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**BIDEN COMMUTES ROUGHLY 1,500 SENTENCES, PARDONS 39 PEOPLE IN BIGGEST SINGLE-DAY ACT OF CLEMENCY**

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## One Nation, One Election, One Decision

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Centre's call for 'One Nation One, Election' inched closer to realise its dreams of simultaneous polls by paving the way to table the proposal in the Parliament next week after the Union Cabinet on Thursday approved two bills, including one to amend the Constitution to implement 'One Nation, One Election'. Sources said the Cabinet chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi gave nod to draft legislations to hold simultaneous polls to the Lok Sabha and Legislative Assemblies only. While a high-level committee led by former president Ram Nath Kovind had also proposed holding the municipality and panchayat polls along with the national and state elections in a phased manner, the Cabinet decided not to touch the subject currently. The Constitution Amendment Bill to hold simultaneous polls to the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies will not require ratification by at least 50 per cent of the states, the sources noted. Another Constitution Bill proposed by the Kovind panel was aimed at creating provisions to hold simultaneous elections to municipalities and panchayats, along with the elections to the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies, by inserting a new Article 324A. It would have required ratification by half of the State Assemblies.



File photo: PTI

But the Union Cabinet has kept the local body polls out of as of now. The second Bill will be an ordinary one to amend provisions in three laws dealing with Union Territories that have Legislative Assemblies, Puducherry, Delhi and Jammu and Kashmir, to align the terms of these Houses with other legislative Assemblies and the Lok Sabha as proposed in the Constitution Amendment Bill. The statutes it proposes to amend are the Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi Act-1991, the Government of Union Territories Act-1963 and the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act-2019. The proposed Bill will be an

ordinary legislation, not requiring a change in the Constitution and will also not need ratification by the states. The Government is keen on holding wider consultations on bills that are likely to be referred to a parliamentary committee. The sources said the Government also wants to consult the speakers of various state legislative Assemblies through the committee. Moving ahead with its 'One Nation, One Election' plan, the Government in September accepted the recommendations of the high-level committee for holding simultaneous polls for the Lok Sabha, state Assemblies and local bodies in a phased manner. In its report submitted to the

Government in March, just before the general election was announced, the panel recommended implementing 'One Nation, One Election' in two phases. While the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its allies are pushing for simultaneous polls, several opposition parties have opposed the idea. The Government is of the view that simultaneous polls will reduce expenditure in the long run and different parts of the country will not be under the Model Code of Conduct throughout the year due to various polls. Simultaneous polls were held in the country between 1951 and 1967. The concept of simultaneous elections has featured in many reports and studies since 1983, essentially

implying a return to the previous practice of conducting polls concurrently. Congress reiterated its opposition to the very idea of simultaneous polls and accused the Government of trying to divert attention from "questions being raised on the electoral integrity of the democratic system".

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### ELECTIONS FOR THE LOK SABHA AND ALL STATE ASSEMBLIES CAN BE HELD TOGETHER:

- For synchronising the Lok Sabha and Assembly elections, the President shall notify the date of the first sitting of the Lok Sabha after a general election as the "appointed date".
- Tenure of all State Assemblies formed via polls after the "appointed date" and before the expiry of the full term of the Lok Sabha will only be for the period ending up to the subsequent parliamentary polls. After this one-time transitory measure, all Lok Sabha and Assembly polls will be held simultaneously.
- Fresh elections could be held to constitute a new Lok Sabha in the event of a hung House or a no-confidence motion or any such event.
- Where fresh elections are held for the House of the People (Lok Sabha), the tenure of the House will be "only for the unexpired (remaining) term of the immediately preceding full term of the House".
- When fresh elections are held for state legislative Assemblies, then such new Assemblies — unless sooner dissolved — shall continue up to the end of the full term of the Lok Sabha.



AAP National Convener Arvind Kejriwal launches the 'Mukhya Mantri Mahila Samman Yojna' to give a monthly assistance of Rs 1,000 to women in Delhi. Photos: Ranjan Dimri/The Pioneer

## Eye on Polls, Kejriwal announces Mukhya Mantri Mahila Samman Yojna

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

With the Assembly polls drawing closer, after giving five 'revdis' (freebies) including free DTC bus rides to women, Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) national convener Arvind Kejriwal on Thursday announced his sixth freebie, of giving monthly assistance of Rs 1,000 to women in Delhi each month, under the 'Mukhya Mantri Mahila Samman' Yojna. He also promised the amount would be raised to Rs 2,100 if the AAP government returned to power. The scheme was approved by the Delhi Cabinet despite objections by the Planning Department and Finance Department. The scheme needs Rs 4,560 Crore annually for the year 2025-26. The scheme was initially announced in the 2024-25 Budget with an allocation of Rs 2,000 Crore. The scheme, however, seemed to have hit the bureaucratic

logjam with the Finance department flagging budgetary constraints. The scheme is on the lines of 'Majhi Ladki Bahin Yojana' in Maharashtra, 'Ladli Behna Yojna' in Madhya Pradesh, 'Grahalexmi' scheme of Kerala, 'Kalaigari Magalir Urumi' of Tamil Nadu and 'Laxmir Bhandar' of West Bengal that played a major role for the ruling party to defeat anti-incumbency factor. Addressing a press conference along with Chief Minister Atishi, Kejriwal announced the Delhi Cabinet has approved the scheme and women can begin their registration from Friday. However, he clarified the elections are likely to be announced soon and therefore the money could be credited in beneficiaries' accounts only after the polls as the date for the crucial polls would be announced in the next 10 to 15 days.

Delhi Chief Minister Atishi, meanwhile, said if the Model Code of Conduct comes into force after January 13, the first installment will be transferred into the bank accounts of eligible women before elections. The Planning Department in its noting said that as against the estimated Revenue Receipts of Rs 65034.69 Crore during 2024-25, total expenditure of Rs 77700 crore (including Expenditure on Programs/ Projects and Other Expenditure) is projected and the gap between receipts and total expenditure i.e. deficit is proposed to be covered by 'NSSF Loan' and unspent balance. As the opening balance is about exhausted, therefore, implementation of proposed new scheme involves huge amount of funds i.e. Rs 4560 crore through Loan is not appropriate and good for the financial health of the Government.

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## No surveys, suits related to Places of Worship Act till hearing over: SC

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

In an important development, the Supreme Court on Thursday restrained all courts from entertaining fresh lawsuits and passing any effective interim or final orders in pending cases seeking survey or to reclaim religious places, especially mosques and dargahs. Observing the court couldn't decide the matter without the Centre's response, the Bench comprising Chief Justice Sanjiv Khanna and Justices Sanjay Kumar and KV Viswanathan asked the Government to file its reply to the pleas and cross petitions in four weeks. It also granted four weeks to other parties to file their rejoinder after the Centre filed its reply. "As the matter is sub-judice in this court, we deem it appropriate that no fresh suit would be registered and proceedings are undertaken till further orders of this court," the CJ-led Bench said. The order stalls proceedings in about 18 lawsuits filed by various Hindu parties seeking survey to ascertain original religious character of 10 mosques including Gyanvapi at Varanasi, Shahi Idgah Masjid at Mathura and Shahi Jama Masjid at Sambhal where four persons' lives were



snuffed out in clashes. The special Bench was hearing about six petitions, including the lead one filed by lawyer Ashwini Upadhyay and BJP leader Subramanian Swamy, challenging various provisions of the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991. The 1991 law prohibits conversion of any place of worship and provides for the maintenance of the religious character of any place of worship as it existed on August 15, 1947. However, the dispute relating to Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid at Ayodhya was kept out of its purview. There are several cross petitions which seek strict implementation of the 1991 law to maintain communal harmony and to preserve the present status of mosques, sought to be reclaimed by Hindus on the ground that they were temples before

invaders razed them. The Bench made it clear that it would be examining the "vires (legality), contours and ambit" of the 1991 Law and it was imperative to ask other courts to "stay off their hands" till it passed any further orders. "In pending suits, the courts will not pass any effective interim or final order, including order of survey, till further orders," the Bench said. Senior advocate J Sai Deepak, appearing for a Hindu party, opposed the order restraining all other courts and said the parties should have been heard before such a direction. The CJ said it was quite natural to ask courts to not to pass any order as the Supreme Court was hearing the larger issue. The Bench said if parties insisted then, the matter could be sent to a High Court. "Can the trial courts overreach the Supreme Court," asked the Bench and said the apex court was already dealing with the validity of the law. Notably, the Bench had issued notice to parties, including the Centre, on the lead petition in September, 2022. The Bench also appointed nodal counsel for assisting it in the hearing on the pleas which would be listed after eight weeks.

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## All is not well in the House

DEEPAK KUMAR JHA ■ NEW DELHI

In a peculiar move, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) on Thursday jumped to the Well, and aisle of the Rajya Sabha protesting against the Opposition, who too were on their feet, trading charges over a no-trust motion brought against Chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar. While a legislative business was scheduled to be tabled by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman when the upper house resumed post lunch, BJP MPs immediately raised slogans on the allegations of the Congress leadership's "links" with billionaire investor George Soros. Though Lok Sabha after morning two adjournments resumed post lunch and continued till late evening smoothly discussing a Bill on Disaster Management Amendment Bill, Rajya Sabha witnessed yet another 12th day of ruckus, and this time members of the Treasury Benches were more aggressive than the Opposition who until last week were on their feet. As Dhankhar rejected notices by the Opposition when the House started in the morning amidst sloganeering by the Congress. Leader of House Union minister JP Nadda rose to speak and strongly condemned Congress president, and Leader of Opposition Mallikarjun Kharge for criticising the Chairman at a Press conference outside the House on Wednesday. Citing a rule, Nadda said questioning or criticising a ruling of the Chairman amounts to contempt of both the House and the Chair. "At a press conference on Wednesday, Khargeji criticised the Chairman. This is objectionable and condemnable. It sets a wrong precedent.



Union Minister Giriraj Singh staged a protest over Congress leader Sonia Gandhi's alleged links with an organisation funded by the George Soros Foundation. PTI

This needs to be condemned by one and all," Nadda said. Refuting Kharge's allegation made at the press conference that he was not given an opportunity to speak in the House, he said letters were written by the Chairman to the Leader of Opposition (LOP) time and again, asking him to participate and come to the Chairman's chamber. But Kharge did not go to the Chairman's chamber and also did not attend the last meeting of the Business Advisory Committee, he said. "The Congress has even tried to demean the constitutional post by criticising 'the Chair as a cheerleader' on its official social media handle", Nadda pointed out. Nadda then gave ammunition to the Congress as soon as he touched upon the relationship between George Soros and (Congress leader) Sonia Gandhi who were present in the House triggering a

protest by the Opposition leaders. The Chairman gave the floor to Kharge to respond to Nadda's remarks but the Congress leader could not speak much as the members of the treasury benches were on their feet, sloganeering. "They want to divert attention from the main issue," Kharge said amid intense sloganeering from the treasury benches. Kharge urged the Chair to bring the House in order, but Dhankhar adjourned the proceedings till 2 pm. As the House reassembled at 2 pm, the Trinamool Congress (TMC) sought permission to raise a point of order on the Bangladesh issue to which the Chair said it was not a point of order prompting the party members to raise slogans. Dhankhar then asked former prime minister HD Deve Gowda to speak, however his speech was lost in the din.

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## NDMC presents surplus budget of ₹463.40 Crore

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

In a big relief to the residents of New Delhi, the New Delhi Municipal Council (NDMC) did not hike the property tax rate in Lutyn's Delhi. The NDMC budget proposal tabled in the council, proposes to 'setting up a 'Veerangna Museum' by Comprehensive Conservation of Gole Market Heritage Building and its adjoining areas, night/staggered timing of cleaning of public spaces, new design of school uniforms, tablets for students, smart parking, mist spray kits on poles for clean air and two



Photos: Ranjan Dimri/The Pioneer

foot over bridges at AIIMS Gate No.1, Aurobindo Marg and Delhi High Court near Gate No.5. Presenting a surplus budget of Rs Rs 463.40 Crore projected in 2025-26, the NDMC chairman Keshav Chandra announced that there will not be any hike in the current rates of property tax for the year 2025-26. The council is expecting to collect Property Tax of Rs. 1150 Crore in Revised Estimates 2024-25 and Rs. 1290 Crore in BE 2025-26. According to the budget document, the total receipts of the Budget Estimates (BE) 2025-26 are Rs. 5770.60 Crore against Rs. 5319.75 Crore provided in Revised Estimate 2024-25. The total actual receipts in 2023-24 were Rs. 5005.05 Crore. The BE 2025-26 for the revenue receipts are Rs. 5100.32 Crore against Rs. 4730.31 Crore provided in RE 2024-25 and actual of Rs. 4417.12 Crore in 2023-24.

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## Grandmaster D Gukesh is youngest-ever world champion

PTI ■ SINGAPORE

Indian Grandmaster D Gukesh on Thursday became the youngest World Chess Champion at 18 years, after beating title-holder Ding Liren in the last game of a nerve-wracking showdown to herald a new era of dominance for the country's chess players. Taking forward the incredible legacy of the great Viswanathan Anand, Gukesh became only the second Indian to clinch the coveted prize after the iconic player, who owned the crown five times in his career. After settling into "semi-retirement", the 55-year-old Anand, incidentally, played a pivotal role in shaping Gukesh at his chess academy in Chennai. Gukesh secured the requisite 7.5 points as against 6.5 of his Chinese rival after winning the 14th and last classical time control game of the match that seemed headed for a draw for most part. As winner, he will walk away with a whopping USD 1.3 million (approx Rs 11.03 Crore) from the



India's D Gukesh reacts after beating title-holder China's Ding Liren in the 14th and last game of the FIDE World Chess Championship 2024, in Singapore. PTI

2.5 million prize purse. "I was dreaming this moment for the last 10 years. I am happy that I realised the dream (and made it) into reality," the soft-spoken Chennai-lad told reporters after the historic triumph here. "I got a bit emotional because I was not expecting to win. But then I got a chance to press on," he added. The triumph was expectedly hailed across India with Prime Minister Narendra Modi hailing it as "historic and exemplary". "This is the result of his unparalleled talent, hard work and unwavering determination," PM Modi posted on X. The reticent teenager grinned widely and raised his arms in celebration after the victory, a stark contrast from the poker face he usually sports while playing. Even on Thursday, when the analysts had proclaimed that the match, in all likelihood, would go into a tie-breaker, Gukesh's face hardly gave anything away as he gained the upper-hand.

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## Centre needs 2,000 more IAS, IPS!

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Centre, on Thursday, informed the Parliament about a shortage of Government officers at the top level, mentioning that there are 1,316 and 586 vacant posts of Indian Administrative Service (IAS) and Indian Police Service (IPS). Union Minister Jitendra Singh said that, out of the total sanctioned strength of 6,858 IAS, there were 5,542 officers in-position, as on January 1, 2024, in a written reply to the Rajya Sabha. There were 4,469 IPS officers working against their sanctioned strength of 5,055, Singh, the Minister of State for Personnel told the RS. Of the 1,316 vacant posts of

IAS, 794 were meant for direct recruitment, and 522 were promotion posts, he said. Of the 586 vacant IPS posts, 209 were of direct recruitment, and 377 were promotion posts, the Minister said. There are 2,151 Indian Forest Service (IFS) officers in-position, against their sanctioned strength of 3,193, Singh said. Of the 1,042 vacant IFS posts, 503 were for direct recruitment and 539 promotion posts, he added. The IAS, IPS and IFS officers are selected through the Civil Services examination conducted by the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) annually. The minister, also shared details of appointments made to IAS, IPS and IFS from General, Scheduled Castes (SCs),

Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) during the last five years. During the 2022 civil services examination (CSE) year, 75 General, 45 OBC, 29 SC and 13 ST appointments were made in the IAS. Similarly, 83 General, 53 OBC, 31 SC and 13 ST were appointed in the IPS during the same period. A total of 43 General, 51 OBC, 22 SC and 11 ST appointments were made in the IFS during CSE 2024, according to the data shared by the minister. The Government also stated that Central ministries and departments are directed from time-to-time to fill up vacancies in a time-bound manner.

