be adjudged the best in her event. In dressage freestyle, Raju, who rode Louk, did extremely well in his event, securing 65.18 marks. It was a very competitive event in which Javeer Verma, Geetika and Navyashree ran him close. "It was extremely satisfying to see in this junior championship the talent



India has. It gives EFI hope and confidence that the game will grow fast in the country. Almost all the categories saw very close competition. The margin that separated the winners and other participants was very thin," Equestrian Federation of India secretary general Javeer Singh said. "I am sure that the second half of the championship will also produce high-octane competitions that will conclude on December 29," he said. In the children dressage

category, Subh Chowdhri, astride Furstentanz, trumped the challenge of Pranav Deepak, Punnet Jakhar and Jaiwant Nawle while in the children show jumping event, Mogil Anbu pipped Divyaraj Singh Rathore, Sresh Raju Mantena and Era Shree Harsha to emerge winner. Adding to the accolades in the children I category, Javeer Singh Nagra was awarded the best rider title for his exceptional performances throughout the competition, cementing his place as one of the brightest young talents in Indian equestrian sports. Sahil, astride Candy, logged 93.5 points to emerge winner in the overall individual tent pegging event, finishing ahead of Mohammad Alhamad Chishty (80), Shahrulkh Khan (79) and Adeel Ahkter (76). The action will next resume on December 27 with junior (age group 14-18) and children II (age group 10-12) category events.

Mohun Bagan's set-piece proficiency gives them edge against Punjab FC

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Armed with a strong all-around team most proficient at set-pieces, Mohun Bagan Super Giant will fancy their chances when they face Punjab FC in the Indian Super League here on Thursday. The Mariners have won both their previous ISL matches against Punjab FC. However, Punjab FC have already beaten two sides, Mumbai City FC and Odisha FC, who managed the double over them last season, showing their ability to bounce back. Mohun Bagan enter this match after an eight-game unbeaten run that was ended with a defeat to FC Goa in their last fixture. Head coach Jose Molina has never lost consecutive games in ISL history, and the Mariners themselves have not suffered back-to-back away defeats in a single season. Punjab FC, on the other hand, have lost their last two matches on the road, conceding six goals across these outings, as many as they conceded in their previous five games combined. However, their home record



has been solid, with four wins in five games, including a 2-0 victory against Mohammedan SC in their last home outing. Right now, Mohun Bagan lead the points table with 26 points from 12 games, whereas Punjab FC are positioned seventh, having garnered 18 points from 11 matches. Punjab FC have conceded only one goal in the opening 15 minutes of matches this season, the joint lowest in the league alongside Odisha FC. This defensive strength could give them an early foothold against the Mariners. Punjab FC's Nikhil Prabhu

PKL eliminators: UP Yoddhas to take on Jaipur Pink Panthers, Patna Pirates face U Mumba

PTI ■ PUNE
UP Yoddhas will play Jaipur Pink Panthers, while Patna Pirates will be up against U Mumbai in the eliminators of the Pro Kabaddi League here on Thursday. In the fray for the top prize are Haryana Steelers and UP Yoddhas, both of whom have never won the title, and along with them are three-time champions Patna Pirates, season 8 winners Dabang Delhi KC, season 1 and 9 title holders Jaipur Pink Panthers, and season 2 champions U Mumba, who sealed qualification for the playoffs with the last game of the league stage. The winners of the eliminators will take on Haryana Steelers and Dabang



Delhi KC in the semifinals scheduled for Friday. Table toppers Haryana Steelers, who are through to the semi-finals, are gunning for their first PKL title while Dabang Delhi KC have been one of the best teams this season and have stitched

together a 15-match unbeaten streak, which helped them secure the second position on the points table. UP Yoddhas, who had to go back to the drawing board before the season began, have seen their young raiders and the defence step up in style and U Mumba stormed into the PKL Season 11 playoffs with a superb win against the Bengal Warriorz in the final league stage game this season. Among the highlights for U Mumba this season has been that the young brigade have led from the front. Having finished sixth on the points table, Jaipur Pink Panthers are looking for their third title. And coach Sanjeev Baliyan believes that the mentality and preparations for the playoff week has to be different. "The playoff is a different kettle of fish and there are no second chances like during the league stage. And moreover, to win the PKL title again, the whole squad has to play well, and support Arjun Deshwal."

