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**WORLD 8**  
**'WE SHOULD TRY AGAIN': PUNJAB ASSEMBLY SPEAKER ON FAILED INDIA-PAK PEACE INITIATIVE**

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Light rainfall lashed several parts of Delhi on Tuesday evening, temperatures are expected to drop further in the next two days  
Photo: Ranjan Dimri/The Pioneer

## AQI under 400, Grap-III invoked in Delhi NCR

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

### WEATHER

|     |        |
|-----|--------|
| AQI | 369    |
| MAX | 20.8°C |
| MIN | 9.9°C  |

The Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM) on Tuesday assessed the situation and lifted the restrictions of Stage-IV under the Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP) in Delhi and the neighbouring region, following a decline in pollution levels. However, the restrictions under GRAP Stage I, II and III will continue including curbs on construction and industrial activities remain in place to control pollution levels. The Stage-IV was enforced on December 16 in Delhi and NCR when it breached the 400 mark. The decision comes after Delhi's Air Quality Index (AQI) improved to 369 ("Very

Poor') at 4 PM on December 24, down from a peak of 401 ('Severe') recorded on December 16. The improvement in air quality was attributed to favourable meteorological conditions, including improved wind speed, according to forecasts from the India Meteorological Department (IMD) and the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology (IITM). Residents are urged to remain cautious and adhere to the guidelines issued by the authorities to mitigate the

impact of air pollution on health and daily life. Under Stage-III, classes up to five are required to shift to hybrid mode. Parents and students have the option to choose online education, wherever available. Stage III bans on non-essential diesel-operated medium goods vehicles with BS-IV or older standards within Delhi. The restrictions also include on plying of BS-III petrol and BS IV diesel LMVs (4 wheelers) in Delhi and in the districts of Gurugram, Faridabad, Ghaziabad and Gautam Budh Nagar. Persons with Disabilities shall be permitted to ply BS-III Petrol / BS-IV Diesel LMVs, provided that these are specifically adopted for them and are run only for their personal use.

## Rupee at fresh record low of 85.20 against US dollar

PTI ■ MUMBAI

The rupee extended the slide for the second straight session and depreciated 9 paise to settle at a fresh all-time low of 85.20 (provisional) against the US dollar on Tuesday, dragged by a strong greenback against major crosses overseas and subdued domestic equities. According to analysts, increased demand of the dollar due to month-end payment obligations and the fear of an aggressive import tariff by the Donald Trump administration in the US strengthened the greenback. Besides, surging crude oil prices pushed the rupee down further, they added. At the interbank foreign exchange, the rupee opened at 85.10 and touched

the lowest ever level of 85.21 against the greenback during intra-day. The unit finally ended the session at a fresh all-time low of 85.20 (provisional) against the dollar, registering a loss of 9 paise from its previous close. On Monday, the rupee settled 7 paise lower at 85.11 against the US dollar. Anuj Choudhary, Research Analyst at Mirae Asset Sharekhan, said the rupee fell to a fresh all-time low on weak domestic markets and a strong US dollar due to increased demand from importers and surging crude oil prices. He said a hawkish tone of the US Federal Reserve and an improved US economy may further support the dollar. "FII outflows may also weigh on the rupee. However, any intervention by the RBI may support



the rupee at lower levels. USD-INR spot price is expected to trade in a range of Rs 85 to Rs 85.40," Choudhary said.

Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading higher by 0.11 per cent at 107.93, amid soaring US Treasury yields and the fear of delayed interest rate cuts by the US Federal Reserve. Brent crude, the global oil benchmark, rose 0.69 per cent to USD 73.13 per barrel in futures trade. In the domestic equity market, the 30-share BSE Sensex closed lower by 67.30 points, or 0.09 per cent, at 78,472.87 points, while Nifty fell 25.80 points, or 0.11 per cent to close at 23,727.65 points. Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) were net sellers in the capital markets on Monday, as they offloaded shares worth Rs 168.71 crore, according to exchange data.

## Former Home Secy Bhalla is new Manipur Gov

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

In a major reshuffle, former Union Home Secretary Ajay Kumar Bhalla has been appointed as Manipur Governor amid ongoing trouble in the north eastern State. Some of the other States where change was effected according to a Rashtrapati Bhawan communique includes former Union Minister and army chief Vijay Kumar Singh was appointed as Mizoram Governor, while Arif Mohammed Khan was moved to Bihar as Governor. In a surprise move following the resignation of Raghuraj Das as Odisha governor, Hari Babu Kambhampati was appointed as the new man for the State's gubernatorial post. Das has served earlier as Chief Minister of Jharkhand and State Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) President as well.



Park street, Kolkata all decked up for Christmas eve

## Dalit boy dies by suicide after being forced to drink urine

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ LUCKNOW

In a horrifying incident from Uttar Pradesh's Basti district, a 17-year-old Dalit boy died by suicide after being subjected to brutal assault and humiliation during a birthday party. The boy was allegedly forced to strip, beaten, made to drink urine, and further humiliated by being forced to lick spit. The perpetrators also recorded the abuse. Traumatized by the ordeal, the boy hanged himself at his maternal uncle's house on Monday. The victim, a Class 10 student living with his maternal uncle in Kaptanganj, was invited to a birthday party on December 20 by a local youth. According to the complaint filed by his uncle, the boy was ambushed at the gathering, where four to five individuals forced him to strip and assaulted him. They urinated in his mouth and recorded the incident. When the boy later demanded the deletion of the video, the accused humiliated him further by forcing him to lick their spit. Unable to bear the trauma and humiliation, the boy returned home, narrated the incident to his family, and later took his life by hanging. The family approached the police soon after the incident, but the initial response was reportedly lackluster. Two suspects were detained briefly but were released the same evening. This inaction prompted the grieving family to take the boy's body to the Superintendent of Police (SP) office, demanding justice. Amid public outrage, a case was registered against four individuals under charges of assault, criminal intimidation, and abetment of suicide. Three accused-Vinay Kumar, Akash, and Kaju Prasad-have been arrested, while efforts are ongoing to nab the fourth suspect, Sonal. The boy's family revealed that he had been facing harassment from the accused for some time.