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# City freezing at 4.5 degrees, lowest of season

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Cold-wave conditions have gripped north Indian states, including the national capital which is currently freezing at 4.5 degrees Celsius, the lowest of the season. The India Meteorological Department (IMD) issued a 'cold wave' alert till Friday. The forecast predicts cold wave conditions to persist at isolated places until the weekend. The Safdarjung weather station recorded this low at 8:30 AM, which is four degrees below the seasonal average. This drop in temperature follows a 0.4-degree decrease in the 24-hour average, continuing a cold wave that has gripped the city for the second consecutive day. At the Palam weather station, the minimum temperature was recorded at 6 degrees Celsius, which

is three degrees below normal. This station also noted a slight drop of 0.2 degrees in the 24-hour average temperature. The minimum temperature at the Pusa and Ayanagar stations was reported to be 3.2 degree Celsius and 3.8 degree Celsius, respectively. Meanwhile, the maximum temperature during the day was recorded at 22.2 degrees Celsius, 0.8 degrees below normal, the IMD said. Delhi will continue to reel under cold wave conditions for the coming days, according to the India Meteorological Department (IMD) forecast. The Met Office has issued a yellow warning for Friday and Saturday, and forecast that cold wave conditions will persist in isolated places in Delhi. Cold, northwesterly winds up to 16 kmph are likely to blow during the next two days.



According to the India Meteorological Department (IMD), the minimum temperatures in early December across the national capital have been recorded below 5 degrees Celsius for the first time in 14 years. IMD said the last time the minimum temperature dipped below 5 degree Celsius was on December 6, 1987, at 4.1 degree Celsius. On December 11, 1996, the minimum temperature was 2.3 degree Celsius. Delhi recorded a minimum temperature of 4.9 degrees Celsius on Wednesday. IMD defines cold wave conditions to occur when actual temperatures dip below 4.1 degree Celsius or when departures are more than 4.4 degree Celsius in plains, provided the normal minimum is less than or equal to 10 degree

Celsius. The weather department has advised people to wear several layers of loose fitting, light weight; warm woolen clothing. It also advised to cover your head, neck, hands and toes adequately as majority of heat loss occurs through these body parts. It further stated that an increased likelihood of various illnesses like flu, running/stuffy nose or nosebleed, which usually set in or get aggravated due to prolonged exposure to cold. "Do not ignore shivering. It is the first sign that the body is losing heat. Get Indoors," it added. The Air Quality Early Warning System (AQEWS) predicts that Delhi's air quality will remain in the "poor" category until at least Saturday. A bulletin released on Thursday evening stated: "The

air quality is likely to stay 'poor' from Thursday to Saturday, with the outlook for the next six days also indicating 'poor' air quality." A dip in temperatures prevents the dispersal of pollutants, while an increase in wind speed is favourable. Smog and mist are likely on Friday morning, with a mainly clear sky during the day. Smog and mist are expected again in the evening and night. Delhi's air quality remained in the "poor" category, with a 24-hour average AQI of 288. Out of 38 monitoring stations, 20 recorded AQI in the "very poor" category, while the remaining stations reported air quality in the "poor" category, according to data from the Sameer app. The cold wave has also hit other states like Rajasthan, Punjab, Haryana, and others.

# Kejriwal is wizard of corruption: BJP

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi BJP on Thursday launched a sharp attack on AAP Convener and former Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal on the 'Mahila Samman Rashi', calling it "biggest lie of this century". Delhi BJP President Virendra Sachdeva labelled Arvind Kejriwal a "wizard of corruption," questioning why the AAP government in Punjab, which promised Mahila Samman Rashi before assembly elections, has failed to deliver even after two years in power. Sachdeva stated that before the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, Kejriwal collected forms from Delhi women and promised a grant of Rs1,000 starting September. "However, no funds have been distributed to date," he said, accusing Kejriwal of repeating the same tactics with yet another election approaching and calling it a



ploy to mislead women with false assurances. He questioned why Kejriwal delayed cabinet approval for 10 months after initially announcing the grant in February. Highlighting the BJP's achievements, he emphasized that the public trusts only Prime Minister Modi's guarantees. "We have successfully implemented the Women's Honor Grant in

sewage systems, and clean drinking water. He claimed that Kejriwal would likely blame the Lieutenant Governor for delays in disbursing funds, just as he did with the bus marshals issue. Sachdeva alleged that Kejriwal intentionally creates legal hurdles to play the blame game and avoid accountability. Leader of Opposition in Delhi Assembly Vijendra Gupta stated that misleading the public with false promises before every election and then forgetting them afterward has become a habit for Arvind Kejriwal. Gupta mentioned that before the 2022 Punjab Assembly elections and the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, Kejriwal made false promises to women in Punjab of providing Rs1100 per month. "However, the Punjab government has yet to deliver any money to the women there, who are now running

around the offices of the Aam Aadmi Party-led government in frustration," he said. The BJP MLA said that on 4 November, he had written a letter to Chief Minister Atishi, reminding her of Kejriwal's earlier promise and demanding immediate financial assistance of Rs1000 for Delhi's women. "However, Atishi neither responded to the letter nor took any steps to provide the aid. Now, with elections approaching, Kejriwal has floated a new false promise of Rs 2100 in financial assistance to mislead women once again," he said. Gupta reminded that in March this year, just before the Lok Sabha elections, the AAP government announced Rs1000 per month for women. He questioned, "Why, despite the announcement, no money has been disbursed even after 10 months."

# EC emphasises need for rigorous compliance with instructions while updating voter list in city

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Election Commission (EC) told its poll machinery in Delhi on Thursday to ensure a revision and updating of the electoral rolls, in accordance with statutory provisions, with the involvement of political parties. The commission emphasised the need for rigorous compliance with its instructions while updating the voter list in Delhi, where elections are due early next year. The sources said the poll panel has told officials in Delhi that representatives of political parties should be involved in the electoral roll revision process with "fullest transparency and disclosures". It has said that all complaints and grievances from the political parties should be resolved promptly and factually. The Delhi chief electoral officer and other officials concerned were also instructed



that the lists of claims and objections must be shared with the political parties on a weekly basis and published on the CEO and district electoral officer websites. Additionally, no deletions are allowed without conducting a field verification and providing the electors with a notice to ensure that they have an opportunity for a hearing, the EC has told the CEO and his officials. The officials have been directed to look into the issues raised by the political parties

with regard to the revision of the electoral rolls and submit factual details for a further review by the commission. This comes against the backdrop of an Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) delegation meeting the poll authority on Wednesday to urge it to halt any deletion of voters' names from the electoral rolls ahead of the Delhi Assembly election. The term of the Delhi Assembly ends on February 23 and the polls are likely to be held in February itself.

# AAP convener writes to CEC hoping poll body would fulfill its 'assurances' with action

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

A day after meeting the Election Commission officials over vote deletion issue, AAP convener Arvind Kejriwal on Thursday wrote to Chief Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar hoping the poll body will fulfil its 'assurances' with necessary action. Earlier on Wednesday, Kejriwal led a delegation of the AAP in the meeting with the election commissioners to urge them for not undertaking any mass deletion of voters names before the Delhi Assembly polls. In his letter to the chief election commissioner, Kejriwal thanked the Election Commission for hearing concerns over "threat of mass deletions of voters names" in Delhi ahead of the assembly elections. "We were all reassured by your commitment to uphold the sanctity of the electoral



process and to safeguard the right to vote of each and every voter in Delhi," said Kejriwal citing "assurances", including "no mass deletion of votes in any assembly constituency until the Delhi Assembly polls", given to the delegation. He also cited various other "assurances", including no deletion based on lists furnished by individuals, field enquiry by the election officials in the presence of representatives of the political

# All-women panel elected at JNU to three seats reserved for teachers in EC

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

In a first at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, an all-women panel has been elected to the three seats reserved for teachers in the Executive Council (EC), the varsity's teachers body said on Thursday. Previously, these seats have seen one or, at most, two women representatives, the JNUTA said. "Women in all three posts is a first. Earlier, it was usually one or two," a member of the JNU Teachers' Association (JNUTA) said. The newly elected members include Professor Chirashree Das Gupta from the Centre for the Study of Law and Governance, Associate Professor Veena Hariharan from the School of Arts and Aesthetics, and Assistant Professor Santana Khanikar from the Centre for International Politics, Organisation, and



Disarmament in the School of International Studies. The election for Teacher's Representatives to the EC was held on December 9, with an impressive voter turnout of over 90 per cent, as 634 faculty members cast their ballots, as per the JNUTA. According to the results, Gupta secured 141 votes in the professor category, Hariharan won with 84 votes in the associate professor category, and Khanikar received 121 votes in the assistant professor category.

Representing the JNUTA, the all-women panel focused its campaign on key issues such as restoring and strengthening institutional norms and practices that respect teachers' dignity, acknowledge their contributions, and ensure their active participation in university governance. They have pledged to address concerns related to Career Advancement Scheme (CAS) promotions and probation, among other pressing matters. JNU's EC, the highest decision-making body of the university, comprises 14 members, including the Vice-Chancellor as Chair and the Registrar as Secretary. While four deans hold permanent positions, other members are selected by rotation. Three seats are reserved for teachers, with one each for a professor, associate professor, and assistant professor, elected through direct voting.

# LG approves conversion of 11 temporary Welfare Officer/Probation Officer posts in WCD Department to permanent positions

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi Lt Governor (LG) V K Saxena has approved the conversion of 11 temporary Welfare Officer/Probation Officer posts in the Women and Child Development (WCD) Department to permanent positions, Raj Niwas said on Thursday. Giving details, officials said Saxena, a strong advocate for permanent jobs over temporary or ad-hoc positions in government, in a significant stride towards strengthening child protection services in Delhi gave this nod. These crucial roles, categorized as Group B posts under Level 6 of the pay matrix (Rs 35,400 - Rs 1,12,400), were established in 2018 to bolster the implementation of the Juvenile Justice (Care & Protection of Children) Act, 2015 to address the complex



challenges faced by vulnerable children in the Delhi. The Finance Department, in accordance with OM dated 13.08.2020 had recommended 11 posts of Welfare Officer/Probation Officer for conversion into permanent posts. The WCD Department had initially sought the conversion of 12 temporary posts. However, after careful consideration, the Finance Department recommended the conversion of 11 posts, with one post being abolished due to prolonged vacancy.

# LG addresses culmination of silver jubilee celebrations and foundation day at GGSIPU

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi Lieutenant Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena said on Thursday that he has faced various allegations and personal attacks during his tenure, but these challenges have never deterred him from making strong decisions, even if they attract "unjustified" criticism. Addressing the culmination of the silver jubilee celebrations and the foundation day of Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University in Delhi, he emphasised that his commitment to working for the city's betterment has remained steadfast, despite obstacles. "Remember, making decisions that positively impact society is not easy. You will encounter unjustified criticism and challenges from those with vested interests in maintaining the status quo. "There is a saying: 'When making big decisions, it is natural to feel afraid, but choosing not to act out of fear is the wrong move.'" Saxena told the



students. The L-G claimed that over the past two-and-a-half years, there have been "numerous attempts to stop me from doing the work I believe is good". "I was subjected to various allegations and personal attacks. But my commitment to working for the betterment of Delhi and its residents remained strong. That is why I never stopped and continued to work towards my goal." Emphasising the role of the youth in shaping the country's future, Saxena said, "You must be persistent and unwavering in your efforts to achieve your goals, always working in the larger interest of the people." "You carry the responsibility of contributing to the nation's growth and its standing on the global stage. Let us hope that this university remains a catalyst for hope and change." The occasion also saw the announcement of a dual degree programme in Master of Science in Digital Production for Sustainable Manufacturing, in collaboration with AGH University of Krakow, Poland, and plans

to establish GGSIPU's offshore campus in the Republic of Guinea. Highlighting the growth of the university, its vice-chancellor Mahesh Verma said the dual degree programme offers students the opportunity to pursue two semesters in Poland and two in India. Students will have to pay only the Indian fee for the programme, making international education accessible, the university said in a statement. Several infrastructure projects were also inaugurated during the ceremony, including an amphitheatre with 1,000 seating capacity, a health centre and a guest house for visiting faculty. Facilities such as an Industrial Robotics Lab, a state-of-the-art TV studio, a community radio station and an extension counter of Indian Bank at the East Campus were also launched. The event was also attended by the L-G's Principal Secretary Ashish Kundra and Nandini Paliwal, the secretary for higher education.

# Police identifies more than 20 illegal Bangladeshi immigrants on second day of its verification drive

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Delhi Police on Thursday identified more than 20 people on the second day of its verification drive against illegal Bangladeshi immigrants in the national capital, police sources said. The people reside in the Seemapuri area of east Delhi, they added. Teams from the different police stations are visiting slum areas and Delhi's Kalindi Kunj, Shaheen Bagh and Jamia Nagar to check voter IDs and Aadhar Cards of suspected Bangladeshi immigrants, an officer said. The Delhi LG Secretariat on Tuesday directed the chief secretary and police commissioner of Delhi to launch a two-month special drive to identify and take strict action against illegal Bangladeshi immigrants residing in the national capital. "Under our door to door verification, teams are collecting data like Aadhar card number, voter ID card numbers of the



suspected people. After data collecting, a record will be maintained which will be sent to Foreigners Regional Registration Office (FRRO) for proper verification," a senior police officer said. The officer further said beside sending data to FRRO, police will also personally verify to know if the Aadhar card is fake or genuine and enrolled on which year. Police said some of the residents were identified as suspects and there are possibilities of sending them to the detention centre after the completion of their legal process. Another senior police officer said when teams are checking data by visiting personally, they are also recording the entire conversation using their mobile phones to keep proper record. "Beside checking their identifications, we are also checking if anyone is involved in criminal activities by checking police records," said the officer. Delhi has 15 police districts and the directions were issued to all the district heads to conduct the drive for two months, the officer said.

# India's air pollution cost 1.5 Million lives annually, claims new study

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Long-term exposure to fine particulate matter (PM2.5) pollution, a significant environmental and health hazard across India, has claimed a staggering 1.5 million lives reported annually between 2009 and 2019, as per a recent study published in The Lancet Planetary Health journal.

country lives in areas with PM2.5 levels exceeding the WHO recommended threshold of five micrograms per cubic meter for a yearly average. The study by the Consortium for Climate, Health, and Air Pollution Research in India (CHAIR-India) also highlighted that nearly 82 per cent of the population, or about 1.1 billion people, resided in regions where the PM2.5 levels surpassed the Indian National Ambient Air Quality Standards, which set a limit of 40 microns per cubic meter annually. PM2.5 refers to fine particulate mat-

ter measuring less than 2.5 microns in diameter, and exposure to these pollutants is linked to a range of health problems, including respiratory and cardiovascular diseases. PM2.5 air pollution comes from the burning of fossil fuels and biomass in sectors such as transportation, residential homes, coal-burning power plants, industrial activities, and wildfires. These emissions not only impact people's health but also contribute to the greenhouse gases that are warming the planet. The study observed a significant correlation between PM2.5 pollution



A commuter walks to their office amid low visibility due to smog in New Delhi.

levels and mortality rates, with a 10-micron per cubic meter increase in yearly pollution linked to an 8.6 per cent rise in annual deaths. The researchers from CHAIR-India, a global consortium of academic institutions including Ashoka University, Karolinska Institutet (Sweden), Harvard University, and Ben-Gurion University (Israel) used data from satellite observations and over 1,000 ground-monitoring stations, and also gathered death statistics from the Civil Registration System.

spread nature of PM2.5 exposure across the country. While the lowest annual PM2.5 level recorded in Lower Subansiri district, Arunachal Pradesh, at 11.2 microns per cubic meter in 2019, the highest levels were recorded in Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh, and Delhi, where PM2.5 concentrations soared to 119 microns per cubic meter in 2016. The study reveals the pressing need for robust air quality monitoring and stricter pollution control measures in India, given the country's large and consistent exposure to harmful air pollutants.

