

IOC announces probe after bribery scandal

J GOPIKRISHNAN ■ NEW DELHI

After 'The Pioneer' exposed US firms paid a penalty of more than 300 per cent for bribery abroad including HAL, Indian Oil Corporation and Railways, the Indian Oil Corporation (IOC) in a regulatory filing declared probe. Albemarle Corporation, a global specialty chemicals supplier that develops and sells catalysts used in the operation of oil refineries was caught by US Department of Justice for bribing officials in IOC and refineries Indonesia and Vietnam. Albemarle Corporation paid approximately USD 1.14 million in commission to India intermediary company relating to Indian Oil Corporation business and obtained approximately USD 11.14 million in profits on that business between approximately 2009 and 2011, according to a US Department of Justice order dated September 28, 2023. Albemarle was caught for bribery by the US authorities in 2017 and then settled the case in September 2023 by paying a hefty fine of more than USD 198 million to avoid prosecution. In a filing to National and Bombay Stock Exchanges dated December 20, the IOC said it is "neither party to nor is there any allegation against the company in relation to the proceedings" in the US authorities. "However, the company has initiated an internal fact-finding review concerning the incident, which allegedly occurred in



2009 to thoroughly understand the facts surrounding these allegations and to determine the appropriate steps to be taken," IOC said. The state-owned firm said it has "always upheld and is steadfastly committed to maintaining the highest standards of governance, transparency and regulatory compliance across all jurisdictions of its operations". "We assure our stakeholders, partners and employees that we are a law-abiding company, fully compliant with all laws," India's largest oil firm said in the filing. "The Pioneer on December 16 reported that the US Department of Justice's order dated September 28, 2023 says Albemarle Corporation bagged big contracts in Indian Oil Corporation and companies in Indonesia and Vietnam by corrupt practices and bribing of more than 63.5 million dollars. Albemarle is

and then settled the case in September 2023 by paying a hefty fine of more than 198 Million Dollars to avoid prosecution. The 46-page Order imposing fine on Albemarle says the US company also engaged in corrupt practices with an Indian private refinery. However the name of the private refinery is not mentioned in the Order. The Pioneer also reported that another US firm Moog Inc was caught by US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) for bribing in HAL and Indian Railways in 2020. As per the eight page order dated October 11 2024, Moog Inc paid more than 5,00,000 Dollars as bribe for getting contracts in HAL and Railways and paid penalty of 1.68 Million Dollars to US Treasury to avoid prosecution. IT giant Oracle also paid penalty of 23 Million Dollars in September 2022 when caught for bribery of 6.8

Million Dollars in Indian Railways, UAE and Turkey to bag contract. The SEC order detailing bribery in HAL says in November 2021, Moog bagged \$ 1,399,328 valued contract for parts and services related to the April 2021 contract tender. Investigation found that 2.5% commission was received as a bribe by "a HAL official." As per the eight page order, Moog Inc paid more than 5,00,000 Dollars as bribe for getting contracts in HAL and Railways. The September 27, 2022 dated Order of Securities and Exchange Commission says that the IT giant Oracle Corporation was engaged in corrupt practices and bribery in India, UAE and Turkey. "In 2019, Oracle India sales employees also used an excessive discount scheme in connection with a transportation company, a majority of which was owned by the Indian Ministry of Railways... One of the sales employees involved in the transaction maintained a spreadsheet that indicated \$67,000 was the "buffer" available to potentially make payments to a specific Indian SOE (State Owned Entity) official. "A total of approximately \$330,000 was funneled to an entity with a reputation for paying SOE officials and another \$62,000 was paid to an entity controlled by the sales employees," states the 10-page order of Securities and Exchange Commission imposing hefty fine of Rs.23 Million Dollars on Oracle, caught for bribery amount of 6.8 Million Dollars.



Photo: Ranjan Dimri/The Pioneer

AAP opens registration for women, seniors aid

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Stepping up the election fever and in a bid to retain its core voter groups ahead of the high-octane Delhi assembly elections, AAP Convenor Arvind Kejriwal on Sunday announced that the registration for the 'Mukhya Mantri Mahila Samman Yojana', which will provide monthly assistance of Rs 1,000 to women in the city, and 'Sanjeevani Yojana', which will provide seniors over 60 access to free medical treatment at both private and government hospitals, will begin from Monday. In its 2024-25 budget, the Delhi government had announced this scheme to provide Rs 1,000 per month to all women aged above 18. However, Kejriwal recently announced that the amount would be raised to Rs 2,100 if his party returns to power in the assembly elections, slated for February next year. Further, countering the narrative around not implementing Center's 'Ayushman Bharat Yojana' in Delhi, the ruling party announced 'Sanjeevani Yojana' as a healthcare

initiative aimed at providing comprehensive medical care to senior citizens. The program will offer free medical treatment at both government and private hospitals to all Delhi residents aged 60 years and above who possess a Delhi voter ID. With no income-based restrictions, the scheme is designed to benefit over 25 lakh senior citizens. Addressing a press conference, the former Chief Minister stated, "Ever since we have announced this scheme we are getting numerous phone calls regarding the commencement of registration process for this scheme. Today, I am announcing that registration will begin from tomorrow itself." "You don't need to stand in any queues or waste your time. We will come to your doorstep. Across every area of Delhi, AAP has created thousands of teams. These teams will come to your home and will do registration of all the women of the house and give them a registration card (Kejriwal Kavach Card). For your convenience we are sending our teams door to door," he added.

Over 100 students from UP stranded in jungle in dark

PTI ■ BAHRAICH (UP)

Over 100 students and school staff accompanying them were left stranded for hours in the evening in the dense Katarniaghat forests in Uttar Pradesh while returning from an educational tour, officials said on Sunday. The children, aged 14-18, were forced to endure harsh cold during their stay under the open sky without food, water or appropriate clothing for the chilly temperatures after school authorities defied warnings by locals to halt their journey at a safe place, they said. There were 155 people in total, 130 of them children, they added. According to the district administration, the group first attempted to cross the Rupaidiha border to Nepal but was stopped because of border regulations. After being denied entry into Nepal, the managers redirected the buses towards the Katarniaghat Wildlife Sanctuary, known for its dense forests and dangerous wildlife, including leopards, tigers, and elephants. The buses traversed five forest checkpoints before reaching Amba village, deep inside the sanctuary.

A RIDE TO MAHAKUMBH



Sadhus of 'Panch Dashnam Avahan Akhara' take part in a religious procession called 'Peshwai', to reach the Mahakumbh ahead of Maha Kumbh Mela 2025, in Prayagraj



Delhi's Republic Day tableau rejected, AAP slams exclusion

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI/CHANDIGARH

In a surprise move, the proposal for Delhi's tableau for the Republic Day parade has been rejected by the expert committee. The committee, which is responsible for selecting the tableaux for the parade, found Delhi's proposal lacking in theme, concept, design, and visual impact. According to sources, the expert committee had shortlisted 15 States and Union Territories for the parade, but Delhi's proposal failed to impress the committee. The other two union territories, Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Lakshadweep, also failed to make the cut. On the other hand, Punjab and West Bengal, which were absent from last year's parade, have made a comeback this year. The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) had made a big issue out of Punjab and Delhi's

exclusion from the parade last year, and it remains to be seen how the party will react to Delhi's exclusion this year. The Republic Day parade, which is held every year on January 26, is a showcase of India's cultural diversity and military might. The parade features tableaux from various states and union territories, which depict their unique culture, history, and achievements. This year, 15 states and union territories will participate in the parade, including Bihar, Chandigarh, Dadra and Nagar Haveli, Goa, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal. The expert committee, which is headed by a senior defense ministry official, had evaluated the proposals from various states and union territories based on their theme, concept, design, and visual impact.

Raje's carcade crashes in Rajasthan's Pali

PNS ■ JAIPUR

Three policemen sustained minor injuries when a vehicle of former chief minister Vasundhara Raje's carcade overturned in an attempt to avoid hitting a motorcycle in Rajasthan's Pali district on Sunday, police said. The accident occurred while Raje was on her way to meet former minister Otaram Dewasi to express her



condolence over his mother's death. "Seven policemen were travelling in the car. Some of them have sustained minor injuries," Pali SP Chuna Ram Jat said. Raje left for Mundara village of Pali district by road. A police car which was escorting her between Bali and Kot Baliyan overturned while trying to save a bike rider. A BJP leader said that his car was behind the car which overturned thrice. He said he immediately got down and helped in sending the injured policemen to a hospital.



A day to remember for Indian womens' cricket

PTI ■ KUALA LUMPUR/ VADODARA

Opener G Trisha made a doughty fifty before the left-arm troika of Ayushi Shukla, Sonam Yadav and Parunika Sisodia spun web around Bangladesh batters as India scored a 41-run win to emerge champions in the inaugural Women's T20 U19 Asia Cup here on Sunday. Back home in Vadodara in Gujarat, stylish opener Smriti Mandhana extended her purple patch with a classy 91 off 102 balls, propelling India to 314/9 in the first Women's ODI against the West Indies, here Sunday. On a spongy pitch, Trisha's 52 off 47 balls (5x4, 2x6) guided India to 117 for seven, but Indian spinners cut through the Bangladesh line-up to bundle them out for 76 in 18.3 overs. The biggest partnership in Indian innings, in fact in the match itself, was between Trisha and her skipper Nikki Prasad - a 41-run alliance for the fourth wicket. India batters struggled against pacer Farjana Easmin, who took four wickets. Despite that, India were restricted to a below-par total, and Bangladesh seemed well on track for a win once they reached 44 for two in the seventh over. However, Ayushi (3/17), Sonam (2/13) and Parunika (2/12) took over from that point as Bangladesh lost remaining eight wickets for a mere 32 runs. Brief scores were shared as India's 117/7 in 20 overs (G Trisha 52; Farjana Easmin 4/32) while Bangladesh's 76 all out in 18.3 overs (Juariya Ferdous 22; Ayushi Shukla

3/17, Sonam Yadav 2/13, Parunika Sisodia 2/12). Mandhana, who recorded a 50-plus score for the fifth time in as many innings, got the bulk of the runs in her 110-run stand alongside debutant Pratika Rawal (40 off 69). The launch pad was provided by Mandhana for the middle-order to go big and that is what the likes of Harmanpreet Kaur (34 off 23), Harleen Deol (44 off 50), Richa Ghosh (26 off 12) and Jemimah Rodrigues (31 off 19) did to take India past 300. After dropping hard-hitting Shafali Verma, India have tried multiple batters to open alongside Mandhana and on Sunday it was the turn of Delhi cricketer Pratika, who batted at a strike rate of 57.97. The 24-year-old was also dropped at mid-off when she was batting on three in the 10th over. Her four boundaries came on the leg-side as she employed the sweep multiple times. Mandhana, at the other end, entertained the crowd with her trademark shots including a cover drive and pull. India changed gears after the arrival of fit-again skipper Harmanpreet who struck at close to 150 to give the innings a timely move on. The momentum was carried by Richa and Rodrigues who has been in top form of late. For the West Indies, the pick of the bowlers was left-arm spinner Zaida James who took five wickets for 45 runs in eight overs. India could have got a lot more in the death overs but the last three overs only yielded 20 runs with James picking three wickets in the final over.

Loan scam kingpin Bilal Lone caught in Delhi, targeted CRPF officers

SAUMYA SHUKLA ■ NEW DELHI

For years, 33 year old Bilal Ahmad Lone spun a web of deception, targeting those who dedicate their lives to the nation's security-paramilitary officers stationed in the sensitive regions of Jammu & Kashmir. Armed with false promises of easy bank loans, Lone convinced these men to trust him, only to betray them with forged documents and fake deals. However, his endeavor came to an end when Delhi Police's Crime Branch, in a carefully orchestrated operation, tracked him down in the bustling streets of Jama Masjid on Saturday. The police recovered seven Debit Cards of ICICI Bank

issued in name of Central Reserves Police Force (CRPF) Personals from his possession, along with a Lenovo laptop used to create fake documents, Realme phone used for communication, forged stamps, including those purported to be from the J&K Bank and other official agencies and fake documents and cheque books belonging to different banks. A 'Detention Order' was also issued against him by the District Magistrate of Anantnag in Jammu & Kashmir in an order dated December 13 and the same has also been approved by Government of Jammu & Kashmir (Home Department), Civil



Secretariat, Jammu/Srinagar on December 17. Lone, hailing from Kupwara, Jammu & Kashmir, through his schemes defrauded many officers, exploiting them to obtain loans in their names before disappearing with the money. He presented himself as a loan facilitator and preyed on paramilitary personnel who either were looking to buy vehicles or secure personal loans. His fraudulent activities spanned several years, with 14 cases of cheating registered against him in various police stations across Jammu & Kashmir. The Crime Branch received intelligence from the Anantnag police in Jammu & Kashmir about Lone's possible whereabouts in Delhi. "On the

basis of technical surveillance and two days hard ground work by the team, the location of above criminal was found to be in the area of Jama Masjid, Delhi. Accordingly, on December 21, the above team laid a trap at and around Jama Masjid Area and launched an operation to trace him out," Deputy Commissioner of Police (Crime) Vikram Singh said. After an intensive manhunt, the team finally succeeded to locate him and apprehended near Jama Masjid. "Initially, he resisted and tried to create a scene but he was explained about the operation and detention order issued against him by the District Magistrate, Anantnag, Jammu & Kashmir.



GUEST COLUMN

Race for degrees: Never-ending pursuit



Onkar Singh

Higher education systems across the world admit students and roll them out with degrees after fulfilment of the stipulated requirements. Thus, the degree comes as the fruition of completing the prescribed education processes in higher education institutions (HEIs) at respective levels like undergraduate, postgraduate and doctorate. It is a testament to the individual's understanding of the respective subjects by the individual possessing the degree. While a generic framework guides most HEIs, each institution follows its statutory entitlement to issue degrees, which are recognised and accepted worldwide. However, the perceived value of these degrees often varies significantly depending on the reputation of the issuing HEI. This perception is influenced by factors such as the rigour and quality of the institution's education processes.

Besides, ranking and accreditation frameworks—both nationally and internationally—which have gained prominence in recent years, the societal stratification of HEIs based on perceived worth has long existed. Interestingly, public perception of an HEI often diverges from its formal rankings or accreditations, which are based on selected parameters. This discrepancy typically stems from differences in the rigour and effectiveness of teaching, learning and evaluation processes, which ultimately shape the competencies of graduates. As a result, the impact and significance of a degree vary depending on the HEI that awards it, highlighting the critical role of institutional quality in shaping academic and professional outcomes. In recent years, the gaps between the expected competencies of degree holders and their actual abilities, resulting in poor employability, have emerged as a significant challenge for higher educa-

tion systems in many countries, including India. Consequently, students often enrol in degree programmes but fail to achieve the desired outcomes, leaving them dissatisfied with their academic pursuits. These limitations, compel the students to enrol for one after the other degrees and the race for piling up degrees continues with the hope that some of these may fetch them a secured pathway to livelihood. Eventually, it burdens the higher education system and calls for expanding the gross enrolment ratio (GER) through capacity enhancement in HEIs in the public sector as well as the private sector. In the rush to achieve the targeted GER of

requisite skills for pursuing a career. The direct correlation between any degree qualification and its substantiveness for some specific jobs and in case of an individual's unfitness for them, misconstruing the relevance of higher education calls for a deep dive into the whole spectrum from different perspectives.

Curriculum and teaching-learning:

A common explanation for the mismatch between education and employer needs is the outdated curriculum's misalignment with market requirements. However, a merely updated curriculum is insufficient for quality enrichment; ineffective teaching and learn-

ing graduates equipped to tackle real-world problems. By addressing these issues, we can ensure that higher education delivers degrees that are both relevant and valuable to the job market. A well-designed curriculum alone is insufficient. Effective teaching, which fosters conceptual understanding and problem-solving skills, and fair assessments that value creativity, are crucial. Without these, degree accumulation becomes a futile pursuit of employability.

Higher Education Institutions:

The proliferation of higher education institutions (HEIs) with subpar infrastructure, unqualified

holder in a suitable role or a job to survive and thrive for a brilliant career. The expectation of industry and employers to get readymade human resources customised for their specific job requirements is a challenge unless certain degree programmes are customised and run to suit them. Given the degree programmes being generic for catering to a wide spectrum, employers should not shirk making investments in their customisation as per specific needs. Higher education institutions face a constant dilemma: should they prioritise specialised, job-ready programmes or focus on advancing knowledge and research? Striking a balance is crucial, as graduates must contribute to society for many years. Industry and employers must also acknowledge the limitations of traditional education. They should invest in training new graduates and create supportive work environments to retain talent and maximise their return on investment.

Way forward:

To address these challenges, it is imminent to ameliorate the quality of degrees by enriching curricula and refining the teaching-learning-assessment ecosystem to meet the specific needs of individual HEIs. The trend of pursuing multiple degrees merely to secure employment can be mitigated by ensuring that each degree equips graduates with skills and competencies that align with job market requirements. Simultaneously enrolling in multiple degree programs may undermine their value, as the limitations of time and human effort may prevent students from fully engaging with and benefiting from each programme. Recognising and addressing the weaknesses in education processes through open deliberations and collaborative efforts among HEIs, regulatory bodies, and the government can pave the way for meaningful strategies and policy reforms. It is essential to build an effective education system so that students keep on exiting it at different levels and earn their livelihood based on competencies acquired therein, instead of going for degree after degree to secure life.

(The author is vice chancellor of Veer Madho Singh Bhandari Uttarakhand Technical University, Dehradun; views expressed are personal)

Industry and employers:

Ubiquitously, the purpose of any degree is to land its



50 by 2035, the quantitative expansion predominates the qualitative regulation of education processes. As a result, students face persistent uncertainties about their career prospects, leading them to pursue higher qualifications in a cycle of accumulating degrees without necessarily improving employability. A contemplation of reasons for deficiencies with respect to employability in India shows that in spite of HEIs following the globally accepted academic framework in coherence with the standards set by the regulating bodies, there are numerous lapses in deliveries. Generally, it is perceived that educational institutions focus on theoretical knowledge and academic qualifications and miss out on the real-world experience and practical skills sought by employers. It could be true in certain situations, but the mandate of the higher education system is multifaceted and comprises majorly of imparting academic excellence, inculcating critical thinking, advancement of knowledge, and developing

ing processes are equally crucial. While hands-on experience and experiential learning are being integrated into curricula through field internships, projects and group tasks, a lackadaisical approach to practical subject classes and lax oversight of internships and projects undermines students' practical training. Undoubtedly, in most of the educational frameworks, the components of practical, hands-on experience, etc. are adequately built in, but the lapses are in the understanding of their importance and inadequate involvement of teachers and students in them. The insufficiency of capabilities of teachers in respect to practical exercises is also attributed to relying upon the virtual content and lesser focus on these at the time of their formal education is creating a vicious loop. This vicious trap is worsening the scenario. Simultaneously, cultivating soft skills such as professional communication, teamwork, collaboration, and critical thinking is essential for pro-

faculty and inadequate resources has devalued degrees. Achieving the targeted GER requires a significant number of highly qualified teachers, which are currently unavailable. Additionally, many teachers lack the ability to equip students with the skills to navigate professional challenges and think critically. Ultimately, a degree's value is contingent on the institution's commitment to quality education.

Higher education regulators must put stringent checks on the fulfilment of prescribed norms and standards by the HEIs before giving them clearance to admit students and start functioning. The HEIs ought to fulfill the requirements of well-qualified teachers and infrastructure as per norms and standards before admitting students to facilitate enablers for acquiring good degrees.

Use of electric heaters warrants precautions, say doctors

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

The use of electric heaters, blowers and other methods to maintain warmth in living spaces during the ongoing winter can result in dehydration and inadequate oxygen levels for individuals, the doctors said. With winter currently underway, many people have begun using heaters to regulate indoor temperatures. Some burn cow dung to raise temperature without taking the required precautions. The doctors warned that utilising heaters and burning cow dung without proper measures can lead to various health issues which might end up in severe complications.

The medical superintendent at the Deen Dayal Upadhyay district hospital Dr VS Chauhan said that operating heaters or generating heat with other materials like cow dung without ensuring sufficient ventilation during the winter months can cause suffocation. Besides, direct exposure to the heating devices can create significant breathing difficulties for individuals. In addition, heaters and other

heat-generating resources emit harmful gases, including carbon monoxide, which can indirectly impact patients suffering from various ailments such as respiratory problems and lung disorders.

"Individuals with asthma and heart conditions should avoid using electric heaters as these can trigger numerous allergies and potentially lead to cardiac arrest. We have been observing a spike in cases of heart disease and asthma in the OPD which may be directly linked to the use of heaters. Therefore, it is crucial for everyone to exercise caution when utilising these devices which includes taking breaks, ensuring adequate ventilation and avoiding direct exposure," he added.

Senior consultant physician at the district hospital Dr Vijay Singh Panwar echoed the same view, calling for taking precaution before using heaters for relief from the winter chill. "Use of an electric heater leads to the depletion of oxygen in the environment which can contribute to respi-

ratory issues for individuals," he stated. He further highlighted that direct exposure to heaters during winter could result in dehydration and other related health concerns particularly because people tend to drink less water during this season. Sitting in front of a heater can exacerbate this water loss from the body, he said, adding that electric heaters might cause problems such as lung issues, skin allergies and respiratory difficulties, particularly in individuals already down with asthma. He also underscored the fact that electric heaters emit carbon monoxide which in some cases might prove fatal. "I have come across several cases in the Emergency. These are mostly related to the use of heaters and these often prove fatal. During the winter chill, one must ensure proper hydration. Drinking warm water as often as possible is required to keep the normal level of hydration. Besides, adequate ventilation should be ensured and one should opt for cotton cloth instead of blankets near the heater to prevent the risk of burns," he added.

Elephant chased to death by tiger in Corbett

PNS ■ RAMNAGAR

The Forest department's patrol team discovered the body of an elephant in the Bijrani range of Corbett Tiger Reserve on Sunday. Reaching the site in the Malani beat of the range on being informed, the Corbett director Saket Badola inspected the body of the pachyderm and stated that the male elephant was aged about 20 years. Both the tusks of the elephant were found to be secure. Observations



revealed tiger pug marks near the carcass of the elephant and marks of the big cat's claws and teeth on the pachyderm's back. Considering this, it is being surmised that the tiger chased the elephant and exhausted it. This may have been a major reason for the jumbo's death, according to officials. The authorities conducted a post mortem examination of the elephant and sent viscera samples to Indian Veterinary Research Institute in Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh. A camera trap was also set up at the place where the elephant's body was discovered. The Corbett deputy director Rahul Mishra, veterinary officers Dr Dushyant Sharma, Dr Rajiv Kumar, warden Amit Gwaskoti and other departmental staff members were also present at the site.

