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MONEY 10
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WITH POSITIVE RETURNS
DESPITE ROLLER COASTER RIDE

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Humpy makes history with a rapid win

PTI ■ NEW YORK

India's Koneru Humpy bagged an epochal second World Rapid Chess Championship title, beating Irene Sukandar of Indonesia here on Sunday. Humpy had won the event back in 2019 at Georgia and the Indian No 1 is only the second player after China's Ju Wenjun to clinch the title more than once. The 37-year-old Humpy finished the tournament with 8.5 out of 11 points. "I'm very excited and I feel very happy. In fact, I expected it to be a very tough day, like some sort of tie-break. But when I finished the game, I only got to know when the arbitrator told me, and it was a tense moment for me," said Humpy, who began with



India's Koneru Humpy (R) during a match at the FIDE World Rapid Chess Championship, in New York PTI

black pieces, after her victory. "So, this is quite unexpected because the whole year I have been struggling a lot and I had very bad tournaments where I just ended up in last place. So, this came as a surprise," she added. Humpy's achievement capped a sensational year for Indian chess after D Gukesh defeated China's Ding Liren to emerge

champion in the classical format World Championship recently in Singapore. In September, India had won its first-ever gold medals in Open and Women's categories in the Chess Olympiad in Budapest. The seasoned Humpy admitted that she was not thinking about the title after her first-round defeat here. "I think, after the first round loss, I was nowhere thinking about the title, but things turned out well, especially yesterday winning the four games in a row helped me," she said. However, Humpy faced some challenges off the board too as well because of the big time-gap between India and the USA.



Firefighters and rescue team members work near the wreckage of a passenger plane at Muan International Airport in Muan, South Korea AP/PTI

Plane crash in South Korea claims 179 lives

AP ■ SEOUL

A passenger plane burst into flames Sunday after it skidded off a runway at a South Korean airport and slammed into a concrete fence when its front landing gear apparently failed to deploy, killing at least 179 people, officials said, in one of the country's worst aviation disasters. The National Fire Agency said rescuers raced to pull people from the Jeju Air passenger plane carrying 181 people at the airport in the town of Muan, about 290 kilometers (180 miles) south of Seoul. The Transport Ministry said the plane was a 15-year-old Boeing 737-800 jet that was returning from Bangkok and that the crash happened at 9:03 am local time. At least 179 people - among them 71 women, 71 men and nine others whose genders weren't immediately identifiable - died in the fire, the fire agency said. The death toll is expected to rise

further as the rest of the people aboard the plane remain missing about six hours after the incident. Emergency workers pulled out two people, both crew members, to safety, and local health officials said they remain conscious. The fire agency deployed 32 fire trucks and several helicopters to contain the fire. About 1,560 firefighters, police officers, soldiers and other officials were also sent to the site, it said. Footage of the crash aired by South Korean television channels showed the Jeju Air plane skidding across the airstrip at high speed, apparently with its landing gear still closed, overrunning the runway and colliding head-on with a concrete wall on the outskirts of the facility, triggering an explosion. Other local TV stations aired footage showing thick plumes of black smoke billowing from the plane, which was engulfed in flames.

Cold wave, dense fog to hit North India for New Years eve

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

As New Year's celebrations draw near, residents across North India, including Delhi and its surrounding regions, are preparing for an intense cold wave and heavy fog that could impact festivities. While the recent rains have subsided, a significant shift in weather patterns is expected to take hold in the coming days, according to the India Meteorological Department (IMD). The IMD has forecast a period of very dense fog and a cold wave for Delhi, Punjab, Haryana, and Rajasthan between December 30 and January 2. This sudden drop in temperatures, combined with reduced visibility, is likely to disrupt New Year plans for many. In Delhi, the city's maximum temperature has already dipped to 18 degrees Celsius, about 2.4 degrees below normal, while the minimum settled at 13 degrees Celsius, six notches above the average. However, a sharp drop in the minimum temperature by around six degrees is expected over the next few days.

WEATHER

AQI	225
MAX	18°C
MIN	13°C

Def Min seeks army's sharp eye on borders

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ BHOPAL/MHOW

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh on Sunday termed India a "not very lucky" nation on the security front and urged soldiers to keep a sharp eye on internal and external foes who he said are always active. He was addressing Army personnel at the more-than-two-century-old Mhow cantonment in the Indore district of Madhya Pradesh. "Taking the security scenario into account, Bharat is not a very lucky country because our northern border and western border continuously face challenges," said Singh, who is on a two-day tour of the state. Mhow cantonment, 25 km from Indore, is home to three premier training institutes - Army War College, Military College of Telecommunication Engineering and Infantry School - other



Photo: PTI

than the Infantry Museum and Army Marksmanship Unit. "We also face challenges on the internal front. In the backdrop of this, we can't sit quiet, unconcerned. Our enemies, whether internal or external, remain

active always. In these circumstances, we must keep a close eye on their activities and take appropriate and timely effective steps against them," he told the Armymen. To make Bharat a developed and self-reliant country by 2017, the role of the Army is very crucial, said the defence minister. "As the country's defence minister, I would like to tell you that we should be alert always. This patch of time, though often referred to as peacetime, struck me deeply when I arrived and witnessed the discipline and dedication with which you are undergoing training. Your regimen is no less than that of a war," he told the gathering. "To maintain such a level of discipline, dedication and firm conviction are needed," he added.



Delhi Police deports illegal Bangladeshi immigrants

SAUMYA SHUKLA ■ NEW DELHI

Intensifying its drive against illegal immigrants in the national Capital following Lieutenant Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena's orders, the Delhi Police has deported 17 Bangladeshi nationals who were residing in the south and southwest districts of the national capital. On Sunday, the Delhi Police claimed to deport 15 Bangladeshi nationals illegally residing in the national Capital illegally. The police also arrested five such illegal immigrants in the south district. In Southwest district, the police claimed that they deported eight such immigrants residing in Rangpuri area. Deputy Commissioner of Police (Southwest) Surendra Choudhary said, "Those deported are Jahangir, his wife Parina Begam and their six children including four sons and two daughters, hailing from Kekerhat village in Madaripur district of Bangladesh. According to police, Jahangir admitted to entering India through unofficial routes and subsequently, bringing his family over. They had destroyed their Bangladeshi identification documents and were living in Delhi while concealing their original identities. "A team from the Vasant Kunj South police station was tasked to identify illegal immigrants. As part of the intensified efforts to address concerns about unauthorised migrants, police conducted door-to-door verifications of 400 families in Rangpuri," Choudhary said. He added that verification forms were sent to the addresses of suspected individuals in West Bengal and a special team was dispatched to manually verify their documents.

Karnataka Police registers case over alleged kill plot

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ BENGALURU

The Karnataka police has registered a case against the close aide of Karnataka Minister Priyank Kharge, Raju Kapanur and five others in connection with hatching a conspiracy to kill BJP MLA Basavaraj Mattimadu and other leaders. Priyank Kharge, is the son of Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge, and the State is ruled by Congress led K Siddaramiah government. The case was registered based on a suicide note by a civil contractor, Sachin Panchal, who had mentioned that the Congress leaders had connived to kill Mattimadu, Siddalinga Swami of Andola Math, BJP leaders Manikant Rathod and Chandu Patil. Priyank however hit out at the BJP for making baseless allegations against him and politicising Sachin's death. He said nowhere in Panchal's death note is his name mentioned, and added that there were financial transactions between Panchal and Kapanur which need to be investigated. Panchal, a contractor from Bidar, allegedly ended his life by lying down in front of an approaching train on Thursday. In his suicide note, he had accused Kapanur and his aides of making death threats. Meanwhile, the Bidar District-In Charge Minister, Eshwar Khandre, who holds

the forest portfolio, visited Panchal's residence in Bhalki Taluk. As soon as the officials visited the house, the angry family members shouted at them to go away as they held them responsible for Sachin's death. Khandre consoled and assured them that action would be taken against the accused persons involved in the death. Later, the minister announced an ex gratia of Rs 10 lakh to the family members of Panchal. Khandre said the Government Railway Police (GRP) is probing the suicide case and the government would also consider handing over the investigation to the Criminal Investigation Department (CID). The BJP has taken the case seriously. It has demanded that the case should be handed over to the CBI. "The death note written by Panchal, a contractor from Bidar who committed suicide due to harassment by Minister @PriyankKharge's right-hand man, Raju, reveals alarming and serious information that he had given 'Supari' (contract killing) to kill our MLA Basavaraj Mattimadu, BJP leaders Chandu Patil, Manikantha Rathod and Andola Swami," the party's state president B Y Vijayendra said in a statement. Vijayendra and senior BJP functionaries have also decided to visit Panchal's house soon, party sources said.

Boy dies after 16-hour rescue from borewell in MP's Guna

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Even after multiple agencies tried to save the life of a 10-year-old boy for 16 hours, he died after being rescued from a 140-foot borewell in Madhya Pradesh's Guna district. The boy, Sumit Meena, slipped into the open shaft of the borewell at around 5 pm on Saturday in Pipliya village under Raghogarh assembly segment, located 50 km from the Guna district headquarters. Officials said that he was unresponsive when he was brought out at around 9.30 am on Sunday. The boy was rushed to a hospital in Raghogarh on life support system, Guna Superintendent of Police Sanjeev Sinha said. "Sorry to say, he is no more," Guna district chief medical and health officer Dr Rajkumar Rishishwar told reporters at the hospital. "The child was in the narrow borewell for the entire night in the chilly weather. His hands and feet were drenched and swollen. His clothes were also wet and mud was found in his mouth," he said. Doctors examined whether the body parts froze due to hypothermia (a condition that occurs when the core body temperature drops below 95 degrees Fahrenheit), he said.



A dug up drain and an open drain near the Saket metro station



Photos: Ranjan Dimri/The Pioneer

Delhi struggles with overflowing drains

SAUMYA SHUKLA ■ NEW DELHI

The national Capital is plagued by the problem of a bad drainage system which consistently leaves a stench in many areas and overflows with even a drop of rainfall. Exacerbating the problem, the civic authorities responsible to desilt and clean them to ensure that it don't make the area inhabitable and hamper the lives of the common people, often shrug their responsibility. One such drain flows from Lado Sarai and Chattarpur area and through most of the posh South Delhi areas. It is open in front of the Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) camp and the Saket metro station. Residents and people working in the area complain of persistent foul smell from the drain, even as they are forced to carry on with their lives amid the stench. Many do not even remember if they ever saw civic agencies undertaking cleaning work of the drain, which lies right in the heart of the city. Some suggest it was years ago when they saw such an activity. An autodriver who parks his vehicle

right near the drain said that it emits a foul smell, making it very hard to work. "You can get the smell yourself. We smell it daily but what can we do? We have to work here only because customers come here," Lakhinder Singh said. He resides in Sangam Vihar with his family, which is also not free from the foul smell. A resident of a nearby colony expressed his dissatisfaction with the government over not being able to carry out a cleaning drive on a regular basis. "As far as I remember I have only seen any cleaning of this drain three years ago. Since then, at least three monsoons have passed when waterlogging becomes a very big issue. This drain overflows during the monsoon and creates a very bad situation in the area, especially for people who have their homes here," he said. Another person, who puts up his food stall nearby, recalled how summer makes things even worse when it smells even worse. "A lot of people and tourists come to the Saket area and hence we put our stall here so we can earn some money but sometimes it smells so bad that customers do not want to stand here

and eat. The government agencies should clean such big drains," he said, adding that when foreigners come it tarnishes our image on a global level. Residents in the Khanpur and Sainik Farms area who are experiencing discomfort in their normal lives on a daily basis due to the construction work of Delhi Metro share how the drain is making their lives even worse. "When the smell from the drain reaches even our home, which is not located very close to it, you can assess how it must be," a man residing in Sainik Farms said, adding that it also overflows in monsoon causing waterlogging in the streets and making it hard to travel through the stretch. Even as there are multiple agencies in Delhi that manage the city's big and small drains, the high court has called for a single agency to look after them. Moreover, the current design of the drainage system, which was put in place almost 50 years ago in 1976, needs to be overhauled since it can only easily drain 50mm of rain in a day with the city coming to its knees whenever it witnesses massive intense rains.

Diaspora voter turnout disappoints despite high registrations

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Overseas Indians showed great enthusiasm in registering as electors, with nearly 1.2 lakh enrolling in the voter list, but very less people turned up to exercise their franchise in the Lok Sabha elections this year. As per the data released by the Election Commission, as many as 1,19,374 registered as overseas electors in 2024, with Kerala witnessing the highest registrations at 89,839. In 2019, as many as 99,844 had registered as overseas electors. The poll authority said only 2,958 overseas electors flew down to

India to participate in the largest democratic exercise in the world. Of these, an overwhelming 2,670 were from Kerala alone. Several large states such as Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu saw zero turnout of overseas electors. Gujarat, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's home state, saw only two out of 885 overseas electors casting their votes in the Lok Sabha elections. The same was the story in Maharashtra, where only 17 of the 5,097 NRI electors voted. Despite an increase of little over 19,500 registered overseas electors since the 2019 general election, their participation in the latest polls was

poor. While NRI voters is a generic term, the EC describes them as overseas electors — Indians living abroad for a variety of reasons and eligible to vote in the Lok Sabha, assembly and other direct elections. According to the existing electoral law, registered NRI voters have to come to their respective Lok Sabha and assembly constituencies to cast a vote. They have to show their original passport as proof of their identity. Data show that while there were 7,927 registered NRI electors in Andhra Pradesh, only 195 flew down to vote. According to EC, while eligible Indian citizens who



enrol in electoral rolls are called electors, those who actually exercise their franchise are described as voters. In Assam, none of the 19 registered electors voted. Similar was the case with Bihar where none of the 89 registered NRI electors exercised their franchise. Goa too witnessed a similar scenario with none of its 84 voters casting their ballots. In August 2018, the 16th Lok Sabha passed a bill to allow proxy voting rights to eligible overseas Indians. The bill, however, could not be brought to the Rajya Sabha. In 2020, the EC proposed to the Union Law Ministry to extend the

Electronically Transmitted Postal Ballot System (ETPBS) facility, so far available only to service voters, to eligible overseas Indian voters as well. It would require changes in the election rules. But the government has so far not taken a call on the issue. The EC had then told the government that it had been receiving several representations from the Indian diaspora to facilitate voting through postal ballots. The electors cited travel costs, compulsions of employment overseas, and education, among other things, as the reasons for their inability to cast their votes in person, the EC said.

Delhi Chalo Andolan 2.0

Punjab Bandh Today: Services Across Sectors to Be Hit

Dallewal's fast enters 34th day
MONIKA MALIK ■ CHANDIGARH

Services Likely To Be Affected	Services To Remain Operational
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ Educational Institutions: Panjab University, GNDU postpone exams ♦ Fruits and Vegetables: Fresh supplies to be halted due to support from truckers ♦ Milk vendors: Vendors may not operate due to logistical issues during bandh hours ♦ Transport Services: Private and public buses, along with rail services, to remain suspended, with chakka jam at 200 locations and railway track blockages at 50 key points ♦ Petrol Pumps, LPG delivery: Petrol pumps may remain open for emergencies, but LPG deliveries could be delayed due to transport disruptions ♦ Markets, Business Hubs: Many markets, especially in areas affected by chakka jams, will remain closed ♦ Govt Offices: There may be reduced staff attendance, especially from outstation employees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ Medical services: Hospitals and medical services will continue as usual ♦ Weddings: Baraats, wedding processions not to be stopped during the bandh ♦ Emergency services: like airport-related travel, will not be disrupted ♦ Interviews: Interviewees to be given safe passage during bandh hours

Punjab is set to experience a statewide bandh on Monday as part of the farmers' ongoing agitation — Delhi Chalo Andolan 2.0. The bandh call, given by the Kisan Mazdoor Morcha (KMM) and Samyukt Kisan Morcha (SKM) (non-political), will run from 7 am to 4 pm and is expected to disrupt services across various sectors, especially the rail and road traffic.

The bandh comes as farmer leader Jagjit Singh Dallewal's hunger strike reaches its 34th day. Dallewal's indefinite fast is a protest against the government's inaction on 13 critical demands, including the legal guarantee of Minimum Support Price (MSP) for crops. His health condition has become a cause for concern, adding urgency to the ongoing protests.

The bandh is expected to have a significant impact on daily life across the State. Punjab Roadways and private transport unions have suspended their services for the duration of the bandh. Chakka jam are planned at over 200 spots on highways and link roads, while railway tracks will be blocked at 50 locations.

Many markets, including those in Rajpura, Sangrur, Mansa, and Moga, will remain closed. Local business groups have extended support to the bandh, although larger business associations have left participation decisions to individual chapters.

Petrol pumps and LPG cylinder deliveries will also be affected, with transport unions joining the protests. However, emergency requirements will be attended to. Deliveries of milk and fresh produce will be disrupted due to the transport strike and mandi shutdowns.

those affiliated with Panjab University, have postponed Monday's exams to Tuesday; and announced closures for the day.

While no formal strike has been announced by government employees, attendance is likely to be low due to transport challenges. Medical services, including hospitals and emergency facilities, will function uninterrupted. Emergency services, including medical facilities, airport-related travel, will not be disrupted during the bandh. Essential events like weddings and interviews have been assured safe passage during the bandh hours.

Local gurdwaras in districts such as Muktsar, Sangrur, Bathinda, and Ludhiana have arranged langar (community kitchens) to support the protesters and the general public.

Local communities across Punjab have been urged to support the bandh by adjusting their daily schedules. Residents have been advised to stock essential supplies in advance. Farmers have assured that emergencies and critical services will not be obstructed, emphasizing the peaceful nature of their protest.

Citizens have been advised to plan their activities accordingly to avoid inconvenience on Monday. Farmer leader and KMM coordinator Sarwan Singh Pandher has urged the public to complete essential

tasks a day in advance to minimize disruption. The bandh is expected to impact millions of residents across Punjab, with far-reaching consequences for daily life and commerce.

Support for the Bandh

The bandh call has received widespread support from various organizations and unions. The Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) has announced the closure of its offices and the rescheduling of meetings in solidarity with the farmers.

Besides, both private and public transport unions have pledged full participation. The fruit and vegetable mandis are also expected to remain closed as truckers have also announced to join the agitation.

A day preceding the bandh, farmers organized a tractor march in Ludhiana, calling on the public to support their cause. Protests and sit-ins have continued at key border sites, such as Shambhu and Khanauri, where farmers have been steadfast despite severe winter conditions.

The 'Delhi Chalo Andolan 2.0' began on February 13, 2024, at the Shambhu and Khanauri borders. Since then, farmers have attempted to march to Delhi multiple times, between December 6 and 14, facing resistance from Haryana's

authorities. These attempts have been met with water cannons, tear gas shelling, and other measures, but the farmers have remained resolute.

1,125 Govt Buses on 577 Routes to Be Suspended

The Punjab Roadways and PRTC workers' unions have also announced their participation in the Punjab bandh, suspending services of 1,125 government buses on 577 routes for four hours — from 10 am to 2 pm. This partial strike aimed at balancing the farmers' cause with public convenience, ensuring minimal disruption for daily commuters.

The affected routes include inter-state services to Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Delhi, Rajasthan, and Uttarakhand, with operations halted at depots in Patiala, Bathinda, Ludhiana, and Chandigarh. Ahead of the bandh, bus conductors have been informing passengers to minimize inconvenience. Private bus operators have also extended their support to the protest.

PU, GNDU Postpones Exams

In light of the Punjab Bandh, Panjab University, Chandigarh; and Guru Nanak Dev University (GNDU),

'It's Up to Centre to Decide on Dallewal's Eviction', says farmers at Khanauri

Khanauri: As Jagjit Singh Dallewal's indefinite hunger strike enters its 34th day on Sunday, farmer leaders at Khanauri protest site have made it clear that they will continue their demonstration in line with Gandhian principles, leaving it up to the Government to decide whether to forcibly evict their leader. The statement comes amid growing tension, as the Supreme Court, a day before, sharply criticized the Punjab Government for not transferring Dallewal to a hospital, despite his deteriorating health.

Dallewal, a key figure in the ongoing farmer protests at the Punjab-Haryana border, is leading the protest seeking a legal guarantee for MSP on crops. His fast has drawn significant attention, with his supporters determined to press the Centre for their demands.

Speaking to the press at the protest site, a prominent farmer leader and Dallewal's aide Abhimanyu Kohar said: "The Centre has been trying to defame and suppress our agitation from the very beginning." He accused the government of portraying farmers as stubborn while disregarding their legitimate demands. "It is the Centre that is adopting this approach, not listening to us, and ignoring the issues faced by farmers," Kohar added.

Kohar emphasized that the farmers were adhering to Gandhian principles of peaceful protest, despite the immense pressure and hardships they have faced. "Our protests have been peaceful, despite the government's oppression," he said, noting that they have continued their struggle without resorting to violence. "Now, it is up to the government and constitutional bodies to decide whether they want to use force to evict Dallewal," he added.

Kohar also placed the responsibility for any escalation squarely on the Centre, urging the Government to address the farmers' concerns rather than escalate the situation.

Farmers have vowed to continue their agitation, with Kohar making an impassioned appeal to the people of the country. "This movement for MSP is at a critical stage. We are on the brink of victory. Dallewal has put his life on the line for the cause," he said, urging the citizens to decide whether to remain passive or come to Khanauri in solidarity. Kaka Singh Kotra, another farmer leader, echoed this sentiment, calling on Punjabis to gather in large numbers to support Dallewal.