PTI The findings underscore the wide-

## Shah to visit Naxal-affected areas of Chhattisgarh



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Union Home Minister Amit Shah will be on a three-day visit to Chhattisgarh's Naxal-affected areas from December 14 during which he will review the law-and-order situation in the state and interact with surrendered Naxals and locals, sources said on Thursday. Last week, Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Vishnu Dev Sai Shah here and conveyed to him that the Bastar and Kondaogon districts, once infested by Naxals, were completely free from the extremists and operations were on to wipe them out from other areas. The Union home minister will be on a visit to Chhattisgarh from December 14-16 during which he will participate in various programmes related to

security and peace, sources said. Besides chairing a security review meeting in Raipur, Shah will also present the President's Colour Award to the Chhattisgarh Police. He will travel to Jagdalpur, where he will hold interaction with surrendered Naxals, locals and intellectuals, they said. The Union home minister will also attend the closing ceremony of the Bastar olympics and pay tributes to martyrs in Jagdalpur besides meeting the families of the victims of left-wing extremism. Shah will visit security camps and oversee developmental works besides having lunch with jawans of security forces there. 'President's Colour' is expected to boost the morale of Chhattisgarh Police after their excellent work in tackling the Naxals over the years, the sources said. This medal will give new impetus to the sense of duty of these police personnel who are committed to the service and security of the people of the state, they said. "Under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, operations are being conducted against Naxalism with a 'Zero Tolerance' policy and ultra-modern methods," a source said.

## Bihar registers officials on skill building platform

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Bihar government has boarded over 2.4 lakh officials on an online training platform, according to an official statement issued on Thursday. Under the Mission Karmayogi initiative, an MoU was signed on October 7 between the Capacity Building Commission (CBC), Karmayogi Bharat (a special purpose vehicle), and the Bihar Institute of Public Administration and Rural Development (BIPARD). This agreement aims to strengthen the capabilities of government officials and employees in Bihar so that all public servants can become role-based instead of rule-based, said the statement issued by the Personnel Ministry. This will be achieved through the iGOT (integrated government online training) Karmayogi platform, which is a flagship digital initiative aimed at empowering government servants. It will also function as a robust e-learning hub, the statement said. development for Bihar's civil servants, ultimately ensuring better public service delivery, the statement said.

## Road accidents on the rise, says Gadkari

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Union Road Transport and Highways Minister Nitin Gadkari on Thursday said here "When I go to attend international conferences where there is a discussion on road accidents, I try to hide my face." He also underlined that he had set a target to reduce accidents by 50 per cent when he first took charge as the Road Transport and Highways Minister. During a discussion on road accidents in Lok Sabha, "Forget about reducing the number of accidents, I have no hesitation to admit that it has increased. When I go to attend international conferences where there is a discussion on road accidents, I try to hide my face." He was replying to a supplementary question during the Question Hour. The minister said for things to improve



The minister added, "When I go to attend international conferences where there is a discussion on road accidents, I try to hide my face."

human behaviour in India has to change, society has to change and rule of law has to be respected. Gadkari said he and his family met with a major accident some years ago and he needed to be hospitalised for a long time. "By the grace of God, I and my

family were saved. So I have my personal experience of accidents." He said parking of trucks on road is a major cause for accidents and many of the trucks don't follow lane discipline. The minister said he has ordered for following international standards in

making bus body in India. There has to be a hammer near a bus window so that it can be broken easily in case of accidents, he said. Earlier, Gadkari said road accidents claim 1.78 lakh lives annually in the country and 60 per cent of the victims are in the age group of 18-34 years. He said while Uttar Pradesh leads the chart among states, Delhi tops the list for cities. In UP, over 23,000 people (or 13.7 per cent of the total deaths due to road accidents) died, followed by Tamil Nadu with over 18,000 (10.6 per cent) deaths. In Maharashtra, the figure stands at over 15,000 (or nine per cent of the total deaths), followed by Madhya Pradesh with over 13,000 (eight per cent) deaths. Delhi leads the city chart with over 1,400 deaths, followed by Bengaluru with 915 deaths. Jaipur registers 850 deaths due to road accidents.

## CISF security personnel sanctioned for Noida and Navi Mumbai airports

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Union government has sanctioned a combined strength of more than 2,800 Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) personnel to guard two soon-to-be operational international airports in Noida and in Maharashtra's Navi Mumbai, official sources said Thursday. The ministry of home affairs (MHA), under whose command the CISF works, had sanctioned 1,840 posts for the Navi Mumbai airport and 1,030 for the Noida International Airport (NIA) in Uttar Pradesh. The total CISF manpower sanctioned for providing a counter-terrorist cover to the two upcoming airports is 2,870. The sanction of the Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) manpower is for the first phase of operationalisation of the two airports. The force's strength will be enhanced once these airports finish phase II, sources said. The security units, to be headed by Deputy Inspector General rank officers, will take charge once the infrastructure to install security gadgets and other logistics get ready at both the facilities. Being developed by the Adani

Group, the Navi Mumbai International Airport project will be completed in five phases and will have a total handling capacity of 9 crore passengers per annum. The first phase will have a capacity to handle 2 crore passengers per annum. Commercial operations at this airport, second in the Mumbai Metropolitan Region after the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj International Airport, are expected to begin by March-April, 2025. The NIA greenfield facility is being built in the Jewar area of Gautam Buddh Nagar district in Uttar Pradesh, about 75 km from Delhi, and will be the national capital region's second international civil aviation facility after the Indira Gandhi International (IGI) Airport. It is also expected to get operational for passenger operations by April next year. The CISF is the national civil aviation security force that guards 68 airports at present. It provides a counter-terrorist cover to these facilities, thronged by lakhs of domestic and international passengers every day. The force frisks passengers, checks their baggage and undertakes anti-sabotage, counter-terrorist and counter-hijack checks in coordination with other agencies.

## Sagarika moves privilege motion against Rijiju for derogatory remarks



Ghose said, "Mr. Kiren Rijiju, instead of doing his best to run Parliament smoothly, has chosen to repeatedly insult the Opposition."

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Trinamool Congress' Rajya Sabha MP Sagarika Ghose on Thursday submitted a privilege motion notice against Parliamentary Affairs Minister Kiren Rijiju for making a derogatory remark against opposition leaders in the Upper House. The notice has been signed by 60 leaders from opposition parties, a source said. "Yesterday in the house, addressing the opposition, Mr. Rijiju said you all are not worthy of being in this house... The Minister for Parliamentary Affairs, Mr. Kiren Rijiju,

instead of doing his best to run Parliament smoothly, has chosen to repeatedly insult the opposition," Ghose told reporters. "Rijiju has insulted opposition members and used personal terms both inside and outside Parliament. This is totally unbecoming of the high office he holds and amounts to total misuse of his position," TMC's deputy leader in the Rajya Sabha said. She said she had moved a privilege motion against Rijiju for abusing his office with his "diatribes and unparliamentary language" against opposition. The motion has been signed by senior leaders of all

opposition parties, she added. Opposition MPs are "not worthy of being in the House", Rijiju said on Wednesday while hitting out at opposition parties over their attacks on Vice President and Rajya Sabha Chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar. "If you cannot respect the chair you have no right to be a member of this House," Rijiju said. Sixty MPs from the opposition INDIA bloc on Tuesday submitted a notice in the Rajya Sabha for moving a no-confidence motion against Dhankhar. They have accused him of being "extremely partisan" in his role as the chairman of the Upper House.

## TMC pitches for Didi to lead INDIA

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

The Trinamool Congress (TMC) has said that West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee is more interested in dislodging the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government at the Centre than leading the Indian National Democratic Inclusive Alliance (INDIA). Close on the heels of some senior INDIA leaders advocating Banerjee's cause for leading the opposition alliance, senior TMC leader Kunal Ghosh said that "Mamata Banerjee has made it clear that she is not interested in any 'chair' in Delhi. She is more interested in building an alternative platform which can defeat the BJP." Curiously, instead of dwelling on

the Banerjee's cause that was recently upheld by her party MP Sagarika Ghosh and often discussed in the TMC mouthpiece Jago Bangla, Ghosh tended to shift the fulcrum of discussion on the Congress' failure to lead the Opposition in Haryana, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and more recently Maharashtra saying a time had come when the Congress party should start doing some self-introspection on the causes of its repeated failures. Incidentally the Bengal Chief Minister who has been touring East Midnapore earlier expressed gratitude to the senior INDIA leaders for reposing faith on her but avoided making any assertive statement on the contentious issue. "I am grateful to all the leaders

who have honoured me. I wish good health to all of them. May they be well, may their party be well. May India be well," she said in a brief statement. However voicing her frustration post INDIA's repeated defeats in a number of States as also in Delhi Banerjee had said "I created the 'INDIA' alliance. If those leading it cannot manage it well, then give me a chance. I am ready to lead the alliance from Bengal." Early this week senior INDIA leader and RJD patriarch Lalu Yadav once known for his unwavering faith in Rahul Gandhi said "Mamata Banerjee should be chosen as the leader of the 'INDIA' alliance. There's no point in Congress opposing this. She should be made the leader."

## Fadnavis reaches Delhi for Cabinet expansion talks

TN RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

Maharashtra chief minister Devendra Fadnavis will undertake first-ever expansion of his new Cabinet during the weekend, ahead of the brief three-day winter session beginning in Nagpur on December 16. Ahead of the State Cabinet expansion, Fadnavis met Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Union Ministers Amit Shah, Nitin Gadkari, Rajnath Singh and National BJP president JP Nadda in New Delhi.



ings and standing firm behind Maharashtra. In the last 10 years, with your support Maharashtra is Number 1 in almost every sector and now aims to take this journey of VIKAS to the next level under your leadership and guidance. You have always been an inspiration to crores of BJP Karyakarta like us to work even harder". Talking separately to the media, Fadnavis said: "I had a good meeting with the Prime Minister and issues related to Maharashtra were discussed. He extended full support to the state government". During the meeting with Shah, Fadnavis is understood to have discussed various issues relating

to Maharashtra, including the impending State Cabinet expansion and portfolio allocations. Interacting with the media, Fadnavis said: "Our list of ministers would be finalised by the BJP high-command. On the other hand, Shinde Saheb would take a call on Shiv Sena members to be inducted in the ministry. Ajit Dada Pawar will decide on who will be there from his party in the State Cabinet". Interestingly enough, Fadnavis and deputy chief minister Ajit Pawar are in New Delhi. However, deputy chief minister Eknath Shinde has chosen not to accompany Fadnavis to the national capital. Sources close to Shinde attributed Shinde's decision to accom-

pany Fadnavis to New Delhi is that he is not happy with the portfolio allocations proposed by Fadnavis. For, the ruling BJP is not willing to give important portfolios like Home, Urban Development and Revenue to the Shiv Sena (Shinde), a thing that has not gone well with Shinde who was demanding one or two of the three major portfolios. Asked if Shinde had chosen not to accompany him to the national capital because he was upset with the portfolio allocations proposed by the BJP, Fadnavis said: "My purpose of visit is different...Ajit Dada's purpose and engagements are different...Shinde Saheb has some work in Mumbai."

On his part, Ajit Pawar said that he along with his wife and Rajya Sabha member Sunetra Pawar, NCP Working President Praful Patel and state party president Sunil Tatkar met NCP (SP) supremo Sharad Pawar and his wife Pratibha Pawar. "Today is (Pawar) Saheb's birthday... Tomorrow is Kaki's (Pratibha Patil's) birthday...we all wished them...some relations are beyond politics... (late Congress stalwart and first Chief Minister) Yashwantrao Chavan has taught us how to do cultured politics and we try to follow him," said Pawar. Queried if politics was discussed, Ajit Pawar said: "Pawar Saheb discussed issues related to Maharashtra... right from Parbhani violence to Parliament disruption, state cabinet expansion among others." Meanwhile, Fadnavis, Shinde and Ajit Pawar have reported arrived at a consensus on the size and division of the State Cabinet. Since the Maharashtra Assembly comprises 288 members, there will be a maximum of 43 ministers in the State Cabinet -- a number that accounts for 15 per cent of total members in the lower House of the State Legislature. In the normal course, the BJP will get 21 ministerial berths in the 43-member Cabinet, while the Shinde Shiv Sena is entitled for 12 ministers and the Ajit Pawar-led NCP will have to be satisfied with 10 berths.

## Ajit Doval, Chinese counterpart to hold talks on border issue

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

National Security Advisor(NSA)Ajit Doval and his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi, who is also foreign minister, will discuss later this month here all aspects of the boundary issue between the two nations. The likely meeting under the aegis of Special Representative(SR)talks, will take place as armies of India and China have disengaged a few weeks ago from the Line of Actual Control(LAC)in Ladakh after four years, sources said here on Thursday. The high-level talks between the two Special Representatives will mark the first parleys since the Galwan valley clash in 2020. The previous SR talks were held in December 2019. The upcoming dialogue comes in the wake of recent disengagement of troops from both the sides from friction points at Depsang and Demchok. The parleys may see a breakthrough in the broader resolution of the border dispute. The SR talks are expected to involve multilayered discussions aimed at defining and delineating the LAC more clearly, with the ultimate goal of achieving a lasting resolution. Sources indicate that the outcome of these talks will determine the timeline for the next Corps Commander-level meeting, which will focus on operational issues regarding the ongoing patrolling

and buffer zones to prevent further confrontations. India and China have engaged in a series of military and diplomatic efforts to de-escalate the situation along the LAC since 2020. The SR level talks represent a crucial opportunity for both nations to address their differences, enhance trust, and establish a more stable framework for managing their contested border. The SR talks come days after Defence Minister Rajnath Singh held talks with his Chinese counterpart Admiral Dong Jun in Vientiane, Lao PDR on November 20 on the sidelines of 11th ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus. This was the first meeting of the two Defence Ministers following the recent disengagement agreements, and the meeting of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of BRICS summit. Rajnath highlighted the fact that amicable relations between India and China, the two largest nations in the world, would have positive implications for global peace and prosperity. Considering that both countries are and will continue to remain neighbours, he mentioned that "we need to focus on cooperation rather than conflict". Rajnath called for reflecting on the lessons learnt from the unfortunate border clashes of 2020, take measures to prevent recurrence of such events and safeguard peace and tranquility along the India-China border.

# Mahakumbh 2025 aims to set four Guinness World Records

**BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■**  
PRAYAGRAJ

The Prayagraj Mela Authority has announced an ambitious plan to set four Guinness World Records during Mahakumbh 2025, the world's largest religious gathering, scheduled to begin on January 13. The proposed records include the largest synchronized sweeping drive, the largest e-vehicle parade, the most handprint paintings created in eight hours, and the largest river-cleaning campaign.

