

ISRO's to test Space seeds, debris capture and green propulsion

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Demonstration of seed germination in outer space, a robotic arm to catch a tethered debris there, and testing of green propulsion systems are some of the experiments planned on the POEM-4 -- the fourth stage of ISRO's PSLV rocket that remains in orbit after launching a satellite. The PSLV-C60 mission, slated for an year-end launch, is scheduled to place the twin satellites 'Chaser and Target' to demonstrate the space docking technologies that are crucial for building India's space station.

The PSLV Orbital Experiment Module (POEM) will carry 24 experiments -- 14 from various ISRO labs and 10 from private universities and start-ups -- to demonstrate various technologies in space. ISRO plans to grow eight cowpea seeds from seed germination and plant sustenance until the two-leaf stage in a closed-box environment with active thermal control as part of the Compact Research Module for Orbital Plant Studies (CROPS) developed by the Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre. The Amity Plant Experimental Module in Space (APEMS), developed by Amity University, Mumbai, plans to study the growth of spinach in a micro-gravity environment. Two parallel experiments will be carried out simultaneously -- one on POEM-4 in space and one on the ground at the university. The experiment's outcome will provide insights into how higher plants sense the direction of gravity and light.

The Debris Capture Robotic Manipulator, developed by VSSC, will demonstrate the capturing of tethered debris by a robotic manipulator using visual servoing and object motion prediction in the space environment. The robotic manipulator will be capable of capturing free-floating debris in future POEM missions.

PM Narendra Modi receives Kuwait's highest honour



PTI ■ KUWAIT CITY

Kuwait on Sunday conferred its highest honour - 'The Order of Mubarak Al-Kabeer' - on Prime Minister Narendra Modi for his role in strengthening the good relations between the two countries. Prime Minister Modi received the honour from Kuwait's Amir Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al Sabah at the Bayan Palace here. "I am honoured to be conferred the Mubarak Al-Kabeer Order by His Highness the Amir of Kuwait, Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al Sabah. I dedicate this honour to the people of India and to the strong friendship between India and Kuwait," Modi said in a post on X. "The Order of Mubarak Al-Kabeer" is a knighthood order of Kuwait.

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar said that the conferment of the Mubarak Al-Kabeer Order on Prime Minister Modi is a proud moment for all Indians. The honour recognises Prime Minister's steadfast commitment and leadership in strengthening linkages with the Gulf region. Also showcases the depth of India-Kuwait historic ties and people to people relations," he said in a post on X. In a release, the Ministry of External Affairs said the Prime Minister dedicated the award to the long-standing friendship between India and Kuwait, to the Indian community in Kuwait and to the 1.4 billion people of India. "The conferment of the award on this historic visit of a Prime Minister of India to Kuwait after 43 years added a special meaning to the occasion," it

said. In a post on X, Ministry of External Affairs Spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal described it as "a testament to the long-standing India-Kuwait friendship". The award was given to Prime Minister Modi for strengthening the good relations between the two nations, Kuwait's state-run news agency KUNA reported. This is the 20th international honour given to PM Modi by a country, officials said. The award was instituted in 1974 and has since been conferred on select global leaders. It has been previously awarded to foreign leaders like Bill Clinton, Prince Charles and George Bush. Modi reached Kuwait on Saturday for a two-day visit. His visit is the first by an Indian Prime Minister to the Gulf nation in 43 years.

He received a ceremonial welcome and Guard of Honour at the Bayan Palace. Modi had earlier received honours from Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain. In November, Guyana and Dominica conferred their top awards on Prime Minister Modi for his contributions during the COVID-19 pandemic and his exceptional contributions to the global community and efforts in strengthening bilateral ties with the two Caribbean nations. In the same month, Nigeria conferred its national award - the Grand Commander of the Order of the Niger - on Prime Minister Modi for his statesmanship and stellar contribution to fostering bilateral ties, making him the second foreign dignitary to receive the distinction.