Ganga corridor to be developed considering needs of next 25 years

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

The State government will focus on development of the Haridwar-Rishikesh Ganga Corridor considering the requirements of the next 25 years. This was the main subject of discussion when Haridwar MLA and former cabinet minister Madan Kaushik met the chief minister Pushkar Singh Dhami at the CM's residence here on Sunday. During their meeting, the chief minister said that the suggestions given by public representatives will also be included in the works to be executed for development of the Ganga corridor. Dhami further informed that in the works being proposed at present the buildings located in the corridor area will not be demolished. The beautification work of the corridor



will be undertaken without any demolition, he said. The CM further stressed that the form and appearance of the ancient sites will not be changed but be kept in its original form. Dhami further informed that open space will be developed in

Haridwar and Rishikesh as part of the Ganga corridor project. Among other effects, the development of such open spaces will also help in reducing the crowding on special occasions when multitudes throng to bathe in the Ganga river.

Paragliding Acro and SIV competition concludes in Tehri

PNS ■ NEW TEHRI

The four-day Paragliding Acro and SIV competition concluded at the Tehri dam reservoir here on Sunday. The competition was organised jointly by the Uttarakhand Tourism Development Board (UTDB) and the Tehri district administration. Theo Debluk from France won the first position in the paragliding acro competition and received a cheque for Rs five lakh while the second prize winner Hugo Lami also from France was presented a cheque for Rs three lakh and the third position holder Pablo from Switzerland was presented with a cheque for Rs two lakh. In the SIV competition, first position holder Om Tanaji Takwe received a cheque for Rs two lakh, second position holder Yograj Thakur was presented with a cheque for Rs 1.5 lakh while third position holder Kapil Nautiyal was presented with a cheque for Rs one lakh.

points on the Tehri lake while cruise boats and other types of boats will also be launched in the near future, he said. Further, work on the ring road is also being undertaken at a swift pace, the DM said, while adding that all these efforts will enhance employment opportunities in the area while also boosting the economic condition of the

local residents. Earlier, paraglider pilots from across the nation and abroad displayed various moves in the air which were appreciated by the tourists.



A total of 75 participants from various States including Himachal Pradesh, Maharashtra, Uttarakhand and the North Eastern States in addition to 25 pilots from various countries like Turkey, France, Iran, Russia, Spain and Switzerland participated in the competition this year, the organisers stated.

NTPC Limited

Registered Office Address : NTPC Bhawan, Core-7, SCOPE Complex, 7-Institutional Area, Lodhi Road, New Delhi-110 003
Corporate Identification Number- L40101DL1975G0007966

The applicant above named has made an application before the Central Electricity Regulatory Commission (CERC), New Delhi for determination of tariff of Feroze Gandhi Unchar Thermal Power Station Stage-IV (500 MW) from 01.04.2024 to 31.03.2029.

- The beneficiaries of the generating station are:
 - Uttar Pradesh Power Corp. Ltd. (UPPCL), Shakti Bhawan 14, Ashok Marg, Lucknow-226 001.
 - Rajasthan Urja Vikas Nigam Limited (RUVNL) (on behalf of DISCOMs of Rajasthan), Viduyt Bhawan, Janpath, Jaipur-302005.
 - Haryana Power Purchase Centre. (HPPCC), Shakti Bhawan, Sector-VI, Panchkula, Haryana-134109.
 - Power Development Department (PDD-J&K), Govt. of J&K, Civil Secretariat Srinagar.
 - Electricity Department (Chandigarh), Union Territory of Chandigarh, Addl. Office Building, Sector-9 D, Chandigarh.
 - Uttarakhand Power Corporation Ltd. (UPCL), Urja Bhawan, Kanwali Road, Dehradun-248001.
- Capacity of the generating station : 500 MW
- Approved capital cost of the project : Rs. 2901.42 Crore
- Authority which has approved the Capital Cost : CERC
- Scheduled date of commercial operation : Not Applicable
- Actual date of commercial operation of station : 30.09.2017
- Capital cost on date of Commercial operation of Station : Not Applicable
- Details of tariff:

Particulars	Tariff for the previous year*	Year-wise tariff sought to be determined				
		2024-25	2025-26	2026-27	2027-28	2028-29
1. Capacity Charges (Rs. Lakh/year)	64388.10	65942.29	65772.07	66518.83	67715.36	68846.99
2. Energy Charges (Rs./kwh)		4.14				

*As per Petition for truing-up of tariff for 2019-24 period for Feroze Gandhi Unchar Thermal Power Station Stage-IV filed with Hon'ble CERC.
9. A copy of the petition made for determination of tariff is posted on the website of NTPC, namely www.ntpc.co.in under the Tab "Notices".
10. The suggestions and objections, if any, on the proposals for determination of tariff contained in the petition may be filed by any person, including the beneficiaries through e-filing portal of the Commission, with a copy to the Petitioner within 30 days of publication of this notice.

Place : Noida (P. Piyush)
Date : 29.11.2024 Addl. General Manager (Comm.)
Leading the Power Sector



CM launches 74 development projects worth Rs 188.07 crore in Dehradun

New parking facilities coming up in Doon

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

Chief minister Pushkar Singh Dhami inaugurated and laid the foundation for 74 development projects worth Rs 188.07 crore at Kanak Chowk in Dehradun on Sunday. The initiatives included 36 projects valued at Rs 111.22 crore which were inaugurated and 38 projects worth Rs 76.85 crore for which the foundation stones were laid. The CM launched these projects during the foundation laying event for two automated parking facilities and one ground-level parking in Kanak Chowk area, all estimated to cost about Rs 11 crore. He also flagged off three rescue and rehabilitation vehicles aimed at tackling child begging and inaugurated a document management desk at the Dehradun district magistrate's office.



In his address, Dhami said that the inaugurated and upcoming projects, covering sectors like education, health, roads, drinking water, irrigation, flood protection and urban development, will significantly improve the lives of people in Dehradun and surrounding areas. He stated that the new parking facilities, especially the automated and ground-level parking, will help alleviate traffic congestion in crowded areas, saving both

time and resources. The rescue vehicles launched as part of the anti-child begging initiative will also play a crucial role in rehabilitating children found begging on the streets. The introduction of the document management desk at the DM's office will also streamline the tracking and management of incoming correspondence, he said. He said that the newly launched electric vehicle charging stations will provide convenience to residents with electric vehicles

and contribute to the city's environmental conservation efforts. "The process of setting up charging stations at seven other locations in Dehradun is currently underway. With the launch of these initiatives, the government is committed to making Dehradun free from air pollution, further supporting the city's status as one of the top five cleanest cities in the country, as recognised under the National Clean Air Programme by the Ministry of Environment, Government of India," he said.

Dhami also informed that the establishment of smart schools along with a modern library with a seating capacity for 650 readers at Lansdowne Chowk has also been completed. "To promote environmental conservation, 30 electric buses are now operating in Dehradun. The government is also constructing a 300-bed cancer hospital in Harrawala. The mental health institute at Selaqui has also been upgraded. These efforts are aimed at transforming Dehradun into a model city," he added.

Joshi orders all districts to prepare for bigger holiday crowds from Dec 24 onwards

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

In view of the upcoming Christmas and New Year celebrations, the director of the Traffic Directorate Arun Mohan Joshi has issued an order to all district police incharges regarding traffic management for events tak-

ing place from December 24 to January 2. In his order, Joshi said that the State witnesses a variety of religious, cultural and public events during this period, attracting a large number of local citizens as well as tourists from neighbouring States. He has instructed all senior/ superintendents of police to compile a list of locations where such events are planned or where large crowds are expected. Once the event sites are identified, the police must prepare a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) to ensure safe traffic management and to prevent any untoward incidents, as per Joshi. He instructed that areas with high traffic volume must have proper traffic diversion plans in place along with alternative routes. Adequate police forces should be deployed where necessary to maintain order. Given the expected influx of vehicles,

well-planned parking arrangements should be established ahead of time to accommodate the crowd efficiently, he said. He further stated that due to the significant number of tourists expected to visit popular des-



tinations such as Nainital, Kedarnath, Haridwar, Rishikesh, Mussoorie, Dehradun and Ranikhet, specific instructions must be issued to traffic personnel. Besides this, necessary signage, including signboards and barricades, should also be installed to guide traffic effectively and ensure smooth operations. Joshi directed to take strict action to curb accidents caused by drunk driving, speeding and rash driving. A detailed action plan should be developed at the police station level to enforce traffic safety measures, especially in light of the increased travel during this period, he said. The director has mandated that these points must be included in the SOP and submitted to the Directorate soon ensuring that all traffic management measures are in place to handle the increased traffic from December 24 onwards.

the survey was reportedly conducted after the corporation received many complaints from local residents regarding streetlights not functioning in several wards, which prompted the municipal workers to inspect and repair the streetlights. During this inspection, the missing lights were discovered. The officials said that the corporation is making necessary arrangements to ensure locals do not have to go through dark roads at night during winter. The police have started an investigation based on the complaint and gathering necessary evidence in the matter against culprits, they added.

50 streetlights stolen from electric poles in Haldwani

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

Some thieves have reportedly stolen 50 LED streetlights from electric poles in Haldwani, Nainital district. The Municipal Corporation of Haldwani (MCH) and the company responsible for streetlight operations EESL have filed a complaint against the unknown culprits. According to the officials, EESL registered a complaint in the Mukhiani Police Station stating that the missing LED streetlights were installed as part of a contract for street lighting in the municipal area. A survey that was conducted over three days from December 19 to 21 revealed that 50 streetlights were reportedly missing from electric poles between wards 37

and 54. The officials said that the survey was reportedly conducted after the corporation received many complaints from local residents regarding streetlights not functioning in several wards, which prompted the municipal workers to inspect and repair the streetlights. During this inspection, the missing lights were discovered. The officials said that the corporation is making necessary arrangements to ensure locals do not have to go through dark roads at night during winter. The police have started an investigation based on the complaint and gathering necessary evidence in the matter against culprits, they added.

Installation of smart metering important for reducing power losses: Yadav

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

The installation of a smart metering system will play a crucial role in reducing power losses, the managing director of the Uttarakhand Power Corporation Limited (UPCL) Anil Kumar Yadav said. He said this while providing updates on UPCL's progress in managing power losses over the past few years. He said that under the leadership of chief minister Pushkar Singh Dhami and with the guidance of the Energy secretary, UPCL has made significant advancements in the power distribution sector. In Uttarakhand, the demand for power sup-

ply has increased by over 10 per cent in recent years. To address this, UPCL has established a robust power distribution system and has taken vital steps to enhance operational and business efficiency, he said. Yadav added that to meet the growing demand, UPCL has strengthened its distribution network in recent years, including the construction of new substations and the establishment of new power lines throughout the State. In the year 2023-24, about 4,350 distribution transformers have been installed to maintain a balance of power across all feeders in

the State. He highlighted that Central government initiatives such as the AMISP and the Loss Reduction of RDSS Scheme are currently being implemented. The primary objective of these schemes is to reduce power losses and ensure a high-quality power supply to consumers. Additionally, Yadav noted that UPCL has improved its billing and collection efficiency over the past few years, achieving a remarkable reduction of approximately 5.8 per cent in I-C losses. The managing director of UPCL emphasised

that reducing I-B losses is crucial for improving the financial health of the distribution company. Decreased losses lead to increased revenue, technological advancements, a better balance in demand and supply and ultimately, savings that enable electricity to be offered to consumers at lower rates, he said. Yadav stated that the installation of smart metering systems, along with the use of technologies such as SCADA and RT-DAS systems, will also play an essential role in further diminishing power losses.

District hospital geared up to implement guidelines related to change of bed linen

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

Following the direction of the Health minister Dhan Singh Rawat, the administration of Deen Dayal Upadhyay District Hospital has geared up for changing bed linen in different colours from Monday to Sunday. Stating this, the hospital's medical superintendent Dr VS Chauhan stated that the Health minister has recently instructed all government hospitals across the State to adopt the practice of regularly changing bed linen in patient wards. Additionally, he has advised that the hospital management utilise bed

linens of different colours each day. Consequently, in response to the Health minister's directive, the hospital administration has taken action to procure bed linens in various colours corresponding to each day of the week. He stated that the relevant officials have been instructed to procure bed linens. Approximately 2,000 to 3,000 bed linens in various colours will be acquired. The hospital administration has been ensuring the quality of the bed linens prior to purchase. In light of this, the procurement process is



expected to be undertaken during a period of 15 days, after which the directives from the Health minister

will be implemented at the hospital. The medical superintendent further said that the funding for the purchase of the bed-sheets has been allocated to the hospital from the funds received from the State government under the Ayushman scheme. The aim of this initiative is to regularly change the bed linens according to the colours designated for each day, thereby maintaining hygiene for the patients and enhancing the overall aesthetic appeal, he added. He further

emphasised that, as per the guidelines, a white bed sheet will be spread in the ward on Monday, pink on Tuesday, green on Wednesday, yellow on Thursday, purple on Friday, blue on Saturday and light grey on Sunday. It is pertinent to mention here that this movement is expected to not only further enhance the focus on hygiene but also expected to affect the appearance of the hospital wards and the mood of the patients and their attendants in a positive manner in government hospitals.

Rain and snowfall expected to bring temperatures down today

Weather forecast to change in Dehradun & seven other districts on Monday

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

Parts of the State are forecast to witness light rain and snowfall on Monday. This is expected to bring the temperature down further by a few notches. The State Meteorological Centre has forecast that very light to light rainfall/snowfall is likely to occur at isolated places in Uttarakashi, Rudrapur, Chamoli, Tehri, Dehradun, Bageshwar, Pithoragarh and Almora districts today. Apart from this, dry weather is likely to prevail in the remaining districts of the State.

Meanwhile, according to the information provided by the SEOC, the minimum temperature in Pithoragarh on Sunday was 15 degrees Celsius with the weather remaining clear. Amidst clear weather, the minimum temperature in Almora was five degrees Celsius while the minimum temperature was two degrees Celsius in Rudrapur. Similarly, the minimum temperature was four degrees Celsius in



Uttarakashi and 11 degrees Celsius in Pauri. In Bageshwar district the minimum temperature was five degrees Celsius. In Champawat district the minimum temperature was 4.5 degrees Celsius while in Udham Singh Nagar it was five degrees Celsius and in Nainital it was six degrees Celsius. The minimum temperature in Haridwar was recorded at seven degrees Celsius and at

five degrees Celsius in Chamoli. The provisional State capital Dehradun is forecast to get colder on Monday with both the maximum and minimum temperatures set to drop by a notch. Similarly, other mountainous and plain regions in the State may also get colder following light rain and snowfall forecast today.

The provisional State capital Dehradun is forecast to witness a partly to generally cloudy sky with the possibility of very light rainfall in some areas. The maximum and minimum temperatures are likely to be about 21 degrees Celsius and six degrees Celsius respectively in Dehradun today. Even on Sunday the minimum temperature in plain areas including Dehradun, Pantnagar and Udham Singh Nagar was lower

than the minimum temperature in mountainous locations like Pithoragarh and Pauri, according to information from the State Emergency Operations Centre (SEOC). The maximum and minimum temperatures recorded on Sunday were 24.5 degrees Celsius and 7.2 degrees Celsius respectively in Dehradun, 23.7 degrees Celsius and 3.4 degrees Celsius in Pantnagar, 16 degrees Celsius and 3.5 degrees Celsius in Mukteshwar and 17.1 degrees Celsius and five degrees Celsius in New Tehri.

Dehradun police arrest 11 men for attempting to disturb public peace

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

Police arrested 11 men from two different areas of Dehradun on Sunday on charges of causing disturbance and nuisance in public places. The accused were arrested following disturbances reported in Raipur and Clement Town police jurisdictions. The Dehradun senior superintendent of police Ajai Singh informed that seven individuals were arrested late on Saturday and in the wee hours of Sunday after police received a report of a heated altercation between two groups near Walk-in-Wood restaurant on Sahastradhara Road. Despite attempts by police to mediate, the situation escalated with both groups resorting to violence. Due to which, the police arrested seven individuals under Sections 126, 135 and 170 of the BNSS Act. The arrested individuals from the Raipur area were identified as Rahul (24), Tushar (24), Abhinav Rawat (24), Sarthak Sharma (25) and Ayush Vardhan (37), Amit Sharma (38) and Ravindra Kumar (40). In a separate incident the same night, the police arrested four young men in Clement Town area under Section



170 of the BNSS Act for disrupting peace in the area. The arrested individuals in the Clement Town area were identified as Shivam Negi (20), Vasu Chauhan (22), Keshav Verma (21) and Alokik (21). Besides this, the police also conducted an operation late on Saturday across urban and rural areas and seized 25 vehicles for drunk driving and 41 for other violations. They penalised 55 individuals under the Police Act and collected Rs 17,000 in penalties. The police also notified 29 families of minors and youths violating traffic rules, as per Singh. The SSP said that the police are carrying

out intense checking as part of ongoing efforts to maintain law and order due to upcoming Christmas celebrations, Winter Carnival, New Year's festivities and 38th National Games. All police station incharges have been directed to take stringent action against individuals involved in criminal activities or attempts to disturb public peace, he said.




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Misleading advertisements: CCPA imposes ₹ 2 lakh penalty on Shubhra Ranjan IAS Study

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The Central Consumer Protection Authority (CCPA) has imposed a penalty of Rs 2 lakh for misleading advertisements on Shubhra Ranjan IAS Study. The decision was taken to protect and promote the rights of consumers as a class and ensure that no false or misleading advertisement is made of any goods or services which contravenes the provisions of the Consumer Protection Act, 2019.

In view of the violation of the Consumer Protection Act, 2019, the CCPA, headed by Chief Commissioner, Nidhi Khare, and Commissioner Anupam Mishra has issued an Order against Shubhra Ranjan IAS Study for misleading advertisement regarding UPSC Civil Service Exam 2023.

Coaching Institutes and

online edtech platforms use pictures and names of successful candidates to influence prospective aspirants (consumers), without disclosing the courses opted by such candidates or the fees paid by them & length of the course so attended.

The institute's ads claimed "13 students in the top 100", "28 students in the top 200", and 39 students in the top 300" in the UPSC CSE 2023, and prominently displayed successful candidates' names and photos, an official statement said.

The CCPA found that Shubhra Ranjan IAS Study Institute concealed important information about the courses taken by students it claimed had cleared the prestigious Indian Civil Services Exam (CSE) in its advertisements.

Shubhra Ranjan IAS Study prominently displayed suc-



Successful candidate's names & pictures and simultaneously advertised various types of courses provided by them on its official website. However, the information with respect to the course opted by the said successful candidates in UPSC Civil Service exam 2023 was not disclosed in the above-mentioned advertisement. The institute used terms like "Shubhra Ranjan IAS" and "Students of Shubhra Ranjan

IAS" in its advertisements and letterheads, creating a deceptive impression that Shubhra Ranjan is/was an IAS officer, it added.

"Institute used terms such as "Shubhra Ranjan IAS" and "Students of Shubhra Ranjan IAS" in its advertisements and letterheads, creating a deceptive impression that Mrs. Shubhra Ranjan is/was an IAS officer. This constitutes a misrepresentation and unfair trade practice under Consumer Protection Act 2019, thereby misleading the public and potential students into believing that the services or guidance provided by them are directly associated with the credibility of an IAS officer. The Institute submitted that it was a clerical mistake, which is not tenable as the term Shubhra Ranjan IAS or @shubhraranjanias has been frequently used on its letterheads and in its advertise-

ments. Institute utilized deceptive practices to create a perception of exceptional quality and success. An advertisement should be truthful & honest representation of facts by making disclosures in such a manner that they are clear, prominent and extremely hard to miss for viewers to notice," the CCPA said.

The consumer regulator said the advertisements violated provisions of the Consumer Protection Act of 2019 related to misleading advertisements by "deliberately concealing important information".

The lack of proper disclosure about successful students' course details deprived consumers of making an informed choice while selecting coaching institutes, the CCPA said, asking Shubhra Ranjan IAS Study to discontinue the misleading ads.

On November 22, CCPA

imposed a Rs 7 lakh penalty on Vajirao & Reddy Institute for misleading advertisements regarding the results of the UPSC CSE 2022. Vajirao & Reddy Institute in its advertisement claimed "617 selections out of 933 in UPSC CSE 2022" and "We are ranked at 1st position among the list of top UPSC Coaching Institutes in India". CCPA has so far issued 45 notices to various coaching institutes for misleading ads and imposed a penalty of Rs 63.60 lakh on 20 coaching institutes, directing them to discontinue the misleading advertisements.

The Department of Consumer Affairs, through the National Consumer Helpline, has successfully intervened at a pre-litigation stage to ensure justice for students and aspirants who enrolled for the UPSC Civil Services, IIT and other entrance examinations.

Dhankhar calls for accountability of lawmakers

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Against the backdrop of Parliament witnessing poor productivity due to disruptions, Vice-President Jagdeep Dhankhar on Sunday called for accountability of lawmakers and said people would force them to think why they were sent to Parliament. He also said that for any democracy to succeed, expression and dialogue must go hand in hand with great responsibility on both sides.

Dhankhar is the Rajya Sabha's ex-officio chairman.

Calling for accountability among parliamentarians, he said, "... Make no mistake, I am referring to parliamentarians. People have learned to take disorder as order. There is no sense of revulsion." Hopefully, people will write and their thoughts will move, the vice-president said, according to an official statement. "People will force you



to think, why did you go there (Parliament)?" he said. Addressing awardees of the Chaudhary Charan Singh Awards - 2024, the vice-president said agriculture was the spine of rural development. "Unless agriculture develops, the rural landscape cannot be changed. And unless the rural landscape changes, we cannot aspire to have a developed nation," he said.

For India to be a developed nation by 2047, people's income must increase eight-fold that, he said, was a "daunting challenge".