## Delhi Police bust gang settling illegal migrants, 11 arrested



SAUMYA SHUKLA ■ NEW DELHI

Even as a high voltage political drama has been underway over the issue of Rohingyas and Bangladeshi immigrants staying illegally in the National Capital, the murder of a man, who used to push women in prostitution, led to the Delhi Police in busting a gang involved in settling these immigrants in Delhi. Police have arrested 11 people including four Bangladeshi nationals. The accused involve seven people who were allegedly involved in making forged documents including Aadhaar card, birth certificates, caste certificates, matriculation certificates, COVID certificates, and income certificates, at nominal prices starting from Rs 7, Aadhaar operators and tech experts. A woman in the intervening night of October 20 and 21 came to Sangam Vihar police station to report that her husband, Santu Sheikh alias Raja, has been murdered which led to the police tracking down four people involved in his murder and subsequently busting the gang. The Bangladeshi nationals, 26 years old Midul Miyan alias Akash Ahmed and 24 years old Fardeen Ahmed alias Abhi Ahmed along with their wives, were arrested and interrogated in connection with the murder of Santu Sheikh alias Raja. Among the motives behind the murder, Raja used to push the wives of the accused into

prostitution and also tried to make physical relations with them while also bullying them for minor issues. They all lived in close proximity. "However, the police learnt during interrogation that these accused had entered India illegally and had been residing in Sangam Vihar for several years," Deputy Commissioner of Police (South) Ankit Chauhan said. They were found in possession of Bangladeshi ID cards (chip-based NID cards) and birth certificates. Around 21 Aadhar cards, four voter ID cards, and eight PAN cards were also recovered from the victim's residence. Chauhan said, "Under the guidance of Hon'ble Lieutenant Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena, we formed a team to unearth the entire matter and conduct a thorough probe into the illegal immigration issue." These immigrants came to India through the jungle route and then took bikes and taxis to reach the nearest town from where they took AC trains to travel to Delhi, he said. Further questioning of the accused led to the arrest of 26 year old Sahil Sehgal who ran a 'Poonam Online Computer Centre' in Rohini Sector 5. "It was found that the centre was involved in preparing Aadhaar cards and other documents using fake IDs. Sehgal revealed that he was approached by illegal Bangladeshi immigrants through the deceased Santu Sheikh alias Raja," the DCP added. "Sahil used the fake website

'Jantaprints.Site' to generate fraudulent birth certificates and sent them to his associate Ranjit for Aadhaar card processing," the officer said. Ranjit, a resident of Sector 7 in Rohini, worked with 25 year old Afroz, an authorised Aadhaar operator at Karnataka Bank in Rohini Sector 5. Using fake birth certificates, Afroz facilitated the creation of Aadhaar cards. "Ranjit and Afroz were arrested, and investigations revealed that the 'Jantaprints.Site' offered fake documents," he added. Payments for these documents were made via Paytm QR codes linked to a number registered under Mohammad Chand. Based on technical surveillance, 28-year-old Mohammad Chand, from Uttam Nagar, was arrested from Vikas Nagar, Delhi. He confessed to retaining a two per cent commission and transferring the remaining amount to Saddam Hussain. Thirty three-year-old Saddam Hussain, from Uttam Nagar, was arrested, leading to the discovery that the 'Jantaprints.Site' was operated by his associate, Deepak Mishra. Saddam transferred the payments to Deepak Mishra, retaining a 2 per cent share for himself. Further questioning revealed that the accused initially created Aadhaar cards showing ages under 18, as such cards were easier to process at multiple centres in Delhi. Cards for individuals over 18 were limited to just four centres in Delhi.

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## Shah reviews implementation of three new criminal laws in U'khand

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

Union Home minister Amit Shah chaired a meeting to review the implementation of three new criminal laws in Uttarakhand in the presence of chief minister Pushkar Singh Dhami in New Delhi on Tuesday. He reviewed the implementation and current status of various new provisions related to police, jails, courts, prosecution and forensics in Uttarakhand.



He said that under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the three new criminal laws are becoming the protectors of civil rights and the basis of 'ease of justice'. He asked Dhami to implement the new criminal laws 100 percent as soon as possible. Shah said that the new laws are victim and citizen centric and they need to be implemented promptly with this spirit. He said that the Uttarakhand government should make efforts to fill the gaps in technology and other areas towards 100 percent implementation of the new laws. The Home minister fur-

ther said that the Uttarakhand government should give priority to 100 per cent implementation of the new laws in all police stations and jails in areas where more FIRs are registered. Emphasising on the use of technology, he said that more than one forensic mobile van should be available in every district of the State. Shah said that for forensic visits, teams should be divided into three categories - serious, normal and very normal - so that resources can be better utilised. Along with this, he also emphasised that a protocol should be made to decide the designated place for video conferencing and the cameras installed at all

## Dhami apprises Shah of winter Yatra facilitation

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

Chief minister Pushkar Singh Dhami met Union Home minister Amit Shah in New Delhi on Tuesday. In the meeting the CM informed Shah about the winter Char Dham Yatra which is underway in the winter abodes of the Char Dham deities- Joshimath

(Badrinath), Ukhimath (Kedarnath), Kharsali (Yamunotri) and Mukhba (Gangotri).

He informed the Home minister about the steps taken by the state government for promoting the winter Char Dham Yatra. Dhami

also informed Shah about the works undertaken under the Vibrant Village programme in Uttarakhand. The duo also discussed the steps being taken for empowerment of the cooperative sector and better coordination with the farmers.

## U'khand to become 100 % organic in next 2 years: Rawat

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

The Cooperation minister Dhan Singh Rawat has said that Uttarakhand will become completely organic in the next two years. He said that 62 out of 95 blocks of the State have become organic and 47 blocks have been certified.

