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INSIDE

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

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

AQI under 400, Grap-III invoked in Delhi NCR

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

WEATHER

AQI	369
MAX	20.8°C
MIN	9.9°C

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

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

impact of air pollution on health and daily life. Under Stage-III, classes up to five are required to shift to hybrid mode. Parents and students have the option to choose online education, wherever available. Stage III bans on non-essential diesel-operated medium goods vehicles with BS-IV or older standards within Delhi. The restrictions also include on plying of BS-III petrol and BS IV diesel LMVs (4 wheelers) in Delhi and in the districts of Gurugram, Faridabad, Ghaziabad and Gautam Budh Nagar. Persons with Disabilities shall be permitted to ply BS-III Petrol / BS-IV Diesel LMVs, provided that these are specifically adopted for them and are run only for their personal use.
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Rupee at fresh record low of 85.20 against US dollar

PTI ■ MUMBAI

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

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



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

Former Home Secy Bhalla is new Manipur Gov

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

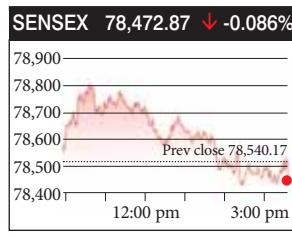
In a major reshuffle, former Union Home Secretary Ajay Kumar Bhalla has been appointed as Manipur Governor amid ongoing trouble in the north eastern State. Some of the other States where change was effected according to a Rashtrapati Bhawan communique includes former Union Minister and army chief Vijay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

MERRY CHRISTMAS



Park street, Kolkata all decked up for Christmas eve
 PTI

MARKETS



LoPs record dissent over NHRC postings

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Leaders of Opposition Mallikarjun Kharge and Rahul Gandhi had recorded their dissent over the selection of the Chairperson and Members of the National Human Rights Commission on the grounds that the process adopted was "fundamentally flawed" and a "predetermined" exercise that ignored mutual consultation and consensus. They had proposed the names of Justice Rohinton Fali Nariman and Justice KM Joseph for the position of chairperson. The Opposition leader's dissent note was released to the media a day after former Supreme Court judge V Ramasubramanian was appointed as the new Chairperson of the NHRC. The Opposition leaders also suggested retired High Court judges Muralidhar and Akil Abdulhamid Qureshi as NHRC Members. The meeting of the Selection Committee for picking the Chairperson and Members of the NHRC was held on December 18 at the Parliament House. The Selection Committee is headed by the Prime Minister and the panel comprises Lok Sabha Speaker, Deputy Chairperson of Rajya Sabha, Home Minister and Leaders of Opposition from Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha.
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Dalit boy dies by suicide after being forced to drink urine

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ LUCKNOW

In a horrifying incident from Uttar Pradesh's Basti district, a 17-year-old Dalit boy died by suicide after being subjected to brutal assault and humiliation during a birthday party. The boy was allegedly forced to strip, beaten, made to drink urine, and further humiliated by being forced to lick spit. The perpetrators also recorded the abuse. Traumatized by the ordeal, the boy hanged himself at his maternal uncle's house on Monday. The victim, a Class 10 student living with his maternal uncle in Kaptanganj, was invited to a birthday party on December 20 by a local youth. According to the complaint filed by his uncle, the boy was ambushed at the gathering, where four to five individuals forced him to strip and assaulted him. They urinated in his mouth and recorded the incident. When the boy later demanded the deletion of the video, the accused humiliated him further by forcing him to lick their spit. Unable to bear the trauma and humiliation, the boy returned home, narrated the incident to his family, and later took his life by hanging. The police approached the police soon after the incident, but the initial response was reportedly lackluster. Two suspects were detained briefly but were released the same evening. This inaction prompted the grieving family to take the boy's body to the Superintendent of Police (SP) office, demanding justice. Amid public outrage, a case was registered against four individuals under charges of assault, criminal intimidation, and abetment of suicide. Three accused-Vinay Kumar, Akash, and Kaju Prasad-have been arrested, while efforts are ongoing to nab the fourth suspect, Sonal. The boy's family revealed that he had been facing harassment from the accused for some time.
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Delhi Police bust gang settling illegal migrants, 11 arrested