CPI(M) slams rule change blocking access to election footage

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The CPI(M) on Sunday demanded the immediate withdrawal of an election rule amendment preventing public inspection of certain electronic documents such as CCTV camera and webcasting footage. In a statement, the CPI(M) Politburo expressed its strong objection to the amendment, restricting the access of political parties and candidates to electronic records, including video and other digital trails. The Government tweaked the election rule to prevent public inspection of certain electronic documents such as CCTV camera and webcasting footage as well as video recordings of candidates to check their misuse. Based on the recommendation of the Election Commission (EC), the Union

law ministry on Friday amended Rule 93(2)(a) of the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961, to restrict the type of "papers" or documents open to public inspection. The CPI(M) said these steps were initially introduced by the EC in consultation with political parties to ensure greater transparency, and described as "retrograde" the move to amend the rule. Proper consultations were not carried out with political parties on the issue, it alleged. "Media reports suggest that the government held consultations with the Election Commission of India while drafting the new rules. However, the Election Commission's reported concurrence was not preceded by any consultation with political parties, contrary to the established precedents over the years," the CPI(M) said. "The government's argument,

which questions the locus standi of the petitioner on the conduct of the electoral process, is specious. This approach completely excludes political parties' involvement in the procedures to be followed," the Left party said. The CPI(M) said its experience, particularly during the Lok Sabha elections in Tripura, showed that charges of rigging led to the examination of videographic records within polling booths, ultimately resulting in repolls being announced in almost half the polling booths across both constituencies. "In this era, where technology is an integral part of the electoral process, the government's move represents a retrograde step," it said. "The Politburo of the CPI(M), therefore, demands the immediate withdrawal of the proposed amendments to the Conduct of Election Rules," it added.

Alleged J and K terrorist caught in West Bengal

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ NEW DELHI

A joint team of West Bengal and Jammu and Kashmir Police on Sunday picked up an alleged terrorist linked to Tehreek e Mujahideen and Lashkar e Toiba. His arrest comes three days after two others were nabbed from Murshidabad district. The police arrested Javed Munshi an Improvised Explosive Device expert and a weapons handler hailing from Jammu and Kashmir (J and K). He was living with his relatives in Canning town in South 24 Parganas and was planning to move to Bangladesh via the

Sunderbans, police sources said adding several incriminating documents and other electronic devices were recovered from him. He had earlier been charged of a murder in the J and K, sources said. Munshi reportedly confessed to having visited Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan on several occasions with fake Pakistan passports, police said. Earlier, in a joint operation, the Assam STF and the West Bengal STF on Thursday arrested two suspected militants - Abbas Sheikh and Minarul Sheikh - in Murshidabad's Hariharpara, who were linked to another foreign national and 'handler'

Muhammad Shaad Radi who was allegedly living in India for the past 10 years --- regularly slipping in and out to Bangladesh. They were reportedly working towards recruiting moles in North Bengal beyond Malda with their eyes on the Chicken's neck area that connects the North East to the rest of the country. "The terror modules were planning to create communal tension in this part of the border by inciting people and had been appointing recruits," a senior police officer said adding they were looking for other terror moles involved in the job.

Delhi's Republic Day Tableau Rejected, AAP Slams Exclusion

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"The committee had a tough task of selecting the best tableaux from among the many proposals received," said a defense ministry spokesperson. "The selected tableaux will showcase the rich cultural diversity and heritage of our country." The rejection of Delhi's proposal is seen as a setback for the city, which has a rich cultural heritage and a long history of participating in the Republic Day parade. "I want to ask them -- why is Delhi's tableau being excluded once again this year? Why are the people of Delhi being prevented from participating in the Republic Day celebrations," Kejriwal asked at a press conference. Claiming that Delhi's tableau has been missing the cut for several years now, Kejriwal said, "What kind of politics is this? Why is there so much hatred towards Delhi and its people? If these leaders hold such animosity, why should the people of Delhi vote for them?"

Over 100 students from...