Meanwhile, in a video message on Saturday, Dallewal responded to the Supreme Court's remarks, refuting claims that he was being held against his will. "Who spread this misconception that I am being kept hostage? I am here of my own volition, and I am not under anyone's pressure," Dallewal said. He emphasized that his hunger strike was a personal decision, rooted in the suffering of farmers across the country. "Seven lakh farmers have committed suicide due to debt. Saving farmers is necessary, and that's why I am here," he said.

Notably, the Supreme Court has given the Punjab Government until December 31 to persuade Dallewal to seek medical treatment, allowing the state to seek assistance from the Centre if needed. However, Dallewal has thus far refused medical attention, with a team of doctors monitoring his condition round-the-clock. The coming days will be critical as the protest enters a decisive phase.

Amritsar, have postponed all scheduled for December 30, 2024. GNDU issued a notification regarding degree exams.

Punjab Computer Teachers' Protest Exposes AAP's Education Model

A Teacher's Fast-Unto-Death Enters 8th Day; Relay Hunger Strike 120th Day
PNS ■ SANGRUR

While the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) is busy promoting its much-touted 'Education Model' in Delhi ahead of the upcoming Assembly elections, a computer teacher's hunger strike in Punjab has brought to light the stark contrast between the party's claims and its actions on the ground. Johnny Singha, a government computer teacher, entered the eighth day of his fast-unto-death on Sunday, demanding the AAP-led Punjab Government to pay the long-overdue salaries and address other critical concerns of the teaching staff.

Singha's extreme protest has garnered attention as he, alongside his fellow teachers, continues to face neglect from the State Government. His fast-unto-death began on December 22, while a relay hunger strike by other computer teachers has been ongoing for 120 days, with no significant intervention from the state authorities.

united under the banner of the Computer Adhyapak Bhukh Hartal Sangharsh Committee, have been vocal about the Punjab Government's failure to meet their wage revision demands and provide wage parity.

One of the teachers present near Singha's protest site, Harpreet, expressed his concern: "Despite Johnny sir's hunger strike entering its eighth day, not a single official has come forward to address his grievances." The frustration among the protesting teachers is palpable, as they compare their plight to the government's swift actions to address other protests. "While Ministers visited the Khanauri border to meet fasting farmer leader Jagjit Singh Dallewal, no effort has been made to resolve our issues," said another teacher Gurpreet Siddhu.

The teachers' discontent stems from the broken promises made by AAP during 2022 elections. "Ahead of the Assembly election, AAP had promised that under their government, nobody would need to agitate or climb water tanks to get their genuine demands accepted... But today, not only have our earlier wage benefits been with-

drawn but our colleague has also been pushed towards fast-unto-death," said Siddhu, reflecting the deep disappointment among the teachers.

Rohit Kansal, another protesting teacher, condemned the government's apathy, stating, "Johnny sir was left with no option but to take this extreme step to force the government to listen. He is determined that his sacrifice will not be in vain; he wants to fight for our rights, even if it costs him his life." Kansal criticized the government's "double-speak," accusing them of failing to fulfill promises made during over 40 meetings with ministers.

The teachers are demanding several key issues be addressed, including the implementation of the Sixth Pay Commission, a revision in dearness allowance (DA), and compensation for the families of over 100 computer teachers who have passed away during their service. Last month, the teachers had staged a dharna outside the Chief Minister's residence, but were persuaded to move their protest after receiving assurances from State Finance Minister Harpal Singh Cheema and Education Minister Harjot Singh Bains.

PM Modi gives Kurukshetra's example in malaria prevention during 'Mann Ki Baat'

PNS ■ PANCHKULA

Haryana Chief Minister Nayab Singh Saini on Sunday said that Prime Minister Narendra Modi shared the success story of Kurukshetra's efforts in malaria prevention with the entire country during his 'Mann Ki Baat' programme. The Prime Minister praised Kurukshetra for presenting a model to tackle malaria, said the Chief Minister after listening to 'Mann Ki Baat' programme along with party workers in Panchkula.

Saini said that Haryana Health Department ran special campaigns to control mosquito breeding, spread awareness through radio and other mediums, and successfully reduced malaria cases. The Prime Minister commended Haryana's efforts and mentioned that the World Health Organization (WHO) has also recognized India's initiatives in malaria prevention, he added.

The Chief Minister said that the Prime Minister also talked about the upcoming Maha Kumbh in Prayagraj



starting January 14, 2025, emphasizing its cultural and traditional importance. Lakhs of devotees from India and abroad participate in this event, he added.

Later, the Chief Minister attended a satsang at the Sant Nirankari Bhawan in Panchkula, and praised the Sant Nirankari Mission for its active participation in various social initiatives. Saini added that he recently participated in 'Ek Ped Maa Ke Naam' campaign held at Sant Nirankari Adhyatmik Sthal, Samalkha, where approximately 30,000 saplings were planted. "Under the leader-

ship of Satguru Mata Sudiksha Ji Maharaj, the Mission also participates in blood donation camps and cleanliness drives, which benefit society significantly," he said.

Mann Ki Baat' prog continues to inspire and guide nation: Hry Speaker

Haryana Vidhan Sabha Speaker Harvinder Kalyan, addressing the gathering after airing of 117th episode of 'Mann Ki Baat' programme in Karnal's Jani village on Sunday, asserted that the programme continues to provide new direction and inspiration to the entire nation with each episode. The programme motivates people from all walks of life to excel in their respective fields and inspires a collective commitment to progress.

"Despite the challenges faced in various regions, the stories of resilience and success shared by the Prime Minister through the programme inspire the youth to pursue their dreams with determination," he said.

Grenade Attack on Police Stations

Punjab Police Busts Pak-Backed BKI Terror Module: Mastermind Among 5 Arrested
PNS ■ CHANDIGARH/BATALA

Punjab Police has successfully dismantled a Pakistan-ISI-backed terror module, with the arrest of five individuals, including its mastermind Abhijot Singh. The terror module, linked to the Babbar Khalsa International (BKI), was responsible for the recent grenade attacks on police establishments in Batala and Gurdaspur.

The state Director General of Police (DGP) Gaurav Yadav, confirming the arrests on Sunday, emphasized that this development has solved all the incidents of attacks on police establishments across the State.

The five arrested members of the module have been identified as Abhijot Singh, Kuljit Singh, Rohit alias Ghessi, Shubham, and Gurjinder Singh alias Raja — all residents of Qila Lal Singh in Batala.

During the operation, police teams recovered two pistols, including a sophisticated 9MM Glock pistol and a .32 bore pistol, which were in the possession of the arrested individuals.

The arrests come after two major attacks — the first on December 12, when a hand grenade was hurled at the Ghaniae Ke Bangar Police Station in Batala; and the second on December 20, when a grenade attack targeted the Wadala Bangar Police Post in Gurdaspur. The BKI had claimed responsibility for both attacks through separate social media posts, further solidifying the group's involvement in these terror acts.

DGP Yadav commended the Punjab Police for their swift action, stating that the successful bust of this module had solved all the incidents related to attacks on police establishments in the state. He also revealed that during the operation to recover evidence, two of the accused — Abhijot Singh and Kuljit Singh — attempted to escape police custody and engaged in a gunfight. In the ensuing encounter, both accused sustained bullet injuries. They were subsequently admitted to Civil Hospital in Batala, where they are reported to be in stable condition.

Further investigations are underway to trace the full scope of the terror module, including establishing both forward and backward linkages.

DIG Border Range Satinder Singh detailed that Batala Police had launched a special operation after the attacks, using a combination of technical and human intelligence. Under the leadership of Batala SSP Suhail Qasim Mir, the police team successfully tracked down and apprehended all the accused involved in the attacks.

SSP Mir added that the investigation is ongoing, and more arrests and recoveries are anticipated in the coming days as the police work to dismantle the entire terror network operating within the state. The police are also focusing on uncovering further ties to foreign-based operatives within the BKI.

Punjab Govt intensifies efforts to clean 'Buddha Dariya'

Focus on cow dung disposal and industrial waste management
PNS ■ LUDHIANA/CHANDIGARH

To address the pollution crisis plaguing the 'Buddha Dariya', the Punjab Government has stepped up its commitment with Local Bodies Minister Dr Ravjot Singh and Rajya Sabha MP Sant Balbir Singh Seechewal on Sunday visiting the 'Buddha Dariya' site along with the 225 MLD Jamalpur Sewage Treatment Plant (STP) on Tajpur Road to oversee the ongoing cleaning and waste management initiatives. The visit was aimed at assessing the progress and accelerating the resolution of longstanding

environmental challenges, including the critical issue of cow dung disposal that has severely impacted the river's water quality.

During their visit, the two were joined by several prominent local politicians and officials, including Ludhiana East MLA Daljit Singh Bhola Grewal, Ludhiana North MLA Madan Lal Bagga, and Ludhiana West MLA Gurpreet Bassi Gogi. Senior bureaucrats, including Additional Chief Secretary (Local Bodies) Tejveer Singh, Local Bodies Department director Gurpreet Singh Khaira, and officials from the Punjab Pollution Control Board (PPCB) and Punjab Water Supply and Sewerage Board (PWSSB), were also present to discuss critical measures.

Addressing the ongoing pollution from cow dung, Dr

Ravjot and MP Seechewal emphasized the urgent need to establish biogas plants in Haibowal and Tajpur Road dairy complexes for proper disposal of cow dung. Currently, one biogas plant is operational at Haibowal, and plans for an additional plant are underway.

In the interim, local authorities have been instructed to hire private contractors to lift and transport the cow dung from dairy complexes to designated disposal sites. Civic body officials assured that machinery and manpower had been deployed, and tenders would be floated soon for the required contracts.

Additionally, they highlighted the importance of regulating waste management in dyeing industry. Dr Ravjot and MP Seechewal directed the PPCB to conduct regular

checks on Common Effluent Treatment Plants (CETPs) and STPs operating in the region to ensure compliance with environmental standards. They also issued clear instructions to prevent illegal dumping of electroplating industry waste into the sewer lines, a key contributor to the contamination of the river.

Another significant step discussed during the visit was the temporary arrangements being made by the Sewerage Board to pump sewage waste from the gashala point to the Jamalpur STP, until the Intermediate Pumping Station (IPS) is established at the site. Due to a pending court case, the IPS project has been delayed, but contractors have been directed to ensure that all dairy units in the area are properly connected to the waste disposal system to pre-

vent further contamination of Buddha Dariya.

Both Dr Ravjot and MP Seechewal reiterated their commitment to cleaning 'Buddha Dariya', stressing that they were not against industries but would not allow pollution to continue unchecked. They emphasized that public cooperation was crucial in this cleanup mission.

Renowned environmentalist and MP Seechewal, who is personally overseeing the second phase of 'Kar Sewa' for rejuvenating the river, also appealed to the people to join the movement, particularly highlighting the historical and religious significance of the river. Additionally, illegal sewer connections from dairy units have already been disconnected in recent weeks as part of the broader efforts to restore the river's health.



Zirakpur: As part of the annual tradition, a langar (community kitchen) was organized at Satguru Studio, Baltana, in memory of the Sahibzades. Many people gathered to partake in the langar, which has been held annually for the past five years. The langar was organized by Satguru Studio with support from Mohit, Rohit, Darshmit, Saurav, and others. The event continues to be a meaningful way to honour the memory of the Sahibzades and serve the community.

Constitution has stood the test of time, remains guiding light for us: PM Modi in Mann ki Baat

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday said the Constitution has stood every test of time, lauding it as "our guiding light". Speaking in his monthly Mann ki Baat broadcast, Modi noted that the next Republic Day will mark the 75th anniversary of the implementation of the Constitution.

"It is a matter of immense pride for all of us.

The Constitution which its makers gave to us has stood every test of time. It is our guiding light, our guide," he said. Modi said he reached this position in life because of the country's guiding document. Modi also pointed out that the next Republic Day will mark the 75th anniversary of the implementation of the Constitution.

He asked people to visit the website constitution75.Com which, he said, has been launched to link citizens with the constitutional heritage and legacy.

They can read the Constitution in different languages, ask questions and upload their videos leading to its preamble, he said. His government, Modi said, has launched yearlong activities



since the Constitution Day on November 26. Opposition parties, especially the Congress, have accused his government of weakening the Constitution, a charge vehemently denied by the ruling BJP.

Modi has constantly highlighted his government's efforts to strengthen constitutional values and spirit and has, in turn, accused the main opposition Congress of subverting the country's guiding document whenever it was in power.

Speaking further in Mann ki Baat Modi described the upcoming 'Maha Kumbh' as the 'mahakumbh of unity' as he asked people to return from

the grand religious congregation with the resolve to banish hate and division from the society. "Mahakumbh's speciality lies not just in its vastness but also in its diversity," he said. It is a matter of pride for the countrymen, he said, and asserted that the Constitution has stood every test of time.

"It is our guiding light," he said, adding that he reached this position in his life due to the Constitution.

Modi also remembered four icons of Indian cinema Raj Kapoor, Mohammed Rafi, Akkineni Nageswara Rao and Tapan Sinha in their birth centenary year in his last Mann Ki Baat address of 2024.

PM Modi lauds Bastar Olympics, hails upcoming WAVES Summit

Prime Minister Narendra Modi lauded the recently concluded Bastar Olympics 2024, saying the event has given a platform for youngsters to hone their talent and build a new Bharat. The Bastar Olympics 2024, held in the eponymous district, was organised by the Chhattisgarh government last month.

The multi-sport event was aimed at spotting local talents, integrating tribal youths of Naxal-hit Bastar into the mainstream and enhancing relations between people and administration. Referring to the Bastar Olympics in his monthly 'Mann ki Baat' broadcast, Modi said it was a unique event and a symbol that a change was taking place in the country.

"Do you know that a unique Olympic has started in our Bastar! Yes, a new revolution is coming into being in Bastar through the first Bastar Olympics. Friends, the Bastar Olympics is not just a sports event. It is a platform where development and

sports are merging together, where our youth are honing their talent and building a new Bharat," he said. Modi said it was a matter of "great joy" for him that the dream of the Bastar Olympics had come true. The prime minister also referred to several individual prize winners in the sporting event.

India will host the World Audio Visual Entertainment Summit (WAVES) for the first time in February next year which will be a global platform for its creative talents, fostering collaborations and showcasing the country's potential as a hub for world-class content creation. Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke extensively about the WAVES Summit in his monthly 'Mann ki Baat' Radio address on Sunday. Comparing the WAVES to global events like the World Economic Forum in Davos, Modi said the leaders from the media and entertainment industry as well as creative minds from across the globe will gather.

Home Ministry's 2024 highlights: New criminal laws, CAA rollout and violence reduction efforts

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Replacing the century-old criminal laws with a new set of legislations for introducing a modern and technology-driven criminal justice system, rolling out the controversial Citizenship (Amendment) Act and fire-fighting to check unabated violence in Manipur kept the Union home ministry busy in 2024.

Assisting the Election Commission in holding the assembly elections in Jammu and Kashmir without major incidents and bringing down the violence in Naxal-affected states and northeastern region are the other key highlights of the country's crucial ministry. While the population enumeration exercise Census continues to be on hold for past four years as no decision has been taken by the ministry as to when it will be carried out, the ministry created five year districts in Ladakh and renamed Port Blair in Andaman and Nicobar Islands as Sri Vijaya Puram during the year.

The three new criminal laws - Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita and the Bharatiya Sakshya Adhinyam - replaced the colonial-era Indian Penal Code, the Code of Criminal Procedure and the Indian Evidence Act of 1872



respectively. The new laws came into effect from July 1. Home Minister Amit Shah, who piloted the legislations, said the new laws would give priority to providing justice, unlike the colonial-era laws that gave primacy to penal action.

"These laws are made by Indians, for Indians and by an Indian Parliament and marks the end of colonial criminal justice laws," he said. Shah said the laws were not just about changing the nomenclature but bringing about a complete overhaul. "Soul, body and spirit of the new laws are Indian," he said.

The new laws brought in a modern justice system, incorporating provisions such as Zero FIR, online registration of police complaints, summonses through electronic modes such as SMS and mandatory videography of crime scenes for all heinous crimes.

According to home ministry officials, the new laws have

tried to address some of the current social realities and crimes and are going to provide a mechanism to effectively deal with these, keeping in view the ideals enshrined in the Constitution. The CAA, which was enacted in December 2019 for granting Indian nationality to persecuted Hindu, Sikh, Jain, Buddhist, Parsi and Christian migrants from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan who came to India on or before December 31, 2014, was rolled out in March and the first set of 14 people were granted Indian citizenship under the law in May. After the enactment in 2019, the CAA got the president's assent a few days later but the rules under which the Indian citizenship were supposed to be granted were issued only on March 11 after over a delay of four years. The passing of the CAA in 2019 sparked protests in different parts of the country with agitators terming it "discriminatory".

Tigress Zeenat eludes sedation in West Bengal's Bankura district, operation to resume

PTI ■ KOLKATA

Tigress Zeenat, who strayed from Odisha's Simlipal forest to Bankura in West Bengal, could not be sedated despite tranquilisers having been used on it early Sunday morning, and the operation will be resumed after veterinarians give the go ahead, an official said.

Chief Wildlife Warden, West Bengal, Debal Roy said the tigress is at the same place as Saturday night in Bankura district's Gopalpur forest and has been encircled with double netting.

The perimeter of the netting has been shortened with the tigress inside the netted area, he said.

"The tigress was tranquilised at 1.20 am today, but it could not be sedated after repeated doses," Roy told PTI.

He said that since there is an upper limit to the amount of



dosage to be applied on the animal in tranquiliser shots, the operation to sedate it was abandoned temporarily at 4.30 am.

"The tigress is in a very excited state and that is why it is not getting sedated," he said. Roy said that Zeenat has been given some rest at present.

Stating that there are three veterinarians present at the site, he said, "After the vets examine the situation, the tranquilisation efforts to

sedate the tigress will be resumed.

Zeenat was brought to Odisha's Simlipal from Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve (TATR) in Maharashtra last month with the goal of introducing a new gene pool to the tiger population.

Zeenat, who strayed from Simlipal, travelled about 15 km to seek refuge in a forest in Manbazar block on December 27 from Bandwan where she

was holed up between December 24 and 26. She has been in West Bengal for nearly a week after crossing over from Jharkhand.

The tigress has covered over 120 km, roaming the forests at the tri-junction of West Bengal, Jharkhand, and Odisha, in search of new territory after leaving Simlipal. She has shown no signs of heading back to Simlipal Tiger Reserve so far, senior Forest department officials said. The big cat has so far not touched the baits kept in trap-door cages but devoured domestic goats that strayed into the forests.

She has been travelling shorter distances over the last few days, the officials said. Drones have been deployed to monitor her movements but heavy forests are affecting the surveillance, Forest department officials said.

Akhilesh Yadav calls for ballot paper elections, citing distrust in EVMs

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ LUCKNOW

Samajwadi Party (SP) president Akhilesh Yadav has called for elections to be conducted using ballot papers, citing a lack of trust in electronic voting machines (EVMs). The former Uttar Pradesh chief minister said this at a press conference at the SP headquarters here on Sunday, alongside Rahul Kumar Kamboj, an Indian-origin member of Parliament in Germany.

"Even a country like Germany conducts elections using ballot papers. But in India, elections are conducted with EVMs to serve vested interests," Yadav said. Emphasising the need for elections that inspire confidence, he said, "No one trusts EVMs. Even the faces of those who win elections seem dejected as they too do

not have faith in the system."

At the press conference, Kamboj highlighted the benefits of Germany's ballot-paper voting system. "In Germany, voting is still conducted using ballot papers. It is an important system because any discrepancies can be addressed with a recount," he explained.

Reflecting on his visit to Lucknow and his longstanding relationship with Yadav, Kamboj said, "My efforts are focused on fostering a collaboration between Indian-origin individuals and Germany, so that the qualities of both countries can come together. We aim to facilitate cultural exchanges and I invite everyone to participate in the upcoming cultural festivals in Germany. Visa issues will no longer be a hurdle," he said.

Ayodhya Ram temple to get three lifts for easy access to upper floors



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ AYODHYA

In a bid to facilitate a smooth movement for the devotees, who may find it difficult to reach the first floor of Lord Ram temple in Ayodhya, the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust will be installing three lifts within the temple premises, an official said. "We have told you on earlier occasions that the temple of Shri Ram Janmabhoomi is a three-storeyed one.

Ram Lalla, who is present on the ground floor, is visited by lakhs of devotees on a daily basis. On the first floor, there will be the Lord's 'Darbar' (court), there will be the family (of the Lord).

There will be a floor above that as well in which there is a sanctum sanctorum. It is not yet decided what will be in that," Anil Mishra, a member of the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust, told reporters late Saturday evening.

Mishra said that people, who are going to see Ram 'Darbar', can go from the

first floor using the stairs. "For those people who want to go up, but cannot do it with the help of stairs, we have made arrangements for them to go to the temple from the 'Parkota' long back.

The 'Parkota', which connects the corridors of the temples, will be completed. Those who want to go up for darshan will go from behind the temple, arrangements are being made to install a lift there," Mishra said.

"When the 'Parkota' is built, a lift will be installed. The construction agency is making arrangements for installing the lifts. Two lifts will be installed. One lift of big size, which can be used by wheel chair-bound devotees. In this way, there will be a lift in the north direction from where the VIP entry is.

A small lift will be installed for the prominent people and saints who come. In this way, arrangements for three lifts are being made in the parks," he added. Mishra said 'Parkota' connects the corridors of the temple.