SAUMYA SHUKLA ■ NEW DELHI



Even as a high voltage political drama has been underway over the issue of Rohingyas and Bangladeshi immigrants staying illegally in the National Capital, the murder of a man, who used to push women in prostitution, led to the Delhi Police in busting a gang involved in settling these immigrants in Delhi. Police have arrested 11 people including four Bangladeshi nationals. The accused involve seven people who were allegedly involved in making forged documents including Aadhaar card, birth certificates, caste certificates, matriculation certificates, COVID certificates, and income certificates, at nominal prices starting from

Rs 7, Aadhaar operators and tech experts. A woman in the intervening night of October 20 and 21 came to Sangam Vihar police station to report that her husband, Santu Sheikh alias Raja, has been murdered which led to the police tracking down four people involved in his murder and subsequently busting the gang. The Bangladeshi nationals, 26 years old Midul Miyan alias Akash Ahmed and 24 years old Fardeen Ahmed alias Abhi Ahmed along with their wives, were arrested and interrogated in connection with the murder of Santu Sheikh alias Raja. Among the motives behind the murder, Raja used to push the wives of the accused into prostitution and also tried to make physical relations with them while also bullying them for minor issues. They all lived in close proximity. "However, the police learnt during interrogation that these accused had entered India illegally and had been residing in Sangam Vihar for several years," Deputy Commissioner of Police (South) Ankit Chauhan said. They were found in possession of Bangladeshi ID cards (chip-based NID cards) and birth certificates. Around 21 Aadhaar cards, four voter ID cards, and eight PAN cards were also recovered from the victim's residence. Chauhan said, "Under the guidance of Hon'ble Lieutenant Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena, we formed a team to unearth the entire matter and conduct a thorough probe into the illegal immigration issue." These immigrants came to India through the jungle route and then took bikes and taxis to reach the nearest town from where they took AC trains to travel to Delhi, he said. Further questioning of the accused led to the arrest of 26 year old Sahil Sehgal who ran a 'Poonam Online Computer Centre' in Rohini Sector 5.
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Accident in Poonch: Five soldiers killed

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ JAMMU

At least five Indian soldiers were killed and several others received injuries after the vehicle in which they were travelling rolled down in a deep gorge in the Balnoi sector of the frontier Poonch district on Tuesday. The soldiers were on operational duty at the time of the mishap. Initial reports suggested the army vehicle skidded off the road and rolled down a deep gorge after the driver lost control of the vehicle. Confirming the same Nagrota-based White Knight Corps in a post on X said, "All ranks of White Knight Corps extend their deepest condolences on the tragic loss of five brave soldiers in a vehicle accident during operational duty in the Poonch sector". According to statement the vehicle, part of an army convoy, veered off the road near the Line of Control (LoC). At the time of filing the report, the rescue operations were going on, and the injured personnel were receiving medical care in a nearby hospital.

Jump in Maharashtra voter turnout normal: EC issues FAQs

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

Amid concerns flagged by the Congress, the Election Commission (EC) on Tuesday clarified the misconception regarding the jump in voting percentage in Maharashtra that occurred on polling day saying the increase in voter turnout from 5 pm to 11.45 pm is normal and there were no arbitrary additions or deletions of voters in the state. In its 66-page response to the Congress, the Commission said it would not be correct to compare 5 pm voter turnout data with final polling data. The poll body asserted that it is impossible to change actual voter turnout as statutory Form 17C giving details of voter turnout is available with authorised agents of candidates at the time of close of poll at the polling station itself. The Congress had approached the poll panel in November flagging various concerns related to the Maharashtra assembly polls. In a letter to the EC, the Congress said that there was an "inexplicable increase" in voter turnout between 5pm and the final voter percentage announced by the EC at 11.30pm on the day of polling. Coming out with a detailed



note and frequently asked questions (FAQs), the EC told the Congress that increase in voter turnout from 5 PM to 11:45 PM was normal, being part of the process of aggregation of voter turnout. It said there can be bona fide but inconsequential differences in votes polled and votes counted. It said rule-based process was followed with transparency in Maharashtra electoral roll preparation and there was no irregular pattern in voter deletions in the state. It told the Congress that due process was followed, including participation of Congress representatives in preparation of electoral rolls. The poll body said that its complaint of an average addition of 50,000 electors between July and November in 50 assembly seats, out of which 47 have been won by the Mahayuti, is factually incorrect and misleading.
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Cattle shelters along highways: Unique solution to a perennial problem