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Despite warnings from locals and authorities, the school staff insisted on continuing the journey, he said. Around 5 pm, the buses attempted to head towards Nepal again, but they were stopped from proceeding once more. The managers then decided to have the children sit in the open at Bichhiya railway station, located in the heart of the dense forest. With temperatures dropping, the children huddled together to shield themselves from the cold. After receiving information about the stranded students, District Magistrate Monika Rani ordered action. Sub-Divisional Magistrate (SDM) Sanjay Kumar, police and forest department officials, arrived at the site to provide food, set up bonfires, and ensure the safety of the children and staff, he said. SDM Sanjay Kumar confirmed that food was arranged for everyone, and strict instructions were issued to prevent such incidents in the future. The children and staff were safely escorted back to Gonda around midnight, bringing an end to their ordeal.

Woman found dead in Delhi

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

A 22-year-old woman, who was missing from her residence a few days ago, was found dead in a hotel in Delhi's Paschim Vihar area. According to her family members, the woman went missing on December 14 and her family members filed a missing person report on December 16 at Raj Park Police Station. The cause of the woman's death remains unclear.

Tirumala eyes AI chatbot for pilgrim services

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He added that TTD aims to position the world's richest Hindu temple as a model pilgrimage center under its "Vision 2047", in alignment with the state government's Swarna Andhra-2047 initiative. The vision emphasises planned development, environmental management, and heritage conservation in Tirumala, Rao said.

NDMC chairman awards winners at All India Winter Rose Show



STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

New Delhi Municipal Council (NDMC), Chairman Keshav Chandra gave away the prizes to the best judged entries of All India Winter Rose Show held at India - Africa Friendship Rose Garden in Chanakyapuri. Chandra distributed the prizes to the winners of the Rose Show in different 22 categories in the presence of the President of The Rose Society of India, Kuldeep Saddy. The Rose Show displayed 92 Varieties of Roses in 198

Sections & 22 classes with 1400 exhibits by more than 200 participants. Before giving the prizes, Chandra welcomed all the participants of the Rose Show and congratulated all individuals and organizations for organizing such a beautiful show where people can come and witness around 92 varieties of roses in different categories divided on the basis of their nature. He appreciated the work of all experts who were the architects of this wonderful show in the heart of the capital city of India.



Massive fire engulfs electronics manufacturing unit in Noida, no casualties

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

A massive fire broke out in the basement of an electronic equipment manufacturing company in Sector 65 on Sunday. According to the police, no casualties were reported in the incident, although goods worth crores of rupees were destroyed by the fire. "Information about the massive fire at the company located at A-113 in Sector 65 was received at 8 am, following which the fire department dispatched 17 vehicles to the spot," Deputy Commissioner of Police

(Zone II) Shakti Mohan Awasthi said. The fire erupted in the basement of Shyam SDS Electronics Pvt. Ltd., situated in A Block, and quickly spread, engulfing the area in flames. "Upon receiving the information, seven fire tenders initially arrived at the scene. However, due to the intensity of the blaze, more fire tenders were called in," a senior police officer said. The blaze was contained after five hours due to the efforts of around 100 firefighters, he said, adding that the total damage is still being assessed. Chief Fire Officer Pradeep

Kumar Choubey said the fire is suspected to have started due to sparks from the electrical equipment and the battery stored in the basement. "The batteries stored there were bursting intermittently due to the fire, which made extinguishing it more difficult," he added. Kumar noted that, as it was Sunday and no employees were present in the company, there were no casualties. "The cause of the fire is still unknown, but fortunately, there have been no reports of casualties. However, property worth crores has been reduced to ashes," he said.