Over six Lakh apply for PM's internship scheme with 1.27 Lakh opportunities



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Centre on Sunday said about 6.21 lakh applications have been received for 1.27 lakh opportunities under the Prime Minister's Internship Scheme and the selection process is continuing.

The scheme, announced in the 2024 Union Budget, aims to provide internship opportunities to 1 crore youth in top-500 companies over five years.

A pilot project of the scheme, started on October 3, aims to provide 1.25 lakh internship opportunities during 2024-25. In a release on Sunday, the corporate affairs ministry said approximately 6.21 lakh applications have been received against 1.27 lakh internship opportunities. "The selection process for internship is ongoing." Partner companies have posted about 1.27 lakh internship opportunities on the internship scheme

portal. About 4.87 lakh individuals have completed their KYC and registered themselves on the portal, the release said.

Under the scheme, interns will be provided a monthly financial assistance of Rs 5,000 for 12 months and a one-time grant of Rs 6,000. While mentioning about various initiatives taken this year, the ministry said the framework governing cost record and audit will be amended after considering stakeholders' comments and recommendations of the ministry-appointed committee.

From financial year 2023-24, the ministry has issued regular advisories to companies on adhering to the prescribed timelines for filing cost audit reports. "This initiative has led to a 14 per cent increase in the timely submission of cost audit reports during 2023-24 compared to the previous year," the release added.

ISRO set to launch historic SpaDEX mission, demonstrating space docking capability

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

ISRO is set to launch two satellites on Monday night from the Sriharikota spaceport to demonstrate docking and undocking of spacecraft in orbit, which will make India the fourth country in the world to achieve the feat. The Indian Space Research Organisation's (ISRO) warhorse rocket Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle (PSLV) will place the two satellites - SDX01 and SDX02 - in a 476-km circular orbit and attempt the Space Docking Experiment (SpaDEX) in the first week of January, the space agency officials said.

"This mission will mark India's entry into the

exclusive league of nations capable of mastering space docking," Union Science and Technology Minister Jitendra Singh said.

The SpaDEX mission is expected to be a stepping stone for India's future endeavours in space exploration which include getting rocks and soil from the moon on Earth, the proposed Bharatiya Antariksha Station and landing an astronaut on the lunar surface.

Only the US, Russia and China have mastered space docking technologies. "The primary objective of the SpaDEX mission is to develop and demonstrate the technology needed for

rendezvous, docking, and undocking of two small spacecraft (SDX01, which is the Chaser, and SDX02, the Target) in a low-Earth circular orbit," an ISRO official said.

The secondary objective of the mission includes demonstration of the transfer of electric power between the docked spacecraft, which is essential for future applications such as in-space robotics; composite spacecraft control and payload operations after undocking.

"This capability is vital for India's lunar and interplanetary missions. Docking technology enables multi-launch missions and

supports future human spaceflight," Singh said.

After the demonstration of docking and undocking experiments, the two satellites will continue to orbit the Earth for standalone missions for two years. The SDX01 satellite is equipped with a High Resolution Camera (HRC) and SDX02 has two payloads - Miniature Multispectral (MMX) payload and Radiation Monitor (RadMon).

These payloads will provide high-resolution images, natural resource monitoring, vegetation studies and on-orbit radiation environment measurements which have numerous applications, ISRO said.

Astrophysicist Priyamvada Natarajan on the night sky's power to inspire curiosity

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The night sky stokes human curiosity, inspires awe, and gives you the permission to dream and explore what lies beyond, astrophysicist Priyamvada Natarajan, known for her groundbreaking work on black holes, said.

Natarajan, a professor of astronomy and physics at Yale University, US, has published pioneering research on black holes and dark matter - considered the 'enigmas' of the universe. "The spirit of curiosity is fundamentally human, it's part of our DNA, to make sense of the cosmos and our place in it - to understand the regularity of cosmic events, such as what causes day and night, seasons - to go beyond the wonder and fascination, and seek an explanation. As human beings, we've always



been preoccupied with the cosmos and fascinated by it," Natarajan told PTI in an interview earlier this month at Ashoka University, Haryana.

She was part of a team inaugurating the Ashoka-ZEISS Core Imaging Facility, equipped with microscopes of advanced resolution to view a cell and its internal

structure. She is also on the university's Science Advisory Council.

"When you look at the night sky, you see something that's much bigger than yourself, there's an inevitable sense of awe - the sky is for everyone, and it gives us the permission to dream and soar," Natarajan said. A black hole is usually considered to form

in the 'dying' stage of a star's life. Made of highly compact matter, a black hole possesses a gravity so intense that even light cannot escape.

However, in 2005-06, Natarajan proposed for the first time in theory that there must be another way for black holes to form, bypassing the formation of a star first, evidence in support of which she and her colleagues at Yale would go on to publish in Nature Astronomy and The Astrophysical Journal Letters in December 2023. In a 2017 paper, Natarajan's team predicted what the James Webb Space Telescope might detect, much before its launch in December 2021 by the US space agency NASA. Looking at images of the early universe, the team found a galaxy 'UH1' harbouring an overmassive

black hole at its centre, which possessed all the properties as predicted - it was a few million times the mass of the Sun, heavier than expected and firmly in its place already in the very young universe. "And so, if the first black hole is just a few times the mass of the Sun, and the only way to form these seeds was from the explosion of the first stars as per the traditional path very early in the universe, then there's very little time in the universe to grow to a billion solar masses. How can you grow that much, so fast? There has to be a resolution," Natarajan, recounting the time she came up with the idea, said.

"That was what motivated us to ask, 'Ok, is there has to be another way to make a black hole whose birth mass, or the mass of a black hole when it's born, is not a few times the

mass of the Sun, but actually 10,000 or even 100,000 times the mass of the Sun, so that then you don't have to grow that much to account for what is seen already," she said. The idea is referred to as 'direct collapse.' The work brought Natarajan multiple accolades, including being featured on TIME's 100 Influential People of the Year list - "unusual" for a scientist. She was also elected a fellow to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

"A lot of the creative pursuits, such as poetry, music, astronomy, don't generate monetisable returns in the short-term, per se. But that does not make them any less valuable," she said. Natarajan is also noted for her philosophy on mapping dark matter in clusters of about a thousand galaxies, held together by gravity.

Manipur: Four non-local laborers held for ILP violations

PNS ■ IMPHAL

Four people were held in Manipur's Thoubal district for allegedly violating the Inner Line Permit system, CM N Biren Singh said. They were apprehended from Yairipok Bishnunaha on Saturday and steps are being taken for their "deportation", he said. "Today, four non-local laborers were apprehended for violating the Inner Line Permit (ILP) system. They were found residing without valid ILP cards and overstaying at the Yairipok Bishnunaha water reservoir construction site," he said in a social media post. They were identified as Afsar Ali (22), Md Sanfaraj (20), Md Rahamtullah (23) and Sahabaj Alam (20), the CM said. "The defaulters were taken into custody by Yairipok Police Station and have been produced before the Executive Magistrate, Thoubal. Legal action will be initiated against them as per the provisions of the ILP system, and steps are being taken to deport them from the state," he said.

Haryana scraps bonus marks based on socioeconomic status

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ CHANDIGARH

The Haryana Cabinet has approved amendments in the Common Eligibility Test policy to remove the grant of five per cent bonus marks to certain candidates based on socioeconomic criteria for government jobs in Group C and D posts. The government decision follows a May 31 order by the high court on the matter. The approval was given in a meeting chaired by Chief Minister Nayab Singh Saini on Saturday, an official statement said. "As per the amendments, the 5 per cent weightage for social economic criteria provided for the bona fide residents of Haryana has been removed. The said amendments have been done as per the directions of the Punjab and Haryana High Court," said the statement. The amended policy will be called Policy for Recruitment to Group C and D posts through Common Eligibility Test, (Amendment) Rule, 2024, it said. In May, the Punjab and Haryana High Court had struck down the state

government's policy of granting five per cent bonus marks based on the socioeconomic status of the candidate from the state, in the CET for groups C and D posts. Later, in June, the Supreme Court had upheld the Punjab and Haryana High Court order. The apex court was hearing an appeal filed by the Haryana Staff Selection Commission against the Punjab and Haryana High Court's May 31 order. "The Policy for Recruitment to Group C and D posts through Common Eligibility Test, (Amendment) Rule, 2024 shall apply to direct recruitment to Group C posts including the posts of police service, prisons and home guards etc, excluding the teaching posts, ex-Agniveer and Group D posts for which minimum educational qualification is below matriculation...", said the statement. "Furthermore, after the amendment, now the maximum number of eligible candidates to appear for the skill and/or written examination shall be ten times the total number of posts advertised by the

Commission. Earlier, the candidates equal to four times the number of posts advertised were eligible to appear," the statement said. On May 5, 2022, the state government introduced Common Eligibility Test (CET) for Group C and D posts. In another decision, the cabinet approved the decision to bring an ordinance for further amending the Haryana Contractual Employees (Security of Service) Act, 2024. Under this amendment, the phrase "in a calendar year" will be replaced with "during a period of one year of contractual service." This amendment is being introduced to address request raised by contractual employees regarding the calculation of their service days, the statement said. Employees had requested that the 240-day service requirement be calculated based on the actual number of days during a one-year period of contractual service, instead of a calendar year. The current system posed challenges for employees who joined between May and December, as the service

days for their first year of employment were not being fully counted. "For instance, employees whose date of joining falls after May and before December would not meet the 240-day service requirement for their first calendar year of service, thus affecting their job security," it said. "In addition, for the year 2024, employees raised concerns as the number of days until the cut-off date of August 15, 2024, is only 227, which falls short of the required 240 days," it added. In response to these requests, the Haryana Cabinet has approved the amendment to consider 240 days of service during a period of one year of contractual service, thereby addressing these issues and ensuring better job security for contractual employees, it said. Under the Haryana Contractual Employees (Security of Service) Act, 2024, the benefit of job security is admissible to those contractual employees who fulfil the five years contractual service between August 15, 2024, the statement added.



The ceremonial installation of Lord Ram's idol in Ayodhya's temple positioned UP as a symbol of cultural and spiritual significance.

PTI

Uttar Pradesh 2024: Lord Ram idol installation marks historic year for the state

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ LUCKNOW

Uttar Pradesh, experienced a year of transformation in 2024, marked by remarkable milestones and a blend of cultural preservation and developmental progress. The year began with the historic installation of Lord Ram's idol in Ayodhya's grand temple, an event that symbolized the culmination of a 500-year-long wait and reaffirmed the state's cultural heritage. As the year comes to a close, Uttar Pradesh is engrossed in preparing for the grand Maha Kumbh 2025 in Prayagraj, showcasing its ability to merge tradition with modernity. On January 22, the ceremonial installation of Lord Ram's idol in Ayodhya's temple was conducted by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, with Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath in attendance. This historic event drew global attention to Ayodhya, positioning it as a symbol of cultural and spiritual significance. Shortly after, the state demonstrated its economic prowess during the Groundbreaking Ceremony 4.0, held on February 19-20 in Lucknow. At this event, investment proposals worth Rs 10 lakh crore were turned into reality, underscoring Uttar Pradesh's rising prominence as a business-friendly destination. Healthcare also saw unprecedented growth in 2024 with the inauguration of 18 new medical colleges, including government institutions in districts like Bijnor, Bulandshahr, and Kushinagar. On February 25, PM Modi virtually inaugurated AIIMS Raebareilly, making it the second operational AIIMS in the state, alongside Gorakhpur. These developments represent the Yogi government's commitment to enhancing healthcare access for all. For the first time in 24 years, scholarships for

Sanskrit students were significantly increased, benefiting over 1.5 lakh students. Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath distributed these scholarships at Sampurnanand Sanskrit University in Varanasi on October 27, reinforcing his government's dedication to promoting traditional education. Ayodhya's Deepotsav 2024 set a new Guinness World Record with over 25.12 lakh diyas illuminating the city, surpassing the 2023 record of 22.23 lakh. The event saw 1,121 Vedacharyas performing the Sarayu Aarti, adding spiritual grandeur to the festivities. The state's achievements extended to infrastructure development as well, with the first validation flight landing at Noida International Airport in Jewar on December 9. This milestone, coupled with an increase in land acquisition compensation for farmers to Rs 4,300 per square meter, marked significant progress toward the airport's operational launch in 2025. In addition to these milestones, Uttar Pradesh made strides in employment generation, with over 7 lakh youths securing government jobs through transparent recruitment drives. The Mukhyamantri Kanya Sumangala Yojana saw its financial aid increased from Rs 15,000 to Rs 25,000, providing greater support to families across the state. Environmental conservation efforts also bore fruit, with the summer census recording 19,918 Sarus cranes and the plantation of 36.80 crore trees, expanding the state's forest cover by 559.19 square kilometers. As 2024 concludes, Uttar Pradesh stands as a testament to cultural pride and developmental progress. From record-breaking celebrations to infrastructural advancements and economic growth, Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath's leadership has positioned the state as a beacon of progress, ready to embrace the opportunities of the future.

Cyber warriors, drones, AI cameras: Maha Kumbh 2025 to be under 24x7 surveillance

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI, PRAYAGRAJ

In a first, "underwater drones" capable of diving up to 100 meters will be deployed during the upcoming Maha Kumbh to provide round-the-clock surveillance at Sangam area in Uttar Pradesh's Prayagraj, the Union Culture Ministry said on Sunday. Besides, renovation of 92 roads and construction of 30 pontoon bridges and installation of 800 multilingual signages are being undertaken there to facilitate the pilgrims and other visitors showcasing India's culture and diversity. Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership, the Uttar Pradesh government is making "extensive preparations to ensure that Mahakumbh 2025 in Prayagraj is a grand, safe and spiritually enriching event", the ministry said. Expected to host over 40 crore devotees from across the globe, this 45-day festival from January 13 to February 26 will showcase India's rich cultural heritage and spiritual traditions. The Culture Ministry shared details on the preparations underway and the civic amenities and security arrangements that will be in place for the mega congregation. "For the first time, underwater drones capable of diving up to 100 meters will provide round-the-clock surveillance at the Sangam area," it said in a statement. Also, the deployment of 2,700 cameras with artificial intelligence (AI) capabilities will provide "real-time monitoring" and facial recognition technology will be used at entry points for enhanced safety, the ministry said. "A team of 56 cyber warriors will monitor online threats. Cyber help desks are being set up in all police stations," it said. The ministry had recently announced that it would set up a thematic space -- 'Kalagram' in Prayagraj to showcase India's cultural heritage and diversity during the Maha Kumbh.



An aerial view of Sangam, the confluence of the Ganga and Yamuna rivers, area ahead of the Mahakumbh 2025. PTI

"Special provisions have been made for international visitors with multilingual signages and cultural programmes showcasing India's diversity. Through these comprehensive efforts, Mahakumbh 2025 aims to be not just a religious gathering but a global celebration of spirituality, culture, safety, sustainability and modernity," the statement said. 'Mahakumbh Nagar' is being transformed into a temporary city with thousands of tents and shelters, including super deluxe accommodations like the IRCTC's "Mahakumbh Gram" luxury tent city which offers deluxe tents and villas with modern amenities, the ministry added. According to the statement, renovation of 92 roads and beautification of 17 major roads are nearing completion. The construction of 30 pontoon bridges using 3,308 pontoons is underway and 28 are already operational. A total of 800 multilingual signages (Hindi, English and regional languages) are being installed to guide the visitors, the ministry said. "Over 400 have been

completed, with the rest to be ready by December 31," it said. Besides, "over 2,69,000 checkered plates have been laid for pathways" and mobile toilets and robust waste management systems will ensure hygiene, the statement said. A number of measures have been taken to ensure robust disaster response in case of any untoward incident. A state-of-the-art multi-disaster response vehicle would enhance safety and disaster readiness, "capable of handling situations ranging from natural disasters to road accidents," it said. "This includes a lifting bag with a capacity of 10-20 tonnes, enabling the rescue of individuals buried under debris and specialised machines to lift and move heavy objects weighing up to 1.5 tonnes," the statement said. The deployment of four Articulating Water Towers (AWTs) capable of tackling fires up to 35 meters high and 30 metres wide will be in place, the ministry said.

Kutch records third tremor over 3 Magnitude this month

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ AHMEDABAD

A tremor of 3.2 magnitude jolted Gujarat's Kutch district on Sunday morning, the Institute of Seismological Research (ISR) said. There was no report of any casualty or damage to property, the district administration said. The tremor was recorded at 10.06 am with its epicentre located 18 kilometres north-north east of Bhachau, the Gandhinagar-based ISR said. It is the third seismic activity of more than 3 magnitude in the district this month. A 3.7 magnitude tremor jolted Kutch on December 23. On December 7, a tremor of 3.2 magnitude was recorded in the district, according to the ISR. Last month, Kutch recorded an earthquake of 4 magnitude on November 18. Earlier, on November 15, Patan in north Gujarat was jolted by an earthquake of 4.2 magnitude.

Jammu-Srinagar highway reopens after day-long closure

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ JAMMU

The 270-km Jammu-Srinagar highway was on Sunday reopened for vehicular traffic after a day-long closure due to heavy snowfall, allowing stranded vehicles to proceed to their respective destinations, officials said. However, several other

important inter-district routes, including the Mughal Road, Sinthan Pass, Sonamarg-Kargil inter-UT road, and Baderwah-Chamba interstate road, remained closed for vehicular traffic due to heavy snowfall. "The highway has been reopened today following the clearance of snow accumulated on various stretches of the road,"

a traffic official said. The stranded vehicles along the highway are being cleared, he added. "Passenger traffic is plying on the highway. Commuters are advised to follow lane discipline, as overtaking may cause congestion," J-K Traffic Police said in an advisory. It also advised commuters to drive cautiously, as the road is

slippery between Banihal and Qazigund. The Mughal Road, which serves as an alternative link to the Kashmir Valley from Jammu region's Poonch district, remained shut due to snow accumulation, officials said. Similarly, the Sinthan Pass in Kishtwar has been closed for vehicular traffic due to heavy snowfall.

Danapur division completes 100 years of service, celebrations planned

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI, PATNA

The historic Danapur division of the Indian Railways network that manages some of the lines and stations originally set up nearly 160 years ago will complete an eventful journey of 100 years on January 1. The division has planned a grand celebration on January 31 at the old Jagjivan Stadium where it will also host an exhibition showcasing its rich history through archival documents, photographs and railway artefacts. We are also working on a coffee table book on the centenary of the Danapur division. Besides going through our old documents and photographs kept in different departments at the DRM office, we are also trying to crowd-source relevant material for the book," said a senior Railway Ministry official of the Danapur division. Danapur (earlier Dinapore) division was established on January 1, 1925. Its office is located in a majestic building erected in



The headquarters of Danapur Division of the Indian Railways, at Khagaul, near Patna.

1929 near the historic Danapur station at Khagaul town near Patna. The first divisional superintendent of Danapur was C Eyers, who took charge on January 1, 1925. The post was redesignated as divisional

railway manager (DRM) from 1980s onwards, according to information displayed on the succession board. While the division is 100 years old, the Danapur (earlier Dinapore) railway station was

built in the 1860s, along with the old Patna station (now Patna Sahib station) located in Patna City, and the erstwhile Bankipore station (near the site of the current Patna Junction built much later) on the

Howrah-Delhi line, as per railway experts and some archival records. The old stations at Fatuha, Bakhtiarpur, Barh, Mokama, Gulzarbagh and Bihta, located on a section of this line which

falls within the limits of Danapur division, were built in later years, they said. The current Danapur division spans the rail network from Jhajha to Kuchman. The Mughalsarai rail network was also part of it before it was carved out as a separate division in later decades after Independence. Till the redevelopment of Patna Sahib station a few years ago, a plaque bearing 'PATNA 1861' embedded on a wall of its building was visible from the platform. The then East Indian Railway (EIR) system laid the line from Howrah to Delhi, and operations on it began phase-wise from early 1850s to late 1860s, which included construction of the iconic bridge over Sone river at Koelwar and a bridge each over Yamuna at Allahabad and Delhi, all major feats of civil and railway engineering. A team at the Danapur DRM office is currently busy scouring through old files and records, searching for old photographs, correspondences and other

archival material which can be used in the planned exhibition and the coffee table book. The red-and-white building located near Danapur station is the centrepiece of a quaint railway colony at Khagaul, dotted with many handsome British-era structures such as the official residence of the DRM, 'Rail Sadan', old railway school and hospital, and a few beautiful churches, besides humble railway colonies. Danapur division was put under the Kolkata-based Eastern Railway (ER) established in 1952. From 2002 onwards, it came under East Central Railway (ECR), carved out of ER, with headquarters at Hajipur in north Bihar. According to old publications, after the government of India took over the management of EIR, with effect from 1925, it was split into six divisions -- Howrah, Asansol and Dinapore, known as lower divisions, and Allahabad, Lucknow and Moradabad, known as upper divisions.

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PAPER WITH PASSION

Shifting stance

Trump's support for H-1B visas marks a major shift, offering relief to US companies and Indian tech workers alike

Politicians seldom walk their talk and do not mind taking u-turns even if it means reversing their own previous positions. Donald Trump the US President elect is the latest example. Trump has expressed his support for the H-1B visa program, which facilitates the entry of skilled foreign workers into the United States. This development comes as a marked departure from his earlier stance during his first presidential term, where he labeled the program 'very bad' and 'unfair' to American workers. Trump's latest remarks not only align him with tech magnate Elon Musk but also have significant implications for Indian professionals and US companies. The controversy surrounding the H-1B program reignited when Musk took to social media to vociferously defend the program against criticisms from immigration hardliners. Musk's electric vehicle company, Tesla, alone secured 724 H-1B visas this year, underscoring his vested interest in maintaining the program. Trump echoed Musk's sentiments in an interview, stating, "I've always liked the visas. I have used it many times. It's a great program."