Dhankhar also laid stress on the need for strengthening the village economy. "The greatest market we have is agricultural produce, yet farming communities are hardly involved with it. The farming sector must be prioritised by governments for it

to become an engine of economic development," he added. The Chaudhary Charan Singh Awards - 2024 were presented for contributions to agriculture, rural development and journalism. A statement by the Kisan Trust said the awards were presented on Saturday and the event was attended by Union ministers Dharmendra Pradhan and Jayant Chaudhary. Inaugurating the event on Saturday, Pradhan lauded Charan Singh's legacy that, he said, continued to inspire those working tirelessly for the uplift of India's farmers and rural communities.

Union minister Chaudhary said the current policies of the Narendra Modi government reflected the vision of Charan Singh. His vision on procurement prices, debt relief for farmers, land reforms and the uplift of landless people is still relevant, he said, according to the Kisan Trust.

Will SC conduct further inquiry, asks Surjewala after Pegasus spyware case verdict in US

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Congress general secretary Randeep Surjewala on Sunday claimed that the Pegasus spyware case verdict in the US proved how 300 WhatsApp numbers of Indians were targeted and asked if the Supreme Court would now conduct a further inquiry in view of the judgment.

Surjewala shared a media report which said that, for the first time, a court in the US had held Israel's NSO Group liable for its intrusive spyware Pegasus. "The Pegasus spyware case verdict proves how 300 WhatsApp numbers of Indians were targeted in the illegal spyware racket," Surjewala said in a social media post.

He said it was time for the Narendra Modi government to answer who the 300 names targeted were. "Who are the two Union ministers? Who are



the three opposition leaders? Who is the constitutional authority? Who are the journalists? Who are the business persons? What information was retrieved by the BJP government and agencies? How was it used - misused and to what consequence?" the Congress leader asked.

He also questioned if appropriate criminal cases would now be lodged against the political executive or officers in the present government and the company owning NSO. "Will the Supreme Court

take note of the judgment of the US court in Meta v/s NSO? Will the Supreme Court proceed to make public the report of the Committee of Technical Experts on Pegasus Spyware, submitted to it in 2021-22?" Surjewala said.

Questioning if the Supreme Court would now conduct a further inquiry in view of the judgment affirming the targeting of 1,400 WhatsApp numbers, including 300 from India, he asked, "Will the Supreme Court now ask Meta to submit to itself the 300 names to meet the ends of justice in the Pegasus case?"

"Shouldn't Facebook (now Meta) now have responsibility to release the names of 300 Indians targeted by Pegasus, considering WhatsApp and Facebook have the biggest subscriber base in India and they have 'duty of care and disclosure' to its clients in India?" the Congress leader asked.

Communal Muslim alliance behind Rahul, Priyanka's win in Wayanad, says CPI(M) leader

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI/ THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

CPI (M) Politburo member Vijayaraghavan's recent controversial remarks regarding the Lok Sabha victories of Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi Vadra from the Wayanad constituency have drawn sharp criticism from Congress and Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) leaders on Sunday.

Congress leaders accused the senior CPI (M) leader of making the comments to "please" the Sangh Parivar, while their United Democratic Front (UDF) ally, the IUML, alleged that he was attempting to provoke majority communalism in society.

During a party event in Wayanad on Saturday, Vijayaraghavan reportedly claimed that Rahul Gandhi secured victory in the high-range segment twice with the support of communal forces and that extremist elements were present at Priyanka Gandhi's campaign rallies.

AICC General Secretary K C Venugopal strongly criticised Vijayaraghavan, accusing him of using "communal" language that even the Sangh Parivar might hesitate to employ against Rahul Gandhi. Venugopal also questioned whether the CPI (M)



shared the same opinion. "How can someone holding the position of a Politburo member of the CPI (M) speak in such a communal manner?" Venugopal asked. "This is part of a deal to please the BJP.

This is not just a CPI (M) statement—it is a BJP quotation aimed at crucifying Rahul Gandhi," he alleged.

Leader of Opposition V D Satheesan echoed similar sentiments, charging the CPI (M) with pushing the same communal agenda propagated by the Sangh Parivar. "Post-Parliamentary elections, the CPI (M) is engaged in majority appeasement. This is an effort to gain favour with the Sangh Parivar and escape scrutiny from

Gurugram Police cyber crime team arrests Malaysian national for fraud of Rs 2.81 crore

STAFF REPORTER ■ GURUGRAM

A cyber crime team of the Gurugram police has arrested a Malaysian national for allegedly duping a man of Rs 2.81 crore in the name of investing stock market, police said.

Police said on Sunday that they received a complaint regarding cheating of about Rs 2.81 crore for investing in the stock market. On the complaint, a case was registered under the relevant sections in Police Station Cyber West, Gurugram.

During the investigation, a cyber crime police team led by Priyanshu Diwan, ACP (cybercrime) nabbed the accused from Tamil Nadu on Friday.

The accused was identified as Mohammad Jameel bin Mohammad Iqbal a resident of Malaysia.

"During the probe, the investigation team found that the mother of the accused is from Tamil Nadu and he is also married in Tamil Nadu, due to which he knew the Tamil language.

The above accused had come to India with another Malaysian partner, and he had taken the Indian SIM card used in committing the fraud from another accused, Devkaran.

Some other SIM cards pro-



vided by the accused have also been used in the fraud cases," Priyanshu Diwan, ACP (cybercrime), said.

Police then circulated a lookout notice against the accused, and the accused had come to Tamil Nadu to attend a wedding ceremony, after which the accused was arrested by Gurugram Police. 04 accused have already been arrested in this case, he said.

The investigation team has recovered a Malaysia passport, an international driving license, a Malaysia identity card, a health card, a debit card, a Malaysia driving license, a mobile phone, a SIM card, a ring and foreign and Indian currency

NDA to contest 2025 Bihar Assembly polls under leadership of Nitish, Modi: Deputy CM

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Bihar Deputy Chief Minister and BJP leader Samrat Choudhary said on Sunday said NDA will contest the assembly polls in Bihar next year under the leadership of Chief Minister Nitish Kumar and Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

"There is no confusion," he said during a Press conference at the BJP headquarters in the national Capital when asked to comment on speculation that the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) could do a rethink on projecting Kumar as its leader in the polls.

He was responding to Union Home Minister Amit Shah's recent interview to a news channel in which he was asked if the NDA could go to the polls in Bihar without declaring a chief ministerial candidate, like it recently did with great success in Maharashtra.

Shah, a former BJP president who is still regarded as the party's principal strategist, had replied after a pause, "We will sit together and decide. We will let you know after we have made a decision." The cryptic response had led to furious speculation that the BJP could insist on not projecting Kumar in the 2025 polls.

Dismissing the speculation, Choudhary said, "The NDA is working under the leadership of Nitish Kumar and Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Bihar and we will continue to contest elections under the leadership of both leaders."



Modi Government's 'calibrated erosion' of EC's integrity: Kharge on election rule

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge on Sunday hit out at the government for tweaking an election rule to prevent public inspection of certain electronic documents, alleging it is part of the Modi government's "systematic conspiracy" to destroy the institutional integrity of the Election Commission.

Kharge also said the Modi government's "calibrated erosion" of the ECI's integrity is a frontal attack on the Constitution and democracy. The government has tweaked

an election rule to prevent public inspection of certain electronic documents such as CCTV camera and webcasting footage as well as video recordings of candidates to prevent their misuse. Based on the recommendation of the Election Commission of India (ECI), the Union law ministry on Friday amended Rule 93(2)(a) of the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961, to restrict the type of "papers" or documents open to public inspection.

While Congress general secretary-in-charge communications Jairam Ramesh indi-



cated the grand old party would legally challenge the amendment, Lok Sabha MP and Congress general secretary (organisation) KC Venugopal said the poll panel had chosen opacity and a pro-government attitude in its dealings thus far.

Reacting to the development, Kharge said Modi government's audacious amendment in the Conduct of Election Rules is another assault in its systematic conspiracy to destroy the institutional integrity of the Election Commission of India. "Earlier, they had removed the Chief Justice of

India from the Selection panel which appoints Election Commissioners, and now they have resorted to stonewall electoral information, even after a High Court order," he said in a statement.

Everytime the Congress party wrote to the ECI, regarding specific poll irregularities such as voter deletions and lack of transparency in EVMs, the ECI has responded in a condescending tone and chosen not to even acknowledge certain serious complaints, Kharge said. "This again proves that the ECI, even though it is a quasi-judicial

body, is not behaving independently," he said.

"The Modi government's calibrated erosion of ECI's integrity is a frontal attack on the Constitution and Democracy and we will take every step to safeguard them," Kharge said.

According to Rule 93, all "papers" related to elections shall be open to public inspection. The amendment inserts "as specified in these rules" after "papers". Law ministry and ECI officials separately explained that a court case was the "trigger" behind the amendment.

While documents such as

nomination forms, appointment of election agents, results and election count statements are mentioned in the Conduct of Election Rules, electronic documents such as CCTV camera footage, webcasting footage and video recording of candidates during the Model Code of Conduct period are not covered.

"CCTV coverage, webcasting of polling stations are not carried out under Conduct of Election Rules but are the result of steps taken by the ECI to ensure a level playing field," a former ECI official explained.

Mohali building collapse: death toll rises to two, probe suggests adjacent plot digging led to incident

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ CHANDIGARH

The death toll in the Mohali building collapse climbed to two with the body of a 29-year-old man recovered from under the rubble on Sunday, even as a preliminary probe suggested that digging in an adjacent plot led to the incident.

The multi-storey building collapsed on Saturday evening in Sohana village of Punjab's Mohali district, with at least five people trapped under its rubble. Rescue efforts continued overnight to find possible survivors.

Sub-Divisional Magistrate, Mohali, Damandeep Kaur said one male body was recovered during the ongoing rescue operation. He was identified as Abhishek Dhanwal from Ambala.

Earlier in the day, Abhishek's father told reporters at the site that his son, who used to visit a gym in the building, was missing and his phone was not reachable. Abhishek worked in the IT sector and used to live in a nearby area, his father said.

Earlier, a 20-year-old woman



died in the incident on Saturday evening. The woman hailing from Himachal Pradesh, died after she was pulled out of the debris of the building. She was rescued from the rubble in a critical condition and was rushed to a hospital, but she succumbed to injuries. Police have booked two building owners in the incident. Viraj S Tidke, officiating deputy commissioner, said on Sunday

that, "A three-storey building collapsed yesterday. The rescue operation continued overnight. So far, two bodies have been recovered". The building also had a basement. Several excavators have been pressed into service as part of the rescue operation. National Disaster Response Team (NDRF), Army, state rescue teams have been working since Saturday evening to address the crisis. Medical

teams, along with an ambulance, have also been deployed at the site since Saturday evening. As the operation continued at the site, required equipment and machinery have been made available to the rescuers, in addition to those brought by the NDRF and Army. Preliminary information suggests that the building, which also had a gym, collapsed due to digging in an

adjacent plot.

Mohali Senior Superintendent of Police Deepak Pareek told reporters at the site on Sunday that as per preliminary investigations the owner of the building, which collapsed, had a plot of land adjacent to it on which digging work to construct a basement was on. "However, no permission was taken and no concerned agency was informed about the unauthorised digging," Pareek said.

Leader of Opposition in Punjab Assembly Partap Singh Bajwa slammed the Mohali district administration over the incident. Bajwa, a senior Congress leader, who visited the site, told reporters that he has learnt that some structures have been built in the area in flagrant violation of rules. "Accountability should be fixed in the matter. As head of district administration, personally, I hold the Deputy Commissioner responsible," he said adding the administration should take necessary measures to ensure such incidents are not repeated in the future.

Home Minister Amit Shah slams left parties for turning Tripura into backward state, credits BJP for bringing development

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ DHALAI/TRIPURA



Home Minister Amit Shah on Sunday hit out at Left parties for turning Tripura into a "backward" state during their 35-year rule and said it could witness progress only after the BJP assumed power in 2018.

Addressing a public meeting after visiting a village where displaced Bru tribals were rehabilitated, Shah said that Tripura remained behind on all parameters of development during the communist rule but is now moving forward on the path of progress. "For 35 years, the communists ruled Tripura. The communists claimed that they worked for the welfare of the poor. The Congress also ruled Tripura for a considerable time. But the people of the state always remained poor. It was when the BJP came to power that Tripura could witness development," he said.

Shah said when he visited Tripura in 2017 as BJP president and stayed for five days, only 11 people took party membership. "Gradually we started our work. We worked hard and could oust the communists from power" after

toiling for years, he said. The home minister said during the Left rule, just 2.5 per cent of the people used to get piped drinking water and now 85 per cent get potable water. Under the communist rule, there was no free foodgrains for the poor but now each person gets 5 kg rice and everyone is getting free treatment of up to Rs 5 lakh, he said. Shah said investments have come to Tripura and people are getting free power and LPG connections. Now the school drop rate is less than 3 per cent while enrolment is 99 per cent. But during the Left rule it was very poor, he said.

"Tripura is now peaceful following the signing of peace accords with insurgents. With the blessings of Maa Tripurasunderi, Tripura will be one of the most developed states in the country. Today, I am getting immense happiness," he said. Referring

to the settlement of Bru refugees, the home minister said the BJP governments at the Centre and the state decided to rehabilitate 40,000 displaced people. "The Bru were living in sub-human conditions. But the Left government never took any action to improve their condition. Now we are addressing it and already 11 villages have been set up while one more is in the works," he said. Shah said the Brus are now getting all the freedoms enjoyed by any other Indian citizen. They now have an Aadhar card, they are enrolled in the voter list, they have ration cards and all these were ensured by the Modi government, he said. He said the rehabilitated people were given Rs 1.5 lakh for the construction of their houses, Rs 4 lakh as fixed deposits and Rs 5000 for 24 months as monthly expenses. Bru migrants from three districts of Mizoram - Mamit, Lunglei and Kolasib districts - came to North Tripura district in 1997, 1998 and 2009 due to serious ethnic violence in Mizoram between Bru and Mizo communities.

Assam's forest cover shrinks by 83 square kilometre: ISFR report 2023

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ GUWAHATI

Assam's forest cover has decreased by over 83 sq km between 2021 and 2023, with the total area under forest and tree cover in the state now at 30,415.01 sq km, according to the India State of Forest Report (ISFR) 2023.

Union Minister for Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Bhupendra Yadav, had launched the report at the Forest Research Institute in Dehradun on Saturday, with a nationwide increase of 1,445 sq km in total forest and tree cover recorded since 2021.

The total forest area in this north eastern state is 28,313.55 sq km, which is 36.10 per cent of the state's total area, while area under tree cover is 10,718.28 sq km, bringing the total forest and tree cover area to 30,415.01 sq km. The ISFR reported a decrease of forest and tree cover area by 83.92 sq km in the state.

Altogether 4.07 per cent area of the state's forest cover is under very dense forest (VDF), 12.45 per cent under moderately dense forest (MDF) and 19.58 per cent under open forest (OF), as per the report. Assam is among the five states which have shown maximum decrease of forest cover inside the recorded forest area (RFA)/green wash (GW) category. Tripura has recorded the maximum decrease (116.90 sq km), followed by Telangana (105.87 sq km), Assam (86.66 sq km), Andhra Pradesh (83.47 sq km) and Gujarat (61.22 sq km).

As per the report, between 2021 and 2023 MDF inside RFA/GW for Assam has decreased by 134.32 per cent and scrub by 18.41 per cent. However, VDF has gone up by 43.63 per cent, OF by 4.03 per cent and non-forest (NF) area by 105.07 per cent.

BJP secures third consecutive term in Arunachal Pradesh, wins 46 Assembly seats

PTI ■ ITANAGAR

Arunachal Pradesh's political landscape underwent a major shift in 2024 as the BJP secured a third consecutive term, winning 46 out of 60 assembly seats in the simultaneous Lok Sabha and state elections. In addition to political developments, the state faced a dark chapter with disturbing revelations of widespread sex trafficking involving minors.

The victory included 10 uncontested wins, attributed to the party's focus on development under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership. Among its allies, the NPP retained five assembly seats, the NCP won

three, and the People's Party of Arunachal (PPA) claimed two. Three independents were also elected.

The Congress suffered a devastating blow, winning just one of the 19 seats it contested.

While Chief Minister Pema Khandu credited the BJP's success to development initiatives under the NDA government, Congress state president Nabam Tuki acknowledged the defeat, saying the party will continue to fight for the rights of the people. In the Lok Sabha elections, the BJP secured both parliamentary seats.

Besides politics, the state faced a dark chapter in 2024 with revelations of widespread sex

trafficking involving minors. A major case surfaced in August when survivors bravely came forward to expose the exploitation. Police arrested nine people who allegedly operated the racket for years.

The Arunachal Pradesh State Commission for Protection of Child Rights (APSCPCR) intervened, recommending stringent action, including dismissing three government employees, among them a police officer, for their involvement.

Key suspects, Chaya Dulom, a health department worker, and her husband David Dulom, a water resources department surveyor, were accused of coercing young

girls into the sex trade. In the same month, an interstate trafficking ring was busted at Ziro in Lower Subansiri district, rescuing four victims, including two minors.

In May, police uncovered another trafficking network involving five minor girls from Dhemaji, Assam. This led to the arrest of 22 people, including traffickers and pimps. Protests against the proposed 12,500 MW Siang Upper Multipurpose Project (SUMP) gained momentum throughout 2024, with indigenous communities in Siang and Upper Siang districts raising environmental and cultural concerns.

On October 5, hundreds of residents gathered in Geku village to oppose NHPC's ongoing surveys. NHPC identified three potential sites for the dam, sparking fears of displacement and loss of agricultural land.

Siang Indigenous Farmers Forum (SIFF) General Secretary Donggo Libang criticized the project, warning, "It will submerge paddy fields and strip locals of their land rights." Protests escalated after the Upper Siang district administration issued notices to government employees and village heads who joined the demonstrations.

The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA)

approved investments worth Rs 3,689 crore for two hydropower projects in Shi Yomi district - the 186 MW Tato-I and the 240 MW Heo projects. These projects aim to strengthen Arunachal Pradesh's power supply and integrate it with the national grid. Deputy Chief Minister Chowna Mein, who oversees the power portfolio, announced plans for 11 major hydropower projects scheduled to commence between 2025 and 2027.

"These projects will secure the state's economic future by creating jobs and boosting power generation," Mein said. In a bid to improve governance, the state-appointed 10 guardian

ministers for its 28 districts to oversee infrastructure and welfare projects. Additionally, 26 bureaucrats were designated as mentor secretaries for each district to ensure effective implementation of policies. After a four-year hiatus marred by controversy, the Arunachal Pradesh Public Service Commission (APSPC) successfully conducted the prelims of the Arunachal Pradesh Public Service Combined Competitive Examination (APSPSCCE) on December 15.

The 2020 examination had been tainted by a question paper leak scandal, leading to public outrage and erosion of trust.

Tigress on the move: Zeenat's journey from Odisha to West Bengal

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ KOLKATA/BHUBANESWAR



Forest personnel are monitoring the movement of a tigress which strayed from Odisha's Similipal Reserve Forest and is currently in West Bengal's Purulia district.

West Bengal's Chief Wildlife Warden Debal Roy informed the three-year-old tigress brought from Maharashtra to Similipal Reserve Forest is fitted with a radio collar and is currently located in the Bandwan area of Purulia district. It earlier crossed over to West Bengal from neighbouring Jharkhand and roamed around in Jhargram and Paschim Medinipur district, all parts of the forested 'Jangalmahal' belt.

Asked about reports that another tigress from Similipal which had escaped around the same time and roamed around the forested corridor of three neighbouring states has already headed back to her old habitat, Roy said "We don't have information about two tigresses escaping from Similipal and having strayed into West Bengal."

"Whether you call her Zeenat or Jamuna, we have information about one tigress leaving Similipal, entering Jharkhand and now having

crossed over to our state for the past three days. Our men are keeping a constant vigil on her movement," he said.

He said forest personnel from Odisha are also working with their Bengal counterparts in monitoring the movement of the big cat which has so far not shown any signs of aggression. The tigress had covered not less than 50 km after straying from Similipal in Odisha but such behaviour is normal for tigers who wander several kilometres in search of a new territory, another forest official said. "Probably the forest belt of neighbouring states, having similar habitat, became a corridor for her and she is trying to set up a new territory. We are at work to drive her away to Similipal through the same route or if she is captured, release her

back into the reserve forest in Odisha. We are hopeful there is no man-animal conflict," the senior state forest official said.

"The prey base is low in the areas where it is presently located. So, we hope she turns back to the reserve since there is more prey there," he said. Meanwhile, the authorities of the Similipal Tiger Reserve (STR) on Sunday said that it was not averse to putting the tigress under sedation in order to bring her back to the core area of the National Park. STR field director Prakash Chand Gogineni said "Tigress (Zeenat) is moving in West Bengal. The Odisha and West Bengal forest departments are tracking and moving with it. It is fit and fine. Efforts are being made to bring it back by tranquilisation," Gogineni said.

Claiming that tigress Zeenat, which walked into Jharkhand on the northern side of the Similipal, later moved into West Bengal forests on Friday. He said forest department personnel of both the states are tracking Zeenat through signals from her radio collar and efforts are underway to guide her back into Similipal. However, if the animal does not return to her habitation in the core area of the Similipal, the authorities may apply tranquilization as an alternative mode to bring her back, he said, adding that the three-year-old tigress Zeenat and two-and-half-year-old Jamuna were brought from Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve (TATR) in Maharashtra with the goal of introducing a new gene pool to the tiger population. Jamuna was brought from Maharashtra on October 27, while Zeenat arrived on November 15 and was released into the wild on November 24. While Jamuna was roaming the Similipal landscape in good health, Zeenat walked into Jharkhand and later to West Bengal forest which was connected through forests. Odisha Forest officials said that Zeenat was also in good health.

International drug syndicate busted: NCB Ahmedabad seizes two kilogram ketamine

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ AHMEDABAD



The Narcotics Control Bureau Ahmedabad has busted an international drug syndicate with the seizure of two kg ketamine and arrested four persons, including three Nigerian nationals, the NCB said on Sunday.

The accused conspired to traffic ketamine from India to foreign countries through courier parcels, the NCB said in a release, detailing the significant crackdown of the organised drug crime operating from the Indian soil. The value of the seized contraband was not specified. Ketamine is a highly valued and sought after contraband in USA and also used as a "date rape" drug, the release said. The NCB Ahmedabad received an initial input on December 3 that nearly two kg of ketamine concealed in spice packets of various brands was being shipped to the US through courier agencies, it said.