AAP opens registration for women, seniors aid

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The beneficiaries will need to show their voter identity cards, and all eligible women voters in Delhi will receive the benefits, he added. Kejriwal also announced that registration for the Sanjeevani Yojana will start tomorrow, and elderly people will be registered at their homes by AAP volunteers. He said, "Today, we are officially inaugurating these schemes. Tomorrow, we will begin visiting some areas and starting the registration process. Myself, Atishi Ji, and Manish Ji will personally go to some locations and help people register. After this, registration for these schemes will be opened across all of

Delhi." Sharing a few snippets from the announcement, AAP National Convener Arvind Kejriwal posted on his 'X' handle (erstwhile Twitter), stating: "We recently announced 2 big schemes for the people of Delhi. 'Mahila Samman Yojana' and 'Sanjeevani Yojana'. From tomorrow our team will go door to door to register for these two schemes. To register for this, it is very important to have your Delhi voter card." Expressing her delight, Chief Minister Atishi shared on her 'X' handle, stating: "I believe that around 35 to 40 lakh women may benefit from the 'Mahila Samman Yojana'. Similarly, I estimate that around 10 to 15 lakh senior

citizens could benefit from the 'Sanjeevani Yojana'. This is a big step, and I encourage everyone to take full advantage of these schemes." "The elderly people of Delhi will get the protection of Sanjeevani from their son Arvind Kejriwal. The registration of 'Sanjeevani Yojana' is starting in Delhi from tomorrow. Be it a private or a government hospital, the elderly above 60 years of age will no longer have to worry about the cost of their treatment because their son Arvind Kejriwal is with them," she stated. In the run for the upcoming Delhi elections, AAP is vying for a third consecutive term, having won 62 out of 70 seats in the last election.

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

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Then, he admitted that he was already aware about the proceedings being initiated by the J&K authority and therefore, he was absconding and hiding himself knowingly," the DCP added. Accordingly, he above accused was arrested under the provision of Section 35(1)(b)(ii)(j) of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS), 2023. Bilal Ahmad Lone is no ordinary conman. The police said that Bilal is no ordinary conman and has cheated a large number of people in Jammu & Kashmir by inducing them on pretext of getting them loan for purchasing of vehicles. "He

used to target the paramilitary personals posted in Jammu and nearby area. Most of the victims in the cases registered against him, are para-military officials posted in J&K. Either he used to obtain loan on the name of para-military officers or used to sell the vehicles to them which were taken by him on loan from bank by preparing forged No Objection Certificate (NOC) purported to be issued by the Bank," a senior police officer said. "Information of his arrest has been given to the concerned police station of Anantnag district, J&K, and teams of J&K Police are on the way to take the custody of accused person," the DCP said.

CM Atishi visits Rangpuri Pahadi after LG shares video

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

After Lieutenant Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena shared a clip of his visit to Rangpuri Pahadi, detailing hellish living conditions, where dirty water could be seen filled on streets, drains overflowing, while roads were submerged in the sewage water and residents complaining of huge power bills...

South Delhi and Kapashera in South-West Delhi along with MP Ramvir Singh Bidhuri on Saturday after repeated requests from the locals. After a visit to the Rangpuri Pahadi area, Atishi stated, "I am thankful to LG Sir for attracting our attention to this. If the LG identifies any problem or issue in Delhi, he should inform us, and we will ensure it is resolved...

distressing to witness once again the helplessness and pathetic life conditions of lakhs of people of the national capital. He had referred to the local women, citing their problems of living in the area, with streets lined by overflowing sewers and lack of basic facilities. The video was from his visit to the Rangpuri Pahadi area in South Delhi on Saturday...



was not from rain, but from overflowing sewers. The Lieutenant Governor mentioned that the women seen in the video narrating their problems and heart-wrenching sufferings are from Delhi, not from any other state or country. He further mentioned that similar conditions were seen earlier in various areas like Burari, Kiradi, Kalandar Colony, Sangam Vihar, Mundka and Gokulpuri, where people were living in pitiable conditions.