The minister was addressing the fourth Rural Voice Agriculture Conclave and NACOF- 2024 at India Habitat Centre, New Delhi on Monday.

The minister expressed happiness at the Uttarakhand Silk Federation receiving the National Cooperative Federation (NACOF) award - 2024. The award was received by the federation's managing director Anand Shukla. In his address, Rawat said that about 12 lakh farmers of Uttarakhand were given interest free loans of Rs one to five lakh which has

helped in augmenting their income. He said that not even a single loan to the farmers in Uttarakhand has become NPA. He claimed that Uttarakhand's model of cooperative committees is being adopted by every State. The minister said that Uttarakhand has taken many new initiatives in the field of cooperative sector which other States are emulating. He said that the development will occur only when the farmers become empowered. Rawat said that while the agricultural land is decreasing and the fertility of the soil is also getting reduced, the population of the country is continuing to decrease. The theme of the fourth Rural Voice Agriculture conclave was institution building for farmers. In the conclave one farmer, one cooperative body, one social organisation and one public organisation was awarded.

## Congress has always insulted Ambedkar: Dhami

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

Chief minister Pushkar Singh Dhami said that those engaging in divisive politics in the country are trying to grab headlines by manipulating a portion of speech of Home minister Amit Shah in the parliament on BR Ambedkar. Interacting with the media persons in New Delhi on Tuesday, Dhami said the Congress has always insulted Ambedkar. He said that Ambedkar's life was dedi-

cated to equality and nation building. The CM said that the Congress party is now engaging in fake sympathy towards Ambedkar but it has always insulted him. He said that the Congress should apologise for Jawaharlal Nehru and other Congress leaders insulting Ambedkar.

Dhami said that after his resignation from the Nehru cabinet, Ambedkar

was not allowed to speak in parliament. He said that in his resignation letter, Ambedkar had said the SC and ST were ignored and the only concern of the government was for the Muslims. The CM said that the Congress party ensured the defeat of Ambedkar in the Lok Sabha elections in 1952 and 1954.

## BJP slams Congress for minority appeasement, challenges stance on reservation policies

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

The Bharatiya Janata Party State president Mahendra Bhatt accused the Congress of spreading lies in the name of Bhim Rao Ambedkar while pursuing policies favouring minority appeasement. He criticised Congress leaders for attempting to mislead people, stating that the party prioritises its minority vote bank over the rights of Dalits and back-

ward classes. Bhatt alleged that the Congress has repeatedly sought to extend reservation benefits to Muslims, even advocating for increasing the reservation limit beyond 50 per cent.

He accused the party's leadership, particularly the Nehru family, of having a history of disrespecting Ambedkar, citing incidents



like opposing his inclusion in the Constitution's drafting committee and denying him recognition during his lifetime. He further claimed

that Congress delayed implementing critical initiatives like the Mandal commission to suppress the rights of backward classes. "Ambedkar opposed minority appeasement policies like the Waqf Board and Muslim Personal Law, yet Congress continues to dilute reservation rights for political gain," Bhatt said. He alleged that Congress-

ruled States within the INDIA bloc have redistributed reservations meant for Dalits and backward classes to minority communities, undermining constitutional provisions. Bhatt challenged Uttarakhand's Congress leaders to clarify their stance on granting reservations to Muslims and extending the reservation limit.

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| 2.      | Kamrun Nisa,<br>W/o. Abdul Qudous                               |   |   |                    |
| 3.      | Kamrun Nisa   |   |   |                    |

Place : Haridwar, Uttarakhand  
Date : 20.12.2024

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## FIRST COLUMN

## THE ETERNAL WISDOM OF SUNDAR KAND

Sacred texts and mantras hold a timeless power to uplift the soul



RAVI VALLURI

The faithful recognise the profound benefits of chanting or reading sacred texts, mantras, and scriptures like the Hanuman Chalisa and Sundar Kand. These practices are especially embraced by large numbers on auspicious days such as Tuesdays and Saturdays. The vibrations generated by reading these sacred books and meditating on the mantras foster positive thoughts, beautify the mind, and empower us to overcome internal obstacles and dispel negativity clouding our perspective. Yet, many of us struggle to engage in these practices regularly, often citing demanding schedules and lack of time. As spiritual leader Sri Sri Ravi Shankar observes, "The time given to the Divine is the least." Consequently, we neglect to devote quality time to the Lord, remembering Him only in moments of distress. Even when time is found, many face difficulties focusing, maintaining clarity, or chanting with proper intonation. The mind frequently drifts into worldly concerns.



To aid this practice, here is a simple version of Sundar Kand:

Ram Ram Jai Ram  
Ram Jai Ram Ram  
Peaceful, Compassionate, Sinless,  
One served by Brahma and Shambhu,  
One who appears in human form by Maya,  
O Raghuvir, I bow to you.  
You are my innermost Self.  
Liberate me, O Lord,  
Instill devotion within me.

O Lord Hanuman, epitome of strength, knowledge, and wisdom, emboldened by Jambavanth's counsel, set out to cross the mighty ocean in search of Sita. He triumphed over the demoness Surasa and reached Lanka under the cover of night. Guided by divine intuition, he discovered Sita and presented her with Lord Ram's ring, bowing at her feet and seeking her blessings. Hanuman then wreaked havoc in Ashok Vatika—eating fruits, breaking branches, and shaking trees.