The first record attempt will involve 15,000 volunteers participating in a synchronized cleaning drive. ADM (Kumbh Mela) Vivek Chaturvedi said the effort symbolizes environmental stewardship and communal responsibility. "The drive will highlight the spiritual significance of cleanliness and environmental preservation," he added. The second initiative will feature a parade of 1,000 e-rickshaws and electric vehicles, promoting eco-friendly transport. "This initiative underscores Mahakumbh's commitment to sustainable transport solutions, reducing carbon emissions, and improving last-mile connectivity," Chaturvedi stated. The third record will involve 10,000 participants contributing their handprints on canvas, representing unity and diversity. Each print will symbolize the shared spiritual values and collective harmony of Mahakumbh. The final record attempt will



see 300 volunteers cleaning riverbanks at multiple locations. This drive highlights ecological conservation and the spiritual connection between humanity and nature, central themes of the religious gathering. To ensure compliance with Guinness World Records' stringent guidelines, a special coordination team will be formed in collaboration with the Prayagraj Mela Authority. The team will manage logistics, ensure accurate record-keeping, and oversee procedural adherence. "Our team will coordinate with Guinness World Records officials to finalize contracts, interpret performance guidelines, and develop Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs)," Chaturvedi

explained. He emphasized that all processes, from participant registration to event execution, will follow approved guidelines. The records, if achieved, will reinforce Mahakumbh's legacy as a globally significant cultural and spiritual event, combining tradition with environmental consciousness and community engagement. Mahakumbh Mela 2025 is set to be more than just a spiritual event; it promises to be a major economic driver for Uttar Pradesh. The upcoming Mahakumbh expected to generate ₹25,000 crore in revenue for the state. Covering approximately 4,000 hectares, the Mahakumbh is projected to attract 40-45 crore pilgrims, making it the largest religious gathering in the world. The

event's estimated budget stands at ₹6,382 crore, with ₹5,600 crore already allocated for event management and infrastructure development. The ghats of Prayagraj, a key site for devotees and tourists, are being given a grand makeover. On the lines of Kashi's ghats, the UP government is renovating seven prominent ghats along the Ganga and Yamuna rivers to offer a more refined and welcoming experience. The renovation focuses on creating an environment where visitors can comfortably spend time, reflecting the significance of the Kumbh Mela. The project is being carried out by the Construction and Design Division of Jal Nigam at a cost of Rs 11.01 crore.

## PM Modi to lay foundation stone for river linking project in MP

**PTI ■ BHOPAL**

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will lay the foundation stone of the Ken-Betwa river linking project in Madhya Pradesh on December 25, the birth anniversary of former PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee, said Chief Minister Mohan Yadav on Thursday. Yadav was speaking to reporters on the completion of one year of his government in the state. On December 11, 2023, Yadav was formally elected as the BJP legislative party leader and took oath as the CM two days later. "On the 100th birth anniversary of former PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who dreamt of inter-connecting the country's rivers to augment water resources, PM Modi will lay the foundation stone of the ambitious Ken-Betwa National River Linking Project on December 25 in MP's Chhatarpur district," said Yadav. The project to link the Ken and Betwa rivers will benefit Chhatarpur, Panna,



Tikamgarh, Niwadi, Damoh, Shivpuri, Datia, Raisen, Vidisha and Sagar districts of the state, he said. It will provide water for irrigation in 10.62 lakh hectares in the Bundelkhand region, spread across Madhya Pradesh (8.11 lakh hectares) and Uttar Pradesh (2.51 lakh hectares), besides supplying drinking water to 41 lakh population in MP and 21 lakh in UP, he said. MP has also decided to imple-

ment the Parvati-Kalisindh-Chambal river linking project which will benefit Guna, Shivpuri, Sehore, Dewas, Rajgarh, Ujjain, Agar-Malwa, Indore, Shajapur, Mandsaur and Morena districts of the state, said Yadav. This project will provide water for irrigation in 6.13 lakh hectares in MP and PM Modi will lay its foundation stone on December 17 in Jaipur, Yadav said. Yadav said MP will observe

2025 as the 'Industries Year' and Modi will inaugurate the Global Investors Summit, which will be held in Bhopal on February 24-25. Ahead of the investors' meet, the state government has been organising Regional Industry Conclaves across MP and conducting roadshows and conferences in the state and abroad, he said. Because of these joint efforts, the state has received investment proposals worth Rs 4 lakh crore which will generate 3 lakh jobs, he said. The CM said that on the completion of one year of the BJP government in MP, two programmes were launched to highlight the development works of his administration and link more eligible people with welfare schemes. 'Jankalyan Parv' (public welfare festival) and 'Mukhyamantri Jankalyan Abhiyan' (public welfare campaign) will run in December and January. During Janlakyen Parv, to be held between December 11 and December 26, foundation stones of several develop-

## Ramlala's first anniversary to be celebrated over 3 days from January 11

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■**  
AYODHYA

Preparations for the first anniversary of Shri Ramlala's consecration are in full swing, alongside the accelerated construction of the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi temple. Among the temple's five sanctum towers, the pinnacle of the Rang Mandap has been fully completed. Champat Rai, General Secretary of Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust, announced that the temple's first anniversary will be celebrated as per the Hindu calendar on January 11, 2025, corresponding to Paush Shukla Paksha Dwadashi. He said that the consecration of Shri Ramlala was performed on January 22, 2024, according to the Hindu lunar calendar, and its first anniversary falls on January 11, 2025. "All major Hindu festivals such as Janmashtami, Ram Navami, Vivah Panchami, Shivratri, Mauni Amavasya,



Purnima, and Ekadashi are celebrated according to the Hindu calendar, and so will the first anniversary of Shri Ramlala's consecration, Rai said. He added: "To ensure smooth planning, the Trust has formed a four-member committee that will finalize the event details soon." Construction of several temples within the temple complex, including the Saptarishi

Mandir dedicated to Lord Shiva, Surya, Maa Durga, Devi Annapurna, Lord Ganesha, and Hanumanji, has also picked up pace. He added that 18 additional temples are being constructed within the temple complex, with work progressing steadily. The first-floor mandap is nearing completion, where the Ram Darbar will be established.

## After ritual cancelled, bad luck follows Guruvayur temple priest

**KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■ KOCHI**

The cancellation of Udayasthama Pooja at the age-old Lord Krishna Temple at Guruvayur has led to strange and unfortunate happenings. The ritual is a unique worship performed on Ekadashi Days from sunrise (Udaya) to sunset (asthamaana) without break and hundreds of thousands of devotees throng the temple considering it a privilege to offer prayers on that occasion. The Guruvayur Devaswom, the Kerala Government body packed with CPI(M) leaders that administers the temple, describes the Udayasthama Pooja as the most dearest and coveted of all offerings to Lord Krishna. It is believed that Sage Narada accompanied by Srimad Sankaracharya visited Guruvayur Temple on Ekadashi Day. The Bhagavad Gita was advised by Lord Krishna to Arjuna on this day. It is also believed that Melpathur Narayana Bhattathirippadu, Sanskrit scholar par excellence, whose life period was from 1560 to 1603 completed the composition of Narayaneeyam (a poetic work of tribute to Lord Krishna) on Shukla Paksha Ekadasi in the month of Agrayayana which makes it the most auspicious time to get Darshan of the presiding deity. Early this month, the Devaswam issued an order cancelling the Udayasthama Pooja citing problems associated with crowd control. The Government order drew widespread condemnation with Vedic scholars asking the Devaswam to withdraw the decision as the ritual has been observed from time immemorial. Thousands of people throng the temple from all over the country. "Hantha! Bhagyam Jananam" (Oh Lord, How fortunate it is to be born in this temple city) is the catchword in Narayaneeyam, the poetic work eulogizing the virtues of Lord Krishna. Parappanangadi Unnikrishnan Panickar, Kerala's ace Vedic scholar, in a release had



requested the Government not to meddle with the custom and allow the pooja to proceed without trouble. Pandappillil Gopala Menon, Tantrik scholar had sounded alarm bell by forecasting that untoward incidents were bound to happen. The Government's move to do away with the pooja had the concurrence of Chennas Dineshan Namboodirippadu, the Thanthri (chief priest) of the temple for reasons known to him only. The petition filed by a group of devotees was dismissed by a Division Bench of Kerala High Court on late Saturday. Though they approached the apex court challenging the division bench order, it was too late. But what happened on Tuesday turned out to be shocking. A close relation of the Thanthri, who was in the best of her health passed away all of a sudden on Tuesday making Dineshan Namboodirippadu ineligible to enter the temple premise for the next 12 days as he was the one to perform the last rites. "It is one thing that you believe or not in God. But one should never question or challenge age-old rituals as there are reasons behind every pooja performed in temples," said Dr M G Gireshan, an electronics scientist working in a defense laboratory at Hyderabad. Kizhiyedam Raman Namboodiri, second-in-command of the Thanthri, was weeping while he recounted the incidents that followed the post-Kerala High Court decision dismissing the petition by believers. All that Namboodiri could say was "Hantha! Bhagyam Jananam" and "Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna".

## CM Yogi reviews Mahakumbh preparations ahead of Modi's visit

**BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■**  
MAHAKUMBH NAGAR

Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath visited Prayagraj on Thursday to oversee preparations for Prime Minister Narendra Modi's highly anticipated visit on Friday where PM is set to inaugurate projects worth thousands of crores for Mahakumbh 2025. During his visit, CM Yogi conducted a comprehensive ground inspection of Mahakumbh Nagar and key sites, including the Sangam Nose, where the Prime Minister is scheduled to perform rituals. He provided clear directives to officials to ensure smooth execution of the events and seamless arrangements for devotees and dignitaries. Mela Officer Vijay Kiran

Anand briefed CM Yogi on arrangements for the PM's cruise tour, and the Chief Minister provided essential guidelines while emphasizing the need to maintain the Ganga's cleanliness. The Chief Minister also visited several important locations, such as the temporary 100-bed hospital built in Sector One Parade. During his inspection, CM Yogi reviewed critical areas like the Emergency Ward, ICU, OPD, and the operation theatre. The hospital boasts advanced facilities, including AI-powered cameras in the ICU and a state-of-the-art laboratory. Pleased with the innovations, CM Yogi emphasized the need for proper staffing, availability of medicines, and enhanced ventilation to ensure top-notch care for devotees during the



Mahakumbh. The temporary hospital, built with support from the Cantt Board and Medanta doctors, is set to serve as a critical healthcare facility for Mahakumbh 2025, including a 10-bed ICU. CM Yogi expressed satisfaction with the arrangements, urging

officials to ensure efficient functioning. At the Akshay Vat Corridor within the Prayag Fort, CM Yogi inspected the ongoing Smart City development work. He appreciated the corridor's beautification and praised highlights such as the child form statue of Shri

Krishna and the Sapt Rishis' artwork. CM Yogi also visited the Bade Hanuman Mandir Corridor on the Sangam coast, where Phase-1 development is underway by the Prayagraj Development Authority (PDA). After reviewing the progress, he performed aarti and prayed for the well-being of all citizens. He urged the PDA to accelerate work to ensure timely completion of the temple corridor. The CM also visited Akharas in Sector 20, inspecting arrangements at Shri Panchayati Akhara Bada Udasin, Shri Panchayati Akhara Niranjani, and Anand Akhara. He interacted with saints and assured them of his future visit. CM Yogi also reviewed external arrangements at other Akharas to ensure they meet expectations.

Finally, CM Yogi conducted a final inspection at Triveni Marg, Ganga Riverfront Road Jhansi, and Chhatnag Ghat, directing officials to ensure all necessary facilities are in place for the devotees during Mahakumbh 2025. Throughout his visit, CM Yogi was accompanied by Deputy CM Keshav Prasad Maurya, Jal Shakti Minister Swatantrdev Singh, Industrial Development Minister Nand Gopal Gupta Nandi, Tourism Minister Jaiver Singh, former minister and MLA Siddharth Singh, along with other leaders and officials. The meticulous inspections and directives issued by CM Yogi aim to ensure a seamless and spiritually enriching experience for the millions of devotees expected to attend the grand Mahakumbh 2025.

## Need to prepare NRC like document to differentiate Indians, infiltrators: Assam CM

**PTI ■ BHUBANESWAR**

There is a need to prepare an NRC (National Register of Citizens) like document to differentiate Indians and infiltrators, Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said in Puri on Thursday. Speaking to media persons after visiting Jagannath temple at Puri, Sarma said the Assam government on Wednesday decided that one should have his/her name registered in the NRC for obtaining an Aadhaar card. If the applicant's name is not there in the NRC, he/she will not get an Aadhaar card, he said. "I desire that NRC-type documents should be prepared so that we can easily differentiate who are Indians and who are infiltrators," Sarma said. It is difficult to make fencing on the Bangladesh boundary in Assam and West Bengal because many such areas have rivers. However, the boundary can be secured using technology, he stated. "The government of India has introduced technological interventions in Assam and



Tripura. But, the West Bengal government is not fully cooperating. If Bengal cooperates, we can stop infiltration," Sarma said. On the alleged attack on Hindu community in Bangladesh, he said, "It is very unfortunate and a matter of concern. But, I am hopeful that Prime Minister Narendra Modi will definitely take some steps at a diplomatic level for the protection of the Hindu people in Bangladesh." He said the Prime Minister had recently sent Foreign secretary to Bangladesh and hoped that peace would be restored in the country with the efforts made by the PM in a diplomatic way. Slamming the Congress over

the issue, the Assam CM said, "Neither Rahul Gandhi nor the Congress party ever stood with the Hindu community. They will not stand with them in future too. Even many times, communal harmony was disturbed in the country for them." Speaking in favour of the 'one nation, one election' system, he said, "In Assam, the Assembly and Parliament elections are being held at different times. During elections, the developmental works usually hamper almost the entire year." So, the Prime Minister wants to have 'one nation, one election' so that development works would not hamper, he added. To implement it, there is a need to bring amendments to the Constitution with a 2/3rd majority in both houses of Parliament. And, the Prime Minister will surely do it, he claimed. When journalists asked him about the fate of Naveen Patnaik-led BJD, he said, "BJD's era has ended now and the BJP government will remain in Odisha for at least 50 years."