Saxena said that he has assured the people that the cleanliness drive will begin in a day, while he will personally monitor the progress of these efforts to ensure that the residents get at least the basic amenities for a quality life. Saxena had also given suggestions to officials of agencies, including the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) and the Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board (DUSIB), to improve the situation.

terrible deterioration of the Capital, like broken sewer pipes, broken roads, garbage dumps, the soaring three garbage mountains, polluted air and water, which the Delhi Congress has been pointing out for the past several years but went unheeded, was seriously acknowledged by Lt. Governor V.K.Saxena after visiting some colonies like Rangpuri Pahari, Kapshera etc. and he was shocked to find the terrible living conditions of the people, amidst filth and squalor. He said that though the LG's visit might have been an election propaganda for the BJP, it opened his eyes to the pathetic condition of the colonies and how the Kejriwal Government had reduced the city into a huge garbage bowl...

Registration starting for Kejriwal's schemes is betrayal of public: BJP

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Delhi BJP on Sunday accused the former Chief Minister and AAP supremo Arvind Kejriwal of presenting 'a bundle of lies' over his announcement of registration for the 'Mukhya Mantri Mahila Samman Yojana' and 'Sanjeevani Yojana', while objecting on the registration being done by AAP workers for a government scheme. South Delhi BJP MP Ramveer Singh Bidhuri objected to how Kejriwal is announcing the schemes instead of Chief Minister Atishi. He said, "The registration starting for both the schemes from Monday is a betrayal to the public. Bidhuri said that if these are government schemes, then how can the AAP workers register them? The lack of registration officially means that the public is being deceived."



sented a bundle of lies through a press briefing. However, those lies have now become stale, and the people of Delhi will no longer fall for them." She alleged that Kejriwal has promised Rs 2,100 per month for women, but even before the Lok Sabha elections, he announced Rs 1,000 per month for women, filled out forms, and yet didn't disburse even a single rupee. "Kejriwal announced a similar scheme in Punjab in 2022, but until the end of December 2024, no woman in Punjab has received any funds in her account," Swaraj claimed, remarking that for Arvind Kejriwal, women's respect is just an election gimmick. She demanded that Kejriwal respond to why his private secretary, at his residence, physically assaulted MP Swati Maliwal and why he maintained silence on this incident. She questioned why the

same private secretary, guilty of such conduct, was promoted to an advisory position in the Punjab government. "The women of Delhi are well aware of Kejriwal's deceit and asked him to stop serving falsehoods under the guise of Mahila Samman," she added. Bansuri Swaraj also highlighted that Kejriwal has never implemented the Ayushman Bharat Scheme, a welfare scheme by the central government, in Delhi due to his political vendetta. "If he couldn't do justice to senior citizens with this scheme, how can he claim to ensure their welfare now?" she questioned. Further, the Lok Sabha MP said that like the promise of women's respect, the Sanjeevani scheme is also merely an election stunt. "Even though the scheme's entire cost is covered by the central government and it is implemented in 33 states, including Punjab where Kejriwal's government exists, it remains unimplemented in Delhi," she said. Swaraj pointed out that it is suspicious why Kejriwal is suddenly concerned about senior citizens after governing for 10 years and added that the AAP government's budget is running a deficit of Rs 7,000 crore, making the Sanjeevani scheme a mere illusion and a strategy to create a vote bank.

Police identify 175 illegal Bangladeshi immigrants in verification drive

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Amid politics heating up on the issue of illegal immigrants residing in the national Capital, the Delhi Police on Sunday claimed to have identified 175 people during their verification drive against illegal Bangladeshi immigrants residing in outer Delhi. Recently, the Delhi Lieutenant Governor (LG) Secretariat directed the chief secretary and police chief to launch a two-month special drive to identify and take strict action against illegal Bangladeshi immigrants residing in the city. While the BJP alleged the ruling party of using Bangladeshis and Rohingyas illegal immigrants as a vote bank, the AAP hit back by accusing the Centre of providing these immigrants with houses and facilities in the Capital. "The 12-hour verification drive began at 6 pm on Saturday in outer Delhi area," senior police officials said, adding that the police have intensified their efforts to identify and detain individuals residing without valid documentation. "As part of the ongoing operations, 175 individuals have been identified as suspected illegal Bangladeshi immigrants during extensive verification drives in outer Delhi," a senior police officer said. The city police launched a drive for the identification of