Former Chelsea player Oscar returns to Brazil's Sao Paulo from China

AP ■ SAO PAULO
Former Chelsea midfielder Oscar is returning to his Brazilian boyhood club Sao Paulo after 14 years, which included a long spell in Chinese soccer. Sao Paulo president Julio Casares posted photos Tuesday on his social media channels which showed him with the 33-year-old former Brazil international. Casares described the move as "a super transfer." Minutes later, Oscar thanked China's Shanghai Port, where he played for eight seasons, for his time at the Chinese Super League club. "Today I finish a cycle that marked my life forever," he said. "I leave with my heart full of gratitude and pride for everything we achieved



together." Oscar joined Sao Paulo on a free transfer. Neither the Brazilian club nor the player disclosed the duration of their deal, but local media reports said he signed a three-year contract. Oscar is returning to a club he sued to leave for another Brazilian team, Internacional, in 2010.



Valencia hires Carlos Corberan as its new head coach

AP ■ VALENCIA
Relegation-threatened Valencia has hired West Bromwich Albion manager Carlos Corberan as its new head coach through June 2027. Valencia fired Rubén Baraja on Monday after another setback in La Liga left the Spanish club stuck in the relegation zone and sparked renewed protests against Singaporean owner Peter Lim. "Carlos Corberan has been appointed as coach of Valencia CF, signing a contract through to 2027," a statement on Valencia's website said early Wednesday. "A buy-out option in his contract with West Bromwich Albion was taken up to allow him to leave." No official figure was given but the compensation for the former Valencia youth player was reported to be in the region of \$3 million. The Spaniard led West Brom to its current seventh place in England's second-tier Championship. West Brom earlier said in a statement that the 41-year-old Corberan "is set to return to his homeland with the club's gratitude and best wishes following a two-year tenure at The Hawthorns." Chris Brunt, Damia Abella and Boaz Myhill "will oversee first-team duties until further notice."

NADA update on Hima Das suspension creates confusion

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Asian Games gold medallist sprinter Hima Das, who was exonerated for a 'whereabouts' failure by the National Anti-Doping Agency (NADA), was handed a retrospective suspension by the same body in an unusual turn of events. The 16-month suspension period ran from July 22, 2023 to November 21, 2024 and the athlete is now free to take part in tournaments but what has created a flutter is that she had been competing in events as recently as in June this year. NADA has recently announced that she was suspended by its anti-doping panels for failing to provide her



whereabouts. Known as the 'Dhing Express', she was handed the suspension under a case resolution agreement as per the NADA website. She is currently training in Thiruvananthapuram. The timeline around her suspension has created confusion as the athlete has been competing since April this year, including

participating in the Indian Grand Prix meet in Bengaluru and the National Inter-State meet in Panchkula in June even as her suspension was till November 21, 2024. The most intriguing thing is that she ran four races in June. When PTI reached out to her after her training session on Wednesday, Hima declined to comment on the issue. An Athletics Federation of India (AFI) source also confirmed that her suspension got over in November. A 'case resolution agreement' is made between the anti-doping agency and the athlete when both parties consent, and the athlete agrees to accept the consequences imposed without pursuing further appeals.

Former Manchester City player Benjani Mwaruware challenges ruling in bid to lead Zimbabwe soccer federation

AP ■ HARARE
Former Manchester City forward Benjani Mwaruware on Tuesday challenged a ruling to block him from potentially becoming the new head of Zimbabwe's soccer federation. Benjani, who also played for Portsmouth, Sunderland and Blackburn in the Premier League, last week filed his nomination to become the next president of the Zimbabwe Football Association (ZIFA). But an ethics committee of the association on Monday didn't include the 46-year-old among those eligible to contest the January elections, without immediately giving a reason.