This admission not only signals a softening of his earlier rhetoric but also a pragmatic acknowledgment of the program's benefits to the US economy. Indian IT professionals stand to benefit immensely from Trump's change in stance. Historically, Indians have been the largest beneficiaries of the H-1B visa program, occupying a lion's share of the annual quota. Trump's endorsement could reassure prospective applicants and existing visa holders about the continuity of the program, which has often been a lifeline for skilled workers seeking opportunities in the United States. The move

also counters recent fears of stringent immigration policies that could hinder their aspirations. The US technology sector, which has long relied on the H-1B visa program to address skill shortages, is likely to welcome Trump's shift. Companies like Google, Microsoft, and Tesla have consistently advocated for the continuation of the program, citing a lack of homegrown talent to meet the industry's demands. Musk's pointed critique of American culture's celebration of mediocrity over excellence highlights the role of foreign talent in driving innovation and maintaining the US's competitive edge globally. Trump's stance, however, has drawn ire from far-right activists and prominent figures within his own party. Critics, including Steve Bannon and Nikki Haley, argue that prioritising foreign workers undermines American labour and exacerbates domestic unemployment. Trump's endorsement of the H-1B visa program reflects a pragmatic shift rather than an ideological reversal. Recognising the indispensable role of skilled immigrants in the US economy, his administration's move signals a commitment to fostering economic growth and maintaining technological leadership. For Indian professionals, it offers renewed hope, and for US tech companies, it ensures access to the global talent pool they rely on to innovate and thrive.

PICTALK



An elderly woman makes kites for the upcoming Makar Sankranti kite festival, in Hyderabad

PTI

The paradox of happiness: Why we fear what we seek

As much as we strive for everlasting joy, we often find ourselves wary of its fleeting nature, hesitating to fully embrace it

If there is one thing that we relentlessly pursue in life—the only thing we put all our pennies on in this big worldly gamble—it is happiness. The ultimate goal that we all crave is everlasting bliss. What charades and circuses we play to attain the state of eternal joy! While this rignarole governs our everyday thoughts and actions, another element sneaks in as soon as we reach our dream: Fear—the fear of losing the happiness that we know is ephemeral. Come to think of it, much as we covet it, happiness frightens us. It also makes us wary of revealing our joys, and we often hide good things to avoid getting jinxed. Why do we fear happiness? Why do we think every moment of joy comes at a price?

The fear of happiness is a paradox embedded in the human psyche. It's almost as if we've been conditioned to believe that joy is too fragile to last, that it carries an expiry date we cannot predict. This belief turns happiness into a double-edged sword: on one side, it is the elation we strive for; on the other, it is the dread of its inevitable end.



Where does this fear originate? Perhaps it stems from a deep-seated awareness of life's impermanence.

We've all seen moments of bliss snatched away by unexpected turns of fate. A child's innocent laughter may be followed by tears, a promotion at work may bring unforeseen stress, and a long-anticipated celebration may be marred by tragedy. These experiences condition us to approach happiness with caution, to brace ourselves for the fall even as we revel in the peak. This trepidation finds cultural expressions, too. Superstitions like "knock on wood" or "touch iron" are more than quaint habits; they are safeguards against the perceived fragility of joy. Similarly, the kaala teeka or talisman traditions reflect a universal belief that happiness attracts envy and, by extension,

misfortune. We place such conditions maybe because happiness, unlike sorrow, feels fleeting and illusory. Pain lingers and forces us to adapt, but happiness feels transient, like a butterfly—beautiful, delicate, and always ready to flit away. Is it fair to treat happiness as a precarious treasure? By fearing it, do we not dilute its essence and sabotage our ability to experience it fully? Modern life has made this paradox even more pronounced. With social media encouraging us to share our highs, celebrating joy has become a public event. On one hand, we feel validated by likes and comments; on the other, the exposure amplifies our unease. Will the digital applause somehow disrupt the balance of our good fortune? These questions linger, even as we hit the "share" button with a smile. But perhaps the greater fear is not external—it's internal. Happiness asks us to be present, to be vulnerable, and to believe that we deserve good things. For many, this is a daunting proposition. When shaped by struggles or conditioned to expect the worst, joy feels for-

eign, even undeserved. The fear of losing it becomes a defence mechanism, a way of preparing ourselves for the inevitable end of happy times. It is important to recognise that happiness, like all emotions, is inherently fleeting. Accepting its impermanence allows us to savour it without clinging or dreading its end. Happiness deserves the same grace. Vulnerability is the price of true happiness, and the courage to embrace it, however briefly, is what makes life rich. Sharing our joy—whether with loved ones or the world—is not an invitation to misfortune but an act of trust in the abundance of good things. Let's challenge the belief that happiness comes at a cost. Life's highs and lows are inevitable, but they are not always sequential. A moment of joy does not necessitate a subsequent sorrow. Joy, in its purest form, deserves to be embraced—without caution, without apology, and most importantly, without fear. It's all easier said than done, I admit. (The author is a columnist and writing coach based in Dubai. Views are personal)



ASHA IYER KUMAR

The statesman and a gentleman

Dr Singh's journey from a humble student to a distinguished statesman is a testament to perseverance, intellect and humility



V K BAHUGUNA

As the country mourns the death of former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh who breathed his last on 26th December 2024 at the age of 92. The world leaders condone the death of a man who was a common man's Prime Minister and a golden boy of destiny. He ruled the nation for 10 years after having successfully dealt with the economic crisis of 1991 when the then Prime Minister Narsimha Rao appointed him Finance Minister and the rest is history of dismantling the license raj and ushering in economic liberalization of the economy and the nation is grateful to him and the Narsimha Rao for opening up the economy of caged lion that is India the benefits of which the nation is reaping today. I write this article when the country's politics is witnessing high conflicts and drama and the entire gamut of politicians coming from a background which is miles away from Dr Manmohan Singh's academic background as most of the time the politicians are jostling with each other in the quest for power, position and money.

The fractured polity of India is the creation of politics of power and money which also seamlessly spreads across sectors of society and administration. Dr Manmohan Singh was born in Pakistan and came to India as a poor student but due to the sheer talent, perseverance and hard work obtained a scholarship and attained high educational qualifications as an economist from the University of Cambridge and Oxford. As an academician and economist, he served the nation with dignity and aplomb as an officer and bureaucrat in the Planning Commission, Chief Economic Advisor and Secretary in the Ministry of Environment, Governor of the Reserve Bank of India, Chairman of the University Grant Commission and finally as politician member of Rajya Sabha for more than 30 years and Prime Minister for 10 years.

The luck favours the brave as the saying goes and he had plenty of it. No Prime Minister in the past nor the near distant future is going to have such a background and rich profile as Dr Manmohan Singh has and with this, he has etched his name in the history of India. As such no academician or economist in India could hope to achieve the post of Prime Minister of India considering our varied polity and its nature. Most of the professionals end up on bureaucratic posts and some may occupy the constitutional position of President or Vice-President of India or Governors. Sonia Gandhi will also be remembered for choosing him as Prime Minister of India after she was elected as leader of the Congress Parliamentary Party in the year 2004 and refused to hold the post considering opposition to her foreign origin. The Indian masses specially educated elite and young brains aspiring to be great leaders in many fields including politics must take several lessons from the life of Dr Manmohan Singh. The first, he was talented and humble but more than that he had a very high emotional intelligence. These days lot of people in diverse fields end up failing even though they have high calibre, capability, knowledge and intelligence but lack emotional intelligence. It is the emotional intelligence that frames the mental makeup of individuals reflected in their demeanour while dealing with



THE LUCK FAVOURS THE BRAVE AS THE SAYING GOES AND HE HAD PLENTY OF IT. NO PRIME MINISTER IN THE PAST NOR THE NEAR DISTANT FUTURE IS GOING TO HAVE SUCH A BACKGROUND AND RICH PROFILE AS DR MANMOHAN SINGH HAS AND WITH THIS, HE HAS ETCHED HIS NAME IN THE HISTORY OF INDIA

people of diverse background and situations. Second, he had an uncanny talent for perceiving things with poise and confidence coming his way and organizing his capability most efficiently for the benefit of his organizations and ultimately for the country as Prime Minister of India and for his party. Many of our leaders in politics as also in bureaucracy lack poise and confidence and that results in making mistakes at crucial times. Third is how to handle provocative situations and when to be outspoken. This quality is essential while handling diversified issues with conflicting claims and counterclaims in both politics and administration. The fourth is to be silent like when Rahul Gandhi tore a proposed bill of his government publicly, and act firm like a solid rock and take a decision to its logical end without any compromise. The iron will he had shown when while signing the nuclear deal with America had shown his strong commitment and capability to carry his decision to its logical end even though the CPM withdrew support for his government. His government was, however, bailed out by the Samajwadi party but it has shown his strong personality as a national leader while dealing with international diplomacy. This attitude is the

hallmark of excellent leaders who can balance things considering what is best for the governance and the country. The fifth lesson which is most important for today's leaders is; that he was above favouritism, caste or religion and thus deftly handled his government with loyalty to his party leader and the country. However, sometimes the hangers-on in power especially in the bureaucracy do play mischief as observed by this writer nevertheless, such things always happen with all powerful posts and people. Though he was criticised by the opposition he maintained his poise and firmly remained loyal to his way of doing things and because of his scholarly eloquence and demeanours he was respected by all world leaders who mattered in international diplomacy. Dr Manmohan Singh, the academician par excellence, achieved dazzling heights. Such personas are born in politics once in a century or not born at all. I hope the current politicians of his party and the budding politicians/social and administrative aspirants imbibe these virtues to become effective leaders of tomorrow, which India needs today.

(The writer is the former Director-General in the Ministry of Environment and Forest, Government of India; views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

THE LEGACY OF MANMOHANOMICS

Madam — In the article Dr. Manmohan Singh's legacy as a pivotal figure in Indian politics and economics is thoughtfully and comprehensively evaluated. Through his tenure as prime minister for two consecutive terms and as finance minister in the 1990s, it recognizes his crucial contribution to the development of contemporary India. His strategic diplomatic engagements and economic liberalisation initiatives, such as the historic civil nuclear agreement between the United States and India, are rightfully hailed as turning points that have improved India's resilience and status in the world. Singh's lasting impact on India's socio-economic structure is also highlighted in the article, from social welfare reforms to Aadhaar-based delivery systems. Nonetheless, it is not afraid to criticize his administration, pointing out his difficulties with coalition politics, the impression of policy paralysis, and corruption scandals that damaged his administration's reputation. His personal integrity and his special status as a technocrat negotiating the turbulent waters of Indian politics are acknowledged in order to counterbalance these criticisms. What is noteworthy is the article's claim that, despite changes in administration, Singh's vision and policies continue to support India's advancement. It is convincing and evidence of Singh's enduring influence that "Manmohanomics" is being promoted as a "Make in India" paradigm for emerging countries. Overall, this article is a contemplative homage to a leader whose accomplishments merit a more lenient assessment from the past.

Janvi Rajwani | Ujjain

THE FALLING RUPEE

Madam—Apropos, "Rupee falls further 23 paise to hit fresh record low of 85.5 against US dollars," The Pioneer, Dec 28. Its a cause of concern that rupee has crossed the psychological barrier of 85

Memorial for Dr Singh



In a bid demand to allocate space for a memorial" for the former Prime minister of India, Dr. Manmohan

against the dollar. It is an all-time low after a steady drop for some weeks, and the rupee is unlikely to rise soon. There are situations when a weaker currency does good to the economy and sometimes, conscious policy initiatives are taken towards that. But that is not the case with India now. Both global and domestic factors have contributed to the weakening of the rupee. India's economic growth has fallen to its lowest level in three quarters and merchandise trade deficits widened. The weaker rupee offers some opportunities. It provides an export advantage and could boost export-oriented industries like textiles. Incentives may be offered to such industries and suitable trade strategies can be formulated in their favour. Meanwhile, domestic manufacturing and productivity should be improved and reliance on imports should be reduced as they will become costlier. But, a weaker rupee fuels inflation as imported goods and services become dearer. RBI interventions and other

Singh. The people of our country are simply unable to understand why govt of India could not find a location for his cremation and memorial that is befitting of his global stature, record of outstanding achievements, and exemplary service to the nation for decades.

Kharge also demanded that Singh's last rites be conducted at a place where a memorial can be built. When Kharge explained the demand and his communication with Modi to CWC, sources said a member of the Gandhi family even suggested that the cremation could be done at Shakti Sthal or Veer Bhumi - the resting places of former PMs Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi.

Dimple Wadhawan | Kanpur

measures will provide only temporary relief. The lasting solution to rupee depreciation and other global challenges is to strengthen the domestic economy by improving production and increasing exports.

N Sathasiva Reddy | Bengaluru

PROVIDE MEDICAL HELP TO DALLEWAL

Madam — Apropos to providing medical help to Dallewala. The Supreme Court has clarified in clear terms to provide medical help to the agitating farm leader to save his life and deal with the resisting crowd with iron hand if required. However the state government representatives have expressed their reservations of taking the risk of physical jostling with the resistance. The point to ponder is who is then going to do the needful if not the state authorities putting the credibility of the Supreme Court order in question.

R S Narula | Patiala

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FIRST COLUMN

THE CHALLENGES OF A NOBLE PROFESSION

Despite their vital role, educators remain undervalued and overstressed, leading to burnout



SAKSHI SETHI

The teaching profession, often referred to as one of the noblest vocations, faces significant challenges in today's world. As society evolves, so do the expectations placed upon educators. Despite their pivotal role in shaping future generations, teachers grapple with numerous issues ranging from inadequate compensation to increased workloads and shifting societal dynamics. Addressing these challenges is crucial towards ensuring the sustainability and effectiveness of education systems worldwide.

Today, one of the most pressing issues for teachers is the sheer volume of work they manage. Beyond classroom teaching, educators are tasked with lesson planning, grading, administrative duties, and even participating in extracurricular activities. This workload which quite often extends beyond school hours, leaves little time for their family life or personal development. Even the pressure to meet standardized testing benchmarks and adaptiveness to diverse student needs adds to their stress levels, contributing to burnout and high attrition rates within the profession. Despite the critical importance of their role, many teachers feel undervalued and underpaid. In numerous countries, teacher salaries lag behind those of other professions requiring similar levels of education and expertise.

This financial disparity not only affects their quality of life but also discourages talented individuals from entering the profession. There is no denying that recognition for the hard work and dedication put up by a teacher is very limited which nowadays is diminishing their morale and job satisfaction. The integration of technology into education has trans-



formed teaching methodologies, requiring teachers to continually update their skills. While digital tools have enhanced learning experiences, they also demand significant effort from educators to adapt and implement effectively. The shift to online and hybrid learning models during the COVID-19 pandemic underscored this challenge, highlighting gaps in training and access to resources. Not only adaptations towards new learning models but another complexity that a teacher faces is classroom management.

With the advent of Gen Alpha, the role of a teacher has become increasingly complex as they now have to deal with a wide range of student behaviours and needs. Issues such as bullying, mental health challenges, and lack of discipline have increased enormously, and the abolishment of corporal punishments requires educators to act as counsellors and mediators in addition to their teaching roles. At the same time, rising parental expectations and involvement have also created added pressure, with some parents demanding individualized attention for their children. Despite so many challenges, there are multiple opportunities to improve the teaching profession and support educators. Increased investment in education systems, including better salaries and benefits, can help attract and retain talented teachers. It is extremely important to know that teaching is the only profession that creates other professions.

Promoting a culture of respect and appreciation for teachers, by recognizing their contributions through awards, public acknowledgement, and meaningful feedback can boost morale and reaffirm their value to society. The challenges faced by teachers today are multifaceted and require comprehensive solutions. By addressing issues such as workload, compensation, and training, society can ensure that educators are equipped and motivated to excel in their roles. Supporting teachers is not just an investment in their well-being but in the future of the students they inspire and educate. It is imperative to honour their dedication and create conditions that allow them to thrive, for the benefit of all.

(The writer is an educator; views are personal)

Reaching for the stars, ruining the earth



NILANTHA LANGAMUWA

In 2024, a year of rising conflicts and environmental crises, the race for space supremacy highlights a paradox: we look to the stars while neglecting our planet

That was a harrowing near-miss. Trump endured an assassination attempt, and the ensuing spectacle was nothing short of fantastical. As he emerged, emboldened and defiant, a self-proclaimed martyr rallying Americans to "fight...fight...fight," the undercurrent of turmoil in the U.S. political sphere became irrefutable. Following the attack, responsibility was squarely placed on the Secret Service, prompting the resignation of its chief, Kimberly Cheatle. However, the pivotal question is not about security oversights but rather the significance of his survival.

The fact that Trump has now emerged from such an ordeal only solidifies his centrality in American political discourse. His rhetoric will escalate to unprecedented levels of provocation, further inflaming a deeply divided nation. As January 20 nears and he ascends to the presidency as the 47th leader, we must confront an uncomfortable truth: America is on the precipice of a more ominous epoch. This is not merely about one man's political endurance—it is about the disintegration of American society itself, driven to the brink by long-standing forces in motion. On the broader geopolitical stage, 2024 has been a year of unsettling reconfigurations.

In Asia, China's dominance over Taiwan is undeniable, with global consensus growing that Beijing's ambitions will not yield to Western opposition. For years, the U.S. has provoked China through military deployments and arms to Taiwan. Yet, China's psychological and economic warfare has shifted the global balance of power, eroding America's influence in the Pacific. Despite this, the U.S. persists, its foreign policy increasingly marked by desperation and entrenched arrogance. Meanwhile, the war in Ukraine, now in its third year, serves as a painful reminder of the West's misguided strategy of intervention. NATO's resolve is deteriorating, and support for Kyiv is dwindling in many Western capitals as the economic cost of the war becomes more pronounced. Public disillusionment with the conflict is palpable, yet the U.S. continues to allocate resources to a war with no clear resolution in sight.

The arms industry flourishes, and NATO's failure to pursue a diplomatic resolution leaves a bitter aftertaste, as Russia, empowered by internal European divisions, presses its advantage. In 2024 alone, the global arms trade reached a staggering \$632 billion, with much of that revenue enriching manufacturers who profit from relentless destruction. The grim reality is that war has evolved into a lucrative enterprise, sustaining the military-industrial complex while civilians bear the cost.

A similar dynamic is unfolding in West Asia, where Israel's military actions against Palestine and Lebanon have extended into Syria by year's end, driven by a voracious expansionist agenda, all under the protective mantle of U.S. support. The missile exchanges between Iran and Israel risk escalating into full-scale warfare, with no resolution in sight. Yet, the West remains obsessively focused on preserving its hegemonic power, blatantly disregarding the mounting humanitarian catastrophes. In parallel, the Arab world exposes its deep-seated fragmen-



INDIA IS POISED TO BECOME THE WORLD'S THIRD-LARGEST ECONOMY WITHIN FIVE YEARS, YET RISING TENSIONS WITH THE UNITED STATES PRESENT AN OPPORTUNITY TO REASSESS THE TRUE NATURE OF AMERICA'S 'ASIA PIVOT'

tation, driven by centuries-old dogmas and self-serving political agendas, all of which continue to wreak havoc on the lives of millions of Muslims.

The situation in South Asia mirrors this instability. With the reelection of Narendra Modi and the BJP, India is significantly expanding its global influence, even as internal crises—such as communal violence in the Northeast and Kashmir—continue to intensify, with the government blaming its negligence. India is poised to become the world's third-largest economy within five years, yet rising tensions with the United States present an opportunity to reassess the true nature of America's 'Asia Pivot'. As tensions escalate in Pakistan and neighbouring Afghanistan, the region teeters on the brink of broader conflict. Political instability in Bangladesh, exacerbated by alleged U.S.-sponsored 'people's protests' that ousted Sheikh Hasina, and fragile politics in Nepal, which increasingly aligns with China, further fuel the growing unease.

Sri Lanka and the Maldives, after years of political turmoil, have found a degree of stability by year's end. Sri Lanka, in particular, has experienced a remarkable political shift, with a single party securing a supermajority in parliament, now populated by a wave of inexperienced young politicians.

While the Maldives continues to navigate its political challenges, South Asia—often dismissed as a 'dead regional idea'—remains a crucial player in global geopolitics. Meanwhile, in 2024, Africa boldly rejects colonial influence, with nations like Niger, Burkina Faso, Senegal, and Chad expelling French forces and reclaiming sovereignty. Yet, the continent's vast resources fuel a neocolonial

scramble, exposing deep-rooted corruption and divisive leadership. Despite efforts to break free, Africa remains trapped by external exploitation and the greed of its elites, hindering true autonomy and progress. At the same time, the relentless march of artificial intelligence in 2024 highlights a more subtle threat: the obliteration of labour.

Entire industries, from retail to finance, have been disrupted by automation, leaving millions of workers displaced. In the U.S., unemployment rates hovered around 4.5% in 2024, but these statistics scarcely reflect the many individuals who have been relegated to underemployment or excluded from the labour market entirely. Meanwhile, global projections suggest that job displacement due to automation will increase by up to 30% over the next decade. While the technocrats celebrate AI's progress, millions are left behind. Simultaneously, the integration of AI into military systems raises the frightening possibility of autonomous warfare, where human lives are subject to the whims of algorithms.