## Widespread rains lash TN

**PTI ■ CHENNAI**

Widespread rains lashed parts of Tamil Nadu on Thursday, prompting authorities to declare a holiday for schools in Chennai and many other districts. With the water-level fast rising in the reservoirs in the state, the Public Works Department officials opened the shutters of two dams in Chennai suburbs and another in Thiruvannamalai district. About 13,000 cusecs water was released from Sathanur dam in Thiruvannamalai, while 3,500 cusecs water from Chembarambakkam dam, and another 1,000 cusecs water was discharged from the Poondi reservoir, as the level of water in these dams dangerously inched towards the full reservoir capacity levels. Following the heavy rainfall warning issued by the IMD, six NDRF teams have been alerted to swing into rescue and relief activity in case of emergency, the government said. It also urged the people in the low-lying areas in the state to remain vigilant and take appropriate action. Overnight rains lashed Chennai and the neighbouring Tiruvallur, Chengelpet and



Kancheepuram, besides Villupuram and some areas in the Cauvery delta region. Following sharp showers, authorities declared a day's holiday for schools in districts, including Chennai, Tiruvallur, Chengelpet, Kancheepuram, Villupuram, Ramanathapuram, Thanjavur, Mayiladuthurai and Cuddalore. The regional weather office has forecast more spells of rain in Chennai, Tiruvallur, Chengelpet and Kancheepuram, Villupuram, Kallakurichi, Tiruvallur, Thanjavur districts in the state, besides the neighbouring union territory Puducherry. In Thiruvannamalai, the Sri Arunachaleswar temple staff and volunteers braved the

downpour to carry the 6.5 feet high copper cauldron (koparai) with the Lord's name on their lips, to place it atop the 2,668 feet high mountain to light the Maha Deepam on December 13 evening. The lighting of the deepam marks the conclusion of the annual 10-day Karthiga deepam festival at the renowned temple. The Bharani deepam will be lit at the temple on Friday morning. Wednesday's Well Marked Low Pressure Area over the Southwest and adjoining Southeast Bay of Bengal brought heavy rain in the southern districts as well. The interior districts in the state have also experienced a heavy spell since this morning.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

## Empowering young innovators

Prime Minister Modi highlights the role of young minds in tackling real-world challenges with creativity and technology

The best way to predict the future is to invent it, said Alan Kay. And indeed how true it is for a nation. A nation that invents and finds solution to its problems marches on the path to progress. Echoing the same sentiment, Prime Minister Narendra Modi highlighted the pivotal role of innovation in nation-building during his interaction at the Smart India Hackathon (SIH) 2024, emphasising how young minds are shaping the future through creativity and technological ingenuity. The event, which included participation from over 1,300 student teams across India, showcased groundbreaking ideas aimed at solving real-world challenges. The SIH is a testament to the transformative power of education and innovation in building a self-reliant India. The event not only bridges the gap between academia and industry but also fosters a culture of collaboration and problem-solving. At the National Institute of Technology (NIT) Srinagar, which hosted the grand finale of the software edition for the first time, 25 exceptional teams from 21 states convened to present their innovative solutions.



The hackathon addressed 250 problem statements submitted by 54 ministries, departments, state governments, public sector units (PSUs), and industries, covering sectors like healthcare, sustainability, education, disaster management and agriculture. With a 240 per cent increase in participation compared to the previous year, SIH 2024 is the largest edition to date, involving over 86,000 teams at the institute level and 49,000 at the national level. Among the standout participants was the 'Big Brains Team' from NIT Srinagar, led by Syeeda Aiemen D Saleem. The team worked on an AI-powered Virtual Reality Friend, a tool designed to assist children with autism spectrum disorder and intellectual disabilities. The project, developed under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, aims to help children enhance social and interactive skills in a simulated environment. PM Modi lauded the team's empathetic approach, emphasising the global relevance of such solutions and their potential to transform lives. PM Modi's interaction with the participants highlighted his vision of leveraging local innovation to address global challenges. He stressed that solutions tailored for India's unique needs could resonate globally, contributing to the world's progress. "Every child has the right to grow and prosper, and innovative solutions like these ensure no one is left behind," he remarked. By providing a platform for young minds to explore, collaborate and innovate, the Smart India Hackathon is shaping the next generation of problem-solvers and leaders. As India aims to establish itself as a global innovation hub, initiatives like SIH play a crucial role in realising this vision, reaffirming the transformative power of education and technology in nation-building.

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### PICTALK



Young women visit a snow covered park after snowfall in Shimla

# AI's boost to the spirit of service

From streamlining efforts to enhancing inclusivity, AI is reshaping how volunteers connect, contribute and make an impact



RAJDEEP PATHAK

Volunteering has long been a vital pillar of community development, social change, and global solidarity, offering individuals a meaningful way to contribute to society while fostering personal growth. In today's interconnected and fast-paced world, the concept of volunteering is undergoing a dynamic transformation, largely driven by advances in technology. The International Volunteer Day (IVD), celebrated globally on December 5, 2024, under the theme "Economic and Social Development," highlighted the pivotal role of volunteers in shaping a better world. Sub-themes emphasised their contributions to alleviating crises and supporting underprivileged populations affected by natural disasters, man-made crises, or socio-economic challenges. Volunteers have consistently been on the frontlines of crisis management, stepping in where governments and organisations often encounter limitations. Whether during pandemics, natural disasters, or humanitarian emergencies, their role remains indispensable, particularly for vulnerable populations. The advent of advanced technologies, particularly Artificial Intelligence (AI), is significantly reshaping the landscape of volunteerism. AI enhances the efficiency, inclusivity, and accessibility of volunteering initiatives, ensuring they have a far-reaching impact. By leveraging AI-driven tools, organisations are creating platforms that align volunteer skills with opportunities, reduce mismatches, and optimise efforts. This transformation not only improves the volunteer experience but also amplifies the positive outcomes for communities in need. AI-powered platforms such as "HelpFinder" are revolutionising how volunteers are matched with organisations. By analysing data on individual skills, interests, and locations, these platforms ensure that volunteers are placed where they can make the most meaningful contributions. This precision reduces mismatches, boosts retention rates, and fosters a sense of accomplishment among volunteers. During crises, AI-powered systems can quickly



analyse data to identify affected areas and volunteer availability, enabling swift deployment to critical zones. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, AI-driven platforms like "OneRescue" coordinated volunteer initiatives for contact tracing, mental health support, and supply distribution, proving invaluable in mitigating the crisis. Corporate social responsibility initiatives also benefit from AI. Tools like "Benevity" facilitate employee engagement by connecting them with volunteer opportunities that align with organisational goals. These solutions ensure streamlined coordination, impactful volunteering, and sustained enthusiasm among participants. AI-powered chatbots further enhance volunteer experiences by providing instant support, answering queries and assisting with training. In India, a nation of 1.45 billion people, the ethos of service is deeply ingrained in its culture. Family values, religious teachings, and community traditions emphasise the importance of helping others. Today, AI is augmenting these efforts. Chatbots are used to handle volunteer queries related to vaccination drives, maternal health, women's and children's safety, and more. In the UK, AI-driven systems have optimised food bank logistics and facilitated grocery deliveries to vulnerable indi-



AI ENHANCES THE EFFICIENCY, INCLUSIVITY AND ACCESSIBILITY OF VOLUNTEERING INITIATIVES, ENSURING THEY HAVE A FAR-REACHING IMPACT. BY LEVERAGING AI-DRIVEN TOOLS, ORGANISATIONS ARE CREATING PLATFORMS THAT ALIGN VOLUNTEER SKILLS WITH OPPORTUNITIES, REDUCE MISMATCHES AND OPTIMISE EFFORTS

viduals, demonstrating how technology empowers volunteers to make a tangible difference. Innovative applications like "Be My Eyes" enable volunteers to assist visually impaired individuals remotely, while platforms like "GoodSAM" connect trained volunteers with emergency services in real time. For example, volunteers alerted through GoodSAM can provide critical assistance such as CPR or use an Automated External Defibrillator (AED) before professional help arrives. Virtual volunteering has further expanded opportunities for professionals to contribute their expertise remotely. Platforms like "Catchafire" and the UN's Online Volunteering Service facilitate mentoring, legal advice, language translation, and more, breaking geographical barriers and making volunteering more inclusive. Digital tools have eliminated traditional obstacles to volunteering, such as physical distance, time constraints, and accessibility issues. People with disabilities, caregivers, or those in remote locations can now volunteer from their homes. This inclusivity aligns with the 2024 IVD theme, fostering collaboration among diverse communities toward the shared goal of economic and social development. By harnessing the right technology and resources, volunteers can work together to

address pressing global challenges. In natural disasters like hurricanes, earthquakes, and floods, volunteers equipped with drones and AI tools can map affected areas and deliver supplies more efficiently. Apps like "Zello" enable seamless communication during emergencies, transforming smartphones into walkie-talkies for coordination. In efforts to combat poverty and hunger, volunteers support food banks, organise community kitchens, and deliver resources. Digital tools like "ShareTheMeal," a United Nations World Food Programme crowdfunding app, empower individuals to donate meals with a simple tap, making a significant impact on global hunger. Education is another critical sector where volunteering, supported by technology, has made remarkable strides. Online platforms have democratised access to education, reaching remote and underserved communities. Initiatives like "Code.org" empower volunteers to teach coding skills, equipping students with the tools needed for a technology-driven future. Gender-focused volunteer programmes address inequality by providing legal aid, counseling and advocacy for women's rights, further demonstrating the transformative power of volunteering. (The writer is Programme Executive, Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti; views are personal)

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### INDIA'S SOFT POWER POLICY

Madam — The ongoing conflict in Gaza and Israel's military action against Hamas have drawn global attention. In this context, Israeli Ambassador to India, Reuven Azar, praised India's soft power policy, underlining its relevance in international diplomacy. He acknowledged that Israel, due to its heavy reliance on military strength, has lagged in areas like information management and public relations. India has strengthened its global position through diplomacy, cultural influence, and dialogue as key tools of soft power. Initiatives like yoga, cultural exchanges, and multilateral diplomacy have not only earned India international goodwill but also enhanced its global image. Despite its firm stance against terrorism, India has effectively combined dialogue and public relations to make its policies inspirational for the global community. In contrast, Israel's excessive reliance on military power weakens it in ideological battles, further complicated by adversarial propaganda from Arab media. Military strength alone is insufficient; tools of soft power, such as dialogue, empathy, and media management, are essential for long-term success. India's example demonstrates that balancing soft and hard power not only safeguards national interests but also garners global acceptance. Israel should take inspiration from India's strategy to refine its policies and strengthen its information and public relations framework.

R K Jain | Barwani

India's veteran ecologist and nature scientist Madhav Gadgil has been named as one of the six 'Champions of the Earth' by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) for 2024. He is renowned for his seminal work in the ecologically fragile Western Ghats region of India, which is a unique global biodiversity hotspot. Gadgil made an extensive study on the Western Ghats region, chairing the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel in 2011, and came out with a list of grim and grave findings for the Western Ghats region. The panel's report, which is popularly known as the Gadgil report, recommended in 2011 that the entire hill range be declared an ecologically sensitive area and recommended a ban on mining, quarrying, industries, new thermal power plants, hydropower projects, and large-scale wind energy projects. Gadgil's bold and honest recommendations faced opposition from some of the state governments, political bigwigs, industries, and local communities. Braving all odds, he championed the protection of the earth and the environment. Gadgil's research has helped to protect marginalised people, promote community-driven conservation of ecosystems and influence policymaking at the highest level.

### UNEP honours Madhav Gadgil



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M Pradyu | Kannur

demonstrations against atrocities on Hindus in Bangladesh and Bangladeshi illegal immigrants. The issue of illegal immigrants, whether from Bangladesh, African countries, or any other country, being detrimental to the integrity of the country, law and order, and social fabric and homogeneity poses potential challenges of demographic change, crime control, drug menace, security, and anarchy. However, this is a very formidable challenge for the government to work out the strategy and implement it in view of the opposition from the immigrants and their local political harborers. A question will certainly arise why only in Delhi and why not in the entire country. There may be a spate of court cases as well in view of the large-scale illegal issue of identity cards of Aadhar, PAN, or BPL. It is, therefore, imperative that a nationwide strategy should be evolved and implemented firmly. Of course, the political parties following an appeasement agenda and vote bank politics will leave no stone unturned to disrupt it, but

it is a national priority and a security threat.

Vinod Johri | Delhi

### VOTERS' NAME DELETED

Madam — The deletion of the eligible voter's name before the election has encroached about the entire country and is intensifying terrifically. The senior AAP leader Sanjay Singh highlighted an application for the deletion of 3,800 voters' names in just the RK Puram constituency. Such incidents are frequently observed before polls, which wrest the voting rights and thwart them to contribute to choosing preferred leaders. It's an out-and-out violation of the Universal Adult Franchise" in the largest democratic country. It's a grave issue that demands urgent action. The EC must not turn into a complaint tool instead of a neutral body and deploy every effort to address it and ensure the voter's right.

Jakir Hussain | Kanpur

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

## The transformative role of interactive learning in education

This modern approach is not just a shift in teaching strategies but a leap toward preparing students for the dynamic demands of the future workforce

The landscape of education has evolved significantly, with technological advancements and the integration of AI, making interactive learning a favoured approach. Because interactive learning fosters engagement, critical thinking and long-term memory, it makes it possible for knowledge to be assimilated more thoroughly. This is unquestionably an improvement over the conventional approaches, which mostly emphasise rote memory and depend largely on textbook-based techniques. The abilities needed in today's dynamic environment are better suited for interactive learning. Passively absorbing knowledge using conventional teaching approaches results in surface learning, which is ultimately counterproductive. According to National Training Laboratories research, passive learning techniques like reading and lectures only have recall rates of 5-10 per cent.



and real-world problem-solving. This increases engagement and extends retention. Digital tools, project-based learning, and group discussions are all included in this approach's scope. Students in interactive classrooms outperformed those in traditional lectures by 6 per cent on examinations, according to Harvard University research. Here are some ways that interactive learning approaches work better than conventional strategies: **1. Enhanced Retention:** According to National Training Laboratories research, active learning strategies like practice-by-doing and group discussions had higher retention rates, ranging from 50 to 75 per cent. Students may directly apply STEM principles

through hands-on experiences. According to research from the American Society for Engineering Education, pupils who participated in interactive STEM activities learned much more than those who received standard instruction.

**2. Encouraging Critical Thinking:** Interactive learning promotes creativity and critical thinking by allowing students to investigate other viewpoints and pose questions. According to a McKinsey & Company research, interactive learning environments foster critical thinking and reflection while increasing student engagement and fostering productive social interactions. Another immersive method of student engagement is gamification, which boosts students' incentive to tackle challenging issues and permits in-depth learning.

**3. Real-World Application:** Project-based learning, which links education to real-world issues and increases the applicability of information in practical contexts, is a crucial element of interactive learning. In contrast to students who studied using traditional

al techniques, students who participated in project-based programs demonstrated superior application of information to real-life circumstances, according to a 2022 research by Edutopia. **4. Future Ready:** Through more engaging and relevant instruction, interactive learning equips students to overcome obstacles more effectively than traditional approaches ever could. To educate students for the uncertain and constantly changing times, education must emphasise abilities like problem-solving, teamwork, and flexibility in today's competitive labor market. Interactive approaches also boost motivation and encourage teamwork, which aids students in honing their communication and teamwork abilities. The global EdTech market is expected to grow to \$404 billion by 2025, according to EdTechXGlobal. Students that use an interactive learning technique not only perform better academically but are also better prepared to handle problems in the real world.

(The writer is Founder Zamit; views are personal)



AARUL MALAVIYA

The Advent of Interactive Learning: A more hands-on approach is provided by interactive learning, which combines technology, teamwork,



## FIRST COLUMN

### INDIA SHARES ITS VISION FOR WEST ASIA

The Manama Dialogue provided India with a platform to outline its vision for regional stability



KUMARDEEP BANARJEE

Even as Syria was undergoing huge regime change, with a possibility of leaving a long-lasting impact on the geo-political mix of West Asia, India's external affairs minister was delivering a lecture on the changing dynamics of international cooperation at the Manama Dialogue. The Manama dialogue is a platform to bring policy makers, and ministers to discuss and debate the strategic defence, security and foreign challenges of West Asia. The dialogue happening against the backdrop of the fast-changing narrative in Syria provided India with a unique opportunity to weigh on its most pressing concerns in and for the region. Syria has been ruled by the Assad dynasty for nearly 50 years. However, this dynastic rule converted the country, on the border of Turkey and Jordan into a brutal police state. Russia and Iran had been supportive of the Assad dynasty, for strategic reasons. Iran supported the regime, to build its axis of resistance against Israel, while Russia, has air force and naval bases in Syria. Global leaders are watching the Syria theatre closely even as Israel continues its war in the neighbourhood. The storming of Israeli troops in Gaza and Ukraine, distracted Iran and Russia, which led to the exit of Bashar Al Assad last week. However, what is of concern to many would be, the rise of rebel leader Abu Mohammed al-Jawfani, an ex-Al Qaeda member.