illegal Bangladeshi immigrants residing in Delhi on December 11, a day after the LG Secretariat ordered a crackdown on such persons. "Concerned about the growing number of undocumented immigrants, the Outer District Police has launched a series of targeted operations and joint checks in various areas under its jurisdiction," the police officer said. He further added that special teams, including personnel from local police stations, district foreigner cells, and specialised units, have been deployed to conduct door-to-door checks and gather intel-

ligence on suspected illegal immigrants. Police said that the operations involved thorough scrutiny of documents and detailed interrogations of the identified individuals. "Verification efforts extended beyond the district, with teams dispatched to the native places of these individuals in coordination with local police in their respective areas to authenticate their identities," he added. Police said that the verification drives are part of a broader initiative to identify and repatriate individuals living in the national capital

without valid legal documents. On December 13, the Delhi Police said they had apprehended two illegal Bangladeshi immigrants and identified over 1,000 others. Deputy Commissioner of Police (Southeast) Ravi Kumar Singh had said that the teams had identified more than 1,000 people during their drive and apprehended two men from Kalindi Kunj and Hazrat Nizamuddin areas. The police said that these individuals were staying in the national capital without any valid documentation. Both the accused, identified

as 22 year old Abdul Ahad and 32 years old Mohammad Azizul, were apprehended by the Hazrat Nizamuddin Police Station team on December 10 and 12, respectively. During interrogation, Ahad, hailing from Bangladesh's Sylhet, revealed that he had entered Delhi on December 6 with the help of a Bangladeshi agent in search of work. Azizul, a resident of Dhaka, had admitted to crossing the Benapole border in 2004 through West Bengal and had been living in India ever since. Police said they had produced both individuals before the Foreigners Regional Registration Office (FRRO) for deportation proceedings. Meanwhile, the Shahdara police had identified 32 individuals during the operation on December 12. Teams from different police stations across 15 districts in the national capital are visiting slums and areas like Kalindi Kunj, Shaheen Bagh, Hazrat Nizamuddin, and Jamia Nagar to check voter IDs and Aadhaar cards to identify suspected Bangladeshi immigrants. The officer also said that, besides sending data to the FRRO, police would personally verify the genuineness of the Aadhaar cards. According to police sources, over 1,500 illegal Bangladeshi immigrants have been identified during the checks across the entire national capital.

Two members of gang involved in luxury car theft held



STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi Police has arrested two members of a gang involved in luxury car theft, including the kingpin who used air travel to avoid suspicion after delivering stolen vehicles. According to the police on Sunday, the Anti-Robbery and Snatching Cell (ARSC) of the Crime Branch busted the gang known as the 'high flying gang' and recovered four stolen vehicles. Deputy Commissioner of Police (Crime) Bhisham Singh said, "The arrested individuals include the kingpin, Harender alias Hunny. They operated across multiple states stealing and selling luxury cars." Police laid a trap based on a tip-off about a Toyota Fortuner being driven to Yamuna Vihar. "One of the accused, 39 year old Aas Mohammad attempted to flee but was apprehended after a chase that ended at Alwar Tiraha on the Delhi-Jaipur Highway," the officer said. Singh said that during interro-

gation Mohammad revealed the gang's modus operandi and disclosed the location of other stolen vehicles, including a Maruti Brezza and a Maruti Baleno, recovered from Ghaziabad and Delhi. He also identified Harender as the kingpin. According to police, following Mohammad's arrest, Harender went underground to evade arrest. "A non-bailable warrant was issued against him and after extensive tracking he was arrested following a 100 kilometres chase near Rajnagar Extension in Ghaziabad. A stolen Maruti Brezza was also recovered from his possession," they said. Harender from Khajurin Khas has been involved in 20 criminal cases, including robbery, vehicle theft and cheating. He initially worked as a driver but later turned to auto-lifting for quick money, the police said. His associate, Mohammad from Seelampur, was a taxi driver before joining the gang. Both used air travel to avoid suspicion and maintain a lavish profile, they said.