Allowing himself to be captured by the asuras, he was taken to Ravana's court. There, he urged Ravana to repent and return Sita to Lord Ram. Ravana, consumed by ego, refused and instead set Hanuman's tail ablaze. In response, Hanuman used the fire to destroy Lanka's golden city. Before departing, Hanuman comforted Sita and took her Chudamani (jewel) as a token for Lord Ram. On returning, he presented it to Ram, who embraced him, deeply moved by his devotion and bravery. When asked how he accomplished the task, Hanuman humbly replied that nothing is impossible with the grace of Lord Ram. Lord Ram then instructed Sugreev to assemble the army and seek the ocean's permission to cross into Lanka. Meanwhile, Mandodari, Ravana's queen, warned him of the dire consequences of his actions and implored him to release Sita, but he refused. Ravana's virtuous brother Vibheeshan also advised him to repent, cautioning that even Lord Shiva would disapprove of his deeds.

Ignoring all advice, Ravana's stubbornness led Vibheeshan to abandon Lanka and seek refuge at Lord Ram's feet. Recognising his righteousness, Lord Ram crowned Vibheeshan as the future king of Lanka. Ravana sent spies disguised as messengers to gather information on Lord Ram's plans. They returned with alarming news and urged Ravana to free Sita, but he remained defiant. With the help of Nal and Neel, Lord Ram constructed the Setu bridge to cross the ocean. Along the way, he released the river Sarayu from its curse and advanced toward Lanka. This timeless Sundar Kand, penned by Tulsidas, continues to inspire and guide devotees on their spiritual journey.

(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)

## Atal ji: The statesman with vision and resolve



NARENDRA MODI

Today, as we mark the 100th Jayanti of Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee, we celebrate the life and legacy of a statesman whose vision and leadership continue to inspire generations



Today, 25th December is a very special day for all of us. Our nation marks the 100th Jayanti of our beloved former Prime Minister, Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee Ji. He stands tall as a statesman who continues to inspire countless people.

Our nation will always be grateful to Atal Ji for being the architect of India's transition into the 21st century. When he took oath as PM in 1998 our nation had passed through a period of political instability. In about 9 years we had seen 4 Lok Sabha elections. The people of India were getting impatient and also sceptical about governments being able to deliver. It was Atal Ji who turned this tide by providing stable and effective governance. Coming from humble roots, he realised the struggles of the common citizen and the transformative power of effective governance.

One can see the long-term impact of Atal Ji's leadership in so many sectors around us. His era marked a gigantic leap in the world of Information Technology, telecom and communications. This was particularly important for a nation like ours, which is also blessed with a very dynamic Yuva Shakti. The NDA Government under Atal Ji made the first serious attempt to make technology accessible to the common citizens. At the same time, there was foresight in connecting India. Even today, most people recall the Golden Quadrilateral Project, which connected the length and breadth of India. Equally notable were the Vajpayee Government's efforts to enhance local connectivity as well through initiatives like the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana. Similarly, his Government gave a push to metro connectivity by doing extensive work for the Delhi Metro, which stands out as a world-class infrastructure project.

Thus, the Vajpayee Government not only boosted economic growth but also brought distant regions closer, fostering unity and integration. When it comes to



ATAL JI PRESIDED OVER THE CREATION OF THE NDA, WHICH REDEFINED COALITIONS IN INDIAN POLITICS. HE BROUGHT PEOPLE TOGETHER AND MADE NDA A FORCE FOR DEVELOPMENT, NATIONAL PROGRESS AND REGIONAL AMBITIONS

the social sector, an initiative like the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan highlights how Atal Ji dreamt of building an India where modern education is accessible to people across the nation, particularly for the poor and marginalised sections. At the same time, his government presided over many economic reforms which set the stage for India's economic surge after several decades of following an economic philosophy which encouraged cronyism and stagnation.

A wonderful example of Vajpayee Ji's leadership can be seen in the summer of 1998. His Government had just assumed office and on 11th May, India conducted the Pokhran tests, known as Operation Shakti. These tests exemplified the prowess of India's scientific community.

The world was stunned that India had done the tests and expressed their anger in no uncertain terms. Any ordinary leader would have buckled, but Atal Ji was made differently. And what happened? India stood firm and resolute with the government calling for another set of tests two days later, on 13th May! If the tests of the 11th showed scientific skill, the ones on 13th showed true leadership. It was a message to the world that gone were the days when India would buckle under threats or pressure. Despite facing international sanctions, the then NDA government of Vajpayee Ji stood firm, articulating India's right to safeguard its sovereignty while simultaneously being the strongest proponent of world peace.

Atal Ji understood Indian democracy and also the need to make it stronger. Atal Ji presided over the creation of the NDA, which redefined coalitions in Indian politics. He brought people together and

made NDA a force for development, national progress and regional ambitions. His Parliamentary brilliance was seen throughout his political journey. He belonged to a party with a handful of MPs but his words were enough to rattle the might of the all-powerful Congress Party that time. As Prime Minister, he blunted the criticisms of the Opposition with style and substance. His was a career spent largely in the Opposition benches but never carried any trace of bitterness against anyone, even though the Congress stooped to new lows by going to the extent of calling him a traitor! He was also not one to cling on to power through opportunistic means. He preferred to resign in 1996 instead of following the path of horse-trading and dirty politics. In 1999, his Government was defeated by 1 vote.

A lot of people told him to challenge the immoral politics happening then but he preferred to go by the rules. Eventually, he came back with another resounding mandate from the people. When it comes to commitment to protecting our Constitution too, Atal Ji stands tall. He was deeply impacted by the martyrdom of Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee. Years later, he was a pillar of the anti-Emergency movement. In the run-up to the 1977 elections after the Emergency, he agreed to merger of his own Party (Jan Sangh) into the Janata Party. I am sure it would have been a painful decision for him and the others, but safeguarding the Constitution was all that mattered to him.

It is also noteworthy how deeply rooted Atal Ji was in Indian culture. Upon becoming India's External Affairs Minister, he became the first Indian leader to speak in Hindi at

the United Nations. This one gesture showcased his immense pride in India's heritage and identity, leaving an indelible mark on the global stage.