DEEPAK KUMAR JHA ■ NEW DELHI

In a step to enhance road safety and address the challenge of stray cattle and to avoid animal-related accidents on the National Highways (NH), the central road making agency National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) has taken a pilot project to provide cattle shelters along the NHs. The initiative aims to create a safer travel experience for commuters while ensuring care and management of stray cattle, and animals found along the National Highways. With shelter areas ranging from 0.21 to 2.29 hectares, shelters under the pilot project will be strategically located to serve as safe spaces for stray cattle, reducing their presence on National Highways. The initiative will be implemented on various National Highway stretches, including the UP/Haryana Border to Rohna

section of NH-334B, where shelters will be set up along the Kharkhoda Bypass. Similarly, shelters will be constructed along Bhiwani - Hansi section of NH-148B at Hansi Bypass, Kiratpur-Nerchowk section of NH-21 and the Dangiawas to Jajiwala section of the Jodhpur Ring Road on NH-112. The NHAI has been facing challenges posted by stray cattle/animal movement on National Highway in several states across the country which is hazardous to road users' safety. Although several steps for removal of cattle from the National Highways were taken in the past but they could not get anticipated success due to several ancillary issues having social and sensitive angles, which included problems pertaining to unknown ownership/transportation of cattle/healthcare/ first aid treatment



during transportation of any injured animals, feeding the cattle till identification of owner or handing them over to the State Government agencies. Several Courts in various states were also very keen in holistic resolution of the changes posted by movement of stray cattle on National Highways. Although control for the root cause of this

NHAI. The concessionaire will also maintain these shelters by providing first aid, adequate fodder, water, and caretakers throughout the concession period, ensuring the well-being of the animals. To further support this initiative, the concessionaire under its CSR initiative will deploy cattle ambulances to transport and treat injured stray animals, set up first-aid centres and hospitals to cater 50 km on each side for timely medical care of these animals. Beyond the construction and maintenance of shelters, the concessionaire will ensure safe transportation of stray cattle to these facilities, provide feed and enforce the provisions of the Cattle Trespass Act, 1871. NHAI Chairman Santosh Kumar Yadav said by addressing the challenges posed by stray cattle/animals on the National

Highways, this unique initiative is another step that furthers NHAI's commitment to not only to create safer National Highways for commuters by enhancing road safety but also fulfils a humane requirement of taking care of stray cattle/animals. "I am sure that this initiative will set a new benchmark for a holistic National Highway infrastructure development in the country," Yadav said. Sharing his thoughts Dineshchandra Agrawal, President - National Highway Builders Federation said "We welcome this step from NHAI to develop shelters for stray cattle/animals along the National Highways and offer our support for this initiative. I would urge our members to come forward and partner in this path breaking initiative that will help spread this noble cause of rehabilitating stray animals and enhancing road safety."

President to confer national bravery awards to 17 children

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

President Droupadi Murmu will on Thursday confer the Pradhan Mantri Rashtriya Bal Puraskar to 17 children from 14 states and Union territories. The Union Ministry of Women and Child Development said in a statement that it would celebrate Veer Bal Diwas and the Pradhan Mantri Rashtriya Bal Puraskar with nationwide activities, highlighting the achievements and potential of India's youngsters. This year, 17 children from 14 states and Union territories will be conferred with the prestigious Pradhan Mantri Rashtriya Bal Puraskar by President Droupadi Murmu, it added. The award recognises exceptional achievements in seven categories -- art and culture; bravery; innovation; science and technology; social service; sports; and environment. The honourees -- seven boys and 10 girls -- will receive a medal, certificate and a citation booklet as part of the recognition. The centerpiece of the celebration, the national programme for Veer Bal