10 people arrested for operating illegal betting syndicate on Big Bash T20 League in Australia

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi Police has arrested 10 people for operating an illegal betting syndicate on the ongoing Big Bash T20 League in Australia and seized five laptops, 14 mobile phones, notepad and T.V. from their possession. According to the police on Sunday, the syndicate was operating from an apartment in Karol Bagh. The accused were identified as 48 year old Raju Vaishnav, 32 year old Jagrat Saihni, 44 year old Parves Kumar, all residents of Delhi, along with 36 years old Yogesh Taneja, 34 years old Tarun Khanna, 38 year old Harvinder Deol from Agra in Uttar Pradesh and 34 year old Manish Jain, 32 years old Kushal and 43 years old Gautam Das, all natives of Rajasthan, a senior police officer added. The police also recovered 10 mobile phones from their possession. Deputy Commissioner of Police (Crime) Sanjay Kumar Sain said they received information about the syndicate led by Raju and his associates operating from Joshi Road in Karol Bagh. "Based on a tip-off, a raid was conducted around 11.30 am on Saturday at a flat on Joshi Road," he said. The flat had three bedrooms and 10 people, including Raju, and they were found placing bets on laptops and mobile

phones during a live match, he added. Preliminary investigation revealed that the group was betting on the seventh T20 match of the Big Bash League 2024-25 between Hobart Hurricanes and Perth Scorchers, which started at 10.30 am, police said. During interrogation they revealed that the syndicate operated both online and offline. For online betting, Jagrat had purchased a master ID from a betting website, the officer said, adding that for each transaction, master ID and this racket user are sharing 5 per cent and 95 per cent profit and loss. The DCP said that the group accepted offline bets by recording them on notepads. "Raju is the mastermind behind the group who convinced other bookies from three different states to join hands to increase profit and reduce losses," he said, adding that he has studied up to eighth standard and is working as a goldsmith. "To earn easy money, he came into this illegal trade and brought all other associates under one platform. He was taking 20 per cent share and the rest of the share divided into all as per their performance and business," the officer said, adding that the flat was rented by Raju in his name for Rs 45,000 per month.

19-year-old mother hangs self in Malviya Nagar

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

A 19 year old mother allegedly died by committing suicide in south Delhi's Malviya Nagar. According to the police, a suicide note has been recovered in which she wrote that no one is responsible and that she has committed suicide of her own accord. Deputy Commissioner of Police (South) Ankit Chauhan said, "On December 20, a PCR call was received at Malviya Nagar police station from AIIMS Trauma Centre regarding a patient, aged 19 years, who was declared brought dead." He said that her husband, namely Sandeep, was also present at the hospital and was questioned. "He stated that his wife, aged 38 years, was unable to conceive a child, so on the advice of some relatives, he married the deceased, a native of district West Champaran in Bihar, in September 2023, with the consent of his first wife," the DCP added. He said that the deceased gave birth to a baby girl who is now five months old. "Today, at around 1:30 PM, while the husband went to pick up his brother's son from school, the deceased allegedly committed suicide by hanging herself in her room. The exhibits, including the ligature material (a chunni), a suicide note, and the deceased's mobile phone, were seized from the spot and taken into police possession for further investigation."

City AQI slips to 'severe' at 409

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

After improving to the 'very poor' category, the air quality index in Delhi has once again slipped to 'severe', with the AQI of 409 on Sunday. The national capital's Air Quality Index (AQI) was recorded in the 'very poor' category with a reading of 370 on Saturday. In addition to the cold wave conditions that have the city shivering, layers of smog engulfed the national capital on Sunday morning. The first half of December provided some temporary relief, with air on six days rated as 'moderate' following an exceptionally polluted November, a month where air quality failed to get better than the 'poor' category. A Swiss based forecaster recorded 427 air pollution at 12.30 pm. According to this website, the air pollution in Delhi was— over 62.3 times — the limit prescribed by the World Health Organisation (WHO) in the morning. The overall level of PM2.5 (a chief pollutant) in Delhi was 311 micrograms per cubic meter as compared to 255.3 micrograms per cubic meter on Friday morning. The overall level of Particulate Matter under 10 microns was 457 micrograms per cubic meter. The level of Nitrogen dioxide (NO2) was recorded 96.7 micrograms per cubic meter, as against the World Health Organization's (WHO) limit being far stricter at 25µg/m3.