Atal Ji's persona was magnetic and his life was enriched by his love for literature and expression. A prolific writer and poet, he used words to inspire, provoke thought, and even offer solace. His poetry, often reflective of his inner struggles and hopes for the nation, continues to resonate with people across age groups. For so many Bharatiya Janata Party Karyakartas like me, it is our privilege that we were able to learn and interact with a person like Atal Ji. His contribution to the BJP was foundational.

In those days to spear-head an alternative narrative to the dominant Congress showed his greatness. Alongside stalwarts like Shri L.K. Advani Ji and Dr. Murli Manohar Joshi Ji he nurtured the party from its formative years, guiding it through challenges, setbacks and triumphs. Whenever the choice came between ideology and power, he always chose the former. He was able to convince the nation that an alternative world view from the Congress was possible and such a world view could deliver.

On his 100th Jayanti, let us rededicate ourselves to realising his ideals and fulfilling his vision for India. Let us strive to build an India that embodies his principles of good governance, unity, and progress. Atal Ji's unwavering belief in the potential of our nation continues to inspire us to aim higher and work harder.

(This tribute to the visionary statesman late former PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee has been penned by PM Narendra Modi)

## Dreaming of a White Christmas in New York City

The first snowfall and the twinkle of lights on the Rockefeller tree—there's a certain magic that makes Christmas in New York unforgettable

The first time I saw New York City during the holidays, I was 19, a college freshman on a whirlwind trip with my friends. It was my first real taste of winter—snow, bitter cold, and the kind of brisk air that turns your cheeks red. Coming from a place where Christmas meant palm trees with twinkle lights, the sight of NYC blanketed in snow felt like stepping into a new world. I didn't know it then, but that trip would spark a love affair with the city that would eventually bring me back here five years later. My First Snow, My First NYC Christmas

I still remember how the snow caught me off guard. It wasn't the gentle, picture-perfect kind I'd imagined from movies. It was harsh, relentless, and



SHREYA DAYAL

absolutely freezing. Walking through Times Square that Black Friday, bundled up in layers that still didn't feel like enough, I saw the city come alive in a way that felt electric. It wasn't just the towering billboards or the endless sales signs luring shoppers into stores at all hours of the night.

It was the energy—the palpable hum of people chasing holiday deals while dodging each other in the snow. It was chaotic, overwhelming, and unforgettable. Somewhere in the madness of flashing lights and icy sidewalks, I knew I wanted to come back someday—not as a visitor, but as someone who belonged here.

**The Magic of NYC's Holiday Icons**

During that trip, we did all the things you're supposed to do when you're experiencing Christmas in New York for the first time. We saw the Rockefeller Center tree, towering above the skating rink, every inch of it glowing like it had been plucked from a fairytale. The cold bit at my fingers as we stood there, taking it all in. For a moment, the crowds

and the cold faded away, leaving only the soft twinkle of the lights and the awe of standing in front of something so iconic.

The Met was another world entirely. As someone who'd only read about it in books, stepping into its grandeur felt surreal. Wandering through the exhibits, I found myself captivated by the way history and art came alive here. Outside, the snow was falling again, but I was too caught up in the beauty around me to notice the cold.

**The Broadway Moment That Changed Everything**

That trip wasn't just about the sights; it was about the moments that stayed with me long after I left. One of those moments was seeing Phantom of the Opera on Broadway.



Sitting in that theater, watching the chandelier crash and the Phantom's haunting story unfold, I felt a kind of magic I couldn't quite explain. It was more than just a show—it was a moment that made me feel alive in a way I hadn't before. Walking out of the theater into the snowy night, the sounds of

the orchestra still echoing in my mind, I felt a connection to the city that I couldn't shake. It was as if New York had opened its arms to me and whispered, "Come back."

**Coming Full Circle**

Five years later, I did come back. I'd dreamed of living in New York ever since that first

trip, and now here I was, not as a wide-eyed tourist, but as someone calling the city home. It's funny how those early memories still feel so vivid, like they're a part of me.

Walking through Times Square today, I still think about that freezing Black Friday night when I braved the snow for the first time. Seeing the Rockefeller tree now brings back flashes of that first tripping in awe of its beauty and dreaming about a future that somehow feels like the present now. Even when I catch a Broadway show, I can't help but remember how Phantom of the Opera made me fall in love with this city in the first place.

**The Spirit of a NYC Christmas**

There's something timeless

about Christmas in New York. No matter how many years pass or how many times you see it, the magic never fades. The snow still glistens, the lights still dazzle, and the city still hums with that unmistakable holiday energy.

For me, it's not just about the sights or the snow—it's about how this city makes you feel. It's about the way it wraps you up in its chaos, its beauty, and its magic, and leaves you with memories that last a lifetime. A White Christmas in New York City isn't just a holiday—it's a story. And for me, it's the story of a 19-year-old who fell in love with the snow, the lights, and the city that would one day become home!

(The writer is a researcher at Johns Hopkins University; views are personal)









# Senior National Badminton: M Raghu, Devika Sihag clinch men's and women's singles title

**PTI ■ BENGALURU**  
Karnataka's M Raghu and Haryana's Devika Sihag secured their maiden senior national badminton titles, emerging champions in the men's and women's sections respectively at the 86th edition of the tournament here on Tuesday.  
Raghu, who won the Egypt international this year, saved three match points in the decider to beat former champion Mithun Manjunath 14-21, 21-14, 24-22 in the final that clocked just under an hour.  
For Devika, it was a befitting end to a successful season as she ended the giant killing run of Shriyanshi Valishetty 21-15, 21-16 in the women's singles summit clash.  
The 19-year-old from Haryana had claimed Swedish Open and Portugal International, besides reaching final at Estonian and Dutch International.