Diwas, will take place at Bharat Mandapam in Delhi. Prime Minister Narendra Modi will be present on the occasion, inaugurating the Suposhit Panchayat scheme that aims to bolster nutritional security at the grassroots. The event will also feature a march-past led by children, representing diverse cultures. Union Minister of Women and Child Development Annapurna Devi will deliver the opening address, setting the tone for a day dedicated to nurturing young minds and fostering creativity, the ministry said in its statement. Approximately 3,500 children, including the awardees, will participate in the event, which will feature cultural performances showcasing India's rich heritage. Educational and creative activities will engage children around the country. Schools, childcare institutions and Anganwadi centres will host storytelling sessions, creative writing competitions, poster-making events, essay writing, poetry recitals and quizzes. Online platforms such as MyGov and MYBharat will also facilitate participation.

AAP launches registration drive for women, seniors schemes



STAFF REPORTER N NEW DELHI

AAP Government's Ministers, MLAs, and volunteers on Tuesday took to the streets to register citizens for the 'Mukhyamantri Mahila Samman Yojana' and 'Sanjeevani Yojana'. Similarly, on Wednesday too, many ministers, MLAs and volunteers including former Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia will register people by setting up camps. On Monday, AAP Convener Arvind

Kejriwal commenced the registration drive for the schemes by personally registering a few beneficiaries. Continuing the initiative, the registration drive for both schemes was extended across Delhi on Tuesday. Several Delhi Cabinet Ministers joined the campaign including Delhi Minister Saurabh Bharadwaj, who organized a camp in Shapur Jat Village in Greater Kailash Assembly constituency, while Minister Imran Hussain facilitated registra-

tions in Motia Khan, Gali Kasam, Ballimaran Assembly constituency. Other leaders, including Minister Raghuvinder Shokeen, MLAs Sanjeev Jha, Vishesh Ravi, Ajesh Yadav, Kuldeep Kumar, and Rajesh Gupta, along with numerous volunteers, conducted camps to ensure maximum outreach. AAP supremo Arvind Kejriwal has instructed volunteers to ensure that no eligible beneficiary is left out of the registration process. Following these

directives, volunteers are actively spreading awareness through public announcements using microphones in their respective areas. They are urging residents to visit the camps and register to avail themselves of the benefits of these schemes. There is no deadline for registration under the 'Mukhyamantri Mahila Samman Yojana' and 'Sanjeevani Yojana'. The ruling party estimates that 35 to 40 lakh women may register for the 'Mahila Samman Yojana',

PM meets economists for inputs on Budget

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The Prime Minister on Tuesday met eminent economists and sectoral experts at NITI Aayog to hear their views and suggestions for the upcoming Budget. Budget creation, improving farm productivity, and mobilising public funds for infrastructure development were some of the issues that figured during the interaction. Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman is scheduled to present the Budget for 2025-26 in the Lok Sabha on February 1, 2025. According to an official statement, the Prime Minister emphasised that Viksit Bharat can be achieved through a fundamental change in mindset, which is focused towards making India developed by 2047. The participants shared their views on several issues, including navigating challenges posed by global economic uncertainties and geopolitical tensions, strategies to enhance employment particularly

among the youth, and create sustainable job opportunities across sectors. Suggestions were also made on aligning education and training programmes with the evolving needs of the job market, enhancing agricultural productivity and creating sustainable rural employment opportunities, attracting private investment and mobilising public funds for infrastructure projects to boost economic growth. Suggestions were also made for promoting financial inclusion and boosting exports and attracting foreign investment, as per the statement. Renowned economists and analysts present at the interaction included Surjit S Bhalla, Ashok Gulati, Sudipto Mundle, Dharmakirti Joshi, Janmejaya Sinha, Madan Sabnavis, Amita Batra, Ridham Desai, Chetan Ghate, Bharat Ramaswami, Soumya Kanti Ghosh, Siddhartha Sanyal, Laveesh Bhandari, Rajani Sinha, Keshab Das, Pritam Banerjee, Rahul Bajoria, Nikhil Gupta, and Shashwat Alok, the statement added.