In 2024, climate change worsened, but leaders offered only empty words. The COP29 collapse highlighted the wealthiest nations' evasion of responsibility, leaving the vulnerable to suffer while the crisis, fueled by inequality and unchecked industrialisation, deepened. By 2024, over 700 million people worldwide were living in extreme poverty, with hunger rates climbing sharply due to both the economic pressures of conflict and climate-related calamities.

For many, securing enough food to survive has become an increasingly insurmountable struggle. In space, the race for hegemony reached new heights, as the U.S.,

China, and private corporations competed for supremacy in the cosmos.

Yet, one must question: why are such vast resources being allocated to space exploration when the world's most pressing issues remain unaddressed? The billions being invested in Mars colonisation could be better used to address the problems on Earth, yet the Western obsession with space reflects a deeper sense of hubris.

Humanity looks to the stars but fails to confront the crises that are unfolding on its soil. The year 2024 will be remembered as one that exposed the profound contradictions of our age. The Western world is at war with itself, consumed by political divisions, economic inequality, and an incapacity to respond to the genuine challenges of our time. The rise of populism, authoritarianism, and unchecked technological advancement portends a future in which the divide between the rich and the poor widens, and the planet teeters on the brink of environmental collapse. In this environment, the struggle for survival will no longer be merely political—it will be existential.

We are increasingly forfeiting our collective responsibility, continuing to vie for better accommodations in a sinking vessel, fully aware that we are all doomed to submerge. As we enter 2025, may we dare to confront the tumult of our times with the audacity to question everything, forging a future that challenges the very forces seeking to dominate us. Wishing you a year of purpose and unity.

(The writer is a journalist and policy analyst. Views expressed are personal)

Veganism: A resolution for health, planet, and compassion

Beyond being a dietary choice, veganism offers transformative benefits for personal health, environmental sustainability, and animal welfare.

As the year winds down, it is natural to reflect on the resolutions that were made in January. While there would be some of us who could hold on to their resolutions and some others who could not. However, there is no reason to feel lost. Making a New Year's resolution itself is a combination of awareness about oneself and a conscious decision to do better. Even setting a goal is a step in the right direction; this is more than most people manage. Being vegan once seen as a fringe lifestyle choice, appears to be occupying an increasingly bigger place not only in the West but also in India. Reports indicate that vegan diets create 75% fewer



PRASHANTH VISHWANATH

greenhouse gas emissions that contribute to global warming, as well as much less water pollution and wildlife damage. Fruits and vegetables, legumes, and grains require less energy, land, and water to produce than animal-derived diets. While diet seems to be the biggest concern for those wanting to

make the switch fact is that veganism is not just about diet, it is a lifestyle that refrains people from any form of animal exploitation. **Veganuary- the global behaviour**

change organisation encouraging people to try vegan in January and beyond- understands the importance of building a supportive community. Prashanth Vishwanath, who heads the organisation in India says "We know it takes a whole ecosystem to form positive habits. That's why we work with brands, restaurants and retailers to make plant-based products more accessible. Our 11 celebrity ambassadors from India show how they're on top of their game while eating

vegan. And anyone trying vegan with us receives more than 10 free resources including daily support emails. The idea is to make the transition to eating more plant-based as fun and rewarding as possible." **Building the 'try vegan' ecosystem**

Collaborating with brands In January 2024, 140 Indian firms participated in the Veganuary movement, launching new goods, special deals, and menu items. More than 40 new goods were launched in India, ranging from vegan eggs to curry meal sets. Nature's Basket, Amazon Fresh, Hilton Hotels, Big Basket, and Hard Rock Cafe were among the firms that participated, and the cam-



paign anticipates that many more will join this year. **Celebrity support**

Veganuary's Indian Ambassadors include film stars, professional athletes, and mountaineers, with Mallika Sherawat being the most recent addition. They are passionate about it and

they have literally helped show millions of people how enriching plant-based eating can be.

They send a loud and obvious message: a plant-based diet is a huge advantage for looking good on screen, channelling inner creativity, and fueling world record

feats. Free resources Annual Veganuary campaigns that encourage people to try vegan for a month as the new year rolls in come with an impressive list of free goodies to make the transition enjoyable and hassle-free.

Participants gain access to a digital celebrity cookbook, with vegan recipes from Indian and global celebrities, a complete vegan starter kit, with comprehensive answers to any questions about adopting a plant-based diet and a lot more.

In India, embracing veganism is especially practical, thanks to the wide range of naturally vegan foods that are culturally familiar, and easy to prepare taking out the need for expensive or

exotic ingredients. It just needs a little bit of planning to ensure it meets all the necessary nutrients.

The list of vegan food varieties is expanding every day, offering plenty of options to not only nourish your body but also delight your taste buds.

So, whether it's for your health, the planet, or compassion for animals, embracing a plant-based lifestyle is more accessible than ever. With the right support and an abundance of options, choosing to eat better could be the most rewarding resolution you take on this year.

(The writer is Country Director for India, Veganuary; views are personal)

Bangladesh students' movement wants 'Mujibist' constitution buried To declare 'Proclamation of July Uprising'

PTI ■ DHAKA

The Anti-Discrimination Students Movement on Sunday announced to issue a belated Proclamation of July Uprising that seeks to "bury" Bangladesh's 1972 constitution calling it a "Mujibist" charter that had paved way for "India's aggression." The interim government of Muhammad Yunus visibly distanced itself from the "Proclamation" while former prime minister Khaleda Zia's party said it was disappointed and added, if there is anything bad in the Constitution, it can be amended. The platform's convener Hasnat Abdullah told a press conference here, "The Mujibist '72 constitution will be buried (in the new proclamation) in the very place where the one-point declaration was made during the July uprising." He said the Proclamation would be made at Central Shaheed Minar premises on December 31 in the afternoon. Weeks of protests led by the students' movement over a controversial quota system in

government jobs had escalated into a nationwide campaign calling for the end of the 16-year regime of Sheikh Hasina, 77, resulting in her ouster on August 5. "The Indian aggression was initiated through the principles of the 1972 Constitution (and) the proclamation will make it clear how the Mujibist Constitution destroyed the aspirations of the people and exactly how we want to replace it," Abdullah said. The Constitution was framed a year after independent Bangladesh was born by the representatives elected in the 1970 election in line with their mandate as "constituent assembly" members. Awami League, under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, had gained an absolute majority, with the party winning 160 of the 162 general seats and all seven women's seats in what was then East Pakistan. But Pakistan's then military under General Yahya Khan eventually launched a sudden army crackdown leading to the Liberation War of 1971 and birth of independent

Bangladesh. Sunday's press conference was told the students' platform along with the National Citizens' Committee will present the Proclamation, which is expected to declare "irrelevant" the deposed prime minister's "Nazi-like Awami League" in Bangladesh as well. Anti-Discrimination Students Movement leader and chief organiser of the National Citizens' Committee Sarjis Alam told the press conference that the "July uprising proclamation should have been declared earlier." "Just as we believe all anti-fascists embraced our revolution, this proclamation will also contain everyone's hopes and aspirations. ... We have crossed only one stage of the revolution," Alam said. The students' platform and different political groups, including former prime minister Khaleda Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), often dub Hasina's ousted regime as "fascist." Visibly distancing itself from the "Proclamation," the interim government of Muhammad

Yunus said it has nothing to do with it. Yunus' press secretary Shafiqul Alam said, "The government has nothing to do with it" and wants to see it (Proclamation) as a "private initiative." Awami League, Hasina's party, is not seen in the public sphere since August 5 as many of its leaders are arrested or are on the run at home and abroad. Their activities are limited to social media platforms occasionally. The BNP sharply reacted to the proposal with its highest policymaking standing committee member Mirza Abbas saying the constitution was written in 1972 at the cost of the blood of three million martyrs. "As your seniors, we feel disappointed when you (Student Movement leaders) say the Constitution should be buried. If there is anything bad in the constitution, it can be amended," he told reporters. "When you (student leaders) say things like this, it sounds 'fascist' as fascists used to say, 'we will bury them, kill them, and cut them off,'" Abbas said.



People stand at the grave of pilot in command Igor Kshnyakin during a funeral of the crew members of the Azerbaijan Airlines Embraer 190, killed in a deadly plane crash in Kazakhstan this week, at the II Alley of Honor in Baku, Azerbaijan on Sunday. AP/PTI

Azerbaijan's president says crashed jetliner was shot down by Russia unintentionally

AP ■ BAKU

Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev said Sunday that the Azerbaijani airliner that crashed last week was shot down by Russia, albeit unintentionally, and criticised Moscow for trying to "hush up" the issue for days. "We can say with complete clarity that the plane was shot down by Russia. (...) We are not saying that it was done intentionally, but it was done," he told Azerbaijani state television. Aliyev said that the airliner, which crashed Wednesday in Kazakhstan, was hit by fire from the ground over Russia and "rendered uncontrollable by electronic warfare." Aliyev accused Russia of trying to "hush up" the issue for several days, saying he was "upset and surprised" by versions of events put forward by Russian officials. "Unfortunately, for the first three days we heard nothing from Russia except delirious



versions," he said. The crash killed 38 of 67 people on board. The Kremlin said that air defence systems were firing near Grozny, the regional capital of the Russian republic of Chechnya, where the plane attempted to land, to deflect a Ukrainian drone strike. Aliyev said Azerbaijan made three demands to Russia in connection with the crash. "First, the Russian side must apologise to Azerbaijan. Second, it must admit its guilt. Third, punish the guilty, bring them to criminal responsibility and pay compensation to the Azerbaijani state, the injured

passengers and crew members," he said. Aliyev noted that the first demand was "already fulfilled" when Russian President Vladimir Putin apologized to him on Saturday. Putin called the crash a "tragic incident" though stopped short of acknowledging Moscow's responsibility. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told Russian state media on Sunday that Putin had spoken to Aliyev over the phone again, but did not provide details of the conversation. The Kremlin also said a joint investigation by Russia, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan has begun at the crash site near the city of Aktau in Kazakhstan. The plane was flying from Azerbaijan's capital, Baku, to Grozny when it turned toward Kazakhstan, hundreds of kilometers (miles) across the Caspian Sea from its intended destination, and crashed while making an attempt to land. Passengers and crew who sur-

vived the crash told Azerbaijani media that they heard loud noises on the aircraft as it was circling over Grozny. Dmitry Yarov, head of Russia's civil aviation authority Rosaviatsia, said Friday that as the plane was preparing to land in Grozny in deep fog, Ukrainian drones were targeting the city, prompting authorities to close the area to air traffic. The crash is the second deadly civil aviation accident linked to fighting in Ukraine. Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 was downed with a Russian surface-to-air missile, killing all 298 people aboard, as it flew over the area in eastern Ukraine controlled by Moscow-backed separatists in 2014. Russia has denied responsibility, but a Dutch court in 2022 convicted two Russians and a pro-Russia Ukrainian man for their role in downing the plane with an air defence system brought into Ukraine from a Russian military base.

Musk causes uproar for backing Germany's far-right party

AP ■ BERLIN

Tech entrepreneur Elon Musk caused uproar after backing Germany's far-right party in a major newspaper ahead of key parliamentary elections in the Western European country, leading to the resignation of the paper's opinion editor in protest. Germany is to vote in an early election on February 23 after Chancellor Olaf Scholz's three-party governing coalition collapsed last month in a dispute over how to revitalise the country's stagnant economy. Musk's guest opinion piece for Welt am Sonntag — a sister publication of POLITICO owned by the Axel Springer Group — published in German over the weekend, was the second time this month he supported the Alternative for Germany, or AfD. "The Alternative for Germany (AfD) is the last spark of hope for this country," Musk wrote in his translated commentary. He went on to say the far-right party "can lead the country into a future where economic prosperity, cultural integrity and technological innovation are not just wishes, but reality." The Tesla Motors CEO also wrote that his investment in Germany gave him the right to comment on the country's condition. The AfD is polling strongly, but its candidate for the top job, Alice Weidel, has no realistic chance of becoming chancellor because other parties refuse to work with the far-right party. An ally of US President-elect Donald Trump, the technology billionaire challenged in his opinion piece the party's public image. "The portrayal of the AfD as right-wing extremist is clearly false, considering that Alice Weidel, the party's leader, has a same-sex partner from Sri Lanka! Does that sound like Hitler to you? Please!" Musk's commentary has led to a debate in German media over the boundaries of free speech, with the paper's own opinion editor announcing her resignation, pointedly on Musk's social media platform, X.

Air Canada flight catches fire on landing, all passengers evacuated safely

PTI ■ OTTAWA

An Air Canada flight coming from St John's City on Newfoundland Island had a rough landing at the Halifax airport in Nova Scotia province that saw the aircraft skid down the runway and part of it catching fire. A statement issued by the airport said the incident involved Air Canada Flight 2259, which was operated by PAL Airlines, CBC News reported. The incident happened around 9:30 pm local time. The statement does not say how many people were on the plane. The people on board were evacuated, and then taken to a hangar to be checked out by paramedics, CBC News said. Due to the incident, the Halifax airport was

temporarily closed Saturday night. A passenger told CBC News that one of the plane's tyres did not deploy properly upon landing. "The plane started to sit at about a 20-degree angle to the left and, as that happened, we heard a pretty loud — what almost sounded like a crash sound — as the wing of the plane started to skid along the pavement, along with what I presume was the engine," she said. The passenger said the plane then skidded down the runway for a "decent" distance as the pilots worked to stop the plane. "The plane shook quite a bit and we started seeing fire on the left side of the plane and smoke started coming in the windows," she said. The airport said one of its runways has since reopened.

North Korea's Kim vows toughest anti-US policy before Trump takes office

AP ■ SEOUL

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un said he will implement the "toughest" anti-US policy, less than a month before Donald Trump takes office as US president, the country's state media reported Sunday. Trump's return to the White House raises prospects for high-profile diplomacy with North Korea. During his first term, Trump met Kim three times for talks on the North's nuclear programme. Many experts however say a quick resumption of Kim-Trump summitry is unlikely as Trump would first focus on conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East. North Korea's support for Russia's war against Ukraine also poses a challenge to efforts to revive diplomacy, experts say. During a five-day plenary meeting of the ruling Workers' Party that ended Friday, Kim called the US "the most reactionary state that regards anti-communism as its invariable state policy." Kim said that the US-South Korea-Japan security partnership is expanding into "a nuclear military bloc for aggression." "This reality clearly shows to which direction we should advance and what we should do and how," Kim said, according to the official Korean Central News Agency. It said Kim's speech "clarified the strategy for the toughest anti-US counteraction to be launched aggressively" by North Korea for its long-term national interests and security. KCNA didn't elaborate on the anti-US strategy. But it said Kim set forth tasks to bolster military capability through defence technology advancements and stressed the need to improve the mental toughness of North Korean soldiers. The previous meetings between Trump and Kim had not only put an end to their exchanges of fiery rhetoric and threats of destruction, but they developed personal connections. Trump once famously said he and Kim "fell in love." But their talks eventually collapsed in 2019, as they wrangled over US-led sanctions on the North.



North Korea has since sharply increased the pace of its weapons testing activities to build more reliable nuclear missiles targeting the US and its allies. The US and South Korea have responded by expanding their military bilateral drills and also trilateral ones involving Japan, drawing strong rebukes from the North, which views such US-led exercises as invasion rehearsals. Further complicating efforts to get North Korea to rid itself of nuclear weapons is its deepening military cooperation with Russia. According to US, Ukrainian and South Korean assessments, North Korea has sent more than 10,000 troops and conventional weapons systems to support Moscow's war against Ukraine. There are concerns that Russia could give North Korea advanced weapons technology in return, including help to build more powerful nuclear missiles. Russia and China, locked in separate disputes with the US, have repeatedly blocked US-led pushes to levy more UN sanctions on North Korea despite its repeated missile tests in defiance of UN Security Council resolutions. Last month, Kim said that his past negotiations with the United States only confirmed Washington's "unchangeable" hostility toward his country and described his nuclear buildup as the only way to counter external threats.

Pak soldier killed, 11 wounded in firing by Afghan Taliban forces

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

A Pakistan paramilitary soldier has been killed and 11 others injured in firing by the Afghan Taliban forces at the border posts of Pakistan troops, days after strikes by Pakistan targeted the banned Tehreek-e-Taliban (TTP) militants. According to defence sources, the Afghan troops resorted to "unprovoked fire on multiple Pakistani border posts" in the Upper Kurram district on Saturday morning. They fired at posts in Ghozgarhi, Matha Sangar, Kot Raghya and Tari Mengal areas using both light and heavy weaponry, sources said. Pakistani forces retaliated, inflicting significant losses on the other side as seven to eight personnel of the Afghan forces were killed in the exchange of fire, sources added. However, in the fire exchange, a "Frontier Constabulary (FC) soldier was killed and 11 others were injured." The incident of firing occurred days after Pakistan targeted terrorist positions in Paktika province of Afghanistan to punish the banned TTP militants, allegedly using Afghan soil to train and attack Pakistan. The Saturday attack came after militants made an infiltration attempt on Friday night, using the posts controlled by the Afghan Taliban to cross into Pakistani territory, but the attempt was thwarted. "The firing was effectively responded to and there are confirmed reports of heavy losses on the Afghan side with over 15 militants killed and many others wounded," according to sources.

3 die off northern France coast in Channel crossing attempt

AP ■ PARIS

At least three migrants died early Sunday while attempting to cross the English Channel to Britain from northern France, authorities said. The deaths were confirmed after an early morning rescue operation involving French emergency services and the navy's "Dauphin" helicopter. Around 50 people were stranded in the water and on the beach near Sangatte at around 6 am, according to the regional prefecture. Rescuers assisted 45 individuals, including four who were transported to hospitals. Three unconscious people were pulled from the water but could not be revived, despite efforts by medical teams. An investigation has been opened by prosecutors in Boulogne-sur-Mer. Jacques Billant, the prefect of Pas-de-Calais, said an overcrowded boat may have contributed to the tragedy. "There were more people attempting to board than the boat could hold," he said during a press conference Sunday. Sunday's tragedy comes during a spike in Channel crossing attempts as 2024 draws to a close. Officials have noted a significant increase in attempted

crossings over the past days. "Since December 24, 23 maritime incidents have been thwarted by international security forces, saving over 1,000 lives," said Billant. "But crossing attempts continue, despite extremely dangerous sea conditions. The water is icy, so survival time in the water is very short." This year has been one of the deadliest for migrants attempting the perilous journey between France and England, one of the world's busiest shipping lanes, with at least 76 deaths reported by officials. Billant blamed human traffickers for putting lives at risk. "These are low-quality boats put into the water solely for profit by these criminal networks, which have no regard for the lives of these children, women and men," he said. In November, a French court convicted 18 people in a migrant-smuggling trial that shed light on the lucrative but often deadly clandestine business of transporting people across the English Channel. Despite French and British efforts to stop it, the route remains a major smuggling corridor for people fleeing conflict or poverty. Migrants favour the UK for reasons of language, family ties or perceived easier access to asylum and work.

Musk vows to 'go to war' to defend H-1B visa programme; Trump sides with him

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Elon Musk has received support from President-elect Donald Trump on his stance on H-1B visas, a day after the tech billionaire vowed to "go to war" to defend the programme used to bring skilled foreign workers to the US. Musk, who along with Indian-American tech entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy has been tapped by Trump to lead his Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), argued last week that foreign workers are needed for tech companies like Musk's SpaceX and Tesla. Musk on Friday blasted a user on X who used a video of Musk discussing SpaceX processes to

go after the billionaire's stance on the visa programme. "The reason I'm in America along with so many critical people who built SpaceX, Tesla and hundreds of other companies that made America strong is because of H1B," Musk wrote on X. He also used a profane quote from Tom Cruise's character in the movie "Tropic Thunder" to attack his critics. "Take a big step back and F— YOURSELF in the face," Musk said. Trump on Saturday sided with Musk, saying he fully backs the programme opposed by some of his supporters. "I've always liked the visas, I have always been in favour of

the visas. That's why we have them," Trump told the New York Post newspaper. "I have many H-1B visas on my properties. I've been a believer in H-1B. I have used it many times. It's a great programme," Trump said. The H-1B visa is a non-immigrant visa that allows US companies to employ foreign workers in speciality occupations that require theoretical or technical expertise. Technology companies depend on it to hire tens of thousands of employees each year from countries like India and China. The tech industry has long called for more H-1B visas to attract highly skilled workers to the US. Trump's first adminis-

tration restricted the programme in 2020, arguing that it allows businesses to replace Americans with lower-paid foreign workers. Musk, himself once on an H-1B visa and whose electric vehicle company Tesla has hired workers using the programme, defended the tech industry's need to bring in foreign workers. "Anyone — of any race, creed or nationality — who came to America and worked like hell to contribute to this country will forever have my respect. America is the land of freedom and opportunity. Fight with every fiber of your being to keep it that way!" he wrote on X on Friday.



Musk also lashed out at those who prioritise personal gain over the well-being of the country. "This is the right position for

those who want America to win. For those who want America to lose for their own personal gain, I have no respect. Zero," he said in a separate post. Musk has been consistently posting on X in favour of the programme. "There is a permanent shortage of excellent engineering talent. It is the fundamental limiting factor in Silicon Valley," Musk wrote on December 25 on X. Several of Trump's supporters and immigration hardliners have been increasingly pushing for scrapping the H-1B visa programme amid debate over immigration. The debate sparked when Laura Loomer, a right-wing

influencer, criticised Trump's selection of Indian-American entrepreneur Sriram Krishnan as an adviser on artificial intelligence policy in his coming administration. Krishnan favours the ability to bring more skilled immigrants into the US. Loomer declared the stance to be "not America First policy" and said the tech executives who have aligned themselves with Trump were doing so to enrich themselves. The debate intensified when Ramaswamy criticised American culture for promoting mediocrity instead of focusing on academic excellence and success on the basis of merit.