Junior National Champions Arsh Mohammad and Sanskar Saraswat added the senior nationals title to their trophy cabinet as they upset top seeds Naveen P and Lokesh V 12-21, 21-12, 19-21 in the men's doubles final. In doubles categories, Ayush Agarwal and Shruti Mishra defeated eighth seeds Rohan Kapoor and Ruthvika Shivani G 21-17 21-18 to bag the mixed doubles crown, while second seeds Arathi Sara Sunil

and Varshini VS won the women's doubles title with a 21-18 20-22 21-17 win over eighth seeds Priya Devi Konjengbam and Shruti Mishra.  
It was the men's singles final which provided the grand finale to the senior nationals as the two players from the state dished out a slugfest.  
Mithun, who won the title two editions ago, was first off the blocks as he clinched the opening game rather easily. Raghu forced a decider by racing through the second game. Raghu's control during the net exchanges made the difference as he forced his way back from 15-19 to level the scores at 19-19.  
But Mithun stayed in the hunt by earning three match points but could not convert any of them.  
In the women's singles final, Devika took control of the match tempo quickly and then maintained her dominance to win in straight games.

# Inter Milan beats Como 2-0 to cement third place in Serie A

**AP ■ FLORENCE (ITALY)**  
Inter Milan beat Como 2-0 to cement third place in Serie A and close the gap on top two Atalanta and Napoli on Monday.  
Carlos Augusto got the opener when he headed home a corner kick in the 48th minute. Marcus Thuram scored the second in stoppage time with a potent strike into the roof of the net.  
It was the first time these teams have played each other in the top division since 2003 and although Inter had lost only one league game all season it struggled to impose itself on 15th-placed Como.  
However, it won without exerting itself and the three points were enough to take Simone Inzaghi's men within three points of leader Atalanta and within one of Napoli. Inter has a game in hand over both clubs.  
Fiorentina missed a chance to go fourth when it lost at home to Udinese 2-1.  
The Florence club won a record eight consecutive Serie



A games before losing to Bologna 1-0 on Dec. 15, and it looked to be back on track when Moises Kean converted a penalty after eight minutes to become the first Fiorentina player to reach double figures in the league since Federico Chiesa in the 2019-20 season. However, Udinese was a different prospect after the break. Lorenzo Lucca equalized with the aid of sloppy defending four minutes into the second half and then Florian Thauvin found space on the edge of the box to curl in the second eight minutes later.  
The result left Udinese in ninth place and Fiorentina in fifth. The match was a special one for Edoardo Bove, the Fiorentina player whose collapse with a heart issue led to the suspension of its game with Inter Milan on Dec. 1. Bove was fitted with a defibrillator implant soon after and sat on the Fiorentina bench for the first time since his collapse. He is not allowed to play but his position on the sideline alongside coach Raffaele Palladino was seen as a step towards normalcy for the 22-year-old midfielder.

# Valencia fires coach Rubén Baraja after setback in La Liga

**AP ■ VALENCIA (SPAIN)**  
Valencia fired coach Rubén Baraja on Monday after another setback in La Liga left the club stuck in the relegation zone and sparked renewed protests against Singaporean owner Peter Lim.  
Valencia said it "decided to bring to an end Baraja's time as first team coach" following a 2-2 home draw against Alaves on Sunday.  
Valencia needed a stoppage-time equalizer to salvage the result that left the club second to last in the standings.  
The home draw prompted more criticism from fans who have long complained about the administration of Lim, whom they accuse of using the club only as a business endeavor.  
Baraja, a former Valencia player, took over the club in 2023. His replacement was not immediately announced.  
"The club would like to publicly thank Baraja for the passion, dedication and commitment that he has shown from the first to the last day of his tenure," Valencia said in a statement.

# There's been a lapse in filing nominations, may be on my part: Manu on Khel Ratna furore

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**  
Paris Olympics' double bronze-medallist Manu Bhaker on Tuesday admitted that "there has been a lapse may be on my part" while filing nominations for this year's National Sports Awards amid a raging controversy over her exclusion from the list of Dhyana Chand Khel Ratna awardees.  
A day after the sports ministry had to do damage control by insisting that the list of awardees is yet to be finalised, the 22-year-old pistol ace took to social media to clarify her position on not being among those recommended for the country's highest sporting honour.  
"With regards to ongoing issue for my nomination for the most prestigious Khel Ratna award -- I would like to state that as an athlete my role is to play and perform for my country.  
"I believe there has been a lapse, maybe on my part while filing for the nomination which is being



corrected," Bhaker wrote on X. The Haryana shooter said her aim is to perform for the country and it would not change whether she gets an award or not.  
This was after her father Ramkishan Bhaker and personal coach Jaspal Rana stated that the snub had affected her morale and drive to perform for the country.  
"Awards and recognition keeps me motivated but are not my goal," she asserted.  
"Irrespective of the award I shall remain motivated to win more medals for my country. It is a request to

short-listed for the Khel Ratna along with 30 Arjuna awardees, 17 of them from para disciplines.  
The awards selection committee is headed by retired Supreme Court judge Justice V Ramasubramanian and also includes former women's hockey captain Rani Rampal, boxer Vijender Singh, and cricket great Anil Kumble among others.  
The committee is mandated to consider those who file their applications but if required, it is also empowered to discuss names which do not feature in that list.  
Manu's exclusion was a shock due to the fact that her historic Olympic performance came just a few months back and is still fresh in public memory.  
The youngster is the first athlete from independent India to win two medals in a single edition of the Olympics.  
She won her bronze medals in the 10m air pistol individual and 10m air pistol mixed team (with Sarabjot Singh) events in Paris.