Dalit boy dies by suicide after being forced to drink urine

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They accused the police of failing to act promptly, which they believe could have prevented the tragedy. "He was humiliated and tormented to a point where he couldn't take it anymore," said a grieving family member. This incident has sparked widespread condemnation, bringing to light the ongoing caste-based discrimination and violence faced by marginalised communities.

Activists and community leaders have called for stringent action against the perpetrators and accountability for the police to ensure justice is delivered. "The boy's tragic death serves as a grim reminder of the urgent need to address systemic discrimination and ensure stronger protections for vulnerable communities in India," Lenin Raguvnshi of People's Vigilance Committee of Human Rights (PVHCR) said.

Delhi Police bust gang settling illegal migrants, 11 arrested

From page 1

Sector 5. Using fake birth certificates, Afroz facilitated the creation of Aadhaar cards. "Ranjit and Afroz were arrested, and investigations revealed that the 'Jantprints.Site' offered fake documents," he added. Payments for these documents were made via Paytm QR codes linked to a number registered under Mohammad Chand. Based on technical surveillance, 28-year-old Mohammad Chand, from Uttam Nagar, was arrested from Vikas Nagar, Delhi. He confessed to retaining a two per cent commission and transferring the remaining amount to Saddam Hussain. Thirty-three-year-old Saddam

Hussain, from Uttam Nagar, was arrested, leading to the discovery that the 'Jantprints.Site' was operated by his associate, Deepak Mishra. Saddam transferred the payments to Deepak Mishra, retaining a 2 per cent share for himself. Further questioning revealed that the accused initially created Aadhaar cards showing ages under 18, as such cards were easier to process at multiple centres in Delhi. Cards for individuals over 18 were limited to just four centres in Delhi. Technical surveillance led to 34-year-old Deepak Mishra, from Uttam Nagar, being apprehended in Ambala and arrested after sustained

interrogation. He disclosed that his brother-in-law, Sonu Kumar, developed the 'Jantprints.Site'. Thirty-one-year-old Sonu Kumar, was arrested from Noida, where he admitted to learning how to create fake websites via YouTube. He also created 'Portalwale.Com' and 'Portalwale.Online' for creating fake ID documents. Sonu Kumar runs a cyber café in Noida, the police said, adding that further investigations are on. Cornering the ruling party on the issue, National Convener of Bharatiya Janata Party's IT cell chief Amit Malviya accused Arvind Kejriwal's Aam Aadmi Party of actively facilitating illegal

immigration of Rohingyas and Bangladeshi nationals in Delhi through a well-organised network. "To divert attention from this anti-national operation, he falsely accused the BJP of canceling voter cards of Poorvanchalis. Now, both his tactics and lies have been thoroughly exposed. Delhi Police has uncovered a racket involved in creating fake Aadhaar and voter ID cards, along with the technology experts behind a fraudulent website. They also debunk Kejriwal's baseless claim about the cancellation of voter cards for Purvanchali women. Arvind Kejriwal is in deep trouble," he shared on X.

LG orders weekly police meets with senior citizens

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Lieutenant Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena on Tuesday directed Delhi Police for weekly interaction with senior citizens and requested divisional commissioner for setting up dedicated help desks for them at district magistrate offices. The Delhi LG Saxena interacted with over 600 senior citizens at the Raj Niwas during 'Samvaad@Raj Niwas' series of dialogues. In a post on X, the LG said he has directed the Delhi Police to

hold weekly interactions with the senior citizens. Police have been instructed to increase patrolling in vulnerable areas, he said. Saxena also requested the divisional commissioner for dedicated help desks at DM offices for settlement of disputes concerning senior citizens. A majority of senior citizens from all across the city raised issues like waterlogging, dark spots, harassment & red tape at government offices, encroachment on footpaths, traffic congestion / road safety, cyber and street crime, etc