"Trump's election hopefully marks the beginning of a new golden era in America, but only if our culture fully wakes up. A culture that once again prioritises achievement over normalcy; excellence over mediocrity; nerdiness over conformity; hard work over laziness," Ramaswamy said on Thursday. He faced backlash for the comment. In response, Musk called for removing "contemptible fools" from the Republican Party who oppose his immigration agenda. Musk later clarified that his statement was addressing the "hateful, unrepentant racists" he considers a threat to the Republican Party's future.

Palestinian shot dead in her West Bank home, family blames Palestinian security forces

AP ■ JENIN (WEST BANK)

A Palestinian woman was shot and killed in her home in the volatile northern West Bank town of Jenin, where the Palestinian Authority is carrying out a rare campaign against militants.

The family of Shatha al-Sabbagh, a 22-year-old journalism student, said she was killed by a sniper with the Palestinian security forces late Saturday while she was with her mother and two small children. They said there were no militants in the area at the time.

A statement from the Palestinian security forces said she was shot by "outlaws" — the term it has been using for local militants who have been battling Israeli forces in recent years. The security forces condemned the shooting and vowed to investigate it.

Separately, a fourth infant has died of hypothermia in the Gaza Strip, where hundreds of thousands of Palestinians displaced by nearly 15 months of war are huddled in tents along the rainy, windswept coast, while an Israeli strike on a hospital that the army said was being used by militants killed seven people.

The Western-backed Palestinian Authority exercises limited self-rule in parts of the Israeli-occupied West Bank. It is deeply unpopular among Palestinians, largely because it cooperates with Israel on security matters, even as Israel accuses it of incitement and of generally turning a blind eye to militancy.

In a statement, the al-Sabbagh family accused the Palestinian security forces of having become "repressive tools that

practice terrorism against their own people instead of protecting their dignity and standing up to the (Israeli) occupation." The Hamas militant group also blamed the security forces and condemned the shooting. It noted that al-Sabbagh was the sister of one of its fighters who was killed in a battle with Israeli troops last year.

Later on Sunday, hundreds of people took part in a demonstration in Jenin in support of the Palestinian security forces. The rally was organised by President Mahmoud Abbas' Fatah party, which dominates the Palestinian Authority and its security forces.

Palestinian security forces launched a rare operation earlier this month in Jenin that they said was aimed at restoring law and order, while critics accuse the authority of aiding the occupation.

Violence has flared in the West Bank since Hamas' October 7, 2023 attack out of Gaza triggered the war there. Israel captured the West Bank, along with Gaza and east Jerusalem, in the 1967 Mideast war. The Palestinians want all three territories for a future state.

An infant dies from cold and his twin is hospitalized in Gaza: In the Gaza Strip, 20-day-old Jomaa al-Batran died from hypothermia and his twin brother Ali was in the intensive care unit of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital.

Their father, Yehia, said the twins were born one month premature and were only able to spend a day in the nursery at the hospital, which like other health centres in Gaza has been overwhelmed by the war and is only partially functioning.

He said medics told their mother to keep the newborns warm, but it was impossible because they live in a tent and temperatures regularly drop below 10 degrees Celsius at night.

"We are eight people, and we only have four blankets," al-Batran said as he cradled his son's body. He said he woke up early Sunday and found that the baby's head was "cold as ice."

At least three other babies have died from the cold in recent weeks, according to local health officials.

Israeli report details abuse of hostages held in Gaza: The war began when Hamas-led militants stormed into southern Israel on October 7, 2023, killing some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and abducting around 250, including women, children and older adults. Around 100 hostages are still inside Gaza, at least a third of whom are believed to be dead.

Israel's Health Ministry released a report Sunday detailing what it said was widespread physical, psychological and sexual abuse of people who had been held in Gaza.

The report, based on the findings of doctors who treated some of the more than 100 hostages released during a ceasefire last year, said the captives — including children — had been subjected to "severe physical and sexual abuse, such as beatings, isolation, deprivation of food and water, branding, hair-pulling, and sexual assault."

The findings, which are to be sent to the United Nations, could increase pressure on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to agree

to a ceasefire and hostage release with Hamas. Families of the hostages and their supporters have held weekly mass demonstrations for months, and diplomats have reported recent progress in the long-running indirect talks.

Strike on a hospital in Gaza City kills 7: An Israeli strike on the upper floor of a hospital in Gaza City on Sunday killed at least seven people and wounded several others, according to the Civil Defense, first responders affiliated with the Hamas-run government.

The Israeli military said it struck a Hamas control centre inside the building, which it said was no longer serving as a hospital.

Israel's offensive has killed over 45,000 Palestinians and wounded more than 1,00,000, according to local health authorities.

They say women and children make up more than half the fatalities but do not distinguish between militants and civilians in their count. Israel says it has killed over 17,000 militants, without providing evidence.

Israel's bombardment and ground operations have displaced some 90 per cent of Gaza's population of 2.3 million people, often multiple times. Vast areas of the territory, including entire neighbourhoods, have been pounded to ruins, and critical infrastructure has been destroyed.

Israeli restrictions, ongoing fighting and the breakdown of law and order have hindered the delivery of humanitarian aid, raising fears of famine, while widespread hunger has left people at greater risk of disease and death.



Demonstrators with Georgian national and EU flags march during an anti-government rally outside the Parliament building in Tbilisi, Georgia, on Saturday. AP/PTI

Kavelashvili is inaugurated as Georgia's president, complicating path toward EU

AP ■ TBILISI

Former soccer player Mikheil Kavelashvili was formally inaugurated as president of Georgia on Sunday, cementing the ruling party's grip in what the opposition calls a blow to the country's EU aspirations and a victory for former imperial ruler Russia.

Outgoing pro-Western Georgian President Salome Zourabichvili said Sunday morning that she would vacate her residence at the Orbeliani Palace in Tbilisi, but insisted she was still the legitimate office holder.

"I will come out of here, come out to you and be with you. ... This presidential residence was a symbol as long as there was a president here who was legitimate. I bring legitimacy with me," Zourabichvili told a crowd of supporters outside the palace.

She called Kavelashvili's inauguration a "parody." Kavelashvili, 53, who was the only candidate on the ballot, easily won the vote earlier in December given the Georgian Dream party's control of a 300-seat electoral college that replaced direct presidential elections in 2017. It is made up of members of Parliament, municipal councils and regional legislatures.

In his speech Sunday, Kavelashvili promised to be "everyone's president, regardless of whether they like me or not." He called for the nation to unite behind him around "shared values, the principles of mutual respect, and the future

we should build together."

Georgian Dream retained control of Parliament in the South Caucasus nation in an October 26 election that the opposition alleges was rigged with Moscow's help. The party has vowed to continue pushing toward accession in the European Union but also wants to "reset" ties with Russia.

Georgia's outgoing president and main pro-Western parties have boycotted the post-election parliamentary sessions and demanded a rerun of the ballot.

In 2008, Russia fought a brief war with Georgia, which led to Moscow's recognition of two breakaway regions as independent, and an increase in the Russian military presence in South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Critics have accused Georgian Dream — established by Bidzina Ivanishvili, a shadowy billionaire who made his fortune in Russia — of becoming increasingly authoritarian and tilted toward Moscow, accusations the ruling party has denied. The party recently pushed through laws similar to those used by the Kremlin to crack down on freedom of speech and LGBTQ+ rights.

Georgian Dream's decision last month to suspend talks on their country's bid to join the EU added to the opposition's outrage and galvanized protesters in front of the parliament building on Sunday held red cards, in reference to Kavelashvili's career in soccer. "Because today our president is

a footballer, we are showing him a red card. The next step will be sending him off the pitch. The Georgian people will definitely do this, because it was a circus that they have held today in the parliament," protester Sofia Shamanidze told The Associated Press.

The outgoing president demands new elections: Zourabichvili, 72, was born in France to parents with Georgian roots and had a successful career with the French Foreign Ministry before President Mikheil Saakashvili named her Georgia's top diplomat in 2004.

Constitutional changes made the president's job largely ceremonial before Zourabichvili was elected by popular vote with Georgian Dream's support in 2018. She became sharply critical of the ruling party, accusing it of pro-Russia policies, and Georgian Dream unsuccessfully tried to impeach her.

Zourabichvili has rejected government claims that the opposition was fomenting violence. "We are not demanding a revolution," she told The Associated Press. "We are asking for new elections, but in conditions that will ensure that the will of the people will not be misrepresented or stolen again."

Who is the new president?: Georgia's opposition has mocked Kavelashvili for lacking higher education. He was a striker in the English

Premier League for Manchester City and played for several clubs in the Swiss Super League. He was elected to Parliament in 2016 on the Georgian Dream ticket, and in 2022 co-founded the People's Power political movement, which was allied with Georgian Dream and became known for its strong anti-Western rhetoric.

Kavelashvili was one of the authors of a controversial law requiring organizations that receive more than 20% of their funding from abroad to register as "pursuing the interest of a foreign power," similar to a Russian law used to discredit critical organizations.

The EU, which granted Georgia candidate status in December 2023 on condition that the country meets the bloc's recommendations, put its accession on hold and cut financial support in June following approval of the "foreign influence" law.

How did protests unfold?: Thousands of demonstrators converged on the parliament building every night after the government announced the suspension of EU accession talks on Nov. 28.

Riot police used water cannons and tear gas almost daily to disperse and beat scores of protesters, some of whom threw fireworks at police officers and built barricades on the capital's central boulevard. Hundreds were detained and over 100 treated for injuries.

15 hurt in Florida when train hits fire truck that drove onto tracks after another train passed

AP ■ DELRAY BEACH (US)

Three firefighters and a dozen passengers were injured in Florida on Saturday when a fire truck with its lights flashing drove around rail crossing arms and into the path of a high-speed passenger train after waiting for another train to pass, according to video of the incident and a person briefed on what happened.

The crash happened at 10:45 am in crowded downtown Delray Beach. In the aftermath the Brightline train was stopped on the tracks, its front destroyed, about a block away from the Delray Beach Fire Rescue truck. Its ladder was ripped off and in the grass several yards away. The Sun-Sentinel reported.

The Delray Beach Fire Rescue said in a social media post that

three Delray Beach firefighters were in stable condition at a hospital. Palm Beach County Fire Rescue took 12 people from the train to the hospital with minor injuries.

The person familiar with the details of the crash, who was not authorised to disclose what happened because of the ongoing investigation and spoke on condition of anonymity, said the fire truck stopped at the crossing and waited for a freight train to go by before maneuvering around the lowered crossing arms.

Video of the collision shows the fire truck driving around cars stopped at the crossing with its lights flashing to cross the double tracks. Emmanuel Amaral rushed to the scene on his golf cart after hearing a loud crash and screeching train brakes from

where he was having breakfast a couple of blocks away. He saw firefighters climbing out of the front window of their damaged truck and pulling injured colleagues away from the tracks.

One of their helmets came to rest several hundred feet away from the crash.

"The front of that train is completely smashed, and there was even some of the parts to the fire truck stuck in the front of the train, but it split the car right in half. It split the fire truck right in half, and the debris was everywhere," Amaral said.

A Brightline safety officer said the entire community is involved in ensuring railroad safety and drivers should never go around closed gates. The Federal Railroad Administration will investigate. A spokesperson for

the National Transportation Safety Board said in the afternoon that it was still gathering information about the crash and had not decided yet whether to investigate. The NTSB is already investigating two crashes involving Brightline's high-speed trains that killed three people early this year at the same crossing in Melbourne along the railroad's route between Miami and Orlando. More than 100 people have died after being hit by trains since Brightline began operations in July 2017 — giving the railroad the worst death rate in the nation. But most of those deaths have been either suicides, pedestrians who tried to run across the tracks ahead of a train or drivers who went around crossing gates instead of waiting for a train to pass.

Netanyahu to undergo prostate surgery

AP ■ TEL AVIV

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is having his prostate removed on Sunday, his office said, a procedure that comes as he manages multiple crises at once, including the ongoing war in Gaza and his own trial for alleged corruption.

Netanyahu, 75, is among a cohort of older world leaders, including US President Joe Biden, 82, and President-elect Donald Trump, 78, whose health and physical fitness are under deep scrutiny both at home and abroad because of their advanced age and the effect that could have on their leadership.

Netanyahu, who has had a string of health issues in recent years, has gone to great lengths to bolster a public image of himself as a fully healthy, energetic leader. During his trial this month he boasted about working 18-hour days, even if those long hours are accompanied by a cigar. But as Israel's longest-serving leader, such a grueling workload over a total of 17 years in power could also take a toll on his well-being.

The procedure has already had a fallout: Netanyahu's lawyer Amit Hadad said in a letter to the court the Israeli prime minister would be fully sedated for the procedure and would be hospitalized for "a number of days," asking that his three days of testimony this week be canceled. The court agreed.

An acting prime minister will take over for Netanyahu while he is undergoing the procedure, according to an official familiar with the arrangements, although it wasn't immediately clear who will step in. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because they weren't authorized to discuss the details behind the procedure with the media.

With so much at stake in the turbulent

region, Netanyahu's health in wartime is a concern for both Israelis and the wider world.

Prostate issues are common for older men, and recovery can be quick: According to Netanyahu's office, the Israeli leader was diagnosed with a urinary tract infection on Wednesday stemming from a benign enlargement of his prostate. The infection was treated successfully with antibiotics but a procedure on Sunday will remove his prostate.

Complications from prostate enlargement are common in men in their 70s and 80s, Dr. Shay Golan, head of the oncology urology service at Israel's Rabin Medical Center, told Israeli Army Radio.

He said that an enlarged prostate can block proper emptying of the bladder, leading to a build-up of urine that can then lead to an infection or other complications. After medicinal treatment, doctors can recommend a procedure to remove the prostate to prevent future blockages, Golan said.

In Netanyahu's case, because the prostate is not cancerous, Golan said doctors will likely perform an endoscopic surgery, which is carried out by inserting small instruments into a body cavity, rather than making any surgical cuts in the abdomen to reach the prostate.

The procedure lasts about an hour, Golan said, and recovery is quick. Golan also said that aside from catheter use for one to three days after the procedure, patients can return to normal activity without any significant limitations.

Netanyahu has had some health issues before, including a heart condition: Netanyahu insists he is in excellent health and his office has worked to craft a public image that backs that up. It releases footage of him touring war zones in full protective gear

flanked by gruff military officers, or meeting with defense officials on windswept hilltops in youthful dark shades and puffer jackets.

But that image was shattered last year when Netanyahu's doctors revealed that he had a heart condition, a problem that he had apparently long known about but concealed from the public. A week after a fainting spell, Netanyahu was urgently fitted with a pacemaker to control his heartbeat. Only then did staff at the Sheba Medical Center reveal that Netanyahu has for years experienced a condition that can cause irregular heartbeats.

That revelation came at a time when Netanyahu was dealing with massive anti-government protests. The news about a chronic heart problem stoked further anger and distrust at a time of extreme political polarization in Israel. Last year, Netanyahu was rushed to the hospital for what doctors said likely was dehydration, where he stayed overnight, prompting his weekly Cabinet meeting to be delayed.

Earlier this year, Netanyahu underwent hernia surgery, during which he was under full anesthesia and unconscious. His close confidant, Justice Minister Yariv Levin, served as acting prime minister during the operation.

The prostate removal comes at a turbulent time in the region: As Israel's leader, Netanyahu is at the center of major global events that are shifting the Middle East. With the dizzying pace of the past 14 months, being incapacitated for even a few hours can be risky in the current regional maelstrom.

Netanyahu will be in hospital at a time when international mediators are pushing Israel and Hamas to reach a ceasefire in Gaza as violence there rages on and fighting between Israel and Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels intensifies.

Lankan HR body cries foul over denial to visit Rohingya

PTI ■ COLOMBO

Sri Lanka's Human Rights Commission Shas written a letter to President Anura Kumara Dissanayake alleging that they have been denied permission to meet Rohingya refugees staying at a military camp since last week.

"On December 26, a team of officials from the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka (HRCSL), including a director, attempted to monitor the detention conditions of these asylum seekers at the Sri Lanka Air Force Camp in Mullaitivu in the Northern Province. However, they were refused access to the asylum seekers," the letter said. The Sri Lanka Navy on December 20 said they had rescued over 100 Rohingyas from Myanmar in a distressed condition in the seas off the island's northeastern coast.

They were spotted by local fishermen in the Mullaitivu district's Vellamullaivaikkal. The government later said their arrival could be due to a human trafficking racket. "Investigations revealed that they had deliberately landed here and we consider them as illegal immigrants," Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Arun Hemachandra was quoted as saying by The Sunday Times here. The HRCSL letter stated that the powers and functions of the commission extend not only to Sri Lankan citizens but to "any person" detained within Sri Lanka. The commission said it had the statutory authority to access the said Air Force Camp and monitor the detention conditions of all asylum seekers, including the children present there.

The HRCSL has summoned the controller general of immigration and emigration and other responsible officials who obstructed the commission's attempts to monitor the detention conditions to appear before it on December 31 to provide an explanation.

PUBLIC NOTICE

General Public is hereby informed that my clients namely, Mr. Harish Kumar Chawla S/o Hira Nand Chawla R/o BG-6/308A, Paschim Vihar, Delhi-110063 Mrs. Himani Chawla W/o Mr. Harish Kumar Chawla R/o BG-6/308A Paschim Vihar Delhi-110063 Mr. Khusali Chawla S/o Harish Kumar Chawla R/o BG-6/308A, Paschim Vihar Delhi-110063 have severed all their relation with their consanguineal/son/brother and daughter in law namely Mr. Siddharth Chawla S/o Mr. Harish Kumar Chawla R/o BG-6/308A, Paschim Vihar, Delhi-110063 aged 26 years & his wife Mrs. Raully Chawla W/o Mr. Siddharth Chawla R/o BG-6/308A Paschim Vihar, Delhi-110063 & their newly born son Yuvraj Chawla S/o Mr. Siddharth Chawla R/o BG-6/308A, Paschim Vihar, Delhi-110063 due to their misconduct and bad habits. Therefore, my clients have disowned & debarred their above-mentioned family members from all their movable & immovable properties and any body who would do any transaction, business or any kind of dealing with them, would do it at his/her own risk and therefore would himself/herself be solely responsible for the same, as my clients have nothing to do with their consanguineal Mr. Siddharth Chawla and Mrs. Raully Chawla or with their activities.

PRANSHU GOSAIN (ADVOCATE)
BG-5/65, GF, Paschim Vihar, New Delhi-16

Public Notice

The Uttar Bharat G.E.CO-OP Group Housing Society Ltd. Plot No. 361, B-Block, Basement, Near Ambrathi Village, Sec-19, Dwaraka, New Delhi 110075

In pursuance of Rule 19(2) of the DCS Rules, 2007 applications are invited from the general public of Delhi to complete the conditions laid down in Rules 19(2) of the DCS Rules, 2007 for filling up Seven vacancies in the Uttar Bharat G.E. Co-Operative Group Housing Society Ltd. (Regd. No. 973 (GH) Regd. Office Plot No. 361, B-Block, Basement, Near Ambrathi Village, Sector-19, Dwaraka, New Delhi-110075), which have arisen due to the resignation of members interested persons can collect the application form in person only from the above-mentioned society office from 30.12.2024 to 31.12.2024 between 11:00 AM and 2:00 PM upon payment of Rs. 500/- in cash. The application form and accompanying documents must be completed in all respects & submitted along with an amount of Rs. 20,12,110/- (Rupees Twenty lakh twelve thousand one hundred ten only) through a Bank Demand Draft (DD) or PayOrder (PO) in favor of "The Uttar Bharat Group Employees Co-op Group Housing Society Limited". This amount includes share money and money admission fee, and Land money interest. The last date for submission of the completed application form, name, as my clients and DD/PO is 03.01.2025 between 11:00 AM and 2:00 PM. If the number of applications exceeds the number of vacancies, a draw of lots will be conducted under the supervision of the Registrar, Cooperative Societies, Government of NCT of Delhi, 001, Court Building, Parliament Street, New Delhi-110001. Applicants will be informed of the draw details in due course. The Bank DD/PO of unsuccessful applicants can be collected from the society office one week after the draw of lots.

Sd/- Secretary-Uttar Bharat G.E. CGHS Ltd.

PUBLIC NOTICE

Information is given to general public at large that Mr. Udal S/o Mr. Rampal is the owner of Plot of Land area measuring 145-2/3 sq. yds. and 51 sq. yds. carved out of Gata No. 436, situated under Seema Nagar Palka, Pargana & Tehsil-Hapur, District Ghazabad, U.P. acquired by virtue of Sale Deed dated 09.01.1985 (Document No. 232) & Sale Deed dated 25.11.1994 (Document No. 3562) registered in SR-Hapur. Our Client Mr. Kuldip S/o Mr. Udal (Applicant), Mrs. Deepa W/o Mr. Kuldip (Co-Applicant) with Mr. Udal S/o Late Mr. Rampal (Co-Applicant) going to mortgage the aforesaid property against the financial assistance from Hero Housing Finance Ltd. Death Certificate and Surviving Member Certificate of Late Mr. Rampal S/o Mr. Moji are not available with our client. To comply the requirements of BANK/NBFC, we give this public notice that if any person(s) having any objection regarding ownership and/or creating mortgage of the said property is/are hereby requested to intimate in writing to the undersigned within 10 days at below address.