Syria despite the dynastic rule managed to maintain a secular political outlook where minorities and diverse groups did not feel any discrimination. Many fear that the rebel leader with Al Qaeda credentials, may push the state to a hardline Islamist nation. Almost every nation in the neighbourhood including Israel is watching the unfolding situation care-



fully. Delhi has been agnostic to the regime change, even though the Assad dynasty has been supportive of India's position on Kashmir, and its stance with Islamabad. Any unfriendly regime in the region would weaken India's position and could be a security concern as well.

Against this backdrop, the Manama dialogue, with several leaders from the West Asia and the Indo-Pacific, provided an important platform for engagement. Mentioning the ongoing conflicts impacting the region S Jaishankar said, "And this today would extend from Gaza to Lebanon and now to Syria as well. But at the same time, we have to be realistic about competing interests in this region... The second political-diplomatic cooperation that we can think of is really at a time when the world is polarised if not downright violent, how do you prevent an escalation of tensions, how do you prevent conflict from spreading further. In recent times, for all of us, the relationship or absence of it between Israel and Iran has been particularly a source of concern, so some of our diplomatic efforts has focused on that particular aspect. There has been the situation in the Red Sea as well. On a more positive note, the third aspect of the political-diplomatic, I would say, we are also looking at certain trend lines coming out of this region. We have been a supporter of the Abraham Accords and some years ago, we started a grouping called I2U2, which involves India, Israel, the US and the UAE. It is still at a relatively early stage and we certainly hope that in the coming days that its a group that will grow."

India in the past decade, has a trade-oriented foreign policy outlook, where, it knows that nothing binds countries more than an economic partnership. Mr Jaishankar mentioned that India has nearly \$170- 180 billion with the ten-member Gulf Cooperation Council and significant economic relations with countries in the Mediterranean. A new US president from January would also be a key benchmark to watch out for days to come. The relationships are most likely to be economic and based on mutual interests.

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

# The dawn of a new era: Syria's path forward

As Syria comes to terms with Assad's departure, the road ahead promises opportunities for renewal but is fraught with risks that will test the resolve of its new leadership



NISHAKANT OJHA



The fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime and the appointment of Mohammed al-Bashir as Syria's Prime Minister on December 10, 2024, mark a watershed moment in the nation's history, offering a mix of promise and uncertainty. This transition signals the end of an era defined by authoritarian rule, civil war and foreign interventions, ushering in a period of both opportunity and immense challenge. Assad's departure, driven by a combination of Russian withdrawal and external pressures, has created a power vacuum with significant implications. Mohammed al-Bashir, a moderate politician known for his diplomatic acumen, has pledged to prioritise national reconciliation and reconstruction. His leadership represents a shift from the autocratic governance of the past toward a more inclusive and reform-oriented approach. However, stabilising Syria remains an uphill battle. Despite al-Bashir's efforts, large swathes of the country remain fragmented, with control divided among Kurdish forces, remnants of opposition groups, and radical elements. Moreover, millions of Syrians continue to suffer from displacement, poverty and inadequate access to basic services, underscoring the dire need for humanitarian aid and international support. Compounding these challenges is Syria's shattered economy, which demands both immediate stabilisation and long-term rebuilding strategies. The role of covert operations by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in the fall of Assad's regime cannot be overlooked. Since the early years of the Syrian Civil War, the CIA has employed programmes such as Operation Timber Sycamore to train and arm select rebel factions, aiming to counter Assad's government, which had strong backing from Russia and Iran. These operations evolved



PRIME MINISTER AL-BASHIR HAS OUTLINED A ROADMAP FOR SYRIA'S RECOVERY, FOCUSING ON POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, AND SOCIAL REFORMS

to include intelligence gathering, cyberattacks, and psychological warfare. Although they played a critical role in destabilising Assad's regime, the complexities of such interventions also fueled unintended consequences, such as the empowerment of extremist factions. For the US, this strategy yielded key geopolitical advantages, including weakening Iranian influence, reducing Russia's foothold in the region, and bolstering counterterrorism efforts. Prime Minister al-Bashir has outlined a roadmap for Syria's recovery, focusing on political, economic, and social reforms. Politically, his plans include forming a transitional government representing Syria's diverse ethnic and political groups and drafting a new constitution that decentralises power and protects minority rights. On the economic front, his administration is prioritising infrastructure development, attracting international investments, and combating corruption to lay the foundation for sustainable growth. Socially, reintegration programs aim to facilitate the return of displaced Syrians and rehabilitate former combatants, while expanded healthcare and education services seek to address the needs of the war-affected population. The fall of Assad and the emergence of al-Bashir have far-reaching implications for the broader West Asia. Regionally, these developments could recalibrate power dynamics, reducing Iran's influence in Syria while opening avenues for normalisation with Israel, partic-

ularly in areas of border security and economic cooperation. On a global scale, Russia's diminished role in Syria marks a strategic loss for Moscow, while China may see opportunities to extend its Belt and Road Initiative into the region's reconstruction phase. Russia's longstanding support for Assad, which began with its military intervention in 2015, faced significant challenges in recent years. Strained by its involvement in Ukraine and Western sanctions, Moscow has grappled with resource constraints, prompting a recalibration of its Middle Eastern strategy. Domestic criticism of prolonged military engagements has further pressured the Kremlin to scale back its commitments in Syria, leaving Assad vulnerable to internal and external pressures. Globally, the Syrian transition carries profound security implications. The power vacuum left by Assad's fall risks a resurgence of extremist groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda, which could exploit the instability to regain strength and pose threats beyond Syria's borders. The ongoing refugee crisis also looms large, with continued instability potentially driving more Syrians to seek asylum abroad, challenging neighboring countries and Europe alike. Additionally, proxy conflicts fueled by regional rivalries and superpower tensions threaten to entangle Syria in broader geopolitical frictions. The transition from Assad to al-Bashir represents a pivotal juncture in Syria's history, offering a chance for renewal amid deep-seated

challenges. While the road to stability and prosperity is fraught with obstacles, a coordinated international effort combined with meaningful domestic reform holds the potential to guide Syria toward a more peaceful and resilient future. The coming months will be decisive in determining whether this new chapter in Syria's turbulent narrative leads to lasting progress. The transition from Bashar al-Assad's regime to Mohammed al-Bashir's leadership marks a critical turning point in Syria's history, offering a glimmer of hope amid a legacy of conflict and instability. Al-Bashir's vision for political reform, economic recovery, and social inclusion aims to chart a new course for a nation shattered by years of war. However, the challenges are immense: fragmented control, a dire humanitarian crisis, and a collapsed economy require urgent attention and sustained international support. On the global stage, the fall of Assad has reshaped regional dynamics, reducing Iranian influence and opening new avenues for diplomacy while exposing Syria to the risks of renewed extremism and geopolitical competition. Whether Syria's new leadership can successfully navigate these complexities and steer the nation toward stability depends on the cohesion of its domestic efforts and the willingness of the international community to provide coordinated and meaningful support. *(The writer is an eminent expert on counter terrorism and West Asian affairs; views are personal)*

## Bridging India's urban-rural divide: Empowering rural learners through skilling

India's vast diversity extends beyond culture and language, manifesting in unequal access to education, skilling and employment opportunities

India is a country with great linguistic, cultural, racial, social and economic diversity. People living in urban areas have access to opportunities for skilling, education and employment that are not easily available to people in semi-urban and rural areas. Over the last decade or two, there has been considerable growth and development in the skilling and education ecosystem due to a multitude of factors. Governments - both central and state - have realised that the only way India can benefit from its tremendous demographic dividend is by ensuring that individuals in the working age are equipped with the knowledge and skills required to thrive in increasingly global workplaces.



NAGESH SINGH

Central and state skilling entities have created massive systems that reach every district around India and make top-quality resources available to hitherto underserved audiences. The corporate sector, leveraging the prevalent Corporate Social Responsibility laws, has also contributed significantly to this by collaborating with government agencies and supporting them with co-

funding, content, certification and job opportunities. The Directorate General of Training (Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship) manages a network of tens of thousands of institutions that collaborate with the corporate sector and civil society to make high-quality skilling available to hundreds of thousands of learners every year. All India Council for Technical Education, through its network of thousands of engineering institutions, offers cutting-edge training and internship opportunities to learners around India, irrespective of their location or socio-economic limitations. Edunet Foundation, for example, makes courseware and skills across the IT spectrum

available to learners across engineering colleges, National Skills Training Institutes and Industrial Training Institutes nationally, directly working with lakhs of learners every year. These programs are offered in blended mode, leveraging classroom learning, synchronous video, online content and hands-on project work. While there is availability of skilling and education opportunities, there are several issues that limit the benefits of these programs. The foremost problem is access to technology. Since the courses are offered in blended mode, learners need access to computers with high bandwidth internet connectivity and not just mobile phones. Almost every household in



India has access to mobile phones but larger devices that are more conducive to experiential learning in technology are not widely available. Both government and corporate stakeholders can make a huge difference by making current technology platforms available to learners in rural areas by donating and/or set-

ting up labs and digital libraries within the premises of existing educational institutions in these areas. The second issue is access to local employment. Most jobs - especially the technology-centric ones - are centred around major cities and towns. For learners who are unable to migrate to employ-

ment, this is a huge barrier. Additionally, of course, there are many problems associated with mass migration to urban areas. There is a need to create local career opportunities that allow people to gainfully work wherever they are, without the need to migrate to a larger city or town. This may be done by a steady focus on entrepreneurship that creates jobs locally and helps in the development of rural areas. Rural micro-entrepreneurship, especially focused on agriculture and associated areas, can solve many of the problems associated with mass-migration and lopsided economic development. Local businesses, thus created, will drive the local economy and create local

employment. A stronger focus on rural enterprise will help India by ensuring inclusive economic development. There are several programs by the government and the corporate sector that are trying to achieve this, but they need to be enhanced and made more potent with support from civil society. In an environment where rural learners have access to technology and employment opportunities, skilling initiatives by the government and the corporate sector will make a bigger impact. Learners will be able to learn and earn locally, thereby bridging the urban-rural divide. *(The writer is chairman, Edunet Foundation; views are personal)*







# GNPA of PSBs declines to 3.12 per cent in Sept: FinMin

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Gross non-performing assets (NPAs) of public sector banks (PSBs) have declined to a decade low of 3.12 per cent at the end of September 2024 from a peak of 14.98 per cent in March 2018 on the back of measures like the 4Rs - recognition, recapitalisation, resolution, and reform - taken by the government, the finance ministry said on Thursday. Since 2015, the government implemented a comprehensive 4Rs strategy of recognising NPAs transparently, resolution and recovery, recapitalising PSBs, and reforms in the financial system to address the challenges faced by PSBs, it said. Capital adequacy ratio of PSBs improved 393 bps to reach 15.43 per cent in September 2024 from 11.45 per cent in March 2015, it said. During 2023-24, PSBs recorded the highest-ever aggregate net profit of



Rs 1.41 lakh crore against Rs 1.05 lakh crore in 2022-23, it said, adding that the figure was Rs 0.86 lakh crore in the first half of 2024-25.

the country to deepen financial inclusion. Their capital base has strengthened and their asset quality has improved. Now they are able to go to market and access capital instead of depending on the government for recapitalisation," it said. To deepen financial inclusion in the country, 54 crore Jan Dhan accounts and more than 52 crore collateral-free loans under various flagship financial inclusion schemes - PM-Mudra, Stand-Up India, PM-SVANidhi, PM Vishwakarma - have been sanctioned, it said. Under the Mudra scheme, 68 per cent of beneficiaries are women and under PM-SVANidhi scheme, 44 per cent of beneficiaries are women, the finance ministry said. The number of bank branches has gone up from 1,17,990 in March 2014 to 1,60,501 in September 2024. Of 1,60,501 branches, 1,00,686 are in rural and semi-urban (RUSU) areas, it said. KCC Scheme aims to provide the

short-term crop loan to farmers, it said, adding that the total number of operative KCC Accounts as on September 2024 stood at 7.71 crore with total outstanding of Rs. 9.88 lakh crore. The Government of India (GoI) has consistently supported the MSME sector in terms of flow of credit at affordable rates through various initiatives, it said. "The MSME advances registered a CAGR of 15 per cent during the last three years. Total MSME advances as on March 31, 2024 stood at Rs 28.04 lakh crore, posted an annual growth of 17.2 per cent," it said. The gross advances of scheduled commercial banks, which grew from Rs 8.5 lakh crore to 61 lakh crore during 2004-2014, has significantly increased to Rs 175 lakh crore in March 2024, according to the finance ministry. Besides, the government has also announced a slew of measures towards welfare of employees working in PSBs.



# IIP growth slows to 3.5 per cent in Oct: Govt data

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India's industrial production (IIP) growth slowed to 3.5 per cent year-on-year in October 2024, mainly due to poor performance of mining, power and manufacturing, as per official data released on Thursday. The IIP recorded a growth of 11.9 per cent in October 2023, according to a statement by the Ministry of Statistics & Programme Implementation. However, on a sequential basis, the factory output in October 2024 rose to 3.5 per cent from 3.1 per cent in September and a contraction of 0.1 per cent in August this year. The growth in the factory output, measured in terms of the IIP, in April-October worked out to be 4 per cent against 7 per cent in the year-ago period, the data showed. As per the data, the mining output growth decelerated to 0.9 per cent in October from 13.1 per cent expansion in the year-ago month. The manufacturing sector's growth decelerated to 4.1 per cent in October from 10.6 per cent a year ago.

Similarly, in power generation, the output growth slowed sharply to 2 per cent from a 20.4 per cent growth a year ago. As per use-based classification, the capital goods segment growth decelerated to 3.1 per cent in October 2024 from 21.7 per cent in the year-ago period. In October this year, consumer non-durables output growth slowed to 2.7 per cent compared to a 9.3 per cent growth in October 2023. Consumer durable goods production grew by 5.9 per cent during the reporting month against a 15.9 per cent expansion in October 2023. According to the data, infrastructure/construction goods reported a growth of 4 per cent in October 2024, down from a 12.6 per cent expansion in the year-ago period. The data also showed that the output of primary goods logged a 2.6 per cent growth in October this year against 11.4 per cent a year earlier. The expansion in the intermediate goods segment was 3.7 per cent in the month under review, lower than the 9.5 per cent a year ago.



# Auto component industry grows 11 per cent to ₹3.32 lakh Crore in Apr-Sept: ACMA

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The automotive components industry grew 11 per cent year-on-year to Rs 3.32 lakh crore in the first half of the current fiscal, industry body ACMA said on Thursday. The turnover of the automotive component industry in the April-September period of last fiscal stood at Rs 2.98 lakh crore. "With vehicle sales across all segments reaching pre-pandemic levels and despite geopolitical challenges on the exports front, the auto components sector witnessed a steady growth in both domestic and international markets in the first half of FY2024-25," Automotive Component Manufacturers Association of India (ACMA) President Shradha Suri Marwah said. She said the festive season brought significant sales across most segments of the vehicle industry. "However, reflecting on the past eight months of this fiscal year, while two-wheelers have shown promising growth, sales of passenger vehicles and commercial vehicles have been relatively moderate," she added. On the exports front, with geological challenges, delivery time and freight costs have once again gone up, Marwah said. "That said, in value terms,

the industry remains in robust health, signalling stability and resilience amidst evolving market dynamics," she added. The components industry continues to make investments for purposes of higher value addition, technology upgradation and localisation to stay relevant to both domestic and international customers, Marwah said. ACMA Director General Vinnie Mehta said that with vehicle sales and exports displaying steady performance, the auto component industry demonstrated a growth of 11.3 per cent scaling a turnover of Rs 3.32 lakh crore in the first half of FY 2024-25. Auto component supplies to all the segments - OEMs (original equipment manufacturers), exports as also the aftermarket remained steadfast, he added. Exports grew by 7 per cent to USD 11.1 billion (Rs 93.34 lakh crore) while imports grew by 4 per cent to USD 11 billion (Rs 92.05 lakh crore) with USD 150 million in surplus, the industry body said. The aftermarket, estimated at Rs 47,416 crore, also witnessed a growth of 5 per cent year-on-year, it added. Similarly, component supplies to OEMs in the domestic market grew by 11 per cent year-on-year to Rs 2.83 lakh crore, ACMA said.