AQI under 400, Grap-III invoked in Delhi NCR

From page 1

The restrictions also include banning of road construction activities and major repairs. The Government may take a decision to stagger timings for public offices and municipal bodies in other areas of NCR. According to the CAQM, the Sub-Committee, accordingly, hereby decided to revoke with immediate effect, its orders dated 16.12.2024, for invoking actions under Stage-IV ('Severe+' Air Quality) of revised schedule of GRAP (December, 2024). The CAQM said in a statement that the air quality index of Delhi is continuously improving since morning and has been recorded as 369 ('Very Poor') on 24.12.2024 at 4 pm, which is about 31 AQI

points below the limits as decided and directed by the Supreme Court for invoking Stage-IV (Delhi AQI 400). The AQI further dropped to 364 at 5pm. "Actions under Stage I, II, and III of the revised GRAP shall remain invoked and be implemented, monitored, and reviewed by all the agencies concerned in the entire NCR to ensure that the AQI levels do not slip further," the commission said in its order. All implementing agencies shall keep strict vigil and especially intensify measures under Stage-I, II & III of the revised GRAP. While GRAP Stage-IV is being revoked, keeping in view the winter season when weather conditions may not be always favorable and in order to

ensure that the AQI levels do not slip further, citizens are requested to strictly adhere to the citizen charter under GRAP-III," it said. The restrictions under Stage-IV include a ban on all construction activities, entry of non-essential polluting trucks into Delhi, and mandatory shifting of school classes, except for classes 10 and 12, to hybrid mode. The measures were aimed at curbing severe pollution levels and included restrictions on industrial activities, construction, and entry of non-essential trucks into Delhi. The AQI is likely to remain in the "very poor" category in the coming days due to favourable meteorological conditions and wind speed, according to the

air quality and weather forecast provided by the India Meteorological Department (IMD) and Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology (IITM). Adding to the environmental concerns, Delhi experienced a chilly morning with a minimum temperature of 10.8 degrees Celsius recorded at 5.30 a.m. Light rain and a drop in temperature further accentuated the winter chill. Thick fog continued to blanket parts of the city, significantly reducing visibility. While the past week's nights have already been cold, daytime temperature drops are often felt more intensely by people due to its impact is usually felt when people are outdoors and active. In the morning, the AQI in all 36 monitoring stations listed

under Centre's Sameer app, which provides hourly data on the National Air Quality Index, was under 450, while some were under 400 as well. At the same time, the air pollution in Delhi was over 37.3 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 188 as compared to 372 micrograms per cubic meter on Monday afternoon. The overall level of Particulate Matter under 10 microns was 262 micrograms per cubic meter. The level of Nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) was recorded at 49.2 micrograms per cubic meter, as against the World Health Organization's (WHO) limit being far stricter at 25µg/m³.

Jump in Maharashtra voter turnout...

From page 1

It said the fact is that only six assembly constituencies had total additions of over 50,000 electors during the period. Hence the question of winning in 47 seats on this basis does not arise. "Candidates, through their polling agents and counting agents, receive all statutorily disclosed data and Forms which are not, in any way, dependent on, or even connected with any aggregation or centralized disclosures through press notes or any other means. Such decentralized statutory disclosures make it impossible for anyone to change or manipulate any details or data in these documents at any stage. The credibility of the Indian electoral space, recognized and acknowledged worldwide, is not episodic and is agnostic to electoral outcomes. It is layered 'bottoms-up' with each step transiting scrupulously into the next step, in a verifiable and sequential system", the EC said. In its reply, the Commission has listed out nearly 60 instances of proactive involvement of political parties or candidates during the entire electoral process. The Commission reiterated that political parties, being key stakeholders, are involved scrupulously at each and every stage of the

election process from Roll to Poll. Meaningful involvement of political parties/candidates are key pillars of the Indian electoral process. The poll body informed the Congress that all data, as demanded by the party, pertaining to electors for each Constituency in Maharashtra and Form 20 is available on CEO Maharashtra's website and can be downloaded. In its reply EC assures collaboration on its meticulous, participative, and transparent processes. The Commission underscored the importance of collaboration with all political parties and welcomed constructive suggestions. While detailing the well laid out mechanism with sufficient checks and balances and disclosures, the EC emphasised that the watertight statutory scheme ensures that deletion and addition of voters is done strictly according to rules with fullest involvement of political parties at every stage. It underlined that there were no bulk deletions or unusual deletion patterns of noticed across all assembly seats. Deletions of an average of 2,779 electors per seat happened on account of death or shifting and duplicate entries after following due process,