Extensive technical surveillance coupled with human intel led the drug law enforcement agency to zero in on a person, Adnan

Furniturewala, who once resided in Pune but later moved to the US, it said. It further came to light that Furniturewala was deported to India after being booked in three cases of drug trafficking in the US, the NCB said.

While being in India, the accused was booked in another case under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act by the NCB Mumbai last year and was currently out on parole, it said. "In the present case, he was always a step ahead of authorities and continuously kept on changing his hideout and employed numerous tactics so as to dodge the agency," the release said.

"However, in a precisely executed operation that spanned through states of

Gujarat, Maharashtra and Karnataka, he was tracked and finally arrested on December 8 from an apartment in Bellahalli area of Bengaluru, Karnataka," it stated.

The probe further indicated the seized ketamine was supplied to him by a Nigerian syndicate operating from Delhi and supplying contraband through courier agencies, the NCB said. "Concerted efforts by the agency led to the nabbing of Emmanuel Ifanyi Nwaobiora alias Mike along with his two associates Ekeleme Ahamfeula Joseph and Emmanuel Osaja on December 18 from Mehrauli area of Delhi," it said. Further investigation was being carried out by the NCB's Ahmedabad zonal unit to find out the source of the contraband, the release said.

Police nab murder and drug accused from Nagpur multiplex during "Pushpa 2" screening

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NAGPUR

Moviegoers watching a late-night show of "Pushpa 2" at a multiplex in Maharashtra's Nagpur witnessed a real-life action scene as police stormed the cinema hall and arrested a man wanted in murder and drug cases.

The dramatic arrest of Vishal Meshram shortly after midnight on Thursday left the packed audience stunned, but police assured them that they could continue enjoying the movie as they nabbed the accused and took him away. Meshram was on the run for 10 months and was eventually tracked down after

police learnt about his interest in the recently-released film, an official from Pachpaoli police station said on Sunday.

The gangster had 27 cases against him, including two of murder and drug trafficking, and was known for his violent tendencies, even attacking police in the past, he said.

Authorities had been pursuing him relentlessly, using cyber surveillance and tracking his movements in a new sports utility vehicle (SUV), the official said. After tracking him on Thursday, police deflated the vehicle's tyres outside the cinema hall, located in central part of the city, to

prevent his escape, he said. When police personnel entered the hall during the movie's climax, Meshram was engrossed in the film.

The police surrounded him and made the arrest swiftly, giving him no chance to resist, the official said. Meshram is currently lodged in the Nagpur Central Jail and will soon be transferred to a prison in Nashik, the police said. "Pushpa 2: The Rule", the blockbuster movie starring Allu Arjun, is a sequel to 2021's Telugu film "Pushpa: The Rise". It was released on December 5 with dubbed versions in Hindi, Tamil, Kannada, Bengali and Malayalam.

Centre reveals West Bengal and Bihar as worst-hit by arsenic contamination of groundwater

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ PATNA/KOLKATA/NEW DELHI



Centre has informed the National Green Tribunal (NGT) that West Bengal and Bihar are impacted the most by arsenic contamination of groundwater. The tribunal is hearing the issue of rice being susceptible to arsenic contamination because it absorbs more of the toxic semi-metallic element from water and soil. Earlier, it sought a reply from the Centre on it.

In an order dated December 16, a bench of NGT Chairperson Justice Prakash Shrivastava and expert member A Senthil Vel noted that the Union Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare had filed its reply after seeking inputs from the Indian

Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR). "States of West Bengal and Bihar are reported to be most affected by arsenic contamination of groundwater irrigation by contaminated groundwater is the major route for arsenic entry into agricultural soil which ultimately leads to its entry

into the food chain," the Centre said in its reply. There can be a "significant build-up" of the toxic element in rice as it is a water-intensive crop, the reply stated. "Transport of arsenic-contaminated rice grain grown in arsenic-endemic areas to non-endemic sites and consequent dietary intakes will also spread

arsenic exposure in the non-endemic population," it noted. The tribunal noted that, according to the reply, the distribution of arsenic content in plant parts generally followed the order of roots, stems and leaves. "The edible parts of leafy (spinach, fenugreek etc.) and underground vegetables (beet, radish etc.) contained much higher arsenic as compared to vegetables with fruit as edible part (brinjal, beans, ladies' finger, tomato etc.). In general, fruit/grain of plants showed less accumulation of arsenic compared to root, stem and leaf," it noted. The reply also suggested various remedial measures to minimise the effect of arsenic in the soil-plant system. These include replacing water-intensive rice

varieties with other less water-intensive crops and relatively arsenic-tolerant rice varieties, growing non-edible and leguminous crops during the dry season in the hotspot areas, application of biochar (modified charcoal produced from burning biomass sources), and increased use of green manures and application of silicate fertilizers. The reply also suggested other remedial measures, such as storing arsenic-contaminated groundwater in ponds and subsequent dilution with rainwater along with conjunctive use of ground and surface water to dilute the arsenic content. The tribunal then implemented the ICAR as a respondent and sought its response. It will hear the matter next on April 15.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Outreach to Kuwait

With a focus on economic cooperation and cultural exchange, PM Modi's Kuwait visit strengthens the ties between the two nations

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent visit to Kuwait marked a historic moment, as he became the first Indian Prime Minister to visit the Gulf nation in over four decades. The visit, at the invitation of Kuwaiti Emir Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, underscores a renewed commitment to strengthening the ties between India and Kuwait. With a focus on economic collaboration, cultural exchange, and mutual prosperity, the visit paves the way for a deepened strategic partnership. India and Kuwait share a relationship that dates back centuries, built on the foundations of trade and cultural exchanges. Over time, this bond has evolved into a robust partnership, encompassing energy, trade and people-to-people connections. Today, Kuwait is a significant energy supplier for India, while Indian expertise and manpower have become indispensable for Kuwait's development. Prime Minister Modi highlighted the enduring solidarity between the two nations, citing instances of mutual support during times of distress. With over one million Indian expatriates residing in Kuwait, the Indian diaspora has played a crucial role in Kuwait's growth, contributing to various sectors including healthcare, engineering and education.



Addressing the expatriate community, Modi praised their efforts, stating, "Their energy, love, and unwavering connection to India are truly inspiring. Proud of their role in strengthening ties between our nations." The economic relationship between India and Kuwait is ripe for expansion. Kuwait, as a key energy supplier, holds strategic importance for India's energy security. Simultaneously, India, with its burgeoning market and investment opportunities, offers Kuwait an attractive destination for its sovereign wealth fund. During his discussions, PM Modi noted the shared aspirations of both nations: building a prosperous 'New Kuwait' and transforming India into a developed nation by 2047. By aligning these goals, the two countries can establish a partnership that drives mutual growth. Modi's visit was not limited to economic discussions; it also celebrated the cultural ties that bind the two nations. The Prime Minister met with individuals who have contributed to fostering Indo-Kuwaiti relations, including Abdullah Al-Baroun, a translator who brought Indian epics like the 'Ramayana' and 'Mahabharata' to Arabic-speaking audiences. As India and Kuwait look to the future, the visit has set the stage for a relationship that goes beyond traditional energy ties. The integration of India's technological expertise with Kuwait's developmental ambitions holds the promise of transformative progress. Furthermore, the strong presence of the Indian diaspora serves as a bridge, fostering deeper connections and mutual understanding. By strengthening this partnership, India and Kuwait are not only enriching their bilateral relationship but also contributing to stability and development in the region.

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PICTALK



A woman plucks aster flowers at an orchard, in Nadia

The Role of Indigenous Knowledge in Combating Climate Change: A Legacy of Hope The discourse on climate change dominated discussions at COP 2024, the United Nations Climate Change Conference, held in Baku, Azerbaijan, from November 11 to 22, 2024. Rising global temperatures, depleting natural resources, and rampant environmental degradation have emphasised the urgency of adopting sustainable practices and advancing conservation efforts. Amid this pressing crisis, the role of indigenous communities in preserving the environment emerges as a beacon of hope. Often referred to as the "guardians of nature," these communities have safeguarded ecosystems for centuries through their traditional knowledge, sustainable practices, and deep connection to the land. One exemplary figure embodying this harmonious relationship with nature was Padma Shri Tulsi Gowda. Known as the "Encyclopedia of the Forest" and affectionately called the "tree goddess" by her Halakki Vokkaliga tribe in Karnataka, Tulsi Gowda's life and work illustrate the profound impact of indigenous wisdom on environmental preservation. With an unwavering commitment to nature, she planted 30,000 saplings during her lifetime, nurturing them with meticulous care.

Tulsi Gowda passed away on December 16, 2024, at the age of 86, leaving behind an inspiring legacy of environmental stewardship. Growing up in poverty, Tulsi Gowda's love for plants and forests remained unparalleled. From an early age, she worked in plant nurseries, demonstrating extraordinary skill in nurturing saplings. Her unique ability to identify the "mother tree" of any species exemplified her deep ecological understanding. Tulsi Gowda herself believed, "It's not important how many plants you have planted; what matters is how much care you've taken of those saplings." The contribution of indigenous communities to environmental conservation extends far beyond



India. Globally, these communities represent less than 5 per cent of the world's population but protect 80 per cent of the planet's biodiversity, according to the United Nations. Their traditional ecological knowledge, passed down through generations, serves as a crucial tool for sustainable resource management. For instance, the Kayapo tribe in Brazil has successfully defended the Amazon rainforest from logging, mining, and industrial agriculture, preserving a vital carbon sink. Brazilian environmentalist and politician Dr. Marina Silva emphasised, "The Kayapo teach us that protecting forests is not just about climate, but about life itself." Similarly, the Sámi people of Scandinavia maintain ecological balance in Arctic regions through sustainable reindeer herding practices. In New Zealand, the Maori concept of kaitiakitanga (guardianship) promotes a cultural commitment to environmental stewardship, influencing national policies. The Ogiek of Kenya, through sustainable honey harvesting, continue to conserve the Mau Forest, a critical water catchment area. This echoes Wangari Maathai's belief that "The future of our forests lies in the hands of those who understand them best - indigenous communities."



THE CHIPKO MOVEMENT OF THE 1970S, WHERE VILLAGERS IN UTTARAKHAND HUGGED TREES TO PREVENT DEFORESTATION, DREW INSPIRATION FROM THE BISHNOI'S SACRIFICE. IN 2021, A SIMILAR INITIATIVE SAVED OVER 500 SACRED OAK TREES IN JAAKHNI VILLAGE, UTTARAKHAND, NEAR FORESTS DEDICATED TO THE LOCAL GODDESS OF JUSTICE

India, too, has a rich tradition of indigenous environmental stewardship. The Bishnoi community of Rajasthan, one of the earliest champions of conservation, exemplifies this ethos. Their sacrifice during the 1730 Khejarli Massacre, where 363 Bishnois gave their lives to protect sacred Khejri trees, remains a cornerstone of ecological movements. Similarly, the Dongria Kondh tribe of Odisha has valiantly defended the Niyamgiri Hills from destructive mining activities, preserving their sacred land and biodiversity. The Apatani tribe of Arunachal Pradesh showcases innovative sustainability through wet-rice cultivation and fish farming, while the Soliga tribe of Karnataka safeguards the Biligiriranga Hills using indigenous forest management techniques. Such efforts have inspired broader environmental movements. The Chipko Movement of the 1970s, where villagers in Uttarakhand hugged trees to prevent deforestation, drew inspiration from the Bishnoi's sacrifice. In 2021, a similar initiative saved over 500 sacred oak trees in Jaakhni village, Uttarakhand, near forests dedicated to the local Goddess of Justice. From the hills of Uttarakhand to the sacred groves of Meghalaya, these movements highlight India's enduring envi-

ronmental heritage. Despite their invaluable contributions, indigenous communities face significant challenges, including marginalisation, land dispossession, and exploitation. Empowering indigenous communities to take leadership roles in environmental management has already shown promising results. For example, joint forest management initiatives have demonstrated effective resource management and biodiversity conservation. Combining indigenous knowledge with modern scientific approaches can create innovative strategies for addressing environmental challenges. Practices like the Zuni tribe's waffle gardens in New Mexico, which conserve water in arid regions, exemplify the sophistication of indigenous ecological wisdom. In an era of environmental crises, humanity must embrace the profound knowledge of indigenous communities to forge a sustainable future. Their traditions, deeply rooted in respect for nature, hold the key to restoring ecological balance. By integrating their wisdom into global conservation strategies, we can create a world that honors the delicate harmony between humanity and the natural world. (The writer is Programme Executive, Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti; views are personal)



RAJDEEP PATHAK

Guardians of nature: Saving the planet

As the world grapples with the escalating impacts of climate change, the wisdom of indigenous communities shines as a vital resource for environmental preservation

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

SC CONDEMNS WITCHCRAFT PRACTICES

Madam — Recently the Supreme Court reprimanded the Patna High Court for staying proceedings in a case involving the abuse of women accused of witchcraft, highlighting the issue as a violation of Constitutional values. The Court condemned the practice of witchcraft as rooted in superstition and patriarchal control, urging for protective measures and social change to combat such discrimination against vulnerable women. The Supreme Court took a strong stance against the victimisation of vulnerable women under the guise of witchcraft, calling it a "blot" on the constitutional spirit. SC has rightly said that the incident that took place in the 21st century was shocking and underlined the failure of legislative, executive and judicial measures to protect vulnerable sections of society. In India, witchcraft allegations are often directed at women who are either widows or elderly. The Court has also observed that the incidents against women accused of witchcraft go against the spirit of the Constitution because they undermine dignity. SC has expressed shock at cases where women have been physically abused and directed in public over witchcraft allegations. The number of witchcraft-related cases reported to the NCRB has been increasing in recent years. The Prevention of Witch Practices Act in Jharkhand criminalises accusations of women as witches. Criminalisation and punishment of those involved in witch hunting is the most appropriate way to end superstition and harmful practices and provide redress to victims.

P Victor Selvaraj | Tirunelveli

DELHI NEEDS DEVELOPMENT

Madam—Apropos of the news 'BJP shortlists candidates for Delhi as manifesto campaign gains momentum' (Dec 21), it is a welcome sign and heartening that BJP prioritises and takes the lead to frame Sankalp Patra, as they call it a political manifesto, with public opinion. BJP has got over 40,000 suggestions, which shows public

Dhaka takes anti-India stance



India's relations with Bangladesh are passing through a difficult phase after the Sheikh Hasina government succumbed before violent protests led by students in the first week of August. All development after her fall is quite worrisome for New Delhi. No doubt it was a foregone conclusion that Dhaka will no longer follow a pro-India policy. But Bangladesh is hell-bent upon destroying the cordial and bilateral relations that New Delhi crafted with the Sheikh Hasina regime. The ouster of the liberal Sheikh Hasina regime has embold-

ened Jamat-e-Islami-led Islamic extremists who are now targeting not only religious minorities but also Sufi shrines and the press. Unfortunately, the Muhammad Yunus government is only interested in flaring up anti-India sentiments in the country instead of containing sectarian violence. The arrest of Hindumonk Chinmoy Krishna Das on sedition charges shows its true colours. Internationally too, Dhaka is interested in joining hands with anti-India forces, particularly China and Pakistan, and Yunus's second meeting with Shahbaz Sharif in the last four months. The anti-India approach of the Yunus government can be measured by a post of Yunus' close aide, Mahfuz Alam, in which he threatened to "annex" parts of India. Before Dhaka intends to go to Islamabad's way, it must not forget that New Delhi holds significant leverage over it in terms of both economy and geopolitics.

Manoj Parashar | Ghaziabad

association with its manifesto. BJP has a large number of MLA aspirants, so the delay in the declaration of candidates is directly proportional to the number of candidates. The manifesto should target the new generation and focus on implementations of the New Education Policy 2000, which echoes in the Lt. Governor's initiative in Samvad@Rajnivas. DDA, MCD and NDMC may be associated in setting up government libraries across Delhi for students and teachers. Traffic jam is the perennial issue for Delhiites, and it is easy to spot the trouble areas. Delhi needs more flyovers across Dwarka and East Delhi. The pollution in Delhi is also a serious concern, and anti-fogging machines need to be installed on major roads. The waste and garbage dumps, particularly in Gazipur Chowk and Janakpuri, deface and stink Delhi. Delhi Government needs to implement the plans. The beggar problem at road crossings is a nuisance. Illegal colonies and Bangladeshi and Rohingya immigrants are a big bane for Delhi. Delhi is not a poor state, and per capita income is much high-

er than in other states, so the freebies like free rations and electricity are not required, and the funds should be allocated to building the infrastructure of flyovers, schools, and hospitals.

Vinod Johri | Delhi

FOCUS ON CONSTRUCTIVE DEBATES

Madam — The parliamentarian should understand that they need to be more productive, constructive, and prolific during the start of the session of the houses. As the winter session of the 18th Lok Sabha ended with the least possible outcomes that Parliamentarians could deliver, causing a scuffle between the members themselves. It should be the moral and fundamental duty to abide by the constitution to uphold the dignity of the Parliament houses and meant it for possible constructive discussion on each and every issue rather than politicising them on personal and party grounds.

Dimple Wadhawan | Kanpur Nagar

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Challenges in CSR accounting: Pathways to meaningful impact



RAJESH SHAH

Implementing CSR initiatives effectively presents significant challenges, ranging from a lack of clear objectives to complexities in measuring their impact

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is a fundamental aspect of modern business strategy, reflecting a company's commitment to social equity, environmental sustainability and ethical practices.

In India, CSR became a legal requirement in 2013, and companies are now expected to integrate these principles into their operations. However, while CSR initiatives are vital for societal and environmental progress, accounting for them presents unique challenges that businesses must address to achieve compliance and maximise impact.

Challenges in CSR Accounting:
1. Lack of Clear Objectives Many companies undertake CSR without clearly defined goals, resulting in misaligned initiatives that fail to resonate with stakeholders or address critical social issues.
2. Insufficient Stakeholder Engagement: CSR initiatives often overlook the input of key stakeholders such as employees, customers, and community members. For instance, a clothing brand may launch a sustainable fashion line without consult-



ing suppliers or customers, leading to low adoption and minimal impact.

3. Limited Resources Smaller businesses face budget constraints and lack expertise to implement effective CSR programmes. A local coffee shop, for example, might abandon a recycling initiative due to insufficient funds for bins or awareness campaigns, missing the chance to enhance its brand.

4. Fund Utilisation Issues Companies often face compliance challenges regarding the disbursement of funds to implementing agencies. Under Section 135(5), mere fund transfer does not qualify as CSR spending unless the implementing agency utilises the funds appropriately. Companies must plan and monitor fund utilisation effectively.

5. Difficulty in Measuring Impact: Assessing the out-

comes of CSR initiatives is complex, as many lack standardised metrics to measure their social and environmental impact. For example, a manufacturing firm may struggle to quantify carbon emission reductions from a green energy project, making it harder to demonstrate success.

6. Reputation Risks Greenwashing or poorly executed initiatives can damage a company's credibility. For instance, a beverage company that markets itself as environmentally friendly while engaging in unsustainable practices risks losing consumer trust and suffering long-term reputational harm. **Strategies to Overcome CSR Challenges**

1. Define Clear Objectives Companies should set SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) goals for their CSR initiatives.
2. Engage Stakeholders Early Regular engagement with stakeholders ensures CSR initiatives address their needs and receive their support.
3. Start Small and Scale Up Small businesses can begin with low-cost, high-impact

projects and expand as they gain experience. A local restaurant might start with a composting programme and later adopt a broader sustainability plan, including local sourcing and reduced waste.
4. Utilise Metrics and Reporting: Establishing clear metrics allows companies to measure and report their CSR progress effectively. For instance, a tech firm could publish an annual report detailing energy savings, employee participation, and community engagement outcomes.
5. Communicate Transparently: Openness about successes and challenges builds stakeholder trust.

Conclusion: Proactively addressing these issues helps businesses enhance their reputation, strengthen stakeholder relationships, and make meaningful societal contributions. Successful CSR initiatives ultimately benefit both companies and communities, driving sustainable growth.

(The writer is partner Audit and Corporate Tax, Bhuta Shah and Co.; views are personal)



FIRST COLUMN

MAKE A DIRECT CONNECT WITH GOD

Our approach to the Divine has been shackled by rituals, often muddling the true essence of spiritual connection



RAVI VALLURI

As a monolithic organisation, railway bureaucracy was once fossilised and adopted an ostrich-like approach while dealing with its internal and external customers and also with rivals till it adopted technology in attracting passenger and freight segments.

This cardinal principle of competitive advantage and adaptability also applies in our relationship with religion, spirituality and almighty God. Humans have been prisoners to an outdated pedagogy while approaching God. The transaction between the Divine and the bhakta has been constrained as the transmission of knowledge and blessings have been clogged in drain pipes, as the seeker and the devout feels impotent and weak.

Can we recall two path-breaking movies from a few years back, OMG – Oh My God! and PK, wherein the relationship of humans and God was explored?

In OMG a petty trader, Kanji challenges the orthodoxy of the religious establishment by suing the Creator for the ruination of his business, much to the chagrin of the priestly and spiritual class. Similarly, PK – an alien who is marooned on planet Earth, as his spaceship leaves without him – questions various religious and spiritual institutions with his childlike curiosity, only to attract disapprobation.

If it was Lord Krishna's flute and discus in the case of Kanji, it became the symbolic wrong number in the case of PK to dispute the indurate thought processes of a shambolic order. A distraught PK was unable to connect with the Divine forms of various religious denominations and all his trials ended in a sandbox of wrong numbers. So, what is the right number? It is a Wi-Fi to God.



Let us for a split second assume that human beings and all the other manifestations of this grand design are like computers, smartphones or other electronic devices. Almighty God can be likened to the World Wide Web possessing the repository of knowledge, of course with the faculty of creation and destruction.

In the wired world all gizmos are connected to the internet through a Wi-Fi. Aberrations or disruptions in the communication do take place, when the battery power is low, or due to software glitches (this can be attributed to low prana levels). The intermediaries, in the form of the priestly class, astutely blame these muddles faced by the gizmos, either in the hands of God or lack of tapas by the seeker. For centuries across the world, as humans evolved from the inception as mere nature worshippers, to established religions, the febrile human mind has always been inquisitive about the acceptable and bizarre theories of existence. Almighty God in all his manifestations and myriad forms is approachable to bestow benedictions. However, tragically it is the gizmo (humans) and the channel (Wi-Fi) that have transfigured and remodeled since perhaps, the Big Bang!