Traffic congestion is particularly significant, as it results in idling vehicles that release high levels of NO2. December's average NO2 level at ITO was 165µg/m3, while Anand Vihar recorded 161µg/m3 — both double CPCB's safety threshold. Even areas with moderate traffic, such as North Campus DU and Punjabi Bagh, showed peaks exceeding 200µg/m3, underscoring the widespread nature of the problem. Delhi's road network, burdened by 7.9 million registered vehicles and an influx from neighbouring cities, underscores the scale of the challenge. The national capital was engulfed in a smog on Sunday morning with residents feeling the chill as cold wave conditions prevailed. AQI readings from various parts of Delhi highlighted the severity of the situation: Okhla Phase 2 (388), Alipur (407), Rohini (423), ITO (382),

Ashok Vihar (339), Wajipur (432), Shadipur (387), Mundka (426), Jahangirpuri (437), Narela (472), DTU (352), R.K. Puram (462), Anand Vihar (423), Pusa (377), and Punjabi Bagh (417). Notably, several locations approached or exceeded the "severe" threshold of 400. The maximum temperature was recorded three notches above normal at 24.1 degrees Celsius. The minimum temperature had settled a notch below normal at 7.3 degrees Celsius, the India Meteorological Department (IMD) said. The city experienced fog in the morning, with humidity levels ranging between 68 per cent and 97 per cent, it said. The IMD has forecast cloudy skies with light rain for Monday. The maximum and minimum temperatures are expected to settle at 20 and 7 degrees Celsius, respectively.

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

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

Coaching Institutes and

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

On November 22, CCPA

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

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

Dhankhar calls for accountability of lawmakers

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI/ THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

STAFF REPORTER ■ GURUGRAM

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

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

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

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

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

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

Some other SIM cards pro-



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

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

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

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



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

He was responding to Union Home Minister Amit Shah's recent interview to a news channel in which he was

asked if the NDA could go to the polls in Bihar without declaring a chief ministerial candidate, like it recently did with great success in Maharashtra.

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

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

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

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

body, is not behaving independently," he said.

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

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

While documents such as

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

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

FIRST COLUMN

MAKE A DIRECT
CONNECT WITH GOD

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



RAVI VALLURI

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

Slowdown in growth:
Is it a temporary blip?

UTTAM GUPTA

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



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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



GURDEEP KAUR

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

Physical and Cognitive Consequences

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

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

Breaking the Cycle

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

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

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

The Way Forward

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

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



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

SMART SNACKING FOR THE CHILLS

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

WHY SMART SNACKING MATTERS

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

SMART SNACKING RULES

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

MIND PORTION SIZES:

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

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



SNACKING IN STYLE DURING FESTIVITIES

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

SIMPLE WAYS TO ROAST PECANS

BASIC ROAST

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

SPICED ROAST

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

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

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



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

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



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

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



HOLISTIC APPROACH TO COMBAT DISEASES



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

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

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

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

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

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

Health Promoting Town Planning Critical to Healthier Communities

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

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

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

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



SOLUTION TO POLLUTION

By **ARUN DUGGAL**

DELHI STRUGGLES TO MEET EV TARGETS

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

BEEN THERE, DONE THAT

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

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

LOOK EAST, LOOK WEST

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

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

REAL SOLUTION TO POLLUTION KEPT AT BAY

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

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

By DR SHIFALIKA GOENKA

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