NCR LAW ASSOCIATES
Advocates & Consultants A-98, Sector-9, New Vijay Nagar, Ghazabad, (U.P.)-201009, MOB- 9999826427, 9999721152

PUBLIC NOTICE

Information is given to general public at large that Halima Khatoun who is/are purchasing the third floor with roof rights, Part of Property Bearing No. A-72 of land area measuring 50 Sq. Yards out of Rect. No. 26 & Killa No. 3, Situated in the village Khureh Khas at Bahadri, Gata No. 6, Rashid Market Extn., Ilaha Shahdara, Delhi-110551 from Nargis Jahan W/o Anwar Ali who acquired the said property by virtue of Sale Deed dated 08.12.2023 (Doc. No. 11956), registered in the office of Sub-Registrar Vill-Zahed executed by Mustaf, Islamuddin & Firaz at U.P. Late Mukhtar Ahmad, Late Mukhtar Ahmad S/o Late Bashir Ahmad & Late Shabana D/o Late Mukhtar Ahmad are not available with Seller i.e. Nargis Jahan W/o Mr. Anwar Ali. To comply the requirements of BANK/NBFC, we give this public notice that if any person(s) having any objection regarding ownership and/or creating mortgage of the said property is/are hereby requested to intimate in writing to the undersigned within 07 days at below address.

NCR LAW ASSOCIATES
Advocates & Consultants A-98, Sector-9, New Vijay Nagar, Ghazabad, (U.P.)-201009, MOB- 9999826427, 9999721152

PUBLIC NOTICE

KVIR Towers Private Limited (CIN :UJ0200DL2013PTC255199) (hereinafter referred to "Company") is a Real Estate development Company, carrying out its business under the popular trade name "RCR". Its activities are spread mainly in the National Capital Region (NCR), more particularly in District Gautam Buddha Nagar. The Company is developing a real estate project in the name and style of RG'S PLEIADAS.

It has come to the notice of said Company that certain Individuals / Companies / Groups in media (Digital/Print) are indulged in wrongful and unauthorised use of its Brand Name, Logo, Project details in their promotional advertising material without prior due notice to and approval from the Company, which is detrimental to its interest.

People at large are warned to beware of any such publications circulated in the market. The said wrongful use of information is also not as per the guidelines laid down under the Real Estate (Regulation and Development) Act, 2016.

NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN TO THE PUBLIC AT LARGE that such wrongful use of information in any print media / portal/ website or in any other way, without the approval of the Company is unauthorised and illegal and shall be at the sole risk, responsibility, and liability of the user of the information and the Company shall initiate appropriate legal action against such offender. Anybody coming across any such publication is requested to bring it to the notice of the Company. In case of any information/complaints doubt about the working of any such unauthorised Individuals / Companies / Groups, kindly visit the official website https://kvir.co.in/ or Mail Id. info@kvir.in of the Company.

Public is hereby also cautioned that anyone dealing with such unauthorised Individuals / Companies / Groups apart from KVIR Towers Private Limited under the impression that they are connected with it shall be doing so at his / her / their own risk, responsibility and consequences. The Company shall not be responsible for any such act or representation.

Please also take notice that unauthorised use of the name of the Company, Brand Name, Logo, Project details would amount to infringement of its rights.

The Company shall contemplate serious action, as may be advised under law, against all such offenders.

Sd/-
KVIR Towers Private Limited
G-06, Ground Floor,
Plot No. SU LSC B-Block RG City Centre,
Lawrence Road, North West, Delhi, India, 110035

Simplification to be the focus for taxation in 2025

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Simplification of direct and indirect tax policies will be the main focus area for the government in the New Year after beginning the review of the six-decade-old income tax law and rationalisation of the GST rate in 2024. With monthly gross GST collections stabilising at around Rs 1.8 lakh crore and gross direct tax collections steadily rising at 20 per cent rate, the effort to ease compliance burden for individuals as well as corporates will gain traction. On the GST front, individuals are awaiting a tax cut in life and health insurance premiums, which will bring down the cost of insurance, while businesses are awaiting the operationalisation of the GST Tribunal for faster dispute resolution.

Also, the work on rationalising GST rates and slabs has been put in motion with a group of ministers (GoM) deliberating on the changes, but a final decision is expected only by the GST Council, comprising the Centre and state finance ministers. Currently, GST is a four-tier tax structure with slabs at 5 per cent, 12 per cent, 18 per cent and 28 per cent. Under GST, essential items are either exempted or taxed at the lowest slab, while luxury and demerit items attract the highest slab. Luxury goods like cars, washing machines, and demerit goods like aerated water and tobacco products attract cess on top of the highest 28 per cent slab. On the income tax front, the government has started a review of the Income Tax Act, 1961, to make it simple

and easier to understand. Amendments to the I-T law, removing the obsolete provisions and making it concise, is likely to be tabled in Parliament as early as the Budget session. Besides, coordination between law enforcement agencies to curb tax evasion and strengthen anti-money laundering provisions over the years has earned India the highest rating from the global financial watchdog Financial Action Task Force (FATF) in 2024. India has been placed in "regular follow-up" -- which is the highest rating category by FATF for India's efforts to implement measures to tackle illicit finance including money laundering and terror funding. UK, France and Italy are among the only G-20 countries which have been placed in this category apart



from India.

On the GST front, tax officers grappled with fake registration for the sole purpose of fraudulently claiming input tax credit (ITC) and defrauding the exchequer. As per information shared

with the Parliament, between April-October, 2024, GST officers detected cases of Input Tax Credit evasion of Rs 35,132 crore by 17,818 fake firms and arrested 69 persons. To check fake entities, the GST Council, comprising the

Centre and states, has already brought in biometric authentication for certain suspicious businesses, under which the person seeking GST registration will be asked to go to an Aadhaar centre to have his biometrics verified. However, with trade and industry flagging challenges faced in getting registration, the GST Council in its meeting on December 21 decided to streamline the GST registration process and tasked the tax officers to work on its implementation. Goods and Services Tax (GST) authorities have so far been using OTP-based Aadhaar authentication to establish the identity of the applicants, seeking registration. AMRG & Associates Senior Partner Rajat Mohan said continued emphasis on rationalizing tax slabs, reducing

litigations through a centralized appellate Tribunal, and leveraging data analytics will be crucial. The introduction of the Invoice Matching System (IMS) in 2025 will enhance transparency and accuracy in GST filings by automating invoice reconciliation and reducing fraudulent ITC claims. "However, the transition may pose challenges for businesses, particularly small taxpayers, who could face increased compliance costs and technical difficulties," Mohan said. Deloitte India, Partner and Leader, Indirect Tax, Mahesh Jaising said in 2025, anticipated reforms include GST rate rationalization, particularly for real estate and insurance sectors, as examined by GoMs, alongside the operationalization of the GST

appellate tribunal. Technology upgrades, such as expanded B2C e-invoicing and implementation of the recently launched Invoice Management System, signal the government's commitment to fostering a simplified, industry-friendly, and growth-oriented tax ecosystem," Jaising said. Nangia Andersen LLP, Executive Director- Indirect Tax, Sivakumar Ramjee said in 2025, the Government is expected to focus on improved GST collection through GST amnesty schemes, bring clearer rules to tax Cryptos and Virtual assets, operationalize the GST tribunals, bring changes in E-way bill procedures and streamline IMS & introduction of Multi-factor authentication for accessing GSTN portal as an additional layer of security.

Stock markets to end 2024 with positive returns despite roller coaster ride

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Dalal Street had a roller coaster ride in 2024 from shattering record after record to facing heavy correction off-late but equity markets still rewarded investors with positive returns, driven by a surge in domestic fund flows and a resilient macro landscape. The first half of the year saw robust corporate earnings, a surge in domestic flows, and a resilient macro landscape, driving the Nifty to an all-time high of 26,277.35 in September 2024, according to Motilal Oswal Wealth Management. "In the last two months, the market has corrected from its all-time high. This correction marked the third major decline since the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, with unprecedented selling by Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) due to a combination of domestic and global factors," it said in a note. As of December 27, the BSE benchmark Sensex has gained 6,458.81 points or 8.94 per cent while the NSE Nifty climbed 2,082 points or 9.58 per cent. The year was marked by significant events, with the Indian general elections and the US Presidential polls taking centre stage. Equity markets also grappled with two major geopolitical turmoil -- the Israel-Iran conflict and the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war.



"2024, was a year of tug of war between the bulls & bears marked by volatility majorly driven by global macroeconomic data points followed by geopolitical tensions impacting markets. Despite all the uncertainties around the world, Indian markets sustained the pressure and delivered very decent returns. "It was also a year of surge in valuation to the peak making Indian markets the most expensive in the world. While the excess liquidity in the market pushed valuations as high as possible surpassing fundamentals theories which eventually invited corrections in the markets from the top," Prashanth Tapse, Senior VP Research, Research Analyst, Mehta Equities Ltd, said. The BSE benchmark Sensex hit its record peak of 85,978.25 on September 27 this year, and the NSE Nifty also reached

the lifetime high of 26,277.35 on the same day. "2024 marked the ninth consecutive year of gains for the Indian equity market. Despite a challenging final quarter, the market delivered strong returns for the year, with midcap and smallcap stocks outperforming and rewarding investors handsomely. "However, benchmark indices like the Nifty and Sensex lagged behind their global counterparts, particularly the US markets. This underperformance was largely driven by persistent and aggressive selling by FIIs," Santosh Meena, Head of Research, Swastika Investmart Ltd, said. From the all-time highs in September, the BSE benchmark is down 8.46 per cent while Nifty has lost 9.37 per cent from the record peak level. The challenges deepened in

the final quarter as disappointing corporate earnings and weaker-than-expected economic growth further dampened investor confidence, contributing to the subdued performance of the headline indices, Meena said. Markets came under bear attack from October onwards amid concerns of foreign investors fleeing the domestic market and stretched valuations. In October alone, the BSE benchmark slumped 4,910.72 points or 5.82 per cent, and the Nifty tumbled 1,605.5 points or 6.22 per cent. So far in December, the benchmark gauge Sensex is down 1,103.72 points or 1.38 per cent. October saw an unprecedented foreign fund outflow of Rs 94,017 crore -- the largest monthly withdrawal on record -- amid increased allocations to China, muted corporate earnings, and high valuation of Indian stocks. "On a positive note, the commencement of the rate cut cycle in the US provided a key tailwind for global equity markets. However, the Indian equity market faced headwinds due to record levels of aggressive selling by FIIs. Adding to the challenges, disappointing Q2 earnings by India Inc. And a slowdown in GDP growth further dampened investor sentiment," Meena said. In 2023, the BSE benchmark jumped 11,399.52 points or

18.73 per cent, and the Nifty climbed 3,626.1 points or 20 per cent. This year, apart from the general elections in India, markets saw tight rate cycle by RBI to tackle inflation, unwinding of Yen carry trade, rate cut by the US FED, election in the US and Trump getting elected as the President of the US and stimulus by China, Manish Bhandari, CEO & Portfolio Manager, Vallum Capital Advisors, said. The recent market correction has improved valuations, and the overall outlook for the Indian equity market remains robust, Meena said. "On the global front, the trajectory of the world economy under Trump's leadership will play a significant role in shaping investor sentiment and market dynamics. Additionally, FII flows will remain a crucial factor in determining the performance and direction of largecap stocks, given their outsized influence on market sentiment," he added. "Factors dependent for growth would again be similar to last year like geopolitical tussle, US Fed interest rate trajectory and Donald Trump's tariff policies along with revival of local corporate earnings followed by domestic government policies to support growth. High focus would be on the dynamic relationship between the US and China," Tapse of Mehta Equities Ltd, said.

Country's liquor cos may approach FSSAI for separate standard for Indian single malt whisky

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Homegrown Indian liquor makers are mulling approaching food & beverages regulator FSSAI for a separate standard for the Indian single malt whisky that is rapidly scaling with the ongoing trend of premiumisation and has won several prestigious international awards. This will help maintain the sanctity and reputation of Indian single malt whisky -- now exported to 60 countries -- and Indian producers are discussing the move, according to Confederation of Indian Alcoholic Beverage Companies (CIABC), the industry body of domestic AlcoBev manufacturers. The Indian distillers are also taking steps to get a geographical indication tag for their single malt whisky that will enhance the brand's credibility and standards. While the sale of Indian single malt whisky rising in high double digits in the country -- the world's largest whisky market -- the industry is also facing a challenge to keep a check on the emergence of smaller single malt whisky brands. According to CIABC Director General Anant S Iyer, the definition of FSSAI is that it should be malt-based, but it does not define single malt. Single malt whisky means that it should come from single distillery and not multiple ones.



"Those not following proper standards should be restrained from claiming themselves as Indian single malt whisky, Iyer said. "We believe that FSSAI should amend its regulations to include a separate standard applicable to Indian single malt whisky. This way, producers who are not following the required standards can be restrained from calling it Indian single malt whisky. It will also help maintain the sanctity and reputation of Indian single malt whisky," Iyer told PTI. In recent years, Indian single malt brands, including Amrut, Paul John, Radico Khaitan's Rampur, Indri from Picadilly Industries, Gianchand from Dewansons, Crazy Cock from South Seas Distilleries, and Doab (Globus), have broken into the segment which was shadowed by the imported Scotch whisky. In 2023, Indian single malts accounted for nearly 53 per cent of total sales, scoring over

the global brands such as Glenlivet, Macallan, Lagavulin, Glenfiddich, and Talisker in the 'desi' market, where the ASP (average selling price) is going up. CIABC has expressed concerns over misrepresentation of the Indian single malt category by some manufacturers, calling their produce as 'single malt' despite it being sourced from different distilleries. CIABC says it undermines efforts of Indian producers who have worked hard over the years in creating a niche for Indian single malt whiskies globally. "Now a host of other Indian domestic players are setting up and maturing Indian malt spirit, using malted Indian Barley in Oak Barrels, which are mainly imported. They are in the process of launching their own Indian single malt whisky brands in the immediate to near future," said Iyer. Indian whiskies are finding their play in the huge whisky category worldwide dominated by scotch, American, Irish, Japanese, and Canadian whiskies, he added. Earlier this year, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) issued its definition of single-malt and single-grain whisky, which came into effect on March 1. According to Iyer, the definition of FSSAI is that it should be malt-based, but they do not define single malt.

Indian economy to grow at 6.5-6.8 per cent in FY25 on higher domestic consumption: Deloitte

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Indian economy is likely to grow at 6.5-6.8 per cent this fiscal and slightly higher between 6.7-7.3 per cent in FY2026, boosted by domestic consumption, Deloitte said on Sunday. Deloitte India Economist Rumki Majumdar said the growth in the first half of the fiscal year 2025 turned out to be slower than estimated as election uncertainties followed by disruptions in activity due to heavy rainfall and geopolitical events weighed on domestic demand and exports. However, India continues to show resilience in certain pockets that are worth noting -- be it in consumption trends, services growth, the rising share of high-value manufacturing in exports, or the capital market. The government's continued focus on infrastructure development, digitisation, and attracting FDI will be the additional growth booster, enhancing overall efficiency. "We remain cautiously optimistic and expect the growth rate to remain between 6.5 and 6.8 per cent this fiscal year and slightly higher between 6.7 and 7.3 per cent in FY2026," Majumdar told PTI. Earlier this month, the Reserve Bank of India cut its growth forecast for the current fiscal to 6.6 per cent from 7.2 per cent projected in June. Deloitte said manufacturing exports in high-value segments like electronics, semiconductors, and chemicals reflect India's strengthening position in global value chains. Meanwhile, capital markets have shown stability despite significant FII outflows over the



past two and a half months, thanks to rising participation from retail and domestic institutional investors. "We anticipate several of these trends to persist through 2025. We believe domestic consumption will remain the cornerstone of India's economic growth, with both rural and urban demand playing key roles. "A myriad of factors, such as improved agricultural incomes, targeted subsidies, social welfare programmes, government employment initiatives, advancements in digitisation, and stronger services sector growth will help broad-based consumption spending," Majumdar said. India will have to ride out the rough patch, as several global headwinds pose challenges. Geopolitical tensions, trade disputes, supply chain disruptions, and the escalating impact of climate change could weigh heavily on growth and long-term economic stability, she added. Anticipated policy changes and trade restrictions in the US could impact export demand and capital flows into the country. Besides, central banks in the West may not go

for as many rate cuts next year if inflation starts moving north. Tighter global liquidity will likely limit the RBI's ability to manoeuvre monetary policy. Majumdar said over the next few years, India's growth will hinge on its ability to economically decouple from global uncertainties. "The Indian economy has the opportunity to turn the lime into lemonade by focusing on three factors. The first would be to build on its own strengths. Harnessing the demographic dividend and growing middle-class wealth through investments in workforce development and employability will drive consumption, reduce skill gaps, boost the labour market, and strengthen capital markets," she said. The second would be the emphasis on building a self-reliant manufacturing sector that will not only meet India's rising domestic demand but also integrate with the global value chain. Also, by advancing digitally delivered services and targeting high-value segments of global value chains, India can capitalise on opportunities, even amid nearshoring and deglobalisation trends.

Foodgrain output set to scale new peak in 2025 as farm sector eyes 4 per cent growth

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India is poised to achieve new heights in foodgrain production in 2025, driven by favourable monsoon, though significant challenges persist in pulses and oilseeds production as the country's agricultural sector shows signs of robust recovery. The Agriculture Ministry's initial projections paint an optimistic picture, with kharif (summer) foodgrain production estimated at a record 164.7 million tonnes for the 2024-25 crop year ending June 2025. Winter crop planting has maintained steady progress, with wheat sown across 29.31 million hectares as of 31 December 2024, while total rabi (winter) crops cover 55.88 million hectares. "We had a good kharif crop because of normal rainfall," Agriculture Secretary Devesh Chaturvedi told PTI. "Overall, the crop prospect for the whole year looks promising," he added, though cautioning against potential heat waves in February-March that could affect the winter wheat harvest. The agricultural sector is projected to bounce back strongly, with growth projections of 3.5-4 per cent in 2024-25, up from 1.4 per cent in the previous fiscal year. Agri-economist S Mahendra Dev attributes this improvement to "good monsoon and rise in rural demand". This growth comes despite localised floods and droughts affecting crops in parts of Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan. Climate change-induced weather



anomalies have particularly impacted onion and tomato yields in certain regions. However, the path ahead isn't without hurdles. To address the persistent challenge of self-sufficiency in pulses and oilseeds, the government will roll out the National Mission on Edible Oils - Oilseeds (NMEO-Oilseeds) in 2025, backed by a substantial budget of Rs 10,103 crore. The initiative aims to reduce import dependency through targeted interventions and increased support prices. The horticulture sector has shown remarkable progress, with record production of fruits and vegetables. The success is attributed to improved farming practices and technology adoption under various government schemes. The sector is witnessing increased technological adoption, with drones and AI-driven tools gaining traction. "These innovations offer immense potential to enhance productivity," said Ashish Dobhal, CEO of UPL Sustainable AgriSolutions. The government's flagship PM-KISAN scheme continues

to provide crucial support, having disbursed over Rs 3.46 lakh crore to more than 11 crore farmers since its 2018 launch. Seven new agricultural schemes announced in September 2024, with a combined outlay of Rs 13,966 crore, are set for full implementation in 2025. These initiatives span various aspects of agriculture, including digital transformation, crop science, livestock health, and natural resource management. However, farmer unrest remains a concern, particularly in Punjab and Haryana, where demands for legal MSP guarantees and other reforms persist. A parliamentary committee has suggested doubling the PM-KISAN support to Rs 12,000 per beneficiary and implementing universal crop insurance for small farmers. While farmer-producer organisations (FPOs) have expanded with 9,204 registrations, they continue to face challenges, including limited market access and weak managerial capacity, potentially affecting their long-term sustainability.

Rupee tumbles 3 pc in 2024; turbulence to ebb in slow motion in next year

PTI ■ MUMBAI

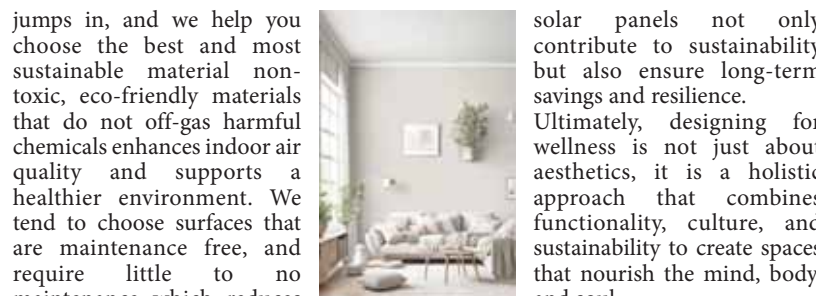
The Indian rupee tumbled 3 per cent in 2024 as concerns over slower economic growth and the green buck's global strength weighed, but it was among the least volatile currencies in the world and the headwinds may be less intense in the coming year. Rupee settled at new lows as the year closed as dollar's resurgence weighed on emerging-market currencies. The action-packed 2024 continued to impact the rupee's exchange rate against major currencies throughout, with a series of geopolitical events ranging from the Russia-Ukraine war and crisis in the Middle East to trade disruptions in the Red Sea and elections across several major economies. Global factors, including measures taken by major central banks, have hit not only the rupee-dollar dynamics but also disrupted the exchange rates of currencies across all emerging economies. In fact, the rupee's fall with respect to the dollar has been less than its depreciation in terms of other currencies. And it has ended up with gains compared to euro and the Japanese yen. Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) ex-governor Shaktikanta Das also said in the central bank's December bi-monthly monetary policy that the Indian rupee has remained less volatile compared to its peers in emerging markets. Yet, the RBI has been more active in its efforts towards



stabilising the rupee-dollar rate, thanks to increased demand for the greenback due to India's dependence on oil imports and the widening trade deficit. "RBI was also seen intervening actively in NDF (non-deliverable forward) markets to prevent sharp depreciation of the rupee," said Naveen Mathur, Director - Commodities & Currencies, Anand Rathi Shares and Stock Brokers. This was evident in foreign exchange reserves, which declined from the record high of USD 704.89 billion in late September to USD to USD 644.39 billion as of December 20, 2024, the lowest level in nearly six months. The foreign currency assets also include the effect of appreciation or depreciation of non-US units like the euro, pound and yen held in the foreign exchange reserves. India's external challenges intensified as China's GDP growth slowed to 4.8 per cent, reducing demand for Indian exports. Besides, supply chain disruptions due to tensions in the Middle East and escalated crisis in the Red Sea hit the trade balance of several countries, including India.