"Our client is aggrieved by your committee's decision and he intends to appeal ... Without any further delay," the player's lawyers wrote to ZIFA's interim boss Lincoln Mutasa. "We are instructed by our client to humbly request that you urgently provide us with full written reasons why your committee concluded that Mr. Benjani Mwaruware

fails to meet eligibility criteria stipulated in the ZIFA statutes." Zimbabwe has been under a FIFA-appointed normalization committee since July 2023 when soccer's governing body lifted the southern African country's 17-month international ban caused by government interference. A new executive will be elected in late January. Former Zimbabwe international Benjani still has a chance, however, through an appeals committee of the federation. Another prospective ZIFA president barred by the ethics committee is a controversial but popular local cleric, Walter Magaya.

Indian cricket in 2024: Painful trophy wait ends before rare loss at home triggers transition talk

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
The monkey was finally off India's back in a roller-coaster 2024 when the financial giants of international cricket ended a 13-year wait for a world title, lost a rare Test series at home and dealt with transition triggered by both expected and unexpected retirements by the stalwarts of the game. There was plenty of action over the last 12 months that kept the loyal Indian fan interested. World Cup triumph; T20 farewell to Rohit and Kohli. The Indian cricket team and its unparalleled fan base were desperate for an ICC trophy after repeatedly faltering in the knock-out stages over the past decade, most recently in the ODI World Cup final at home last year. The trophy finally came home after Rohit Sharma and Co. Played a near perfect tournament to become the T20 World Cup champions in the

USA and the Caribbean. India's clarity of thought throughout the one-month long event was remarkable and with a little bit of luck on their side, especially in the final at Barbados, they were able to go the distance. On undercooked pitches in New York, they were pace heavy before unleashing their trump card Kuldeep Yadav from the Super 8 stage of the tournament. India picked as many as four spinners in the squad but played three in Ravindra Jadeja, Axar Patel and Kuldeep. With Jadeja not getting to do much with both bat and ball, Axar came of age in the competition producing match-winning performances with both bat and ball. The pace duo of Jasprit Bumrah and Arshdeep Singh also played their part to perfection collecting 15 and 17 wickets respectively. In the batting department, Rohit led from the front with a

fearless approach that demoralised opposition attacks. His approach was best summed up in the Super 8 game against Australia where he tore into the likes of Mitchell Starc and Pat Cummins to make all the difference in the game. His opening partner Kohli was not able to make the contributions that were expected out of him but the superstar came up with an innings of immense substance when it mattered the most -- his not-so-fluent 76 of 59 balls kept India in the final after a poor start. The contributions from all-rounder Hardik Pandya, future captain Suryakumar Yadav and Rishabh Pant, playing his first international event following his comeback from a life-threatening car accident, were also noteworthy. A better script could not have been written for the likes of Rohit and Kohli, who got to say goodbye to the T20 format



with the coveted trophy in their hands. It was also a fitting farewell for head coach Rahul Dravid, whose tenure drew to a close. Change of guard in coaching: Surya's unexpected elevation With Rohit calling it a day, it was expected that Hardik will lead the T20 side into the

transition phase, having captained the side in the former's absence. However, Dravid's successor Gautam Gambhir had a different line of thinking as he played a major hand in elevating India's best T20 batter Suryakumar to the leadership position ahead of the series in Sri Lanka. To be fair to Suryakumar, the team has ticked all the boxes since he took over, also witnessing the rise of Tilak Verma and rebirth of the likes of Sanju Samson and Varun Chakaravathy. All three were simply sensational in India's recent T20 series in South Africa. Alongside Samson, Abhishek Sharma has also shown the talent and resolve at the top of the order and could serve India for long. India hit rock bottom against Kiwis While India moved on from the mighty duo of Rohit and Kohli in the shortest format rather quickly, the same is unlikely in the Test team. The chatter around the future of senior players in the Test team has gained momentum after India's first whitewash at home in a three-match series and more recently, the sudden retirement of premier off-spinner R Ashwin.