# India, UK talks on proposed trade agreement may start in Jan: Official

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India and the UK are expected to hold the next round of talks for a proposed free trade agreement (FTA) in January to resolve the pending issues and close the negotiations, a senior official said on Thursday. The talks for the proposed FTA began in January 2022. The 14th round of talks stalled as the two nations stepped into their general election cycles. In November, an official statement said that the dates for the FTA talks in early 2025 would be finalised through diplomatic channels. The negotiations would resume the discussions from the progress achieved



previously and seek to bridge the gaps for expeditiously closing the trade deal. The next round of talks is likely to start at January-end, the official said. The Indian industry is demanding greater access for

as scotch whiskey, electric vehicles, lamb meat, chocolates and certain confectionary items. Britain is also looking for more opportunities for UK services in Indian markets in segments like telecommunications, legal and financial services (banking and insurance). The two countries are also negotiating a bilateral investment treaty (BIT). There are 26 chapters in the agreement, which includes goods, services, investments and intellectual property rights. The bilateral trade between India and the UK increased to USD 21.34 billion in 2023-24 from 20.36 billion in 2022-23.

# Cumulative capex of airports expected to grow 12 per cent at ₹60,000 Crore in three years: Report



PTI ■ MUMBAI

The cumulative capex (capital expenditure) of Indian airports is expected to grow 12 per cent at Rs 60,000 crore in the three years through FY27 from Rs 53,000 crore during 2022-2024, to add required infrastructure for about 65 million passengers per annum, ratings agency CRISIL said on Thursday. CRISIL said 70 per cent of this capex is expected to be funded through debt. The ratings agency said its projections are based on a study of 11 private airports in the country that account for 60 per cent of the total passenger traffic in FY24. In addition to the expected growth in passenger traffic, increase in tariffs and spending within the airport ecosystem will lift revenue of private Indian airports at an

average growth rate of 17 per cent between FY25 and FY27, it said. That, coupled with improved funding access and a predictable regulatory regime, will support the strong credit profiles of private airports. "The number of passengers at Indian airports is expected to clock a compounded annual growth rate (CAGR) of 8-9 per cent over fiscals 2025-2027 from 376 million last fiscal. Growth in domestic traffic, which comprises over 80 per cent of overall volume, will ride on rising demand from the business and leisure segments and government push to increase penetration of air travel," said Manish Gupta, Senior Director and Deputy Chief Ratings Officer, CRISIL Ratings. As of July 2024, the government had operationalised 84 airports and 579 routes under its regional connectivity UDAN scheme to increase regional penetration, CRISIL said, adding that while the impact is small at present, with air traffic in these airports contributing around 2 per cent of domestic air traffic, these regional routes are important as they provide feeder traffic to the metro airports. International traffic will also grow, driven by increased business travel, easing visa requirements, and improving connectivity with airlines adding new routes, it said. To cater to this growth, airport operators are investing in aviation-related infrastructure such as terminal buildings and runways to create room for increased passenger flow. Additionally, airports are developing non-aeronautical offerings such as lounge, car parking, food and beverage spaces and retail outlets, which will help increase revenue, too, the ratings agency said. "Although around 70 per cent of capex is expected to be funded by debt, the credit profiles of private airports will remain strong over fiscals 2025-27 due to an average projected increase of 17 per cent in revenue of airports in the CRISIL Ratings study," CRISIL Ratings Director Ankit Hakhu said.

# Retailers urge FM and GST Council not to go for higher 35 per cent tax rate

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Indian Sellers Collective, an umbrella body of trade associations and sellers across the country, has urged the finance minister and the GST Council not to accept some of GST rate rationalisation suggestions, including the proposal for inclusion of a special rate of 35 per cent on some products. The sellers body is of the view that a fifth GST slab of 35 per cent on demerit goods such as aerated beverages, cigarettes and tobacco, and pricing-based rate structure will materially and fundamentally alter the country's GST framework with devastating outcomes. These recommendations violate both the letter and the spirit that it will be a 'good and simple tax', Indian Sellers Collective said in a statement on Thursday ahead of the 55th GST Council meeting to be held on December 21, 2024 at Jaisalmer, Rajasthan. "On the contrary, it will hurt the profit margins of the retailers, lead to compliance nightmares and fuel a parallel economy. This move will, primarily benefit Chinese producers who dominate the market of cheap products at



the cost of Indian producers," it said. All the gains of the GST regime will be wiped out, with permanent damage to the vast age-old retailer network of India, if the GoM recommendations are adopted by the upcoming GST Council meeting, Abhay Raj Mishra, Member and National Coordinator, Indian Sellers Collective, said. "A 35 per cent tax on demerit goods like tobacco and aerated beverages will exponentially grow their illicit market, and a large number of sellers will move out of the formal economy. A pricing-based rate structure will trigger either manipulation or re-engineering of business models to beat the system. For small and mid-tier sellers, this will mean compliance nightmares and a very high risk of litigation," he said.

# Gold rises ₹500 per 10 gm; silver at ₹97,000 per kg

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Gold prices climbed Rs 500 to Rs 80,900 per 10 grams in the national capital on Thursday due to persistent buying by retailers and jewellers, according to the All India Sarafa Association. The precious metal of 99.9 per cent purity finished at Rs 80,400 per 10 grams in the previous trading session. The yellow metal has jumped nearly Rs 2,000 in the past three sessions. Silver also rallied Rs 700 to Rs 97,000 per kg on Thursday. The white metal settled at Rs 96,300 per kg in the previous session. The price of gold of 99.5 per cent purity also surged Rs 500 to Rs 80,500 per 10 grams. It ended at Rs 80,000 per 10 grams on Wednesday. According to traders, persistent buying by jewellers and a firm trend in the international markets were among the factors that aided the rally in gold prices. Meanwhile, in futures trade on the Multi Commodity Exchange (MCX), gold contracts for February delivery dipped Rs 114 or 0.14 per cent to Rs 78,888 per 10 grams.

# Green shoots on consumption growth, food inflation expected to come down: FICCI President

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Green shoots are visible on the consumption front as food inflation has started receding, newly appointed FICCI President Harsha V Agarwal said. Food inflation is expected to come down to its normal level in the next two quarters, Agarwal said, adding that he is hopeful for a revival in consumption growth, aided by a good crop and increased spending by the government on the big-ticket infra projects and rural schemes in the December quarter. Government spending in the right areas - like increase in capex and ramping up infrastructure, rather than focusing on revenue expenditure - is helping the

overall economy, he said. "We are seeing some green shoots where we believe food inflation is coming down... It has to come back to normal. It might take maybe one quarter or so. But we are seeing situations where it is improving, and hence we are hopeful that consumption should increase," Agarwal told PTI. Government spending in the September quarter was low due to the general elections in the June quarter. However, it increased in the third quarter and is expected to continue in the fourth quarter as well, he said. "Going forward, we see that increasing in Q3 and substantially in Q4. So cumulatively, with all these things, we are hopeful that

the consumption should improve going from here," he added. The government is focused a lot on the rural economy, which has done well in the second quarter. "What we hear is the kharif production is also going to be good this year. So from that perspective, overall, we are quite optimistic from the rural front. And from that is where you know the consumption also is coming and it should increase," said Agarwal. Food inflation in India has been high in recent months, driven by rising prices of vegetables, fruits, oils, and fats. It has slowed down the consumption in urban areas, impacting purchase from the middle class.



"The government has been doing those kind of tax reforms as and where needed" to boost the consumption, Agarwal said. However, he added, "maybe the salary has not gone up to the extent... That is why they are feeling the pinch." With cooling of inflation and increase in private investments, demand of

rural and premium products - are doing "much better". "The challenge is more in the area of the lower middle class, and middle class consumers, where the real hit is. And since the discretionary spend as a percentage is anyway lower, any hit on the inflation has a direct impact," Agarwal said. However, he was "very hopeful, once the inflation is under control, it should improve and things will be much better". Over the cement sector, which faced a decline in price in last two quarters YoY, Agarwal said, "their prices might be declining, but still, all the cement companies are making good profit." He further added it "may be because in the industry now,

consolidation is happening. Some of the larger players are fighting for the market share, etc." Agarwal said government programmes, such as the Production Linked Incentive (PLI) scheme, have made a big difference in some key strategic sectors such as electronic, manufacturing of mobile phones, active pharmaceutical ingredients, etc. "Going forward, what is important is India should not become like an assembly line... Like in electronics. How do we become self-resilient, even in terms of the components required for making electronics? So that may be another key focus area where the government can extend its PLI," he added.



# DEEP DIVE INTO KOLKATA'S PAST



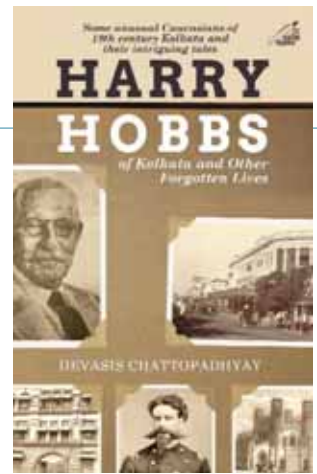
Devasis Chattopadhyay takes you through nine compelling stories of forgotten lives that shaped the cultural and historical history of Kolkata, writes **ABHI SINGHAL**

**H**arry Hobbs of *Kolkata and Other Forgotten Lives* is a compelling and richly detailed collection of nine meticulously researched stories that uncover the hidden aspects of Kolkata's past, many of which are unknown even to the city's residents and historians. Drawing on obscure and forgotten sources such as dusty old files, yellowed newspapers, private family papers, memoirs, and government archives, this book brings to life the untold stories of Kolkata's lesser-known figures and the city itself.

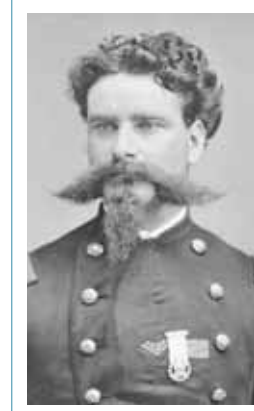
include an opera impresario, an entertainer, a piano tuner, a mercenary, a hotelier, a writer, a publisher, a lawyer, and even a real-life police detective turned crime writer. These characters, often forgotten by history, made remarkable contributions to the fabric of Kolkata during a time of upheaval and change. The book reflects on a significant period of transformation, when Kolkata's unique and syncretic

The book deep dives into the fascinating history of Kolkata, providing an unexplored jist of the city's origins. Some historians believe that Kolkata is mentioned in the Mahabharata, while others trace its roots back to the Mauryan and Gupta periods. The author, *Devasis Chattopadhyay*, then traces the transformation of the city into a metropolis, paying particular attention to its growth and changes in the 19th century. This period, marked by significant social, cultural, and economic shifts, is expertly and theoretically woven into the narrative.

*Chattopadhyay* focuses on the lives of protagonists who were often overlooked by mainstream history as the middle and junior civil or military officials, puisne judges, and a wide array of other fascinating individuals. These



**ABOUT THE BOOK**  
Book: Harry Hobbs of Kolkata and Other Forgotten Lives by Devasis Chattopadhyay  
Publisher: Niyogi Books Private Limited  
Price: ₹595 Pages: 316



identity was shaped, in part, by European and American settlers. It was an era when many of the things we now take for granted like the social norms, institutions, and innovations that were still in their infancy. Yet, the individuals featured in the book were instrumental in creating the cultural and historical landscape of the city. Chattopadhyay's narrative uncovers these hidden histories, offering a fresh perspective on Kolkata's past.

One of the key figures in the book, Harry Hobbs, is also featured in the author's earlier work *Scoundrels and Scroungers*, where *Hobbs* noted that the principal cause of men's downfall up until the end of the 19th century was drinking. In his writings, he provides intriguing glimpses into a Kolkata of the past the one where European women worked as barmaids and a thriving but largely unspoken subterranean slave trade flourished. This was also a time when wealthy Bengali

Babus kept European concubines, and attending English theatre performances or listening to Italian opera was a common pastime among the city's elite. The book is divided into nine chapters, each focusing on a different historical figure: Major Harry H. Hobbs, The Shakespeare Family, Isaac Henry Townley Roberdeau, Richard Reid, Colonel Percy Wyndham, Shirley Tremearne, Henry Thoby Prinsep, David Nunez Cardozo, and others. Through these vivid and captivating stories, Harry Hobbs of Kolkata and Other Forgotten Lives provides a nuanced and fascinating portrait of Kolkata as a city in transition, shaped by diverse influences and inhabited by characters whose contributions to its rich history have long been forgotten. Chattopadhyay's work offers an enriching journey into the heart of Kolkata's past, illuminating the hidden lives that have shaped the city we know today.

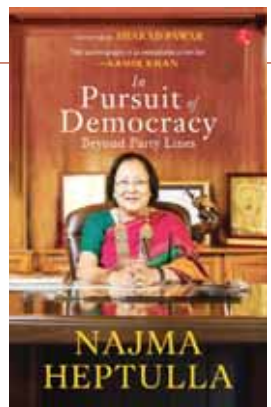
## Najma's journey through politics

By **ABHISHEK SONKAR**



Heptulla's writing style is direct and conversational. It feels like she is talking to you, recounting her life over a cup of tea. She avoids heavy political

jargon, making the book a breeze even if you're not well-versed in politics. The narrative flows smoothly between her professional milestones and



**ABOUT THE BOOK**  
Book: In Pursuit of Democracy: Beyond Party Lines by Najma Heptulla  
Publisher: Rupa Publications  
Price: ₹695

## A Transformative Journey

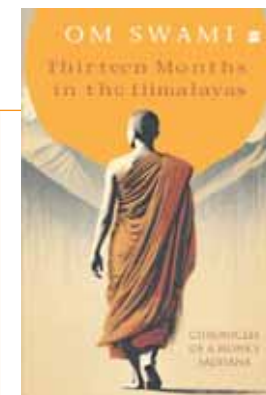
By **GYANESHWAR DAYAL**

**A** Transformative Journey of Faith, Endurance, and the Divine Om Swami's *Thirteen Months in the Himalayas* is a spellbinding account of one man's relentless pursuit of spiritual truth and divine connection. Om Swami's *Thirteen Months in the Himalayas* is an extraordinary account of one man's unwavering pursuit of spiritual truth and divine connection. Following his earlier memoir, 'If Truth Be Told', this book delves deeper into Swami's radical transformation from a successful entrepreneur to an ascetic devoted to discovering the Creator. Written with an almost poetic honesty, it presents a gripping narrative of discipline, endurance, and transcendence.

**A Journey of the Soul:** The Himalayas serve as more than just the backdrop for Swami's odyssey—they become a central character, mirroring the challenges and revelations of his inner world. The author's detailed descriptions of his austere lifestyle, rigorous sadhanas and encounters with celestial energies immerse readers in his spiritual journey. The book's raw and vivid prose captures the stark beauty of the mountains and the unforgiving nature of the terrain, where every moment is a test of will and faith.