DESIGN IDEAS FOR HUMAN WELLNESS



— The author is an architect, the founder of Anjaney Vastu and AB Architects

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By ANURAAG BHARDWAJ

With the scaling up of urban landforms, it becomes very difficult for architects to prioritise wellness over price per square inch. We belong to the land that has rich cultural-centric heritage as well as postmodern rising towers and much diversified living environments and this takes a very new approach. This approach focuses towards more wellness centric designs that not only nurture their function or spatial needs but also has tangible effects on their physiological and emotional needs. A primary tool in this consideration is always a *biophilic design* that connects built and unbuilt environments together with methods of natural lighting, ventilation and greenery.

Traditional physical spaces showcase various features like courtyards and verandah that modern architecture can easily showcase as green roofs, vertical gardens, and open plan layouts that invite the same elements of traditional design like natural light, ventilation and greenery. *Smart Homes* concepts are a great deal breakers today, by applying technology into wellness; we can greatly improve our living spaces. Simply matching the temperature of light to the function of that space greatly controls the mood and efficiency of the people using that space. Let's assume you are in your library, and you do not have ample space to place your book on that table, or there is not enough natural light available, you will always feel uncomfortable and might not use the space altogether.

The choice of material and their specifications is a challenging task in the modern competitive market, that is where the main role of an architect



AYURVEDIC FOOD AND REMEDIES FOR FATTY LIVER

By MOOL MEENA

Fatty liver, a condition where excess fat accumulates in liver cells, is considered a growing health concern. Generally, poor dietary habits and a sedentary lifestyle, with excessive alcoholism, induce fatty liver disorder. Fortunately, Ayurveda-India's ancient holistic medicinal science that not only proposes natural but sustainable remedies can checkmate such ailments with their methodology to heal the body system, emphasising detoxification, maintaining an equilibrium of the human body, and good digestive health.

FATTY LIVER THROUGH AYURVEDA: Fatty liver, in Ayurveda, is caused by an imbalance of Pitta and Kapha doshas. While pitta controls metabolism and digestion, kapha deals with the stability and structure of the body. Disruption of these doshas, brought about by unhealthy diets, stress, or lack of exercise, leads to the accumulation of toxins (Ama) and fat in the liver. Ayurvedic treatments aim to detoxify the liver, stimulate the digestive fire (Agni), and restore harmony between the doshas to support liver health.

AYURVEDIC FOODS AND REMEDIES FOR LIVER HEALTH: Diet plays a central role in the approach of Ayurveda to the management of fatty liver. Incorporation of nutrient-rich foods, herbs, and spices into daily meals can significantly enhance liver function.

Herbs like *Turmeric*, which contain

curcumin, are known to reduce fat accumulation in the liver due to its anti-inflammatory properties. Apart from that, *Kutki*, *Bhuiamla*, *Punernava*, *Bhringraj*, *Triphala*, *Makoi* and *Kansi* help in fatty liver, as they detoxify the liver and improve digestion. Healing foods like *Amla* or *Indian Gooseberry* help to fortify liver cells with Vitamin C, accelerating natural detoxification. Bitter gourd and greens like spinach and fenugreek reduce oxidative stress, further helping the liver clean up. Whole grains, such as barley and millet, aid digestion, prevent spikes in blood sugar levels and ease the liver's workload.

Triphala tea, a combination of three fruits, is highly effective in cleansing the liver and improving digestion. Liver detox water prepared with cumin, coriander, and fennel seeds help to flush out toxins and improve liver function.

THE ROLE OF LIFESTYLE IN AYURVEDIC LIVER CARE: Lifestyle plays a major role in the Ayurvedic care of the liver. Lifestyle activities, including physical exercise such as practicing *Bhujangasana* (Cobra Pose) and *Dhanurasana* (Bow Pose), stimulate liver function and increase blood flow.

Dietary discipline is equally important. Processed and fried foods, excessive sugar, and alcohol must be avoided to not add more burden to the liver. Ayurveda advocates conscious eating home-cooked food, chewing food properly, and maintaining

regular meal timings to improve digestion.

AYURVEDIC HERBAL FORMULATIONS FOR FATTY LIVER: Besides dietetic and lifestyle measures specifically designed formulations for liver health in the form of Ayurvedic herbal drugs are gaining popularity. These often contain powerful herbs like *Turmeric*, *Guduchi*, and *Kalmegh* that help with detoxification and promoting liver health.

Such formulations provide a convenient way to incorporate Ayurveda into daily routines, providing a natural and effective solution for managing fatty liver. Consulting a qualified Ayurvedic practitioner before starting these remedies ensures their safe and proper use.

A HOLISTIC PATH TO RECOVERY: Ayurveda's approach to fatty liver focuses on the root cause of the condition rather than just its symptoms. Through detoxification of the liver, enhancement of bile production, and re-establishment of metabolic balance, Ayurveda brings about holistic health and well-being. Unlike conventional treatments that focus on medication alone, Ayurveda uses natural remedies with personalised dietary and lifestyle changes for sustainable health benefits.

Ayurveda proves to be an excellent additional therapy for patients with liver conditions, helping them undergo a more comprehensive and efficient recovery process with the proper guidance of conventional medicine.

— The author is the COO of Sheopal's

Wanted to prove critics wrong for doubting my Test credentials: Reddy

PTI ■ MELBOURNE

Nitish Reddy wanted to confute his critics and the naysayers who doubted his ability to excel in Test format, and the gritty century at the iconic MCG was his way of conveying that he belongs to highest level of cricket.

A few former players, including a former chairman of selectors, were sceptical about Reddy's elevation as a Test player but with 293 runs in six innings and a batting average of 58-plus, he has answered them back in a befitting manner.

Reddy's 114 formed the cornerstone of India's first innings score of 369 and attracted a lot of attention on the young batter.

Did you ever feel that you will be highest scorer in this

team?

"Some people doubted me, like a youngster who played IPL, can't perform in such a big series. I know a lot of people did talk like that," Reddy said, sharing his frustration after the end of fourth day's play. "I just want to make them feel wrong about what they have said about me and that's what I am doing, I want people to know that I am here to give my 100 per cent for Indian team," the 21-year-old said and his plain speaking was as aggressive as his purposeful batting.

Asked how he looks at the past one month during which his life changed, he was quick to reply: "I guess for you guys, it is like one or two months. For me, it's like, I can see my past two to three years. How hard I've been



working on my batting and bowling."

A lot of people don't know that Reddy had hired side-arm throwdown experts before the start of 2024 IPL and practised against them with speed of deliveries cranking up to 145 clicks from around 18 yards.

"After the first IPL season, I realised what I have to improve my batting and I came up with a plan. When I got the off-season, I worked a lot on my batting and that's what is giving results now. It's not about the one month and two months, I have done the work from last two-three years to be here."

The sacrifices made by his family is well documented and the Australian media was also keen to know about the man behind the player and

the role of his father Mutyulu. "To be honest, my father had 25 years of service in central government and when I was a nobody, and hadn't played a state-level game, the first person who believed in me was my father," he was a touch emotional.

"He believed in me and he resigned from his job for me. He would take me to the ground, gym, always he wanted to be with me. He made a lot of sacrifices. If I have to tell about him, time won't be sufficient but I am so grateful to have a father like him."

"I helped my team in a difficult situation to where we can fight back strongly. So that was a special century for me and for my father as well."

Talk about Virat Kohli, the man he looked up to when he decided to pursue the game,

and he said it was a surreal moment to see his idol give him a standing ovation.

"I have been watching Virat from my childhood. He is my idol and now finally I have played with him. When he scored a hundred in Perth, I was at the non-striker's end. I felt so happy."

"Now, I scored a century, he appreciated me. He came to me and said that 'you really played well, you got the team back in the game'. I always dreamt about that moment and finally when he talked with me, that's the best moment for me," he said as his face beamed.

Asked about the chase on the final day, Reddy said: "First we have to take their last wicket. We will come back strongly and rectify our mistakes from the first innings."

Naomi Osaka says she won't 'hang around' in tennis if the results don't come

AP ■ WELLINGTON

Four-time Grand Slam champion Naomi Osaka says she won't "hang around" in tennis if her results fail to match her high expectations.

The 27-year-old Japanese player will play her first match since she suffered a back injury in the China Open in October at the ASB tennis classic in Auckland on Monday.

Osaka told a pre-tournament news conference in Auckland on Sunday she was "humbled" by her form in 2024 in which she picked up her professional career after an almost 15 month break for the birth of her first child. She ended the season ranked 58.

"I don't think I'm the type of player that would hang around," Osaka told reporters. "I have a lot of respect for all the players on tour, but the point of my life that I'm at right now, if I'm not above a certain ranking, I don't see myself playing for a while."

"I'd rather spend time with my daughter if I'm not where I think I should be and where I feel like I can be."

Osaka had a 22-17 win-loss singles record in 2024, reaching the quarterfinals at Doha and at s-Hertogenbosch in the Netherlands.

"I think 2024 humbled me, but



I also feel like I grew a lot," she said.

"I worked way harder than I've ever worked before. So in that, I guess it was very painful to not get the results I wanted, but I feel like I'm growing and learning and I am really excited for this year (2025)."

"I played really good matches. People still talk to me about my Iga (Swiatek) match at the French Open (lost 7-6 1-6 7-5). So I'm glad that I was able to give people memories as well."

"Even though I got injured in tennis, which was my last tournament, I feel pretty optimistic about how that match would have turned out (against Coco Gauff) and I am excited to play on hardcourt again."

Osaka won the Australian

Open in 2019 and 2021 and the US Open in 2018 and 2020. She says she still has a deep love for tennis, despite recent injury setbacks.

"I've been playing tennis since I was three, and a huge part of that I owe to my parents, but I never really saw my life doing anything else," she said.

"Then, when I sat there and had the opportunity to do other things, I realized that I'd rather be playing tennis."

"So it was kind of one of those realization moments where you feel like you thought you were forced to do something, but in actuality you very much truly loved it."

Osaka will play Lina Glushko of Israel in the first round of the ASB Classic.

Djokovic says players have 'been kept in the dark' on Sinner, Swiatek doping breaches

AP ■ BRISBANE

On the eve of his return to the court, Novak Djokovic has weighed in on tennis' high-profile doping cases and criticised what he perceives as double standards in the sport.

The former world No. 1, who is chasing a record 25th Grand Slam title at next month's Australian Open, expressed his frustration Sunday at being "kept in the dark" regarding top-ranked Jannik Sinner's doping case. Djokovic is the top seed in the Brisbane International this week, making his first appearance at the event since 2009. He will also team up with Australia's Nick Kyrgios in doubles, with the duo headlining Monday's action.

Off the court, Djokovic lent his voice Sunday to Kyrgios's strong criticisms made a day earlier, speaking out at length about the ongoing doping case involving current world No. 1 Jannik Sinner.

"I'm not questioning whether (Sinner) took the banned substance intentionally or not," Djokovic said at a press conference Sunday in Brisbane.

"We've had plenty of players in the past and currently under suspension for not even testing positive to banned substances."

"Some players with lower rankings waiting for their case to be



resolved for over a year. I've been really frustrated ... To see we've been kept in the dark for at least five months (on the Sinner case)."

The International Tennis Integrity Agency (ITIA) charged both Sinner and former women's world No. 1 Iga Swiatek with anti-doping breaches earlier in the year.

Sinner tested positive twice for an anabolic steroid in March but avoided a ban after the ITIA ruled he was not at fault. The World Anti-Doping Agency has appealed the decision. Swiatek accepted a one-month suspension in November after testing positive for the banned substance trimetazidine.

The Serbian further criticised the lack of transparency from tennis authorities regarding doping breaches.

"The ATP hasn't really talked in depth about it. Why have they kept that case away from the

public? We see Simona Halep's case on the WTA Tour, now Iga Swiatek's case," Djokovic said.

"It's not a good image for our sport. I'm just questioning the way the system works and why certain players aren't treated the same as others. Maybe some ranking reasons are behind it, or some players have more financial backing and stronger legal teams to tackle these cases."

Despite his frustrations, Djokovic remains focused on the season ahead. After undergoing knee surgery earlier this year, he returned to reach the Wimbledon final but skipped the end-of-year ATP Finals, where Sinner capped a dominant season with his eighth title. Djokovic is looking to extend his legacy at Melbourne Park, where he has claimed 10 Australian Open titles, and has brought on former rival Andy Murray as his coach for the tournament.

"It's strange for me to share all these kinds of insights about how I feel on the court, some of the secrets of what I'm going through, what I'm thinking about, how I see my game, with somebody who has been one of my top rivals," Djokovic said.

"But I'm so glad and very thankful that he has accepted to work with me, and in Australia ... he's very meticulous, dedicated, and professional."

Ashi clinches maiden women's 3P national title

PTI ■ BHOPAL

Local shooter Ashi Chouksey Lovercame a strong field, that had the likes of Olympians Anjum Moudgil and Shriyanka Sadangi, to clinch her maiden national title in the 50m rifle 3-position event here on Sunday.

Ashi shot a superb 466.7, a full 3.1 points clear of two-time Olympian Anjum at her home range, the MP State Academy, during the 67th National Shooting Championship.

Upcoming shooter Sakshi Sunil Padekar of Maharashtra won the bronze with an effort of 451.3. She then went on to win a silver medal in the junior women's 3P as well to round-off a successful day.

Ashi, who has been in great form over the past two years and was also a part of the Paris Olympic Games trials, extended her run of good form with a solid 590 in qualifications, to get into the eight-woman match-up in third place.

Bhakti Bhaskar Khamkar of Maharashtra topped the qualification field with a blazing 592, while Anjum qualified second, her effort of 590 containing more hits to the inner-10 ring than Ashi.

Sakshi took the sixth spot,



while another Olympian Shriyanka Sadangi qualified seventh.

In the final, however, Ashi was in a different league altogether opening up a 2.3 points gap over Anjum at the end of the first 'kneeling' position round. She maintained the lead after the 15 shots in the second 'prone' position also.

The lead increased to 2.9 after 10-shots of the last 'standing' position and despite a few late 9s after that, the result was never in doubt.

In junior women's 3P, Karnataka's Anoushka H Thokur shot 460.5 in the final to upstage Sakshi, who settled for silver on 456.3.

Haryana's Nishchal, an ISSF World Cup silver medallist last year, shot 443.9 to settle for bronze.

South Africa collapses to 116-8 against Pakistan

AP ■ CENTURION (SOUTH AFRICA)

South Africa collapsed to 116-8 against Pakistan as fast bowler Mohammad Abbas ran riot on Day 4 of the first Test with the tourists closing in on their first Test win in South Africa in 18 years on Sunday.

Abbas grabbed 6-43 on his return to Test cricket after more than three years and South Africa still needed 32 runs at lunch to seal a place in next year's World Test Championship final.

Tailenders Kagiso Rabada, unbeaten on 10, and Marco Jansen with 5 not out was fighting a grim battle for the home team against the relentless Abbas.



Captain Temba Bavuma's controversial dismissal punctuated a South Africa collapse as it lost four wickets for just three runs with Abbas grabbing three

off his six balls. Bavuma, who made 40, surprisingly didn't request a television review when replays suggested that Abbas' ball had brushed the

batter's pocket and didn't make contact with the inside edge of the bat but the South African skipper walked back to the dressing room.

Abbas bowled an unchanged marathon spell of 13 overs, but had to wait until Aiden Markram (37) and Bavuma saw off the testing first hour.

Resuming at a wobbly 27-3, with still 121 runs needed for victory, Bavuma and Markram showed plenty of patience against Abbas' probing line and length before the fast bowler finally got the breakthrough after the first drinks break.

Abbas was rewarded for his brilliant seam bowling when he beat the outside edge of Markram's bat and knocked

back the off stump.

Bavuma survived a couple of close chances when he successfully overturned an on-field lbw decision against him early in the day and Naseem Shah couldn't hold onto a sharp catch at fine leg as he overstepped the boundary cushion while grabbing the ball over his head.

South Africa had controlled the game at 96-4 before Bavuma's dismissal saw Abbas finding the outside edges of David Bedingham (14) and Corbin Bosch's (0) bat off successive deliveries and in between Kyle Verreynne dragged Naseem Shah's delivery back onto his stumps to give Pakistan a chance for victory.

Women's coach Alexandersson announces 23-member squad for Maldives friendlies

PTI ■ BENGALURU

Indian women's football team coach Joakim Alexandersson said on Sunday selected a mix of senior and U20 players in the 23-member squad for the two international friendlies against Maldives here on December 30 and January 2.

The matches will be played at the Padukone-Draavid Centre for Sports Excellence.

"We have some senior women's players joining us in the Bengaluru camp so we'll have a mix of U20 and senior players for this match. We're going to try and implement



some things in tomorrow's game.

"It's nice to see and train the best in the country," said the Swede, who was named chief

coach of India's women's U20 and U17 national teams earlier this month.

The squad:

Goalkeepers: Hempriya Seram, Maibam Linthoingambi Devi, Nandini.

Defenders: Aruna Bag, Juhi Singh, Juli Kishan, Sangita Basfore, Sanju, Shivani Toppo, Sorokhaibam Ranjana Chanu, Toijam Thoibisana Chanu, Vikshit Bara.

Midfielders: Grace Dangmei, Kajol Dsouza, Neha, Nongmeikapam Sibani Devi, Nitu Linda, Rimpa Haldar.

Forwards: Lhingdeikim, Lynda Kom Serto, Pooja, Pyari Xaxa, Simran Gurung.

Roar by MCG crowd after Reddy's hundred is something I never heard: CA CEO Hockley

PTI ■ MELBOURNE

The collective roar of Indian fans after Nitish Kumar Reddy's maiden hundred is something that he has never heard at the MCG, and Cricket Australia's outgoing CEO Nick Hockley said on Sunday that it validated the decision to add a Test to the Border-Gavaskar Trophy.

The CA's decision to increase the number of Tests for the Border-Gavaskar Trophy from four to five has proved to be a masterstroke as crowd attendance and viewership records are set to surpass the hallowed Ashes.

"I want to say thank you to everyone who turned up, the atmosphere last night when Nitish Kumar Reddy scored his hundred, the roar of the crowd was something that I have ever heard," Hockley told PTI in an exclusive interaction.

The record total attendance (over five days) for a Boxing Day Test till date is 271,865 against England back in 2013 and the fourth Test involving

India has already witnessed a footfall of 255,462 spectators. With two more days left, CA is expecting the attendance to go well past 300,000.

Hockley couldn't be more thrilled.

"Absolutely thrilled with the number of fans that have come round from all over India. It's been an absolutely incredible atmosphere as we got over a quarter million people over the gates and that's too on days one, two and three," Hockley said.

"This Border-Gavaskar Trophy has had the biggest Boxing Day crowd ever passing the Ashes and the series is so delicately poised now, it is living up to every hype."

Hockley, who has had a good working relationship with the BCCI, said it was a no-brainer that the four-Test series between India and Australia transformed into a five-match rubber, considering its massive following.

"I think it speaks about the relations between India and Australia and fans are always excited to see these two teams.



The five-Test series is what the fans deserve, players deserve. This series is likely to be alive going into Sydney.

"We haven't had a full fifth day as we have had some unfinished business. I thank and am very grateful to the BCCI to have agreed to play a five-Test series. Hope it continues for the rest of the time."

Days 1, 2 and 3 in Sydney all but sold out.

There is forecast of rain during the New Year's Test in Sydney but even then the Indian diaspora will throng to the grounds with very limited tickets still left for the first three days.

"Sydney will be very, very full. I think there are only very few tickets left for days one, two and three. We encourage people to quickly get their tickets if they want to come on Day 4."

"There is a wonderful community from India in Sydney and we expect a similar atmosphere like MCG," he noted.

Excited about prospects of

cricket's inclusion in Brisbane 2032.

Los Angeles Olympics 2028 will witness the re-introduction of cricket at the quadrennial extravaganza and Hockley along with current ICC chairman Jay Shah are also in talks with Local Organising Committee (LOC) of Brisbane 2032 for keeping the sport in the Games' roster.

"I am super excited for cricket being in Los Angeles, 2028. It is going to be amazing. It will be an opportunity to showcase cricket to a global audience and we are very excited to host the Olympics in Brisbane in 2032. We are hopeful and excited about the prospects of cricket being part of Brisbane 2032."

"It is exciting times for cricket and the Olympics. We want more people who get to see our great game. T20 cricket for men and women is incredible entertainment and it has been the starting point of our discussion as to how we can help to grow the game globally," Hockley concluded.