India's loss to New Zealand in their own backyard was easily one of the most embarrassing outcomes for the team in Test cricket over the past decade. Having slayed 'Bazball' earlier in the year against England, India blanked Bangladesh and were expected to hand out a similar treatment to the visiting Black Caps. However, in a stunning turn of events, the spirited Kiwis out-batted and out-bowled Rohit and Co. To script their biggest series wins overseas. The Indian batters' weakness against the turning ball was exposed threadbare and the duo of Ashwin and Jadeja, who run through sides for fun at home, were bettered by Mitchell Santner and Ajaz Patel. It was only after landing in Australia, Ashwin made up his mind on retirement but his underwhelming outing against New Zealand may have contributed to his big decision. With Ashwin gone and Mohammed Shami not

available, a Test transition is well underway Down Under. The outcome of the remaining two Tests will determine where the Indian batting stands. Jay Shah becomes youngest ICC chairman India is the engine of the global game and its influence on the sport increased further with the elevation of Jay Shah as ICC chairman, making him the fifth from the country at the helm of the governing body after Jagmohan Dalmiya, Sharad Pawar, N Srinivasan and Shashank Manohar. Shah took over in early December and has already made his presence felt by ending the deadlock over the hosting of the Champions Trophy in Pakistan by ensuring consensus for a reciprocal hybrid model in which India will not be required to travel across the border for any ICC event till 2028. Likewise, Pakistan too will get a neutral venue in case of an event in India.

Visitors have exploited Australia's 'brittle' top order: Shastri

PTI ■ MELBOURNE

Former coach Ravi Shastri has backed India to win the Boxing Day Test, saying the visitors have exploited Australia's "brittle" top order to have their "nose ahead" in the Border-Gavaskar Trophy. Shastri added that Indian pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah is "almost single-handedly" responsible for the visitors keeping the series levelled at 1-1. "I think India would take this, the way the series is poised. Any overseas team being 1-1, especially with the games being in Perth, Adelaide and Brisbane, they would take this. "Going 1-1 into Boxing Day is the best case scenario. I would say India have their nose ahead," Shastri told news.Com.Au. Australia's top order comprising Usman Khawaja, Nathan McSweeney and Marcus Labuschagne have been unable to

score against Bumrah. It has forced them to hand a debut to teenage sensation Sam Konstas while dropping rookie opener Nathan McSweeney. "It's been pretty brittle. When you look at this Australian line-up, it's been a long time since I've seen an Australian line-up where the top order is that brittle. India have exploited that and continue to exploit it," Shastri said. All-rounder Mitchell Marsh has also largely struggled for runs. In the last year, Labuschagne, Marsh, Khawaja and Steve Smith all had average less than 30 in Test cricket. "India is 1-1 in the series and that man (Bumrah) has almost single-handedly got India into that position," Shastri said. "As far as Konstas goes, I think he's very refreshing. He's got flair, he's got flamboyance. But Test cricket is Test cricket. His technique will tighten up and he will be the future for Australia." Shastri feels McSweeney was



unfortunate to have been axed after just three Tests. "McSweeney was very unfortunate. He did the hard yards but he's a middle order batsman. I see him travelling to Sri Lanka when the Australian team go there and rebuild his career from there. "But I think it's a good move getting Konstas in because you need someone who can take the attack to the Indian team, because the punches were coming from nowhere." India have won the last two series in Australia and now have the opportunity to become only the third touring side to win three consecutive series Down Under, joining the West Indies (1984/85, 1988/89, 1992/93) and South Africa (2008/09, 2012/13, 2016/17). "Massive. No team has done that in a long time. Australia hammers sides when they come here. For India to pull off three on the trot will be something special.