**Spiritual Discipline Redefined:** What makes this book especially compelling is its depiction of extreme spiritual discipline. Swami's daily routine of meditation, mantras, and fasting is as exhausting to read about as it is inspiring. His ability to persevere through physical deprivation, isolation, and moments of self-doubt speaks to an exceptional strength of spirit. His writing makes you feel the depth of his longing to encounter God, transforming what could have been a remote subject into something deeply relatable. At its core, *Thirteen Months in the Himalayas* is a meditation on faith and purpose. It challenges readers to reflect on their own lives and the sacrifices they are willing to make in pursuit of their truths. The book inspires by showing what is possible when one's commitment to a goal is absolute, even when the goal is as abstract and immense as experiencing the divine.

**Accessible Yet Profound:** Om Swami's journey is deeply personal, yet its lessons transcend individual experience. This book is a rare gem that inspires introspection, courage and hope. Highly recommended for anyone seeking inspiration to explore the limits of human potential and the boundless nature of the divine.



**ABOUT THE BOOK**  
Book: Thirteen Months in the Himalayas by Om Swami  
Publisher: HarperCollins  
Price: ₹499

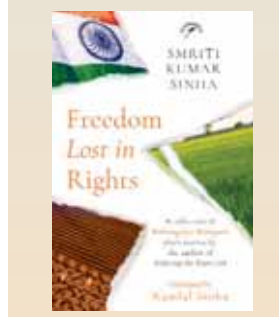
JUST READ



Book: Our Man in Warsaw  
Author: Carlos Tamilavan  
Publisher: Niyogi Books  
Price: ₹595



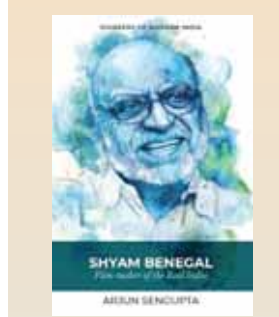
Book: Charles Correa: Citizen Charles  
Author: Mustansir Dalvi  
Publisher: Niyogi Books  
Price: ₹299



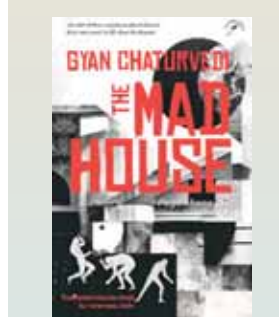
Book: Freedom Lost in Rights  
Author: Smriti Kumar Sinha  
Publisher: Niyogi Books  
Price: ₹395



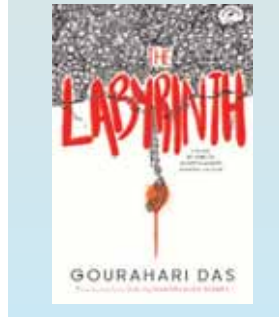
Book: Chicanery  
Author: Timiri N. Murari  
Publisher: Niyogi Books  
Price: ₹695



Book: Shyam Benegal: Filmmaker of the real India  
Author: Arjun Sengupta  
Publisher: Niyogi Books  
Price: ₹299



Book: Madhouse: Pagalkhana  
Author: Gyan Chaturvedi  
Publisher: Niyogi Books  
Price: ₹595

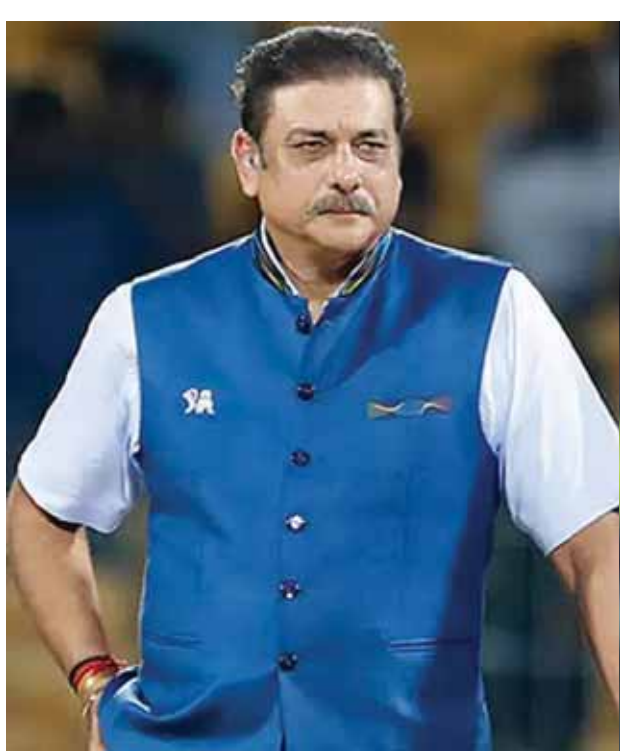


Book: The Labyrinth  
Author: Gourahari Das  
Publisher: Niyogi Books  
Price: ₹295

# Rohit must return to opening if he has to throw the first punch: Shastri

**PTI ■ BRISBANE**

Former India head coach Ravi Shastri, who knows a thing or two about winning Test rubbers in Australia, on Thursday asked India skipper Rohit Sharma to return to the opening slot "if he has to throw the first punch" on an opponent brimming with confidence. Shastri was serving as team director when India won their maiden Test series in Australia in 2017-18 and was the head coach when the side rallied brilliantly to stun the hosts in the last tour in 2020-21. The move to slot Rohit at number six did not yield the desired results for India and they were hammered by 10 wickets in the second Test at Adelaide, leaving the five-match clash locked at 1-1 and with everything to play for in what Shastri believes could decide the fate of the series. "That's where he's (Rohit) been at his best over the last eight or nine years," Shastri was quoted as saying by "The



The triumph of 2021 is considered one of the greatest in the history of Indian cricket and Shastri, while speaking at the first annual Usman Khawaja



Foundation lunch at the Gabba, said the unity showed by the team, despite restrictions due to COVID-19, played a big part in the historic win.

"In COVID, the first Test match you start with five bowlers and the same five bowlers don't play the last Test. That says it all, it's like Australia playing without these five bowlers in the last Test of the series, it's a different ball game. Plus you didn't have quite a few batsmen as well. So it's a tribute to the players. "You can only do so much as a coach from behind the scenes. At the end of it, it's the players who have to go out there and do their job and they were magnificent." Four years ago, after getting bundled out for their lowest Test total of 36 in Adelaide, India made a magnificent comeback to win two of the remaining three games and emerge winners. Shastri fondly recalled a conversation between Rishabh Pant and Shubman Gill, who was helping out the latter with some useful tips right after his dismissal, as India went for the jugular to score 140 odd runs in the final session of play to shock the hosts at the Gabba, which was until then the home team's fortress. "I'll never forget it," Shastri said. "Last session, 140 runs to get. We had two different change rooms because of COVID. I went down from the coaches' room to have a chat with either Rishabh or (Chateshwar) Pujara. When I was about to reach the toilet, I heard a conversation between Gill and Pant. "Seventy-one overs bowled, Gill had got out for 91, and they were the two youngest players in the side, 21 and 22. "Nine overs left, they need the new ball, they'll bring (Marnus) Labuschagne on with his leg spin, you've got to score 45-50 runs there. "They are planning how they can reach closer to the end score, and no way was I going to stop them, I don't want to change that mindset. So I just walked past and said 'do what you have to do'. In the end, we chased down nearly 150 in that last session."



## Virat Kohli addresses team ahead of 3rd Test in Brisbane

**PTI ■ BRISBANE**

He used to be the cynosure of all eyes at training sessions during his captaincy days and Virat Kohli was once again the centre of attention as he addressed his teammates here on Thursday. After the demoralising 10-wicket defeat in the Adelaide day/night game, the visitors needed a bit of inspiration going into the crucial third Test of the series, and the youngsters in the side couldn't have got a better mentor than 'King' Kohli himself to guide them with his words of wisdom. The team huddles before the start of the training session has been a constant feature for years now and Kohli used to do a lot of talking during his days in charge. He did take a back seat once he left captaincy but with skipper Rohit also under immense pressure after four straight defeats, the senior-most player (in terms of Test debut) had to take the initiative ahead of the match starting here on Saturday. With vice-captain Jasprit Bumrah by his side, Kohli was

## Gujarat Giants appoint Pravin Tambe as bowling coach; Marsh takes over as batting coach

**PTI ■ AHMEDABAD**

Gujarat Giants on Thursday appointed former leg-spinner Pravin Tambe as their bowling coach, while Australian Daniel Marsh joined the side as batting coach ahead of Women's Premier League 2025. Michael Klinger, who joined the team last season, will continue as the Giants' head coach. Tambe, who made his IPL debut at the age of 41 back in 2013 for Rajasthan Royals, brings substantial coaching experience, having worked with Kolkata Knight Riders and Lucknow Super Giants. "I'm eager to work with this talented group of players to sharpen their skills and help



them excel," said Tambe. Marsh carries loads of experience, having served as head coach of the Tasmania men's team from 2013 to 2017 and was appointed as the assistant coach of the Australian women's cricket team in 2022. "I look forward to developing a fearless approach to our batting with the aim of

making our team one of the strongest batting units of the WPL," said Marsh. Ahead of the WPL 2025 auction to be held in Bengaluru on Sunday, the Giants had retained players such as Ashleigh Gardner and Beth Mooney. Gujarat Giants' retained players: Ashleigh Gardner, Beth Mooney, Dayalan Hemalatha, Harleen Deol, Laura Wolvaardt, Shabnam Shakil, Tanuja Kanwar, Phoebe Litchfield, Meghna Singh, Kashvee Gautam, Priya Mishra, Mannat Kashyap, Bharti Fulmali, Sayali Satghare. Released players: Sneha Rana, Kothryn Bryce, Trisha Poojitha, Veda Krishnamurthy, Tarannum Pathan, Lea Tahuhu.

## Prasar Bharati to broadcast Hockey India League

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**

The upcoming Hockey India League, which is being revived after seven years, will be telecast live on the country's national broadcaster, Prasar Bharati. The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in this regard was signed in a ceremony between Abhishek Agarwal, Deputy Director General Sports, Prasar Bharati, and Hockey India Secretary General Bhola Nath Singh. Set to commence on December 28 in Rourkela, HIL will be broadcast live across the nation through Doordarshan and Prasar Bharati's new OTT platform -- Waves. This edition of the HIL is path-breaking because it will feature the inaugural season of the women's league alongside the men's competition. While the men's competition will be played in Rourkela, a four-team maiden tournament for the women will be hosted at Ranchi. Navneet Sehgal, chairman Prasar Bharati, emphasised the importance of this partnership. "This is a proud moment for hockey, a sport that has captured the hearts of millions of Indians, and for Prasar Bharati, as we come together to bring the Hockey India League to every corner of the country. Our goal is to showcase this prestigious league to households across India, including remote towns and villages where future hockey stars are emerging. "With Doordarshan's extensive reach and our OTT platform, Waves, we will ensure that the Hockey India League becomes a national celebration, inspiring a deeper connection between the sport and its fans. Together, we aim to elevate hockey's prominence and turn it into a true festival for the entire nation," he said.

## Momentum is with Australia after win at Adelaide, says Sunil Gavaskar

**PTI ■ BRISBANE**

The legendary Sunil Gavaskar feels Australia will have the momentum in the third Test against India starting on Saturday thanks to their victory in the Pink Ball Test at Adelaide last week. Australia levelled the five-match Border-Gavaskar Trophy 1-1 with a 10-wicket win in the day-night Test after losing the first Test at Perth by 295 runs. "The momentum that the Indian team got in Perth was lost during the 10-day gap. Now, the momentum is with Australia because they have won this Test match," Gavaskar told Star Sports. "After the Adelaide Test, a few days later, you are playing at The Gabba. So, the momentum is now with the



Australian team," he added. Speaking to the same channel, former spinner Harbhajan Singh said India should try to play their best cricket to register a win at the 'Gabba' before travelling to more favourable venues in Sydney and Melbourne. "Their best chances will be, I

think, in Sydney and Melbourne. Anyway, if you play your best cricket at The Gabba and win there, then you will definitely win one match out of Melbourne or Sydney," Harbhajan said. He said India have the ability to make a comeback into the series despite the heavy loss in Adelaide. "The equality of the first two Tests shows that both teams have the ability to come back. Australia has come back; now maybe it's India's turn to turn the tables," he said. The owner of 711 international wickets too agreed that the long interval between the first and second Test resulted in India losing the momentum. "This series is tough because both teams have had losses. What happened with Australia in Perth, maybe they didn't expect it. And what happened with India in Adelaide, maybe India also didn't expect it. "Although there was a very long gap in the middle between the two Tests, sometimes such a gap spoils the momentum, and it happened here," he said.

# Manchester City crisis deepens with loss to Juventus in Champions League

**AP ■ PARIS**

Manchester City plunged deeper into trouble in the Champions League by losing 2-0 at Juventus, the latest setback in a scarcely believable run of poor results for the ailing English champions. City dropped to 22nd place in the 36-team standings, with only the top 24 advancing. Progressing to the next round of the new-look format looked a certainty before the season for a team that was European champion in 2023 and has won the last four Premier League titles. But not anymore as City manager Pep Guardiola battles injuries and an apparent loss of belief among his players. City has won just one of its last 10 matches in all competitions, with goals by Dušan Vlahovic



Super-sub Torres Ferran Torres came off the bench to inspire Barcelona to a fifth win in six games and push Dortmund, last season's runner-up, out of the top eight. Torres came on in the 71st to replace Robert Lewandowski,

who had a quiet game against his former club. Just four minutes later, Torres scored a goal on the rebound from Dani Olmo's shot. Serhou Guirassy's second goal of the game levelled the score at 2-2 but Torres scored again in the 85th off Lamine Yamal's

pass on the counter. Raphinha gave Barcelona the lead before Guirassy equalised from the penalty spot. Raphinha and Guirassy are tied for second place in the scoring chart on six goals, behind Lewandowski's competition-high seven. Home comforts for Arsenal Arsenal secured a third straight home win without conceding in the league stage, with Saka scoring in the 34th and 78th minutes and sending in a shot that was turned into the net by substitute Kai Havertz in the 88th. Arsenal is ahead of Bayer Leverkusen, Aston Villa, Inter Milan, Brest and Lille on goal difference. Lille won 3-2 at home to Sturm Graz on Wednesday. In-form Alvarez Man City could sure do with Julian Alvarez at the moment. With a brilliant curling finish to open the scoring, the Argentina striker helped Atletico Madrid beat Slovan Bratislava 3-1 and provide a timely reminder of what City is missing after selling him for more than USD 100 million in August. Alvarez has 12 goals for the season, with four coming in the Champions League. Antoine Griezmann scored Atletico's other two goals at Metropolitan stadium as the Spanish team climbed to 11th place after a 10th straight win in all competitions. Tribute to grieving teammate When Lukasz Lakomy gave Young Boys the lead against Stuttgart, he ran toward the sideline and held up teammate Meschack Elia's jersey as others gathered around him. The gesture was a tribute after Elia's son died unexpectedly this week after a short illness. Elia wasn't playing as he was on his way to his native Congo, where his son died, to be with his family. Both teams wore black armbands and there was a moment of silence before the game, which was won 5-1 by Stuttgart. Late winner Tammy Abraham scored an 87th-minute winner as AC Milan beat Red Star Belgrade 2-1 to move one point off the top eight. Milan lost Alvaro Morata and Ruben Loftus-Cheek to muscle injuries in the first half. Benfica's five-match winning streak ended with a 0-0 home draw against Bologna, and Feyenoord had a 4-2 win over Sparta Prague.