The Wi-Fi is symbolic of a direct connection with the Divine. A true bhakta does he require an emergency quota to board the heavenly train. There is no need to perform rituals, consult tarot card readers, visit places of worship out of fear, beseeching for mercy or boons. A chip is embedded in the DNA to ensure the divine communion which needs to be activated. The regular practice of yogic postures is essentially Hatha Yoga and a tonic for the physical body. The meditation that humans practice is to fortify and safeguard the comfort of our minds, but it is our true inner self, which pines for nourishment. The ordinary mortal today too can be in this state of spiritual reverie through the power of breath. This brings us closest to our inner self. This is the unalloyed Wi-Fi to connect with the Divine.

(The writer is the CEO of Chhattisgarh East Railway Ltd. and Chhattisgarh East West Railway Ltd. He is a faculty of the Art of Living; views are personal)



GURDEEP KAUR

Reels are crafted with algorithms and driven by artificial intelligence to provide instant gratification. However, this seemingly harmless indulgence is contributing to a concerning decline in social and emotional wellbeing. The short bursts of content, typically lasting a few seconds to a minute, are often paired with catchy music, effects, and fil-

ters to maximise engagement. These features captivate both creators and viewers, fostering an obsession that has surpassed earlier trends like the selfie craze.

The statistics are staggering. In 2023, India had approximately 24 crore Instagram users, accounting for nearly 17 per cent of its population – the highest globally. Children as young as five years old are consuming reels, while parents take pride in showcasing their kids' talents online. Although reels highlight creativity and talent, they come with significant risks. Overexposure to adult themes, unsolicited criticism, and the pressure to perform for likes and shares can severely impact a child's self-esteem and emotional health. For parents, the drive

for online validation often overshadows the responsibility to provide age-appropriate environments for their children.

The dopamine rush triggered by watching reels creates a cycle of instant gratification, making it difficult for users to focus on meaningful achievements that require sustained effort. The infinite scroll feature exacerbates this issue, leading to binge-watching that consumes valuable time and energy. For youth, who are particularly vulnerable, this translates to lost opportunities for personal growth, skill development, and building genuine relationships.

Reels and Social Dynamics
The cultural impact of reels extends beyond individual habits, influencing societal



norms and behaviors. Content creators often sensationalise material to attract more viewers, blurring the lines between private and public domains. This trend has led to the normalisation of inappropriate content, including vulgarity, obscenity, and indecent practices, which are being readily adopted by impressionable audiences. The effects are troubling. Incidents of cyberbullying, harassment, and social media-

driven disputes are on the rise. The dopamine-induced focus on short-term gratification undermines hard work and perseverance, fostering a culture of mediocrity. Youth, in particular, are losing precious productive years to the reel marathon, trading real-life interactions for virtual validation.

Physical and Cognitive Consequences

The overconsumption of reels is not only detrimental to mental health but also poses physical and cognitive risks. Prolonged screen time leads to issues such as poor concentration, memory deficits, sleep disturbances, and decreased academic or professional performance. Lifestyle disorders like obesity, diabetes, and hypertension are becoming

more prevalent, exacerbated by sedentary habits encouraged by excessive reel consumption.

Breaking the Cycle

Addressing the negative impact of reels requires a collective effort. At an individual level, self-discipline is crucial. Setting clear limits on screen time and prioritising meaningful activities can help break the cycle. Families play a pivotal role, as parents must lead by example, fostering environments that encourage "family time" and shared activities. Introducing hobbies and alternative forms of entertainment can also reduce reliance on digital distractions.

From a societal perspective, stringent regulations are necessary to monitor and control the type of content being created and shared. Governments

and tech companies should collaborate to design features that promote responsible platform usage.

The Way Forward

They must be used responsibly to avoid their harmful consequences. Striking a balance between virtual and real-world experiences is essential for leading a fulfilling life. Individuals need meaningful relationships, emotional support, and real-life achievements to thrive.

By fostering awareness and adopting healthier digital habits, we can harness the benefits of technology without compromising our wellbeing. (The writer has an experience of 17 years of teaching the under graduate students of Sri Guru Gobind Singh College of Commerce; views are personal)

Slowdown in growth: Is it a temporary blip?



UTTAM GUPTA

This temporary slowdown, attributed to reduced government spending, raises broader concerns about the structural challenges underpinning India's growth story



The GDP (gross domestic product) growth during the second quarter of the current financial year (FY) ending September 30, 2024, decelerated to 5.4 per cent down from 8.1 per cent achieved during the corresponding period of FY 2023-24. It was the lowest in seven quarters and well below the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) forecast of 7 per cent. It was even lower than the 6.7 per cent recorded during the first quarter of the current FY ending June 30, 2024.

Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman observed that deceleration was not a "systemic slowdown"; that it was a temporary blip caused by a reduction in government expenditure (courtesy, elections ended in the June quarter when many projects came to a standstill due to the model code of conduct). She exuded confidence that expansion during the third quarter would make up for the lost momentum. The Ministry of Finance (MoF) expects full-year GDP growth to be 6.5 – 7 per cent. Coming on top of growth of 8 per cent plus achieved during the previous three consecutive years, 6.5 – 7 per cent during the current FY is indeed impressive. Even at this lower level, the Indian economy continues to be the fastest-growing in the world. Then, why should it worry us?

Nearly 70 per cent of India's GDP is driven by domestic consumption; the remaining 30 per cent is driven by investment and export. Domestic consumption includes government consumption and private consumption. Likewise, investment consists of capital spent by the government and private investment. During the last five years, the Central Government has done the heavy lifting especially when it comes to investment. An idea of this can be gauged from its budget outlay 2020-21: Rs 30.42 lakh crore; 2021-22: Rs 34.83 lakh crore; 2022-23: Rs 39.45 lakh crore; 2023-24: Rs 45.03 lakh crore; 2024-25: Rs 48.20 lakh crore.

The Centre's capital spend during these years was 2020-21: Rs 4.39 lakh crore; 2021-22: Rs 5.54 lakh crore; 2022-23: Rs 7.50 lakh crore; 2023-24: Rs 10.01 lakh crore; 2024-25: Rs 11.11 lakh crore. The Central government has also been helping the states



UNION FINANCE MINISTER NIRMALA SITHARAMAN OBSERVED THAT DECELERATION WAS NOT A "SYSTEMIC SLOWDOWN"; THAT IT WAS A TEMPORARY BLIP CAUSED BY A REDUCTION IN GOVERNMENT EXPENDITURE

to boost their capital spend. During 2022-23, it provided them with 50-year Rs 100,000 crore interest-free loans.

During 2023-24, such transfers were Rs 130,000 crore. For the current FY, the transfers are kept at Rs 150,000 crore. It has also given incentives to promote investment in the private sector. The mother of all incentives was a reduction in the corporate tax rate to 15 per cent for new manufacturing enterprises and 22 per cent for existing enterprises. In this year's budget, the corporate tax rate on foreign firms was reduced from 40 per cent to 35 per cent.

The Centre has also done its bit to give a boost to private consumption. In the budget for 2024-25, Sitharaman has given relief in personal income tax (PIT) of around Rs 17,500/- annually by changing the tax slabs under the New Income Tax regime and increasing in standard deduction by Rs 25,000/-. Less tax means higher disposable income in the hands of the people hence the scope for more spending. But, initiatives by the government alone can't ensure high growth on a sustainable basis. To achieve high sustainable growth, it is necessary to give a boost to private consumption. The dip to 5.4 per cent during the second quarter of the current FY when the decline in urban demand took a toll even as heavy lifting by the Centre was not available (due to elections) should serve as a warning signal. This brings us to a systemic problem that has hampered growth for decades.

This has to do with inequalities in the distribution of income and wealth. According to an Oxfam report, 'Inequality Kills', the collective wealth of India's 100 richest people in 2021 hit a record high of US\$ 775 billion or over 25 per cent of India's GDP. In conversation with ET Now at the recently held

Times Network India Economic Conclave, Arvind Panagariya, Chairman, of the 16th Finance Commission said: "The inequality in the sense of the top 1 per cent as a proportion of the bottom 5 percent, yes, that inequality has gone up". Thomas Piketty, a professor at the Paris School of Economics (he is known for his groundbreaking research on economic inequality, wealth distribution, and the dynamics of capitalism) says "the share of India's top 10 percent population is currently at 55-60 per cent". According to him, this should be 30-40 per cent. Whichever source one looks at, we can't wish away the fact that India is home to glaring inequalities in income distribution.

This, in turn, has to do with the manner in which fruits of development are shared amongst the people. Unambiguously, the sharing is unequal. According to an analysis of the financials of India's largest companies – those comprising the BSE 500 index – over five years, the profits of corporations included in this index more than doubled from Rs 480,000 crore during 2017-18 Rs 1000,000 crore during 2021-22, whereas their revenue growth was only 47 per cent.

This means that payments to factors of production other than the owners of capital such as to employees/workers, etc., have been kept under a tight leash, resulting in a disproportionate boost to profits. A big slice of these profits has gone to the pockets of the shareholders of these firms.

Thus, the aggregate dividend paid by them increased from Rs 176,000 crore during 2017-18 to Rs 302,000 crore during 2021-22, which is an increase of 72 per cent. In those five years, cumulatively, they paid 34 per cent of aggregate net profit as dividends. This is an unusually high payout ratio – even higher than 30 per cent paid by the

world's largest companies in America's S&P 500. Whether profits to the firms or high dividends to shareholders, it has been paid for or come at the cost of millions of others. Rs 1,000,000 crore profits of firms in the BSE 500 index during FY 2021-22 came at the cost of undermining the purchasing power of millions of consumers.

Likewise, the mammoth dividend fills the coffers of a few – the money that merely adds to their idle cash balances or is spent on a few luxury items – denying millions of workers decent income. The tendency to appropriate a disproportionate share of the proceeds of wealth generation by a few persons at the top can be seen even amongst the owners of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) who ape large enterprises when it comes to making payments to their workers.

The SMEs being employment intensive, a general belief is that giving a boost to them would help in creating more jobs hence, lead to a more equitable income distribution. But, their owners' paying less to workers militates against this objective.

Even the millions of small and marginal farmers who by nature of their occupation play the role of owner as well as worker don't get to earn a good income as a handful of traders buy their crops at throwaway prices even as the minimum support price (MSP) notified by the government remains mostly on paper. When, the enterprise-owning class no matter which occupation it is in and the scale of its operation is intrinsically prone to sharing less with those who are at the receiving end, inequalities are inevitable. In such a scenario, how can we expect a big push to the demand needed for sustained growth?

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

The allure and impact of Reels: A double-edged sword

In an age where digital connectivity reigns supreme, short-form content like reels has taken centre stage, captivating millions with its addictive allure

In today's digital era, people from all walks of life are increasingly drawn to the virtual world, spending countless hours glued to their screens rather than engaging in real-world activities. Social media platforms, online gaming, and streaming services have created an engaging yet addictive digital ecosystem.

Among these, reels have emerged as a dominant form of entertainment, captivating users with short, visually stimulating content that ranges from dance challenges and comedy skits to educational snippets and senseless videos. While initially sought as a break from daily routines, reels often trap users in an endless cycle of mindless scrolling that detracts from productivity and long-term goals.



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2 US Navy pilots shot down over Red Sea in apparent 'friendly fire' incident

AP ■ DUBAI

Two US Navy pilots were shot down Sunday over the Red Sea in an apparent "friendly fire" incident, the US military said, marking the most serious incident to threaten troops in over a year of America targeting Yemen's Houthis rebels. Both pilots were recovered alive after ejecting from their stricken aircraft, with one suffering minor injuries. But the shootdown underlines just how dangerous the Red Sea corridor has become over the ongoing attacks on shipping by the Iranian-backed Houthis despite US and European military coalitions patrolling the area.

Command acknowledged the Truman had entered the Mideast, but hadn't specified that the carrier and its battle group was in the Red Sea. "The guided missile cruiser USS Gettysburg, which is part of the USS Harry S. Truman Carrier Strike Group, mistakenly fired on and hit the F/A-18," Central Command said in a statement. From the military's description, the aircraft shot down was a two-seat F/A-18 Super Hornet fighter jet assigned to the "Red Rippers" of Strike Fighter Squadron 11 out of Naval Air Station Oceana, Virginia. It wasn't immediately clear how the Gettysburg could mistake an F/A-18 for an enemy aircraft or missile, particularly as ships in a battle group remain linked by both radar and radio communication. However, Central Command said that warships and aircraft earlier shot down multiple Houthi drones and an anti-ship cruise missile launched by the rebels. Incoming hostile fire from the Houthis has given sailors just seconds to make decisions in the past. Since the Truman's arrival, the

US has stepped up its airstrikes targeting the Houthis and their missile fire into the Red Sea and the surrounding area. However, the presence of an American warship group may spark renewed attacks from the rebels, like what the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower saw earlier this year. That deployment marked what the Navy described as its most intense combat since World War II. On Saturday night and early Sunday, US warplanes conducted airstrikes that shook Sanaa, the capital of Yemen that the Houthis have held since 2014. Central Command described the strikes as targeting a "missile storage facility" and a "command-and-control facility," without elaborating. Houthi-controlled media reported strikes in both Sanaa and around the port city of Hodeida, without offering any casualty or damage information. In Sanaa, strikes appeared particularly targeted at a mountainside known to be home to military installations. The Houthis later acknowledged the aircraft being shot down in the Red Sea. The Houthis have targeted

about 100 merchant vessels with missiles and drones since the Israel-Hamas war in the Gaza Strip started in October 2023 after Hamas' surprise attack on Israel that killed 1,200 people and saw 250 others taken hostage. Israel's grinding offensive in Gaza has killed more than 45,000 Palestinians, local health officials say. The tally doesn't distinguish between combatants and civilians. The Houthis have seized one vessel and sunk two in a campaign that has also killed four sailors. Other missiles and drones have either been intercepted by separate US- and European-led coalitions in the Red Sea or failed to reach their targets, which have also included Western military vessels. The rebels maintain that they target ships linked to Israel, the US or the United Kingdom to force an end to Israel's campaign against Hamas in Gaza. However, many of the ships attacked have little or no connection to the conflict, including some bound for Iran. The Houthis also have increasingly targeted Israel itself with drones and missiles, resulting in retaliatory Israeli airstrikes.

Israeli strikes across Gaza kill at least 20

AP ■ DEIR AL-BALAH (GAZA)

Israeli strikes across the Gaza Strip overnight and into Sunday killed at least 20 people, including five children, Palestinian medical officials said. Israeli authorities meanwhile allowed Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, the leader of the Catholic Church in the Holy Land, to enter Gaza and cele-

Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital, which received the bodies. A man and his wife were killed in a strike in the southern city of Khan Younis on Sunday, just after midnight, according to the nearby Nasser Hospital. A strike on a car in Gaza City killed two people, according to the Health Ministry. There was no immediate comment from the military on

where the light is. This is one of the places where the light is," Pizzaballa said. The buzz of Israeli drones circling overhead, a sound that has grown ubiquitous across Gaza during the war, could be heard throughout the Mass. The rare visit to Gaza by the Latin Patriarch came a day after Pope Francis had again criticized Israel's actions in Gaza.

Holocaust, adamantly rejects such allegations. It says it has made great efforts to spare civilians and is only at war with Hamas, which it accuses of genocidal violence in the attack that ignited the war. **War grinds on as winter sets in:** Hamas-led militants stormed into southern Israel in a surprise attack on Oct. 7, 2023, killing some 1,200 peo-



Palestinians look at home destroyed by an Israeli strike late Saturday in Deir al-Balah.

AP/PTI

38 dead, over 100 missing in Congo after ferry capsizes in Busira river

AP ■ KINHASA

Thirty-eight people are confirmed dead, and over 100 remain missing in Congo after an overloaded ferry — full of people returning home for Christmas — capsized in the river Busira late on Friday night, according to local officials and eyewitnesses. The boat sank less than four days after another one in the northeast of the country capsized, killing 25. Twenty people are confirmed to have been rescued so far. The boat was travelling in the northeast of the Congo as part of a convoy of other vessels, and the passengers were primarily merchants returning home for Christmas, said Joseph Joseph Kangolingoli, the mayor of Ingende, the last town before the site of the accident. According to Ndolo Kaddy, a resident

of Ingende, the ferry contained "more than 400 people because it made two ports, Ingende and Loolo, on the way to Boende, so there is reason to believe that there were more deaths." Congolese officials have often warned against overloading and vowed to punish those violating safety measures for water transportation. However, in remote areas where most passengers come from, many cannot afford public transport for the few available roads. At least 78 people drowned in October when an overloaded boat sank in the country's east while 80 lost their lives in a similar accident near Kinshasa in June. The latest accident prompted anger at the government for not equipping the convoy with flotation devices. Nesty Bonina, a member of local government and a prominent figure in the

town of Mbandaka, the capital of the Equateur province where the ferry sank, said he condemned the authorities for not properly handling the recent capsizings. "How can a ship navigate at night under the watchful eye of river service agents? And now we are recording over a hundred deaths," lamented Mr Bonina. The capsizing of overloaded boats is also becoming increasingly frequent in this central African nation as more people are giving up the few available roads in favour of wooden vessels crumbling under the weight of passengers and their goods for security reasons. The roads are often caught up in the deadly clashes between Congolese security forces and rebels that sometimes block major access routes. Hundreds have already been killed or declared missing in such accidents so far this year.

brate a pre-Christmas Mass with members of the territory's small Christian community. A strike on a school housing displaced people in Gaza City killed at least eight people, including three children, according to Gaza's Health Ministry. The Civil Defense, first responders affiliated with the Hamas-run government, had earlier said four children were among those killed. The Israeli military said it carried out a precise strike on Hamas militants sheltering there. A strike on a home in the central city of Deir al-Balah late Saturday killed at least eight people, including three women and two children, according to

those strikes. Israel has continued to carry out daily strikes in Gaza more than 14 months into the war with Hamas. It says it only targets militants, accusing them of hiding among civilians, but the bombings frequently kill women and children. **Vatican envoy celebrates Mass with Gaza's Christians:** Dozens of worshippers gathered in the Holy Family Church in Gaza City as Pizzaballa and other clergy celebrated Mass. A Christmas tree was decorated with golden ornaments and twinkling white lights, and altar boys wearing red and white robes held candles. "For Christmas, we celebrate the light and we are wondering

Francis said Saturday that his envoy had been unable to enter the territory because of Israeli bombing. "Yesterday children have been bombed. This is cruelty, this is not war," Francis said during his annual Christmas greetings at the Vatican. The pope recently called for an investigation to determine if Israel's actions in Gaza constitute genocide, a conclusion later reached by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. The International Court of Justice is investigating genocide allegations brought against Israel by South Africa. Israel, which was founded as a refuge for Jews after the Nazi

ple, mostly civilians, and abducting around 250. Around 100 hostages are still in Gaza, at least a third of whom are believed to be dead. Israel's subsequent bombardment and ground invasion have killed over 45,000 people in Gaza, more than half of them women and children, according to the Gaza Health Ministry, which does not distinguish between fighters and civilians in its count. The offensive has caused widespread destruction and displaced some 90% of Gaza's 2.3 million people, often multiple times. Hundreds of thousands are packed into squalid tent camps along the coast as the cold, wet winter sets in.

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Lara Trump drops out of race to be Florida senator

AP ■ WASHINGTON

Lara Trump, the daughter-in-law of President-elect Donald Trump, said on Saturday that she is removing herself from consideration to be a Florida senator — ending speculation that she could replace Republican Senator Marco Rubio, who has been tapped to be the incoming administration's secretary of state. "After an incredible amount of thought, contemplation, and encouragement from so many, I have decided to remove my name from consideration for the United States Senate," Lara Trump posted on X. Instead, she promised a "big announcement to share in January". The announcement comes weeks after Trump announced that she was stepping down as co-chair of the Republican National Committee, a move which raised questions about

whether she might be vying for a Senate seat. If Rubio is confirmed, his replacement — who would be chosen by Republican Florida Governor Ron DeSantis — would serve for two years until the next regularly scheduled election in 2026. Elected as RNC co-chair in March, Trump was a key player in the GOP retaking the White House and control of the Senate, while maintaining a narrow House majority. What she does next could shape Republican politics, given her elevated political profile and her ties to the incoming president. The idea of placing a Trump family member in the Senate had been backed by some Republicans, including Maye Musk, mother of Tesla and SpaceX CEO Elon Musk, who Trump has named co-head of a group tasked with reducing federal spending and regulations during his second term as president.

Donald Trump taps 'Apprentice' producer Mark Burnett as special envoy to UK

AP ■ WEST PALM BEACH (US)

Mark Burnett, the producer who helped reintroduce Donald Trump to a national television audience with "The Apprentice", is being tapped by the president-elect as special envoy to the United Kingdom in his upcoming administration. "With a distinguished career in television production and business, Mark brings a unique blend of diplomatic acumen and international recognition to this important role," Trump announced on Saturday. Burnett, who was born in London, helped produce hits like "Survivor" and "The Voice", but is perhaps best known for teaming up with Trump for "The Apprentice", which first aired on NBC in 2004. Trump had been well-known in real estate and pop culture circles for decades. But the show helped again make him a household name — though

Trump severed ties with NBC in 2015, the same year he launched his first White House run. The selection of Burnett continues Trump's trend of filling out his incoming administration with people who have high-profile backgrounds in television or politics, or both — including his choice to be defence secretary, Pete Hegseth, a former co-host of "Fox and Friends Weekend", and ex-television doctor and unsuccessful Senate candidate in Pennsylvania, Mehmet Oz. Trump's first campaign in 2016 was rocked by allegations about his conduct on "The Apprentice" and other appearances during his association with NBC, notably in footage in which he said he could sexually assault women and get away with it because he was a "star". Almost a decade after he left his reality TV role, Trump's television career remains central to

his biography and political rise. The show presented Trump Tower to tens of millions of people as a symbol of power and success before Trump launched his first campaign from the building's lobby. "Mark is known for creating and producing some of the biggest shows in Television History," Trump wrote in his statement on Burnett, listing many of his biggest hits before adding, "most notably, 'The Apprentice'" and noting that Burnett "has won 13 Emmy Awards!". Special envoys are usually picked by presidents for the world's traditional hotspots, including the Middle East — where Trump has already said he would like Steven Witkoff to fill the role. The United Kingdom, which has long enjoyed a "special relationship" with the US that makes it one of Washington's strongest global allies, is not typically a candidate for such posts.