"But they'll have to play good cricket. I see Australia coming hard in this Test match, especially with the bowlers. It's the batting that'll be the challenge for Australia more than anything else." Shastri feels India has come to Australia with a strong intent to win. "India have come here to win, they haven't come here to fill in the numbers. Even when I was the coach, our mantra was to play extremely hard, fair and to win. "You have to think of a method to beat Australia and not just compete. You've got to plan properly, how to take your 20 wickets. India have done that and been very aggressive. "They've been in the face of Australia and give as good as they get. It's been entertaining and feisty stuff. The first day of the Boxing Day Test will determine which way the series will go," he added.



South Africa aims to seal its place in WTC final in test series against Pakistan

AP ■ CENTURION

South Africa will be eyeing a place in the World Test Championship final with an all-seam attack against Pakistan in the first test, starting Thursday. The Proteas need to win one of its remaining two test matches in this WTC cycle to guarantee a place at the Lord's final next year and captain Temba Bavuma believes expectations have risen in his team to do well in the two-test series. "There'll be pressure that comes with that," Bavuma said. "But to be honest with you, we're coming into the series to win the series 2-0. We understand that for us to do that, there's certain things that we need to do as a team: keep things simple, keep doing the small things right, and allow the results to take care of itself." South Africa has included four fast bowlers in the lineup with Corbin Bosch, who consistently bowls above 140 kph, set to play his first test at his hometown. Seasoned fast bowlers Kagiso Rabada and Marco Jansen will team up with Dane Paterson and Bosch to challenge Pakistan's batters on an expected pacy Centurion pitch where fast bowlers have a clear advantage over the last six years, picking up 227



wickets with spinners dismissing only 16 batters. Heading into the tests, South Africa's top-order batters did struggle against Pakistan in a rare 3-0 ODI whitewash with Tony de Zorzi, Ryan Rickelton and Tristan Stubbs all failing to read the offspin bowling of Salman Ali Agha in the opening game of the series. Whether it's easy, whether it's hard, Bavuma said. "Whatever, I don't know, trauma that was there... Guys will have to deal with it." Pakistan has long been struggling in test matches in South Africa, losing 12 and winning just two of the 15 test matches since it first toured the country in 1995. Pakistan's below-par show in South Africa includes its lowest test score of 49 at the Wanderers in 2013. Pakistan is lying at No. 7 in the WTC points table and Aaqib Javed is its fourth head coach in this WTC cycle with Mickey Arthur and Mohammad Hafeez quitting after one series. Jason Gillespie resigned just two weeks before Thursday's test.

Cummins' message for Konstas: Have fun and don't overthink

PTI ■ MELBOURNE

Australia skipper Pat Cummins understands what a teenager goes through on a high-profile Test debut and knows what he needs to tell a young Sam Konstas: "Have fun and don't overthink". Konstas, 19, is all set to make his debut against India in the Boxing Day Test, starting Thursday. Konstas has created a lot of buzz in Australian domestic cricket and his Test debut at the expense of Nathan McSweeney has become quite an event. When the skipper was asked about his feelings during his Test debut at 18, Cummins spoke about an element of naivety that can stop a kid from overthinking about how big a deal it is. "I spent a bit of the time wondering why or how I was there, how it happened so quick. I just remember being really excited and I think it's similar to Sammy (Konstas) this week. "There's a level of naivety that you just want to go out and play like you do when you're a kid in the backyard," Cummins said during the pre-match press interaction. "You just want to take the game on, have fun and not overthink. So that's the message to Sam. That's definitely how I felt as an 18-year-old, I was just really excited," Cummins fondly recollected. Cummins shared with