# Lindsey Vonn thinks her new titanium knee could start a trend in skiing

**AP ■ ST MORITZ**  
When Lindsey Vonn last raced on the World Cup circuit nearly six years ago, the constant pain in her knee left her in tears and led to retirement.  
Flash forward to Vonn's comeback race on a titanium knee at age 40 last weekend, and the American skiing standout couldn't have felt more different.  
No more pain. No more swelling. No more tears.  
"The last few years of my career were so much different than they are right now. I'm skiing without thinking about my knee, which I really haven't done since I first tore my ACL in 2013. So it's been a long time that I felt this good," Vonn said on Saturday after placing 14th in a super-G in St Moritz.  
"I'm a little bit older, but honestly I'm a hell of a lot stronger than I once was."  
So much stronger that she's talking up her knee replacement surgery — the first of its kind in World Cup skiing — as a new frontier for the sport. In April, Vonn had a robot-assisted replacement performed by Martin Roche, a South Florida-based orthopedist specializing in complex knee disorders. Part of the bone in her right knee

was cut off and replaced by two titanium pieces. A month later, she was planning her comeback.  
"It's a lot better than my non-existent cartilage," said Vonn, one of the most successful skiers of all time with 82 World Cup wins.  
"I've talked to a lot of skiers already about it and I really think that it could be something that should be considered.  
"I feel amazing. I mean, obviously not everyone responds the same way to surgeries. For some reason, I bounce back pretty well from surgery. But I think it's something to seriously consider for athletes that have a lot of knee problems."  
Knee replacements are usually reserved for older people. Andrea Panzeri, the Italian Winter Sports Federation's head physician and an orthopedist who has operated numerous times on Vonn's good friend and fellow downhiller, Sofia Goggia, said knee replacements are usually performed on patients older than 50.  
"This is definitely the first time in World Cup history that such a young athlete has raced with one," Panzeri told The Associated Press.  
"And I'm not aware of any other elite-level athletes in other sports competing with one, either."  
Panzeri performs knee replacements. But he had never even thought about doing one on a World Cup skier — until he saw Vonn competing with one.  
"Partial prosthetics, like the half-knee ones, are definitely the ones that offer the best performance and we're seeing that (with Vonn)," Panzeri said.  
"I don't think her decision is going to change pro sports. But it could provide more motivation for so-called normal people to try a prosthetic."  
Three-time Grand Slam tennis champion Andy Murray played with an artificial hip at the end of his career. Vonn's former skiing teammate Julia Mancuso also redid her hip a few months after she retired in 2018 and maintains an active lifestyle.  
"I, for sure, would have considered a comeback if I didn't have kids," Mancuso told The AP recently.  
"So I can totally relate to Lindsey."  
But Panzeri said that "hips have different biomechanics than a knee and many more people are able to play sports with a hip prosthetic than a knee prosthetic."

# Hero MotoSports names Nacho Cornejo as new rider

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**  
Hero MotoSports Team Rally on Tuesday named young Chilean rider Nacho Cornejo as its new recruit while announcing a three-member team for the Dakar Rally 2025.  
Cornejo will team up with Sebastian Buhler and 2024 FIM World Rally-Raid Championship (W2RC) winner Ross Branch.  
This will be the team's ninth appearance in the world's toughest race, scheduled to take place in Saudi Arabia from January 3 to 17.  
It was memorable 2024 for the young team as it secured an overall second finish.



In the 12-stage 2024 edition, Branch led the race for four days and remained at second spot for eight days, eventually finishing second overall, making Hero MotoCorp the first Indian manufacturer team to make it to the Dakar podium. For Botswana's Branch, this will be his third Dakar outing with the team.

Buhler, a German living in Portugal, has given consistent performances this year, marking his biggest achievement by securing his first FIM World Championship race podium at Rally Raid Portugal, where he finished second overall.  
At the 2024 Dakar Rally, Buhler came close to winning his first Dakar stage.  
Young Chilean rider Cornejo boasts of an impressive Dakar record, including a fourth-place finish in 2020 and nine stage wins.  
The 47th Dakar Rally will kick off in Bisha, featuring a prologue and 12 stages spanning 7,700 km across the vast desert. For the first time, five stages will have separate courses for FIM and FIA vehicles, covering 45 per cent of the timed distance.  
Dakar 2025 will also be the opening race of the fourth edition of the World Rally Championship (W2RC).  
Hero MotoSports is a Rally GP-class participant at the W2RC 2025, and will attend its five rounds starting with the Dakar, followed by the Abu Dhabi Desert Challenge (February), South African Safari Rally (May), BP Ultimate Rally Raid in Portugal (September), and finally closing the season with the Rallye du Maroc (October).

# Gukesh's triumph underlines India's status as global chess superpower

**PTI ■ BENGALURU**  
The image of a smiling D Gukesh standing with outstretched hands will forever be embossed in the memory of a nation of billions.  
The moment, which came right after his victory over Ding Liren of China in the World Chess Championship in Singapore, was a bold signature on India's rise as a true global chess super power in the post Viswanathan Anand era.  
Year 2024 was a story of resurgence in Indian chess, crafted by Anand himself.  
The fearless and ambitious teenagers or "Vishy's children" as Garry Kasparov calls them, now have a role model to emulate -- an 18-year-old from Chennai, the youngest ever world champion in the long history of chess.

But the genesis of that success was during the FIDE Candidates tournament in April.  
He emerged as the youngest ever winner of that tournament, setting up a title clash with 32-year-old defending champion Liren.  
The Gukesh moment Gukesh was viewed as the favourite going into the title matches, consisting of 14 rounds. That tag itself might have been a pressure point. But with wins in Games 3, 11 and 14, the Indian managed to seal an epochal feat.  
Gukesh showed immense presence of mind to carry an entire nation's hope on his tender shoulders.  
But a crumb of credit should also go to a highly-efficient and varied support staff that included the Anand, the pioneer of chess revolution in India, and renowned mental conditioning coach