But Trump has announced a series of special envoy positions to several top loyalists ahead of Inauguration Day on January 20, including his former ambassador to Germany Richard Grenell who he chose as envoy for special missions. That announcement joined previous ones including Adam Boehler as special presidential envoy for hostage affairs, and Keith Kellogg to serve as special envoy for Ukraine and Russia. Trump also announced on December 2 that he was picking billionaire investment banker Warren Stephens for the more standard role of US ambassador to Britain. That might raise questions about how a special UK envoy could overlap duties, but the president-elect said in his statement that Burnett "will work to enhance diplomatic relations, focusing on areas of mutual interest, including trade, investment opportunities, and cultural exchanges".

Pickup truck driver killed by cops in Texas

AP ■ KILLEEN

A pickup truck driver fleeing police careened through the doors of a JCPenney store in Texas and continued through a busy mall, injuring five people before he was fatally shot by officers, authorities said. The truck crashed into the department store in Killeen, about 68 miles (109 kilometres) north of the state capital Austin, around 5.30 pm Saturday and continued into the building, striking people as it went, Sgt. Bryan Washko of the Texas Department of Public Safety said in an evening news briefing. Emergency medical services transported four victims from the mall to area hospitals and another travelled to a hospital separately. They ranged in age from 6 to 75 years old and their conditions were not immediately known, he said.

The chase began around 5 pm on Interstate 14 in Belton, about 20 miles (30 kilometres) from Killeen, after authorities received calls about an erratic driver in a black pickup, Ofelia Miramontez of the Killeen Police Department said. The driver then pulled off the road and drove into the parking lot of the mall. "The suspect drove through the doors and continued to drive through the JCPenney store, striking multiple people," Washko said. "The trooper and the Killeen police officer continued on foot after this vehicle, which was driving through the store, actively running people over. He travelled several hundred yards." Officers from the state public safety department, Killeen and three other law enforcement agencies "engaged in gunfire to eliminate this threat," Washko said.

Sunak exits Downing Street, successor Starmer revives hope for FTA with India

PTI ■ LONDON

The year earmarked for general elections in both India and the UK was destined to throw up many new scenarios on the political front. Among them was a decision to relaunch a "mutually beneficial" Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between the two countries. Just as India's mammoth democratic exercise edged towards its phased conclusion in 2024, Britain's first Indian-origin prime minister Rishi Sunak surprised many within his own Conservative Party by calling an earlier-than-expected election on July 4 — exactly a month on from a third term win for Prime Minister Narendra Modi's National Democratic Alliance. This meant the FTA talks, having entered their 14th round of intense negotiations, slipped

into a more uncertain phase until the new Labour Party-led government committed itself to deepening its bilateral ties. "We agreed to raise the ambition of our UK-India comprehensive strategic partnership... Crucially, this work will start with trade and investment, and I am pleased to say that we agreed to relaunch Free Trade Agreement negotiations early in the new year," said newly-elected British Prime Minister Keir Starmer after his first meeting with Modi on the sidelines of the G20 Summit in Brazil last month. It mapped out a clearly defined landscape for the future of the India-UK trade ties, which official UK government statistics clock at GBP 42 billion a year in the 12 months to June 2024. Sunak may not have succeeded in getting the FTA over the line, but, as he admitted in his

resignation speech at the doorstep of 10 Downing Street, British voters had given a "clear signal" in favour of change. The 44-year-old leaves behind quite the legacy despite presiding over the Conservatives' worst electoral performance in history. His words that "one of the most remarkable things" about modern Britain is just how "unremarkable" his migrant roots were to the top job will resonate with many, not least a 1.8-million-strong Indian diaspora. Having resigned after the bruising election defeat, Sunak served as interim Opposition leader before handing over the reins to Kemi Badenoch as the new Tory leader. A fellow British Indian leadership hopeful, Priti Patel, soon returned to the frontbenches of Parliament as shadow foreign secretary in a House of Commons with a record of

nearly 30 parliamentarians of Indian heritage — including Lisa Nandy as Culture Secretary and Seema Malhotra as immigration minister. Under Malhotra, the UK introduced measures to curb rising migration, including giving an independent body more power to reduce reliance on foreign labour and expedite the return of illegal migrants. She has a tough task ahead of digitising the entire UK visas and immigration system, the deadline for which has been extended until March 2025. Indian students and professionals are among those impacted, even as their numbers began returning to a steady decline this year with the previous government's clamp down on accompanying spouses and

hiked minimum salary cut-offs. A simmering anti-immigration sentiment was behind a flurry of riots triggered by misinformation around the Welsh-born suspect behind a fatal stabbing of three schoolgirls in Southport, north-west England, at the end of July. While anti-racism activists turned out for large counter-protests, the issue of migration will continue to dominate the news agenda in the new year even as businesses struggle to meet skills requirements across different sectors. It was against this backdrop that the BT Group, back in August, welcomed Bharti Global's acquisition of a significant stake in the British telecom major as a "great vote of confidence". Chairman Sunil Bharti Mittal

described the investment in an "iconic" British company as a "significant milestone" for Bharti Enterprises. Another Indian multinational, Tata Steel, also hit a major milestone as it shut down its furnaces at the UK's largest steelworks in Port Talbot, Wales, to transition towards greener steel-making. It came just before Tata Group icon Ratan Tata, behind setting the course for several cross-sector India-UK tie-ups, breathed his last in Mumbai on October 9. Business and Trade Secretary Jonathan Reynolds led the tributes in the UK to "truly a titan of the business world and someone who played a huge role in shaping British industry". The two-way flows were reflective across different areas beyond business and trade, especially over Diwali — celebrated widely across UK government corridors.

Starmer followed in the footsteps of his Hindu predecessor to light diyas on the doorstep of Downing Street but courted controversy when meat and alcohol were served during the festivity. "We understand the strength of feeling on this issue and so would apologise to the community and assure them it will not happen again," his spokesperson said. The apology came just before Starmer met with Modi, who also raised the issue of long-pending extradition requests — including fugitive diamond merchant Nirav Modi, who remains behind bars at Thameside, south-east London, after another failed bail attempt in May this year. Sanjay Bhandari, a consultant in the defence sector wanted in India on alleged tax evasion and money laundering charges, won a High Court appeal against his extradition order which is to

conclude in the new year. Also expected in 2025 is King Charles III's return to Bengaluru for a wellness retreat where the 76-year-old monarch and wife Camilla made a private stopover in October on their way back from the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Samoa. It came at the close of a tough year for the royals with Charles and his daughter-in-law, Kate Middleton, revealing their cancer diagnosis earlier. However, they are both back on official duties following their treatment and looking ahead to a packed schedule in the new year. As 2024 comes to a close with both nations reaffirming their commitment to deepening trade, business, and cultural ties, 2025 holds promise for a stronger partnership and new opportunities on the global stage.

ROUNDUP 2024: UNITED KINGDOM

German authorities received tipoffs last year about suspect in Christmas market attack

German authorities said they received tipoffs last year about the suspect in a car attack at a Christmas market in Magdeburg as more details emerged on Sunday about the

chiatry and psychotherapy. Authorities say he does not fit the usual profile of perpetrators of extremist attacks. He described himself as an ex-Muslim who was highly critical of Islam and in many posts on social media

Saudi Arabia in November 2023, which led authorities to launch "appropriate investigative measures." "The man also published a huge number of posts on the internet. He also had contact with various authorities, made insults and

year. "This was taken seriously, like every other of the numerous tips," the office said. But it also noted that it is not an investigative authority and that it referred the information to the responsible authorities. It gave no other

which is about 130 kilometres west of Berlin, and beyond. The suspect was on Saturday evening brought before a judge, who behind closed doors ordered him to be kept in custody on allegations of murder and attempted murder. He is facing a possible indictment. The horror triggered by yet another act of mass violence in Germany make it likely that

migration will remain a key issue as the country heads toward an early election on February 23. A deadly knife attack in Solingen in August pushed the issue to the top of the agenda, and led the government of Chancellor Olaf Scholz to tighten border security measures. Right-wing figures from across Europe have criticised German authorities for having allowed high levels

of migration in the past and for what they see as security failures now. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who is known for a strong anti-migration position going back years, used the attack in Germany to lash out at the European Union's migration policies and described it as a "terrorist act." At an annual press conference in Budapest on Saturday,

Orbán insisted that "there is no doubt that there is a link between the changed world in Western Europe, the migration that flows there, especially illegal migration and terrorist acts." Orbán vowed to "fight back" against the EU migration policies and alleging without evidence that "Brussels wants Magdeburg to happen to Hungary, too."



Candles, flowers and wreaths sit in front of the entrance to St. John's Church early Sunday, in Magdeburg, Germany, after a car drove into a crowd at a Christmas market on Friday.

five people killed. Authorities have identified the suspect as a Saudi doctor who arrived in Germany in 2006 and had received permanent residency. Police haven't publicly named the suspect, in line with privacy rules, but some German news outlets have identified him as Taleb A. and reported that he was a specialist in psy-

expressed support for the far-right anti-immigrant Alternative for Germany (AfD) party. He is being held in custody as authorities investigate him. The head of the Federal Criminal Police Office, Holger Münch, said in an interview on the German broadcaster ZDF on Saturday that his office received a tipoff from

even threats. However, he was not known to have committed acts of violence," said Münch, whose office is the German equivalent of the FBI. He said that the warnings, however, proved to be very unhelpful. The Federal Office for Migration and Refugees also said Sunday on X that it received a tipoff about the suspect in the late summer of last

details. Police in Magdeburg, the capital of the state of Saxony-Anhalt, said Sunday that those who died were four women aged 45, 52, 67 and 75, as well as a 9-year-old boy. Authorities said 200 people were injured, including 41 in serious condition. They were being treated in multiple hospitals in Magdeburg,

Prominent Lebanese figure visits Syria, hoping for post-Assad reset in troubled relations

A prominent Lebanese politician held talks on Sunday with the insurgent who led the overthrow of Syria's President Bashar Assad, with both expressing hope for a new era in relations between their countries. Druze leader Walid Jumblatt was a longtime critic of Syrian involvement in Lebanon and blamed Assad's father, former President Hafez Assad, for the assassination of his own father decades ago. He is the most prominent Lebanese politician to visit Syria since the Assad family's 54-year rule came to an end. He held talks with Ahmad al-Sharaa, formerly known as Abu Mohammed al-Golani, who led the Sunni Islamist rebels who swept into Damascus earlier this month and forced the younger Assad from power. "We salute the Syrian people for their great victories and we salute you for your battle that you waged to get rid of oppression and tyranny that lasted over 50 years," said Jumblatt, a key figure in Lebanon's Druze minority and the former leader of a leftist party. He expressed hope that Lebanese-Syrian relations "will return to normal."

Jumblatt's father, Kamal, was killed in 1977 in an ambush near a Syrian roadblock during Syria's military intervention in Lebanon's civil war. The younger Jumblatt was a critic of the Assads, though he briefly allied with them at one point to gain influence in Lebanon's ever-shifting political alignments. "Syria was a source of concern and disturbance, and its interference in Lebanese affairs was negative," al-Sharaa said, referring to the Assad government. "Syria will no longer be a case of negative interference in Lebanon," he said, pledging that it would respect Lebanese sovereignty. Al-Sharaa also repeated longstanding allegations that Assad's government was behind the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, which was followed by other killings of prominent Lebanese critics of Assad. Last year, the United Nations closed an international tribunal investigating the assassination after it convicted three members of Lebanon's Hezbollah — an ally of Assad — in absentia. Hezbollah denied involvement in the massive February 14, 2005 bombing, which killed Hariri and 21 others. "We hope that all those who committed crimes against the

Lebanese will be held accountable, and that fair trials will be held for those who committed crimes against the Syrian people," Jumblatt said. **Iran's leader predicts trouble for new Syrian rulers:** Separately, Iran's supreme leader said that young Syrians will resist the new government emerging after Assad's overthrow as he again accused the United States and Israel of sowing chaos in the country. Iran had provided crucial support to Assad throughout Syria's nearly 14-year civil war, which erupted after he launched a violent crackdown on a popular uprising. Syria had long served as a key conduit for Iranian aid to Hezbollah. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said in an address on Sunday that the "young Syrian has nothing to lose" and suffers from insecurity following Assad's fall. "What can he do? He should stand with strong will against those who designed and those who implemented the insecurity," Khamenei said. "God willing, he will overcome them." He accused the United States and Israel of plotting against Assad's government in order to seize resources, saying: "Now they feel victory, the Americans, the

Zionist regime and those who accompanied them."

सार्वजनिक सूचना
मं मंगल सिंह रावत पुत्र श्री कृपाल सिंह मूल निवासी ग्राम जमरिया पोली गढ़वाल (उत्तराखण्ड) व हाल निवासी राजनगर एकडेयन, गाज़ियाबाद (२० प्र०) अपने पुत्र अजय रावत जो कुमंगति एवं न्याय करने का आदी होने के कारण हमसे लिखित रूप में सभी सम्बन्ध तोड़ते हुए घर से चला गया है से मैं लक्ष्मण प्रसाद से अपना संबंध विच्छेद करता हूँ तथा अपनी चल अवल संपत्ति से भी उसे बेदखल करता हूँ। यह किसी भी व्यक्ति/संस्था के साथ किसी भी प्रकार के लेन-देन/व्यवहार या अन्य किसी भी कृत्य करेगा, के लिए वह/वे स्वयं जिम्मेदार होंगे जिससे लिए मैं या मेरा परिवार किसी भी तरह से जिम्मेवार नहीं रहूँगा।

CHANGE OF NAME
I Hitherto Known As Akash Deep Handa Alias Akash Kapoor S/O B D Handa Residing At Apt 501, A-8 Olive Country Sector - 5, Vasundhara Ghaziabad - 201012, Uttar Pradesh, Have Changed My Name And Shall Hereafter Be Known As Akash Kapoor. It Is Certified That I Have Complied With Other Legal Requirements In This Connection.

PUBLIC NOTICE
I, Kunal Bhatt, S/o Rakesh Kumar Bhatt, Resident of Flat No. 1208, Montova Tower, Mahagan Mascot, Crossing Republic, Ghaziabad, above mentioned flat bought from Vaibhav Kumar Gupta (Son Lalit Mohan Gupta) and Shashi Gupta (Wife Lalit Mohan Gupta) on 22.05.2015. The power of attorney dated 10.03.2013 (original document) given by Vaibhav Kumar Gupta is actually lost somewhere. If anyone has any objection regarding these documents then inform me within 7 days on my given Mobile No. Notify on 9911004412.

PUBLIC NOTICE
This is to inform the Public at large that Smt. Ruchi Mahajan W/o. Sh. Praveen Mahajan and Sh. Praveen Mahajan S/o. Sh. Madan Lal Mahajan are the 'Title Holders' in possession of 'Society Built Up Freehold Property Bearing Flat No. 200, interests, possession (Duplicate), The Delhi Co-operative Group Housing Society Ltd., Plot No. 74, Ashirwad Apartments, I.P. Extension, Patparganj, New Delhi-110092 address: margin: 155.00 sq. mtrs., hereinafter referred to as 'Schedule Property' vide Sale Deed dated 5th October, 2011 duly registered as Regn. No. 16726, Book No. 1, Vol. No. 5764, pp. 104-114 on 07.10.2011 in the Office of the Sub Registrar - VIII, Gesta Colony, New Delhi. That the original document i.e. 'Registration Related Detail Page' of Conveyance Deed dated 7th April, 2015 w.r.t. the 'Schedule Property' has been lost/misplaced and is untraceable as on date, in lieu of which Information Report dated 19.12.2024 bearing LR No. 2415248/2024 has been filed with Delhi Police by the Title Holders. This notice is thus issued to the Public at large, i.e. to any Person(s), Company(ies), Authority(ies), Society(ies), Organisation(s), Financial Institution(s), Bank(s), F.P.s etc. Any knowledge, custody or possession of the above mentioned lost/ misplaced/untraceable original document or otherwise having any claims, rights, title, interests, possession in the Schedule Property, by way of Ownership, Succession, Inheritance, Sale, Mortgage, Exchange, Charge, Lien, Gift, Trust, and other documents, to be delivered to the undersigned within 15 days from the date of this Publication, post expiration of which, any claim(s) or objection(s), if raised or received, shall be treated as null & void and as waived. Jyoti Karkhara, Advocate Address: Chamber No. 6, Block-E, Karkardooma Court New Delhi-110032, Contact No. +91 99716 26497

कार्यालय अधीक्षण अभियन्ता, चतुर्थ वृत्त, लोक निर्माण विभाग, रुद्रपुर (उधमसिंह नगर)
फोन: 05944-240921 ईमेल: sepwdusn@gmail.com
पत्रांक: 3583 / 23 एम-04 / 2024 दिनांक: 21/12/2024
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महामहिम राज्यपाल उत्तराखण्ड की ओर से अधीक्षण अभियन्ता, चतुर्थ वृत्त, लोकनिविदा रुद्रपुर (उधम सिंह नगर) द्वारा निम्नलिखित कार्य हेतु ई-टेंडरिंग द्वारा टू-बिड सिस्टम के अन्तर्गत निविदा आमंत्रित की जाती है। निविदा से सम्बन्धित सभी सूचनायें वेबसाइट <http://www.uktenders.gov.in> पर दिनांक 24.12.2024 से उपलब्ध रहेगी।

क्र. सं.	कार्य का नाम	धरोहर धनराशि (लाख में)	निविदा प्रपत्र का मूल्य (रु में)	निविदा की वैधता (दिवस)	कार्य पूर्ण करने का समय (माह में)	टेकेदार की श्रेणी
1	राज्य योजना के अन्तर्गत जनपद रुद्रपुर के रुद्रपुर ब्लॉक के अन्तर्गत मुख्य बाजार के मध्य सम्यक मार्गों का हॉटमिक्स द्वारा पुनः निर्माण कार्य।	5.65	5000.00 +18% G.S.T	90 दिन	09 माह	भारत सरकार / किसी भी राज्य सरकार के विभाग एवं उपक्रम में मार्ग कार्य हेतु श्रेणी B एवं उच्चतर में पंजीकृत
2	मा० मुख्यमंत्री घोषणा संख्या-1191/2021 के अन्तर्गत जनपद-रुद्रपुर के निवाला-लालपुर मार्ग के कि०मी० 8.636 से 9.636 कि०मी० का टी०डब्ल्यू०टी० द्वारा निर्माण एवं सुदृढीकरण का कार्य। (स्वीकृति की प्रत्याशा में)	3.37	5000.00 +18% G.S.T	90 दिन	12 माह	—तदैव—

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KUMBH MELA SPECIAL TRAINS
For the convenience of Rail Passengers during forthcoming KUMBH MELA-2025, Railways have decided to run the following Special trains as per the details given below:-

02417/02418 Subedarganj - Delhi Jn. - Subedarganj SF Kumbh Special Train (Bi-Weekly) 34 Trips
Train No. 02417 (ARR. 21:35, DEP. 19:40) Subedarganj → Delhi Jn. (ARR. 09:30, DEP. 08:55)
Train No. 02418 (ARR. 19:40, DEP. 09:30) Delhi Jn. → Subedarganj (ARR. 08:55, DEP. 21:35)

04145/04146 Subedarganj - Delhi Jn. - Subedarganj SF Kumbh Special Train (Weekly) 18 Trips
Train No. 04145 (ARR. 21:35, DEP. 19:40) Subedarganj → Delhi Jn. (ARR. 09:30, DEP. 08:55)
Train No. 04146 (ARR. 19:40, DEP. 09:30) Delhi Jn. → Subedarganj (ARR. 08:55, DEP. 21:35)

04111/04112 Prayagraj Jn. - Prayagraj Jn. Unreserved Kumbh Special Ring Rail 94 Trips
Train No. 04111 (ARR. 06:00, DEP. 11:15, 18:50) Prayagraj Jn. → Jaunpur (ARR. 13:50, DEP. 13:55, 06:30)
Train No. 04112 (ARR. 11:15, 13:50, 06:30) Jaunpur → Prayagraj Jn. (ARR. 21:00, DEP. 18:50, 18:50)

04113/04114 Prayagraj Jn.-Prayagraj Jn. Unreserved Kumbh Special Ring Rail 94 Trips
Train No. 04113 (ARR. 17:30, DEP. 22:55, 07:45) Prayagraj Jn. → Jaunpur (ARR. 01:00, DEP. 01:10, 17:45)
Train No. 04114 (ARR. 01:00, 17:45) Jaunpur → Prayagraj Jn. (ARR. 08:00, DEP. 08:00, 17:45)

04210/04209 Prayagraj Sangam-Jaunpur-Prayagraj Sangam Unreserved Kumbh Special Ring Rail 66 Trips
Train No. 04210 (ARR. 14:00, DEP. 14:00) Prayagraj Sangam → Jaunpur (ARR. 17:15, DEP. 14:15)
Train No. 04209 (ARR. 17:15, 14:15) Jaunpur → Prayagraj Sangam (ARR. 14:00, DEP. 17:15)

08251/08252 Raigarh Jn.-Varanasi-Raigarh Jn. Kumbh Special Train 02 Trips
Train No. 08251 (ARR. 14:00, DEP. 10:00) Raigarh Jn. → Varanasi (ARR. 05:25, DEP. 10:50)
Train No. 08252 (ARR. 10:00, 10:50) Varanasi → Raigarh Jn. (ARR. 14:00, DEP. 10:00)

08253/08254 Raigarh Jn.-Varanasi-Raigarh Jn. Kumbh Special Train 02 Trips
Train No. 08253 (ARR. 14:00, DEP. 10:00) Raigarh Jn. → Varanasi (ARR. 05:25, DEP. 10:50)
Train No. 08254 (ARR. 10:00, 10:50) Varanasi → Raigarh Jn. (ARR. 14:00, DEP. 10:00)

09031/09032 Udhna - Ghazipur City - Udhna Kumbh Special Train 04 Trips
Train No. 09031 (ARR. 06:40, DEP. 14:05) Udhna → Varanasi Jn. (ARR. 06:00, DEP. 06:10)
Train No. 09032 (ARR. 14:05, 06:10) Varanasi Jn. → Udhna (ARR. 08:00, DEP. 18:05)