Konstas, how he, as a teenager, handled his debut back in 2011. "I was saying this to Sam the other day, I remember as an 18 year old I was thinking if I didn't have a great game it wasn't my fault, it was the selector's fault for picking me. "I was like, well they're the idiots that picked an 18 year old. You're so young starting out your career it's just its boxing day doesn't get any better than this so just enjoy the moment," he laughed. For Cummins, having 38-year-old opener Usman Khawaja, who is exactly double Konstas' age is a boon for the youngster as he will have calming influence at the other end even as youngsters with uncluttered mind always have an edge. "There's so much value in having experience and you've seen everything before. But there's almost just as many positives in having that freedom and naivety just to go out and see the ball and hit the ball." Indians can throw some challenges at some point. Even in a slump, Virat Kohli and Rishabh Pant are players whom this Australian team really respects. There are two Test matches and there could be a pushback round the corner. "I really hope not but you know they're good players so no doubt they'll throw some challenges at us at some point." Asked if his opposite number Rohit Sharma's poor form is

an advantage, Cummins reminded Rahane's century as a stand-in skipper at Melbourne. "Look, hard to say. It was a good Test match here a few years ago. I think Rahane got 100 from memory. So yeah, it always seems like a boxing day every year is a cracking test match. Last year was a great Test match against Pakistan as well." The Indian team is in transition but Cummins wants to keep focus intact on his set of players. "Every team always has something they're kind of grappling with or trying to improve on. As I said previously, I'm really happy our team's travelling. "I thought after Perth we bounced back brilliantly in Adelaide and last week in Queensland. So for us it's about focusing on what we do well and getting excited for a great week." Head fit, Lyon is king at MCG, Boland is world class. Head coach Andrew McDonald has already spoken about Travis Head being fit and the left-hander's extended net session was an indicator. Head had sustained a quadriceps niggle while batting in the second innings in Brisbane. "Trav is good to go. So he'll play. He just ticked off some final things today and yesterday. No stress, no kind of worries about injury with Trav. So he'll go into the game fully fit."

Bumrah equals Ashwin's record for rating points in ICC Ranking for Bowlers

PTI ■ DUBAI

Pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah got a huge boost on the eve of the Boxing Day Test when he achieved the joint-highest rating ever by an Indian player, equalling the record held by spinner Ravichandran Ashwin in the ICC Ranking for Bowlers. The quick gained 14 rating points following his 9/94 in the drawn third Test at Brisbane to not only equal Ashwin's highest-ever 904 rating points but also consolidate his position at the top of the rankings. Bumrah has a chance to better Ashwin's rating points, which the now-retired off-spinner achieved in



December 2016, when the fourth match of the Border-Gavaskar Test begins at the MCG on Thursday. South Africa's Kagiso Rabada (856) and Australia's Josh Hazlewood (852) are trailing

the Indian pacer at the second and third place respectively. Charismatic Australian batter Travis Head's stellar run in the ongoing series against India helped him climb to fourth spot (825 rating

points) in the Test Ranking for Batters. He is still behind the England duo of Joe Root (895) and Harry Brook (876), and former New Zealand skipper Kane Williamson (867). Head smashed a scintillating 152 at the Gabba to follow up his century in the second Test at Adelaide. Compatriot Steve Smith's century at the Gabba got him into the top-10 once again. Among all-rounders, India's Ravindra Jadeja continues to lead the chart with 424 rating points, while Australia skipper Pat Cummins earned his place back in the top-10, following his four wickets and 42 runs in the third Test at Gabba.

Cristiano Ronaldo takes family to Lapland for Christmas vacation

AP ■ HELSINKI

Soccer star Cristiano Ronaldo said it was "just a little cold" as he posed bare-chested in the snow before taking an icy dip in a pool during a Christmas vacation in Finland's Lapland region. The 39-year-old Portuguese international traveled with partner Georgina Rodriguez and their children, who met Santa Claus in a 10-minute video posted online by Ronaldo on Tuesday. The former Real Madrid and Manchester United great appeared to decline to ski with his family. He wished his followers — including 645 million on Instagram — a "Merry Christmas" in Spanish.