including participation of party representatives. The Commission further clarified that the concept of "Voter Turnout" is neither defined anywhere in the election laws nor does any statute explain the procedure of publication of data of voter turnout at constituency level, state level or at national level. It has simply evolved as a popular term, coined by academicians, media and general public, over the last several decades to broadly denote the level of participation of the electorate in the polling process. To avoid confusion and ambiguity about voter turnout and its reporting mechanism among stakeholders and election authorities, it is imperative to explain the term 'Voter Turnout' (VTR) and provide a clear framework through instructions. On the Congress concerns, the EC said the working of a meticulous, transparent and participative electoral roll updation process, involving all political parties and public at large. While detailing the well laid out mechanism with sufficient checks and balances and disclosures, the poll body emphasised that the watertight statutory scheme ensures that the deletion and addition of voters is done strictly according to rules.

LoPs record dissent over NHRC postings

From page 1

The post of NHRC chairperson had been lying vacant since Justice (ret'd) Arun Kumar Mishra completed his tenure on June 1. In their dissent note, Kharge and Gandhi recorded their disagreement on the grounds that the selection process adopted by the committee was fundamentally flawed. "It was a predetermined exercise that ignored the established tradition of mutual consultation and consensus, which is essential in such matters. This departure undermines the principles of fairness and impartiality,

which are critical to the credibility of the Selection Committee," their dissent note said. Instead of fostering deliberation and ensuring a collective decision, the committee relied on its numerical majority to finalise the names, disregarding the legitimate concerns and perspectives raised during the meeting, Kharge and Gandhi said. They said the NHRC is a vital statutory body tasked with safeguarding the fundamental human rights of all citizens, particularly those from the oppressed and marginalised sections of society. "Its ability to fulfil this

mandate depends significantly on the inclusiveness and representativeness of its composition. A diverse leadership ensures that the NHRC remains sensitive to the unique challenges faced by various communities, especially those most vulnerable to human rights violations," their dissent note read. "We proposed the names of Justice Rohinton Fali Nariman and Justice Kuttiyil Mathew Joseph for the position of Chairperson, keeping in mind both merit and the need for inclusivity. "Justice Rohinton Fali Nariman, a distinguished jurist from the minority Parsi

community, is renowned for his intellectual depth and unwavering commitment to constitutional values. His inclusion would send a strong message about the NHRC's dedication to representing India's pluralistic society," they said. Similarly, Justice Joseph, a former Supreme Court judge, belonging to the minority Christian community, has consistently delivered judgments that emphasise individual freedoms and the protection of marginalised groups, making him an ideal candidate for this critical position, Kharge and Gandhi said. "Furthermore, for the position

of Members, we recommended the names of Justice S. Muralidhar and Justice Akil Abdulhamid Qureshi, both of whom have exemplary track records in upholding human rights," they said. Justice Muralidhar is widely respected for his landmark judgments advancing social justice, including his work on custodial violence and the protection of civil liberties, and Justice Qureshi, belonging to the Muslim minority community, has consistently defended constitutional principles and demonstrated a strong commitment to accountability in governance, the two leaders said. "Their inclusion would

contribute to the NHRC's effectiveness and its commitment to diversity," it said. While merit is undeniably the primary criterion, maintaining a balance that reflects the regional, caste, community, and religious diversity of the nation is equally important, it said. "This balance ensures that the NHRC operates with an inclusive perspective, sensitive to the lived experiences of all sections of society. By neglecting this critical principle, the committee risks eroding public trust in this esteemed institution," the dissent note added. "Lastly, the dismissive approach adopted by the

majority of the Selection Committee in today's meeting towards these considerations is deeply regrettable. The NHRC's credibility and effectiveness depend on its ability to embody the diversity and inclusiveness that define India's constitutional ethos," the dissent note given on December 18 said. "The names we proposed reflect this spirit and align with the foundational principles of the commission. Their exclusion raises significant concerns about the impartiality and fairness of the selection process," Kharge and Gandhi said. A former Chief Justice of India or a retired judge of the top

court is appointed as NHRC chairperson by the president on the recommendation of the selection committee. Former CJs H L Dattu and K G Balakrishnan are among those who have headed the rights body in the past. The NHRC, in a post on X, said, "Hon'ble President of India appoints Shri Justice V. Ramasubramanian (Retd.) as the Chairperson, and Shri Priyank Kanoongo and Shri Justice Bidyut Ranjan Sarangi (Retd.) as the Members of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), India." Kanoongo earlier served as a chairperson of the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR).