09403/09404 Ahmedabad Jn. - Janghai - Ahmedabad Jn. Kumbh Special Train 18 Trips
Train No. 09403 (ARR. 11:15, DEP. 03:00) Ahmedabad Jn. → Janghai (ARR. 18:00, DEP. 03:00)
Train No. 09404 (ARR. 03:00, 18:00) Janghai → Ahmedabad Jn. (ARR. 11:15, DEP. 18:00)

09405/09406 Ahmedabad Jn. - Janghai - Ahmedabad Jn. Kumbh Special Train 18 Trips
Train No. 09405 (ARR. 11:15, DEP. 03:00) Ahmedabad Jn. → Janghai (ARR. 18:00, DEP. 03:00)
Train No. 09406 (ARR. 03:00, 18:00) Janghai → Ahmedabad Jn. (ARR. 11:15, DEP. 18:00)

01455/01456 Pune-Mau Jn.-Pune Kumbh Special Train 12 Trips
Train No. 01455 (ARR. 10:10, DEP. 17:10, 22:00) Pune → Varanasi (ARR. 05:25, DEP. 05:35, 23:50)
Train No. 01456 (ARR. 05:25, 23:50) Varanasi → Pune (ARR. 10:10, DEP. 17:10, 22:00)

09371/09372 Dr. Ambedkar Nagar-Ballia-Dr. Ambedkar Nagar Kumbh Special Train 08 Trips
Train No. 09371 (ARR. 14:05, DEP. 19:15) Dr. Ambedkar Nagar → Varanasi (ARR. 06:00, DEP. 06:10)
Train No. 09372 (ARR. 06:00, 06:10) Varanasi → Dr. Ambedkar Nagar (ARR. 14:05, DEP. 19:15)

01033/01034 Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj (T.) - Mau Jn.-Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj (T.) Kumbh Special Train 14 Trips
Train No. 01033 (ARR. 17:10, DEP. 22:00) Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj (T.) → Mau Jn. (ARR. 05:25, DEP. 05:35, 23:50)
Train No. 01034 (ARR. 05:25, 23:50) Mau Jn. → Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj (T.) (ARR. 14:30, DEP. 17:10, 22:00)

09029/09030 Vishvamitri-Ballia-Vishvamitri Kumbh Special Train 02 Trips
Train No. 09029 (ARR. 08:35, DEP. 14:05, 19:00) Vishvamitri → Ballia (ARR. 06:00, DEP. 06:10, 23:30)
Train No. 09030 (ARR. 06:00, 23:30) Ballia → Vishvamitri (ARR. 08:35, DEP. 14:05, 19:00)

03409/03410 Malda Town-Prayagraj Rambag-Malda Town Kumbh Special Train (Bi-Weekly) 22 Trips
Train No. 03409 (ARR. 13:45, DEP. 17:15) Malda Town → Prayagraj Rambag (ARR. 22:00, DEP. 22:10, 19:15)
Train No. 03410 (ARR. 22:00, 22:10) Prayagraj Rambag → Malda Town (ARR. 13:45, DEP. 17:15)

08791/08792 Durg-Varanasi-Durg Kumbh Special Train 02 Trips
Train No. 08791 (ARR. 10:00, DEP. 10:00) Durg → Varanasi (ARR. 05:30, DEP. 10:50)
Train No. 08792 (ARR. 05:30, 10:50) Varanasi → Durg (ARR. 10:00, DEP. 10:00)

08253/08254 Bilaspur -Varanasi-Bilaspur Kumbh Special Train 02 Trips
Train No. 08253 (ARR. 10:00, DEP. 10:00) Bilaspur Jn. → Varanasi (ARR. 10:40, DEP. 10:50)
Train No. 08254 (ARR. 10:40, 10:50) Varanasi → Bilaspur Jn. (ARR. 10:00, DEP. 10:00)

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Govt to infuse ₹500 Crore in IFCI to improve its financial health

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The government has decided to infuse Rs 500 crore capital in state-owned IFCI to improve its financial health ahead of the company's proposed restructuring and consolidation into a group. With the infusion, the government of India's holding in the company is expected to further increase from existing 71.72 per cent as on September 2024. The capital infusion plan for IFCI was approved through the passage of the first Supplementary Demand for Grants for 2024-25 in Lok Sabha last week. The Supplementary Demand for Grants for 2024-25 made an allocation for an additional amount of Rs 499.99 crore for 'Subscription to the Share Capital of Industrial Finance Corporation of India (IFCI)'. "Taking into account savings of Rs 50.07 crore available in the same section of the grant, the remaining amount of Rs 449.92 crore will be met from surrender of savings available in the capital section of Demand No.30-DEA and it will not entail any additional cash outgo," the Supplementary Demand for Grants said. Earlier this year, IFCI had raised Rs 500 crore capital through the



issuance of equity shares to the government. The Industrial Finance Corporation of India was set up by the government on July 1, 1948 as the first Development Financial Institution in the country. In the second quarter ended September 2024, IFCI had booked a loss of Rs 22 crore and in the first half of FY24, a loss to the tune of Rs 170 crore. As part of the revival and restructuring, the Department of

Financial Services (DFS), Ministry of Finance, last month in-principle approved 'Consolidation of IFCI Group' which entails merger/amalgamation of IFCI Limited and StockHolding Corporation of India Limited and other group companies. As per the proposal, StockHolding Corporation of India Ltd, IFCI Factors Ltd, IFCI Infrastructure Development Ltd and IIDL Realtors Ltd will merge with IFCI Ltd. Further, StockHolding Services Ltd,

IFCI Financial Services Ltd, IFIN Commodities Ltd and IFIN Credit Ltd will be merged into a single entity, which will be a direct subsidiary of the consolidated listed entity. Additionally, StockHolding Document Management Services Ltd, StockHolding Securities IPSC Ltd, IFIN Securities Finance Ltd, IFCI Venture Capital Funds Ltd and MPCON Ltd shall be direct subsidiaries of the consolidated listed entity that is IFCI. Established in 1948 as a statutory corporation, IFCI currently has many subsidiaries and joint ventures and associates under its fold. By the early 1990s, it was recognised that there was a need for greater flexibility to respond to the changing financial system. It was also felt that IFCI should directly access the capital markets for its funding needs. It is with this objective that the constitution of IFCI was changed in 1993 from a statutory corporation to a company under the Indian Companies Act, 1956. Subsequently, the name of the company was also changed to 'IFCI Ltd' with effect from October 1999. However in 2015, the government again raised its stake in the firm to over 51 per cent, making it a public sector company.

FPIs pull out equities worth ₹976 Crore this week amid rising dollar

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

After two weeks of buying, FPIs turned net sellers in Indian equities this week, with a net withdrawal of Rs 976 crore amid a strengthening US dollar and steady rise in US 10-year bond yields, impacting investor sentiment. Foreign Portfolio Investors (FPIs) began the week on a positive note, investing Rs 3,126 crore in equities during the first two trading sessions (December 16-20). However, the trend reversed in the latter half of the week, with FPIs offloading equities worth over Rs 4,102 crore in the subsequent three sessions. This resulted in an overall net outflow of Rs 976 crore during the week, data from National Securities Depository Limited showed. Despite this short-term reversal, the broader December trend remains positive. FPIs have infused Rs 21,789 crore into Indian equities so far this month, reflecting continued confidence in India's economic growth potential and its resilient markets. FPIs adopted a cautious approach due to the US Fed meeting and uncertainty about



its outcome and future policy direction, said Himanshu Srivastava, Associate Director, Manager Research, Morningstar Investment Research India. While the Fed cut interest rates by 25 bps for the third time this year, it signalled fewer rate cuts in the future, dampening investor sentiment and triggering global market sell-offs, he added. Additionally, factors like high valuations, weak corporate earnings for the September quarter, expectations of subdued results for December, rising inflation, slower GDP growth, and a depreciating rupee have further weighed on investor confidence, he noted. "Rising US dollar (dollar index

above 108) and steady increase in the US 10-year bond yields to 4.5 per cent contributed to the FPIs selling. "India-specific issues like slowing growth concerns and flat corporate earnings in Q2 also contributed to the FPIs selling. The strength of the US economy, good corporate earnings growth, and strong dollar are factors favouring the US," VK Vijayakumar, Chief Investment Strategist, Geojit Financial Services, said. FPI selling has brought down the prices of certain large-cap segments, such as banking, making valuations more attractive. Investors can take advantage of this market downturn to invest in quality large caps.

Leather exports likely to grow by over 12 per cent to USD 5.3 bn this fiscal: CLE

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The country's leather and footwear exports are expected to grow by over 12 per cent to USD 5.3 billion in the current financial year on account of healthy demand in key global markets, CLE Chairman Rajendra Kumar Jalan has said. He also said several global companies, including from the US, are showing keen interest in setting up manufacturing bases in India. "Our exports were USD 4.69 billion in 2023-24, and this fiscal, we are expecting it to increase to USD 5.3 billion. Order books are good for the coming months," Jalan said, adding that "huge demand is coming from the US and UK". Indian exporters are exploring business opportunities in Africa as well, he added. He informed that the industry is labour intensive, providing employment to about 42 lakh people. The sector has a total turnover of about USD 19 billion, which includes exports of USD 5 billion. "The sector has the potential to reach a total turnover of USD 47 billion by 2030,



which includes the domestic production of USD 25 billion and export turnover of USD 13.7 billion," Jalan said. He also requested the government that the Production-Linked Incentive Scheme (PLI) be extended to the sector as it will help achieve the USD 47 billion export target and create additional jobs for about 7-8 lakh people. When asked about Budget expectations, he said the council has urged the finance ministry to consider removing export duty on wet blue and crust from 20 per cent at present. "We have also requested to remove import duty on

finished leather," Jalan said. Talking about the sector, Kanpur-based Growmore International Ltd MD Yadvendra Singh Sachan said that for Indian exports, the US and EU markets are recording healthy growth rates. "I request the domestic industry to work on increasing scale as it will help further boost shipments," he said. Sachan suggested that there is a need to brand Indian leather goods in the global and domestic markets. On challenges, he said the industry has to work on adequate skilled labour and design development.

Front-running case: Sebi bans nine entities from market, impounds illegal gains of over ₹21 Crore

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Markets regulator Sebi has uncovered a front-running scheme involving PNB MetLife India Insurance Company equity dealer Sachin Bakul Dagli and eight other entities, who generated illegal gains of Rs 21.16 crore. The front-running by these entities continued for more than three years. Sebi, through an interim order, prohibited Sachin Bakul Dagli and eight other entities from the securities market and impounded the unlawful gains made by them. In a statement on Sunday, PNB MetLife stated that it has fully cooperated with Sebi in the investigation and taken disciplinary action against the individual involved. "In line with our internal processes, we have taken disciplinary action. PNB MetLife is committed to upholding the highest standards of corporate governance, transparency, and integrity," the statement noted. Sebi had conducted an examination into the suspected front running of the trades undertaken by the Big Client, PNB MetLife India Insurance, by certain entities. The focus of the investigation



was to ascertain whether the suspected entity(ies) had front-run the trades of Big Client in connivance with other entities, including dealers and/or fund managers, if any, and thereby violated the provisions of the SEBI's PFUTP (Prohibition of Fraudulent and Unfair Trade Practices) rules and SEBI Act. The investigation period has been taken from January 1, 2021, to July 19, 2024. In its investigation, Ssbi found that most of the trading decisions in PNB Metlife were delegated to Sachin Dagli for execution. The regulator, in interim passed on Friday, noted that Sachin Bakul Dagli (equity dealer, PNB MetLife) and his brother Tejas Dagli (equity sales trader, Investec)

accessed confidential, non-public information about impending trade orders of PNB MetLife and Investec's institutional clients. They used this information to make trading decisions and shared it with Sandeep Shambharkar, who executed front-running trades through the accounts of Dhanmata Realty Pvt. (DRPL), Worthy Distributors Pvt. (WDPL) and Pragmesh Sanghvi. Directors of DRPL and WDPL, including Arpan Kirtikumar Shah, Kabita Saha, and Jignesh Nikulbhai Dabhi, were also involved in facilitating this scheme. This group colluded to create and execute a fraudulent front-running scheme, violating the SEBI Act and Prohibition of Fraudulent and

Unfair Trade Practices (PFUTP) Regulations, resulting in unlawful profits. Trades were executed using non-public information shared via chat platforms. A Buy-Buy-Sell or Sell-Sell-Buy trading pattern was used to profit from market movements caused by large client trades. "Altogether, 6,766 instances of such front-running trades were observed in the account of DRPL, WDPL and Pragmesh Sanghvi and resultantly, unlawful gains of Rs 21,15,78,005 were made by these entities," Sebi noted. The front-running activities through the accounts of suspected entities DRPL, WDPL and Pragmesh Sanghvi have continued for a significantly long period of more than three years, it added. Accordingly, Sebi has restrained these entities "from buying, selling or dealing in securities, either directly or indirectly, in any manner whatsoever until further orders". Additionally, "an amount of Rs 21,15,78,005 being the total unlawful gains earned from the alleged front running activities, is impounded, jointly and severally" from the nine entities, the regulator said.

Akasa Air expects to add few more planes this fiscal

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Akasa Air is in continuous discussions with Boeing on aircraft deliveries and expects to add a few more planes to its fleet in the current fiscal ending March 2025, the airline's chief Vinay Dube has said. The carrier, which started flying in August 2022, currently has a fleet of 26 Boeing 737 MAX planes and 200 aircraft are on order. In a recent interview to PTI, Dube said that 2024 has been a good year for the airline and will continue to build on it in 2025. "On the service excellence we have provided, I think consumers look at Akasa as being a kind and gentler airline, a little more empathetic. We will continue to treat our travellers in a kind, gentle manner," he said and added that the airline also continues to make sure its employees feel loved and respected. Earlier this month, some pilots flagged concerns about alleged training and safety issues, and the airline had rejected them as baseless and untrue. This year, the carrier has inducted 4 planes into its fleet.

Mcap of top-10 most valued firms slumps ₹4.95 lakh Crore

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The market capitalisation (mcap) of Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) slumped Rs 1,10,550.66 crore to Rs 15,08,036.97 crore. The valuation of Reliance Industries tumbled Rs 91,140.53 crore to Rs 16,32,004.17 crore. HDFC Bank's market valuation eroded by Rs 76,448.71 crore to Rs 13,54,709.35 crore and that of Bharti Airtel tanked Rs 59,055.42 crore to Rs 8,98,786.98 crore. The mcap of State Bank of India plunged Rs 43,909.13 crore to Rs 7,25,125.38 crore and that of ICICI Bank diminished by Rs 41,857.33 crore to Rs 9,07,449.04 crore. The valuation of Infosys plummeted Rs 32,300.2 crore to Rs 7,98,086.90 crore and that of Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC) fell by Rs 20,050.25 crore to Rs 5,69,819.04 crore. Hindustan Unilever's mcap declined by Rs 12,805.27 crore to Rs 5,48,617.81 crore and that of ITC went lower by Rs 6,943.5 crore to Rs 5,81,252.32 crore. In the ranking of the top-10 firms, Reliance Industries retained the most valued firm title followed by TCS, HDFC Bank, ICICI Bank, Bharti Airtel, Infosys, State Bank of India, ITC, LIC and Hindustan Unilever.

India has the potential to be a key producer of sustainable aviation fuel by utilising its ethanol supplies and availability of lipids feedstocks like non-edible industrial oils, according to a senior official at the global airlines' grouping IATA. With decarbonisation in focus, efforts are being made to reduce emissions and over the years, Indian carriers have operated some flights with a blend of Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF) and traditional Aviation Turbine Fuel (ATF). Hemant Mistry, Director of Net Zero Transition at the International Air Transport Association (IATA), said the ecosystem for SAF has developed but there is more work to be done. "There are some very good opportunities for India right now. One is in terms of SAF feedstocks like agricultural waste... There is a growing understanding on what to do for SAF production. We are talking to a number of companies to understand how we can collaborate... Oil companies," Mistry told PTI in a recent interview in Geneva. The International Air Transport Association (IATA) represents around 340 airlines, including Indian carriers, that account for more

India has potential to be key sustainable aviation fuel producer, says IATA official

PTI ■ GENEVA/NEW DELHI

than 80 per cent of the global air traffic. "India, the third largest ethanol producer and consumer today, has the potential to emerge as a key SAF producer utilising its existing and advanced ethanol supplies. "At IATA, we see sustainable, low-carbon-intensity ethanol as a promising feedstock to propel India's aviation sector growth," Mistry said. This year, global SAF production is estimated at 1 million tonnes (1.3 billion litres), lower than the earlier projection of 1.5 million tonnes (1.9 billion litres) but higher than the volume of 0.5 million tonnes (600 million litres) recorded in 2023, according to IATA. As the aviation sector pursues ambitious efforts for decarbonisation, IATA has



said SAF production growth is disappointingly slow. While noting that India is poised to emerge as the world's third largest aviation market, Mistry said there is also the opportunity for the country to emerge as a SAF hub in the region. "The position can be further strengthened by the early adoption of innovative global accounting practices where India's SAF supplies can cater to the global aviation market, a true mark of act local, think global," he noted. India is one of the world's fastest growing civil aviation markets and airlines are expanding their fleets as well as networks to cater to the rising traffic demand. On mandating use of SAF, Mistry pointed out that the mandate is a work for scale but that can only come later.

"You can't have a mandate without technology maturity. That is a big risk." In 2025, IATA expects SAF production to touch 2.1 million tonnes (2.7 billion litres). India has the availability of lipids feedstocks like non-edible industrial oils, animal fats and tallows where the supply chains are not well developed with limited supply for biodiesel production, Mistry said. The country's surplus annual biomass availability is estimated to be more than 200 Mt. With multiple options available for road fleets, lipids-based feedstock must be used for India's SAF value chains. These oily feedstocks can be utilised at existing refineries by ASTM-qualified HEFA co-processing pathways, Mistry said. Consultancy Deloitte, in a report in October this year, said India has the potential to produce 8-10 million tonnes of Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF) by 2040, and investments worth USD 70-85 billion will be required to achieve the projected production. On the priorities under the SAF umbrella, Mistry said it is a question about more support to get the technologies to maturity and enable some sort of market development.

CII seeks reforms in India's priority sector lending framework

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Industry body CII has proposed reforms in India's Priority Sector Lending (PSL) framework, suggesting inclusion of emerging sectors and high-impact sectors like digital infrastructure, green initiatives, healthcare, and innovative manufacturing. Arguing that current Development Finance Institutions (DFIs) like SIDBI and NaBFID (National Bank for Financing Infrastructure and Development) have their roles cut out as they have earmarked sectors to finance, the chamber also suggested setting up of a high level committee to look at the revision of PSL norms and explore the need for any new DFIs to cater to some of the new and emerging sectors. Priority Sector Lending is a policy tool aimed at ensuring that key sectors crucial to the nation's development receive adequate financial support. Mandated by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), PSL obligates banks to allocate a specified proportion of their loans to sectors such as agriculture, education, housing, and small industries. The framework ensures equitable credit distribution,

contributing to the socio-economic growth of underserved areas. Despite its massive success, the PSL framework requires regular recalibration to remain relevant. This recalibration is essential to ensure that the financial resources are optimally distributed, in harmony with our vision of Viksit Bharat 2047, CII stated. For instance, while agriculture contributes 14 per cent of the GDP today, its PSL allocation remains at 18 per cent, unchanged from when its GDP share exceeded 30 per cent. Similarly, sectors like infrastructure and innovative manufacturing lack adequate PSL focus despite their potential to drive economic growth, the chamber pointed out. Chandrajit Banerjee remarked, "Sectors like agriculture have reduced contribution to GDP from 30 per cent in 1990s to about 14 per cent now. Hence, it is time that Priority Sector Lending (PSL) framework be reviewed every 3-4 years to align based on emerging priorities and PSL allocations should be in line with GDP contributions and sectoral growth potential.



Mindful snacking can keep you satisfied, nourish your body, and help you avoid unhealthy choices if you embrace nutritious options like pecans to indulge wisely and guilt-free, writes **KAVITA DEVGAN**

SMART SNACKING FOR THE CHILLS

Winter is here, and so is the temptation to indulge in comforting treats! With the chilly weather encouraging cosy evenings and festive gatherings, snacking often takes center stage. But mindless munching, especially on unhealthy snacks, can derail your health and lead to unwanted weight gain. Instead of avoiding snacks altogether, the key is to snack smart and make choices that nourish your body while satisfying your cravings.

WHY SMART SNACKING MATTERS

Snacking isn't inherently bad—it's what and how you snack that matters. Smart snacking can fill nutritional gaps, keep hunger in check, and even prevent overeating during main meals. On the other hand, poor choices, like fried or sugary snacks, can add empty calories, lead to guilt, and make staying healthy during the season difficult.

SMART SNACKING RULES

PLAN YOUR SNACKS: Snacks aren't extras—they should be part of your daily meal plan. Choose nutrient-rich options that complement your meals. A great addition to your winter snack list is American pecans. Packed with over 19 vitamins and minerals, they're now easily available in India and are a nutritious, satisfying option.

MIND PORTION SIZES:

Snacking isn't feasting. A proper snack should be small but fulfilling. For instance, 30 grams of pecans (about 19 halves) offer 200 calories, 3 grams of protein, and fibre to keep you satiated.

SATISFY YOUR CRAVINGS THOUGHTFULLY: Identify what you're craving—crunchy, salty, or



SNACKING IN STYLE DURING FESTIVITIES

- Roasted pecans can be your go-to snack for cosy evenings. They're also perfect for hosting guests during winter celebrations.
- Looking for gifting ideas? Ditch traditional sweets and consider gifting American pecans. They're healthy, innovative, and sure to be appreciated by health-conscious friends and family.

SIMPLE WAYS TO ROAST PECANS

BASIC ROAST

- Spread pecans evenly on a baking sheet.
- Bake at 180°C for 7–10 minutes, stirring occasionally for even roasting.

SPICED ROAST

- Toss pecans with a mix of olive oil, paprika, and a pinch of salt.
- Roast at 180°C for 10 minutes for a flavourful twist.

This winter, embrace mindful snacking by making smart choices like pecans.

— The author is a nutritionist and has taken inputs from American Pecan



sweet—and choose a healthier alternative. If you love crunchy snacks, roasted pecans are an excellent choice. They retain their nutritional profile and are rich in antioxidants, even after roasting.