Head best batter in world, his performances against Bumrah exemplify fearless approach: Chappell

PTI ■ MELBOURNE

Travis Head is the "best batter in the world" whose performances against Indian pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah in the Border-Gavaskar Trophy exemplify his fearless approach and "Australian way of batting", feels legendary cricketer Greg Chappell. Head has dominated the batting chart with 409 runs in the first three Tests with two hundreds and a fifty, and former Australia captain Chappell believes his simplicity and aggression are behind his success as a Test batter. "Head's performances against Jasprit Bumrah in this series exemplify his fearless approach. While most batsmen struggle to survive Bumrah's unorthodox action, sharp pace, and relentless accuracy, Head has treated him like any other bowler," Chappell wrote in Sydney Morning Herald. "By playing with intent and looking to score off Bumrah, Head has not only nullified his threat but disrupted his rhythm. His ability to dispatch short deliveries with authority and drive fuller ones with

precision has been remarkable, underscoring the strides he has made," he added. Chappell said Head's flourish in the recent years across formats is due to an uncluttered mindset. "From a raw, unpredictable talent to one of the most dominant male batters in world cricket, Travis Head has soared into his prime with an almost ethereal elegance," Chappell wrote. "His story is not just about overcoming challenges but about embracing a simplicity of style that has become his hallmark — one that allows his mind to remain uncluttered and his game devastatingly effective," he added. Chappell termed Head's 152 against England in the 2021-22 series as the "turning point." "The turning point came during the 2021 Ashes. Brisbane was a revelation. Walking in at 5-195, he transformed the game with a whirlwind innings, taking the opposition bowlers apart and shifting the momentum firmly in Australia's favour," he wrote. "That innings wasn't just about runs,



it was a statement of intent, a declaration that he would play his way." Chappell believes Head is one of the most feared batters in the world who can dictate terms against the best bowlers. "Since that series, Head has gone from strength to strength, evolving into one of the most feared batsmen in the world. "His numbers since 2022 underline his dominance: 1800 runs at an average of 56.25, with six centuries at a strike rate of 75.6. These are not just impressive figures, they are a testament to his ability to thrive under pressure and dictate terms against the best bowlers in the world," Chappell added. Chappell praised the 30-year-old left-handed batter for prioritising intent over caution, a mindset that allows him to approach every ball with the aim of scoring runs," he wrote. "This doesn't mean recklessness — it's a calculated, efficient approach

that keeps bowlers and captains under pressure. By getting into good positions to score, Head simultaneously positions himself to defend against the better deliveries. It's a virtuous cycle that rewards his positive intent," he added. Chappell said Head's ability to strike balance between aggression and elegance are the qualities which also make him a captaincy candidate in future. "What sets Head apart is his ability to blend aggression with elegance. He has always been a powerful player of cross-bat shots, but his recent improvement in driving full deliveries down the ground has elevated his game," he wrote. "I believe Travis to be the most improved batter in world cricket in the past three years and in becoming so, has formed in favouritism to be the next Australian captain. "In his current form, Travis exemplifies the Australian way of batting, and I agree with Ricky Ponting and Ian Healy when they praise the way he is playing. "Today, as the butterfly of his transformation soars, it's clear: Travis Head is the best batsman in the world."

CHANGE OF NAME

By virtue of an affidavit before Notary Public, I, Pradeep Kumar Senapati (Ex.Army No-14591770w ACP,HAV), S/o-Bihari Charan Senapati, of Village-Kupuni, P.O-Narasinghpur, Tahasil/PS-Pattamunda, Dist-Kendrapara, Odisha, pin-754215 informed that My daughter's name and Date of Birth was mentioned as Sanjukta Senapati, Date of Birth-15.03.1995 in my Army Service Book No.873/2008. Her name and Date of Birth has been recorded as Rachana Senapati, Date of Birth-15.03.1997 in her HSC pass certificate and Aadhar Card(bearing Aadhar No-707168586962). I want to change my daughter's name and Date of Birth in my service book i.e from Sanjukta Senapati, D.O.B-15.03.1995 to Rachana Senapati, D.O.B-15.03.1997.