Paddy Upton.  
Chess Olympiad triumph Before Gukesh, India showed its envious inventory of chess champions to the world in all its splendour at Budapest in September. The country walked away with six gold medals in team and individual categories.  
In the men's team category final, India defeated Slovenia while their women counterparts subdued Azerbaijan to join China and erstwhile USSR as the only three nations to bag the men's and women's gold medals in the same edition of the event.  
In the individual section, Gukesh (Board 1), Arjun Erigaisi (Board 3), Divya Deshmukh (Board 3) and Vantika Agarwal (Board 4) walked away with gold medals.  
Siblings impress The Rameshbabu household



in Chennai have two Grandmasters -- R Praggnanandhaa and Vaishali, who had crossed the 2500 ELO ratings last year. This year, they became the first siblings to play the Candidates, adding another feather to an already burgeoning cap. They are also the first

in the Classical version is a different challenge altogether. Praggnanandhaa achieved this feat during the Norway Chess, Carlsen's home tournament, in May. Milestone for Erigaisi, Divya This is more technical but significant, nonetheless. Erigaisi became the second Indian, after Anand, of course, to cross the 2800 Elo rating points.  
The Indian beat Russia's Dmitry Andreikin in the fifth round of the European Chess Club Cup 2024 to achieve this rare feat. He was also the 15th GM in the history of chess to go past this mark.  
Currently, Erigaisi is world No.4 with 2801 points behind Carlsen (2831), Fabiano Caruana (2805) and Hikaru Nakamura (2802).  
Divya managed to cross the 2500 Elo rating barrier this year to join an elite club of

GMs.  
Deep talent pool Gukesh, Praggnanandhaa, Erigaisi, Vidit Gujrathi and P Harikrishna are the frontline men's players, while D Harika, Vaishali, Divya, Vantika and Tanya Sachdev form a formidable women's line-up.  
But the real strength of Indian chess is elsewhere.  
"These are famous names because they have achieved several honours. But what makes India a strong chess nation is the fact that thousands of kids are now taking to chess. They have seen Gukesh or Praggnanandhaa climbing heights, and now they think: 'why can't we do this?'" says DP Anantha, Vice-President of All India Chess Federation.  
"That increasing talent pool is our real strength. I don't think any other nation can

match us now in that aspect. We will see many young names coming forward next year," he added.  
Perhaps, it's apt to borrow a catch line from the 80s to describe India's chess present chess landscape -- 'Neighbours Envy, Owner's Pride.'  
Big 2025 loading India are currently ranked fourth in the FIDE team rankings. The nation has 64 Grand Masters, logging an average Elo rating of 2668 and a good number of them are less than 25.  
Many of them will be seen in action in tournaments such as Freestyle Chess Grand Slam Tour, FIDE Women's GP, FIDE Women's World Cup in Georgia and Asian Championships in the UAE etc.  
So, keep those seat-belts fastened, more excitement is on the way!

Modern-day greats figure out their own path: Rohit backs Kohli

With a smile, India captain Rohit Sharma on Tuesday played down concerns around Virat Kohli's struggles outside the off-stump in Australia and backed his longtime teammate to the hilt, saying "modern-day greats figure out their own path."

humour in his response. Do you say something or leave a modern-day great alone, the scribe asked. "You only said he is a modern-day great. Modern-day greats figure out their own path," said a smiling Rohit as others broke into a peal of laughter.



line which looked just around six inches outside off-stump. This line has been Kohli's Achilles Heel in the ongoing tour. When Prasad Krishna came

on, he was told to bowl on the "channel" as he wanted to leave balls. Prasad dug one short and he just about defended. Then, the lanky Karnataka man hit the channel, and the batter withdrew his willow in the nick of time.

gaining traction, Rohit's answers about himself were short. When someone has one double digit score in five innings, he wants to be left alone but then commitments needed to be honoured.

could have possibly changed in two days?" he countered with a wry smile. As usual, he didn't give away anything about whether playing two spinners while factoring in the Melbourne heat was feasible or not.

Gill needs to back himself, he's changed things up too much: Ricky Ponting



India top-order batter Shubman Gill has made far too many changes in his batting approach, which is hindering his run-scoring ability on away tours, feels former Australian captain Ricky Ponting, adding that the way out for the young cricketer is to trust his instincts.

up, do they, away from home?" Ponting said on ICC Review on Tuesday. Ponting said he had observed several changes in Gill's technique during the second Test at Adelaide, which were impeding his ability to score runs.

McDonald defends dropping McSweeney for Konstas, says teenager will throw new challenge to India

Australia head coach Andrew McDonald on Tuesday defended the selection committee's decision to drop Nathan McSweeney in middle of the series for Sam Konstas, saying the talented teenager will post a "new challenge" for India.



"We wanted clarity for our batting unit before the team meeting," McDonald said. Selector Tony Dodemaide informed Konstas about his inclusion during training at the MCG here on Thursday.

with the bat in his hands so obviously the skills are in good order. It will just be what risk is associated with that," said McDonald. "But no concerns from my end, he's been able to do his running so I think he'll be functional come game time."

NTPC Limited advertisement for Singrauli Super Thermal Power Station (2000 MW) tariff determination. Includes NTPC logo, address, and a table with columns for Particulars, Tariff for the previous year, and Year-wise tariff sought to be determined (2024-25 to 2028-29).

NTPC Limited advertisement for Dabri Gas Power Station (829.78 MW) tariff determination. Includes NTPC logo, address, and a table with columns for Particulars, Tariff for the previous year, and Year-wise tariff sought to be determined (2024-25 to 2028-29).

NTPC Limited advertisement for Forze Gandhi Unchahar Thermal Power Station Stage-I (420 MW) tariff determination. Includes NTPC logo, address, and a table with columns for Particulars, Tariff for the previous year, and Year-wise tariff sought to be determined (2024-25 to 2028-29).

MEJA URJA NIGAM (P) LIMITED advertisement for Meja Thermal Power Station Stage-I (2x660 MW) tariff determination. Includes company details and a table with columns for Particulars, Tariff for the previous year, and Year-wise tariff sought to be determined (2024-25 to 2028-29).

TATA CAPITAL HOUSING FINANCE LIMITED advertisement for Secured Asset(s) mortgage. Includes TATA logo, company details, and a table with columns for Loan Account No., Name of Obligor(s)/Legal Heir(s)/Legal Representative(s), Total Outstanding Due, and Date of Demand Notice & NPA Date.