SNACK TO CURB HUNGER, NOT BOREDOM: Snack mindfully when you're hungry, not out of habit or boredom. Avoid overindulging and balance high-calorie snacks with



lighter choices during other meals. A handful of pecans paired with fresh fruits can be a delicious and balanced winter snack.

BE PREPARED: Keep healthy snacks handy—store nuts in your bag, desk drawer, or even your car. Pecans are a fantastic non-perishable option for when hunger strikes unexpectedly. This way, you'll avoid grabbing unhealthy, convenient options.



HOLISTIC APPROACH TO COMBAT DISEASES



By **DR SHIFALIKA GOENKA**

Chronic diseases like diabetes, high blood pressure, heart attacks, strokes, and obesity are rapidly rising in India. The good news is that more than half of these conditions are preventable through actions taken through multi-sectoral policy action, simplified generic drug policies, community action, and empowered individuals. The most potent ammunition to protect from chronic diseases is a healthy lifestyle. A healthy lifestyle consists of a diet rich in locally available and inexpensive fruits and vegetables, whole grains, pulses, nuts, and seeds, with extreme moderation in salt and sugar, refined foods, and sugar-sweetened beverages. Additional steps include avoiding tobacco and alcohol. Exercise produces endorphins and is addictive. Leisure and physical activity should be part of everyone's life. All these require an empowered community, an enlightened individual, and an energetic polity.



ASPECTS OF THE ECOSYSTEMS THAT NEED TO BE PART OF THE GRID

Social norms and policies must achieve the following for a health-promoting eco-system.

Healthy Eating: Healthy foods such as fruits and vegetables in their raw forms (and cooked), cheap, nuts, seeds, pulses, whole grains, and healthy oils must be made safer, cheaper, and more readily available, accessible, and affordable across access points such as public transport, at the workplace, and in educational institutes.

Controlling portion sizes is critical. Large portions of unhealthy foods and beverages, especially at discounts, have been proven to push people to eat more. Large servings, large plates, supersized meals, and bottomless drinks must be de-incentivised, and smaller portions must be incentivised. Children must be protected from unhealthy foods and beverage advertising onslaught. Also, targeting children by extolling children to persuade them into unhealthy behaviours, food, and beverages should not be allowed.

Eliminating trans fats and tobacco and decreasing artificial sugar and refined foods are universal goals from a scientific perspective.

The unorganised sector dominates the Indian food market and is price-sensitive. Lower taxes on healthy oils, higher taxes on unhealthy oils, and cheaper fresh fruits and vegetables will boost healthy food production and consumption.

Health Promoting Town Planning Critical to Healthier Communities

Scientific research shows that providing wide sidewalks, large parks, and green forests within a 0.5 km radius of every household improves health in many ways, including preventing more than 50 chronic diseases and improving mental health for the residents and families staying in the vicinity. Trees also act as natural filters, reducing air pollution and creating a healthier environment.

A study published in JACC Advances has shown that living in high-traffic, congested localities alongside highways increases the local population's blood pressure and chronic diseases. High air pollution is a public health crisis. Preventing air pollution should be a top priority across all ministries, as well as housing and development. High air pollution can shorten life-spans by 1.7 years and increase chronic diseases like diabetes, high blood pressure, lung diseases, and asthma, among those exposed to high levels of air pollution.

The holistic way to address the challenge of chronic diseases is to create a grid environment conducive to healthy eating and healthy living through multiple sectors. This leads to a healthy country, systems, societies, and happy people.

— The author is the Deputy Director & Head, Health Promotion, Physical Activity & Obesity Prevention, Centre for Chronic Disease Control (CCDC)



SOLUTION TO POLLUTION

By **ARUN DUGGAL**

DELHI STRUGGLES TO MEET EV TARGETS

Delhi once again finds itself developed in a thick blanket of smog with AQI touching an AQI of 349 or 'very poor' category and hapless Delhiites are turning to humorous memes for solace. One popular tweet went like this: "Time to give Delhi new names: Pollutys Delhi, Haze Khas, Dhua Kuan and Chandni Choke." Apart from the stress busting mirth, citizens of the Capital are hostage to an annualised feature when air pollution swerves between 'very poor to severe' levels as the winter sets in, leading to permanent health issues. Delhi has the unfortunate distinction of being the world's worst polluted capital city. The air is unbreathable, thanks to fully dispersed harmful pollutants – around 40% which comes from vehicular emissions. One survey pegs the financial losses to the Delhi NCR at a very conservative Rs 100 crore/day due to poor air quality.

BEEN THERE, DONE THAT

To be fair, the state government has tried its best. In 2001, it moved public transport to CNG as fuel, levied charges on commercial ICE vehicles, banned 10-year-old diesel and 15-year-old petrol vehicles and introduced the odd-even car numbers initiative. The Delhi EV Policy was framed to encourage greater use of public transport and a viable supply-chain ecosystem through a combination of fiscal and non-fiscal incentives. Initiatives like "Switch Delhi," unveiled in early 2021 to create mass awareness and the ongoing 'Red Light On, Gaadi Off' campaign are well intended. Yet, Delhiites continue to bear the brunt of pollution emanating from within and from nearby states.

Despite a target of 25% EVs in new vehicle registrations by 2023-24, Delhi could manage around 12% in the fiscal. While higher than other states, it's a poor record given the pollution levels. Even after compulsory scrapping of old diesel and petrol vehicles in 2021, the city still has 472 vehicles per 1,000 people. Between 2012-2024, the share of personal vehicles registered was around 92%, but EV 4-wheelers, with just 3% share, have struggled to take off. Regulatory action and financial incentives are inducing some growth in commercial EV segments, but this has to be accompanied by a parallel or superlative growth in personal EVs, to address the pollution crisis.

LOOK EAST, LOOK WEST

New Delhi can take a few cues from Norway and Nepal – countries that have notched up amazing results in pollution reduction and long-term environmental benefits with their commitments to EV adoption. Norway, a country with a population of 5.5 million and an oil and gas producer, has achieved a 35% reduction in CO2 emissions since 2012, improving both air quality and public health. Oslo has the highest per capita number of EVs in the world due to a strict adoption target, generous tax rebates and strategic incentivisation of EV users. With EVs accounting for over 90% of its new car registrations, the world will have to scale up the EV adoption roughly as fast as Norway, if it must meet any net zero targets. Closer home, EVs account for 50% of Nepal's overall vehicle sales (as of FY24) thanks to sustained incentives and low taxes amid a nationwide urgency to cut down energy imports. With nearly all its energy coming from renewable river-fed

hydroelectricity, Nepal is focusing on infrastructure development to support EV ownership.

REAL SOLUTION TO POLLUTION KEPT AT BAY

With the fast-growing economy creating higher disposable income for its huge middle-class, each passing year, the desire for personal mobility will always be on the rise. One perpetual casualty will be air quality. A Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) study in Delhi, Kanpur, Bengaluru, Pune, Chennai, and Mumbai categorically concludes that the transport sector will continue to emit most of the Nox, and around 50% of PM2.5 emissions in these cities, if we keep away from greener transportation. Studies show that subsidies are not a magic bullet unless the switch to EV is made too good to ignore for a customer. Starting with attractive subsidies, customers can be lured by parking benefits, besides manufacturer-offered incentives for upgrades. Most importantly, a modern EV policy with a strong commitment to achieving targets from all authorities would comfort buyers in areas like charging infrastructure. Since many are not fully aware of the need to switch to EVs, regular campaigns must be undertaken. Big cities may pollute more, but smaller and emerging ones are not far behind; every year new towns in Tier 2 and Tier 3 India are making to the WHO's most-polluted cities list. Unless there's collective will to fast-track EV adoption, Delhi's air pollution will always get tossed around in inter-state bickering and internal political rivalries with fewer solutions.

— The author is the founder of Centre of Excellence for Research in Climate Change and Air Pollution, IIT Delhi

Rohit should change his tactics, be more attacking batting at No. 6: Shastri

PTI ■ MELBOURNE

With skipper Rohit Sharma struggling to decipher a way to score runs in the Border-Gavaskar Trophy, former India coach Ravi Shastri says the stylish batter should go in with a clear mindset, change his tactics, and attack the bowlers.

Rohit missed the opening Test Down Under to be with his family for the birth of his second child. He was expected to reclaim the opener's spot but KL Rahul's impressive 77 in India's win at Perth prompted a rejig of the batting order with Rohit moving down to No.6.

The change though has not been fruitful for Rohit as he has managed 10, 3 and 6 runs in the last three innings, while Rahul has cashed on the opportunity by notching up a fine 84 in the first innings at Brisbane in the third Test.

"I would like to see Rohit Sharma, his tactics change a bit because he can still be extremely dangerous at that number (six)," Shastri opined on ICC Review.

"I think he's got to be very clear in his mindset to go out there and take the attack to the opposition and not worry about anything else," the cricketer-turned-commentator added.

Shastri felt Rohit should shun the defensive mindset.

"The last thing you want is him to be in two minds whether to defend or attack. In his case, it should be attack. He picks up length quickly, he should take the opposition on at that number.

"Because if he gets away in the first 10-15 minutes, in any way, he's not got past that 15-20 minutes, half an hour. So why don't you play a natural game, go and take the attack to the opposition and take it from there?" Shastri felt it's the best way for



Rohit to get back into form and win games for India, adding that the best No.6 batters in the world are those who have the ability to counter-attack.

"I think that is his best way of not just coming back into form, winning a game for India as well. Because that number is a crucial number."

"The best No.6s in the world are the guys who know how to have the ability to counter-attack. They read the situation well. Yes, if a lot of wickets have fallen, maybe for a little while. You might have to be circumspect, but the intent has to be far sooner than later.

"Especially when you have that kind of ability and especially when you open the batting for India and you have all the shots for Australian conditions."

Rohit had made his Test debut in 2013 at No. 6 position, marking the occasion with a century. Shastri backed Rahul to retain the opener's slot in the fourth Test following his two half-centuries so far in the five-Test series.

"I would have asked him (Rohit) to open in the last Test match (Brisbane) but then the way Rahul has batted, he was a joy to watch and the way he's batting, I believe he struck a purple patch," Shastri said.

"It could be a position he might just want to keep and enhance the way he's playing because his technique was faultless," said Shastri.

The former India captain said Rahul was currently at the top of his game and his confidence level too was very high.

"The way he left the ball, the way he allowed the ball to come onto the bat, some of his cover drives were as good as any played by anyone in world cricket at the moment. And so I think when there's that much confidence there, you know, let it be."



Wasn't looking to save the follow-on that day in Brisbane: Akash Deep

PTI ■ MELBOURNE

Akash Deep and Jasprit Bumrah saved India the blushes during the Brisbane Test with a resolute 10th wicket partnership but the rookie pacer on Sunday said his focus was on wholesome contribution to the team rather than looking to "merely save the follow-on."

With the Indian batters, barring KL Rahul and Ravindra Jadeja, failing once again, the obstinate 47-run partnership between Bumrah and Akash took India past the follow-on mark during the Gabba Test, which ended in a draw.

"We come to bat lower down the order, so contributions of 20-25-30 runs are very valuable. My mindset is just to contribute. I wasn't looking to save the follow-on that day; I was just looking not to get out. My mindset was this, God willing, we were able to save the follow-on," Akash told reporters here.

Akash smashed Pat Cummins for a four to avoid the follow-on as the Indian dressing room broke into celebrations on day four.

"When you save the match from such a situation, the entire team gets the confidence and our dressing room reflected just that. Everyone was having fun and enjoying."

Salvaging a draw after being on the brink of losing in Brisbane, the Indian team is now filled with confidence, feels Akash.

"If you look at it, it's 50-50, even though we were behind in the last match. But the confidence we built on the last day, we still have that confidence. So, I can say it's 50-50, and this Test match (Melbourne) is very important for both the teams."

Akash did not feature in the playing XI for the first two Tests against Australia but made his way into the team for the third Test.

The 28-year-old gave a good account himself, and was unlucky to miss out on the wicket of veteran batter Steve Smith, whom he troubled no end.

The pacer, who is playing on foreign soil for the first time, revealed tips from Bumrah helped him.

"This is my first time playing in Australia. Jassi bhai keeps on telling us things about how we can go about our job; it makes our job easy."

"He told me one thing, 'Don't get too excited. Just focus on your discipline. How you go about your job in Indian conditions, repeat that here.' He told me just this."

Short-pitched balls against Head: Akash Travis Head continues to be a thorn in India's flesh. After being dismissed for 11 in his first innings of the series, he has gone on to score 89, 140 and 152 in his next three outings.

Obviously, he did not detail the plans, but hinted at a bouncer strategy against the left-hander.

Joe Root returns to England's ODI squad for India tour, Champions Trophy

PTI ■ LONDON

Veteran batter Joe Root's return to 50-over format after more than a year headlined England's squad announcement for the ODI tour to India and the ICC Champions Trophy.

Root's previous assignment in the format was the 50-over World Cup held in India in 2023.

All-rounder and Test skipper Ben Stokes was not considered for selection as he has been recovering from a left hamstring injury sustained during the third Test against New Zealand earlier this month.

Seasoned batter Jos Buttler will lead the side, and the Lancashire man will also captain England in the T20I series against India, which precedes the ODIs.

England will play five T20Is and three ODIs during the white ball tour to India.

Leg-spinner Rehan Ahmed, who made his Test debut against India earlier this year, was included in the T20I squad.

In-form Harry Brook will get another chance to play international bilateral cricket in India after pulling out of the Test series earlier this year due to personal reasons.

England ODI squad: Jos Buttler (Captain), Jofra Archer, Gus Atkinson, Jacob Bethell, Harry Brook, Brydon Carse, Ben Duckett, Jamie Overton, Jamie Smith, Liam Livingstone, Adil Rashid, Saqib Mahmood, Phil Salt, Mark Wood.

England T20I squad: Jos Buttler (Captain), Rehan

Ahmed, Jofra Archer, Gus Atkinson, Jacob Bethell, Harry Brook, Brydon Carse, Ben Duckett, Jamie Overton, Jamie Smith, Liam Livingstone, Adil Rashid, Saqib Mahmood, Phil Salt, Mark Wood.

India vs England Schedule:
T20I: 1st T20I: January 22, Eden Gardens, Kolkata.
2nd T20I: January 25, MA Chidambaram Stadium, Chennai.
3rd T20I: January 28, Niranjan Shah Stadium, Rajkot.
4th T20I: January 31, MCA Stadium, Pune.
5th T20I: February 2, Wankhede Stadium, Mumbai
ODIs:
1st ODI: February 6, VCA Stadium, Nagpur.
2nd ODI: February 9, Barabati Stadium, Cuttack.
3rd ODI: February 12, Narendra Modi Stadium, Ahmedabad.



Atletico Madrid stuns Barcelona with a 2-1 win

AP ■ MADRID

Atletico Madrid coach Diego Simeone ran down the touchline in joy while Barcelona players sunk to the turf in dismay.

Super sub Alexander Sorloth struck again deep in stoppage time to hand Atletico a 2-1 comeback win at Barcelona and ensure Atletico will spend La Liga's short winter break on top of the table.

Atletico's 12th straight win in all competitions lifted it three points above Barcelona.

Barcelona has only two wins in its last nine games and could find itself third on Sunday if Real Madrid beats Sevilla.

Simeone, coaching Atletico since 2011, celebrated winning at Barcelona for the first time.

"We finally did it," Atletico goalkeeper Jan Oblak said. "We are playing well, we started poorly but we knew our chances would come. And in the last minute Sorloth came through. Thanks to him we finally won here. He is the striker we needed."

It was a much more impressive performance from Barcelona, which dominated for long periods and took a deserved lead in the 30th minute.

Pedri started and ended the move, playing a one-two with Gavi, and firing an angled shot into the bottom right corner.

Raphinha almost doubled Barcelona's lead in stunning fashion in the 57th when he lobbed the goalkeeper but the ball came off the crossbar.

Robert Lewandowski got to the rebound but sent it onto the head of Axel Witsel, who needed treatment.

Barcelona was made to rue its missed opportunities when Atletico levelled just three minutes later, partly thanks to a defensive blunder.

Barcelona midfielder Marc Casadó tried to clear Julian Alvarez's cross but passed it straight to Rodrigo De Paul, who fired into the bottom right corner. Casadó put his hands to his head and dropped to his knees in dismay.

Worse was to come for Barcelona as, in the sixth minute of stoppage time, Nahuel Molina made a fantastic run to latch onto a through ball and cross in for Sorloth to fire into the back of the net.

It was Sorloth's eighth goal of the season, five of them after he's come off the bench.

BILBAO'S UNBEATEN RUN

Athletic Bilbao came from behind to beat Osasuna 2-1 and extend its unbeaten run to 14 matches and remain just five points behind Atletico.

Gorka Guruzeta and Alex Berenguer sealed the comeback win for fourth-placed Bilbao after Lucas Torro gave Osasuna a 25th-minute lead at El Sadar.

Guruzeta headed Bilbao level in the 31st and Berenguer struck the winner in the 74th.

Mallorca won at Getafe 1-0 and moved up to fifth.

Women's players arrested over racist incident in Brazil soccer semifinal

AP ■ SAO PAULO

Four River Plate women's players were arrested by Sao Paulo police and accused of making a racial slur, Sao Paulo's public security secretariat told The Associated Press.

On Friday, a Brazil Ladies Cup soccer semifinal between Argentina's River Plate and Brazilian team Grêmio was stopped in the first half after River Plate's Candela Diaz was accused of making monkey gestures to a ball boy, according to broadcast footage and local media reports.

Diaz was detained along with teammates Juana Cangaro, Milagros Naiquen Diaz, and Camila Ayelen Duarte, the players' lawyer, Thais Sankari, told The AP. They remained in custody on Saturday.

Sankari said the River Plate players reacted only after being provoked. "We see in this decision a great arbitrariness and the Brazilian judiciary's desire to send a message. They used this case for that purpose," she said.

After Diaz's gestures on Friday, the Grêmio players walked off in protest. The referee showed red cards to six River Plate players following an on-field fight and ended the match because there was no longer the minimum number of players required to continue.

The score was 1-1 but the referee awarded the match to Grêmio, which will play in the tournament final on Sunday.

The Brazil Ladies Cup banned River Plate from the tournament for two years on Saturday.

Tournament organizers said in a statement on Saturday that future editions will immediately ban any participating team whose athletes or staff "engage in racist gestures on the playing field."

"The organisation reaffirms its anti-racist stance and emphasises that it will never tolerate such incidents."

Grêmio said on X it was supporting its players, who would file a police report.

"We regret what happened and condemn any discriminatory acts," the team said in the statement.

Grêmio coach Thaisan Passos said her players told her River Plate players had previously called them "monkeys."

"Incidents like this cannot keep happening. How long will we keep pretending racism doesn't exist?" she told local broadcaster SporTV.

Diaz has not commented publicly.

River Plate also condemned the discriminatory gestures. The club said in a statement on X it was "taking the appropriate disciplinary measures and will continue working to eradicate such behavior."



Manchester City crisis deepens after losing to Aston Villa 2-1 in the Premier League

AP ■ MANCHESTER

Manchester City's stunning slump deepened after losing to Aston Villa 2-1 in the Premier League.

Goals from Jhon Duran and Morgan Rogers at Villa Park consigned the four-time defending champion to a ninth defeat in 12 games in a season that is unravelling.

Pep Guardiola's team has won just once during that run.

"We don't have a defense for the results. They are not good," Guardiola said.

Third-placed Arsenal closed the gap on league leader Liverpool to three points with a 5-1 win at Crystal Palace, but has played two games more.

City dropped to sixth in the standings, nine points below Liverpool, and has played two games more.

"It's about what I can do with my people to get the results back and continue," Guardiola said. "If there is a moment that I cannot overthink, it is right now. Try to be simple, stick to my principles and give certainty to the team."

TITLE HOPES FADING

After winning six titles in seven years and an unprecedented four in a row, City's remarkable fall shows little sign of stopping.

Guardiola admitted last week he had not been good enough to turn his team's form around.

City was without a win in any of its last eight away games in all competitions. While it looks unlikely to win a fifth straight title, a place in the top four and Champions League qualification could also be in jeopardy after fourth-placed Nottingham Forest won at Brentford 2-0 to move four points clear of City.

Only once under Guardiola has City managed to win the title when losing six times in the league. That was in 2021, when it lost two of its last three games, having already been confirmed as the champion.

City lost nine times when Liverpool won the title in 2020, but its sixth defeat didn't come until February. Guardiola also lost six times in his first season in English soccer in 2016-17 and



City finished third. The latest defeat could have been even more emphatic from a dominant Villa, which moved up to fifth.

Duran scored his sixth goal in as many starts in the 16th minute from Rogers' assist. Duran had a goal disallowed for offside in the second half and Rogers hit the post before doubling Villa's lead in the 65th.

Phil Foden pulled a goal back for City in stoppage time, but it wasn't enough to spark a late comeback.

"We have to stay positive, even though it's difficult, and we have to keep working hard," City striker Erling Haaland said.

JESUS STREAK

It's five goals in a week for Gabriel Jesus against Crystal Palace.

After scoring a hat trick in Arsenal's 3-2 comeback win against Palace in the English League Cup quarterfinals on Wednesday, the Brazil striker hit another two goals when the teams met again on Saturday.

Going into Wednesday's game, Jesus had only scored once for Arsenal since the end of January.

Jesus struck twice in a frantic start at Selhurst Park. He opened the scoring in the sixth, with Ismaila Sarr leveling five minutes later. Jesus restored Arsenal's lead in the 14th and was denied back-to-back hat tricks when hitting the post and then having another close range effort saved by Palace goalkeeper Dean Henderson.

Kai Havertz, Gabriel Martinelli and Declan Rice also scored for Arsenal.

FOREST FLYING HIGH

If City's demise is a surprise story of the season, so is Forest's rise.

After battling relegation for much of last term, Forest is in contention to qualify for the Champions League and possibly more.

Facing a Brentford team that was unbeaten at home, goals from Ola Aina and Anthony Elanga secured another statement win on the road for Nuno Espirito Santo's side, having already won at Anfield and Old Trafford this year.

ISAK TREBLE

Alexander Isak hit a hat trick in Newcastle's 4-0 win at Ipswich.

The Sweden international, who has 10 goals in his last 11 games, wrapped up his treble inside 54 minutes at Portman Road, including one in the opening minute. Jacob Murphy also scored.

Brighton was 1-0 up at West Ham through Mats Wieffer, but Mohammed Kudus levelled for the draw.