MCD to inspect Delhi establishments ahead of festive season

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) on Tuesday ordered random inspections of restaurants, banquet halls, clubs and other establishments in Delhi in a bid to prevent any untoward incident due to overcrowding during Christmas and new year celebrations.

The civic body directed officials to ensure compliance with safety norms during the celebrations, citing concerns over overcrowding and the risks it posed during the festive season. In a circular issued on Tuesday to district health officers, the MCD highlighted that traders often allowed more customers than permitted, encroached on public land and operated in unlicensed or temporary areas, particularly during the year-end festive season.

"It has been observed in the past that traders dealing with such trades allow the entry of an excess number of customers in their establishments than permitted number of seats. This is a serious violation and may lead to deterioration of food and beverage quality, any mishapening due to extra pressure on the existing infrastructure etc in the eating establishments," according to the circular. The MCD also flagged concerns about businesses encroaching on public land, operating in unlicensed areas and illegally setting up temporary kitchens.

Delhi police bust fake visa racket



Police personnel with the accused arrested for running fake visa racket in the New Delhi.

SAUMYA SHUKLA ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi Police on Tuesday claimed to bust a fake visa racket, which was also involved in sending Bangladeshi immigrants abroad, resulting in the arrest of four members. Police said that the accused were involved in preparing counterfeit visa stickers and temporary residence cards for various countries. According to the police, they also recovered Bangladeshi passports from their office and it is believed that they might have sent these immigrants abroad from India. The police recovered around 25 passports, 50 fake visa stickers, five temporary residence cards,

14 rubber stamps/seals, four mobile phones, and two pen drives from them. "Equipment used to produce these fraudulent documents, including UV light machines, blank sticker papers, rubber stamps, and seals, were also seized," Deputy Commissioner of Police (New Delhi) Devesh Mahla said. The case to fore after the police took action after Lakhveer Singh lodged a complaint on December 16 at Chanakya Puri Police Station, claiming he and his friends were deceived by 25 year old Paramjeet Singh alias Sahil, who promised to secure German visas for them at a cost of Rs 8 lakh each. They came in contact through the social media plat-

form Instagram. Singh was arrested near the Kuwait Embassy in Chanakya Puri, and further investigation led to the arrest of three other gang members including 51 years old Tajinder Singh alias Sweetie alias Lucky, 67 years old Sunil Kumar Sood, and 42 year old Uday Pal Singh alias Raja alias Sonu. The police said that the gang had a sophisticated operation for producing fake visas, including a laptop, printer, UV light machine, and other materials seized from Uday Pal Singh's home. "Analysis of the laptop and pen drive revealed 8.5 GB of data containing fake visa stickers, indicating the gang may have

defrauded many individuals across the country," the DCP said. "A case has been registered at the Chanakya Puri Police Station under section 318 (4) (Cheating), 336 (3) (Forgery of valuable security), 340 (2) (Forged document or electronic record and using it as genuine) and 61 (2) (criminal conspiracy) and the investigation is ongoing to determine the full scale of the racket's operations," the officer said. He added that Sood, a resident of Subhash Nagar, was first arrested in 2003 in a visa fraud case. "In 2018, he started working as a middleman for arranging fake visa stickers to earn money and came in contact with Tajender Singh," the DCP said.

Haryana CM announces Gurugram metro expansion to begin from May 2025

PARVESH SHARMA ■ GURUGRAM

Chief Minister of Haryana Nayab Singh has announced that the construction work of Metro expansion between Millennium City Center to Railway Station, Sector-22 and Cyber City in Gurugram will be started from May 1, 2025.

A total of ₹5,452.72 crore will be spent on this project. ₹896.19 crore will be spent on this project by the Central government and ₹4,556.53 crore by the Haryana government, he said.

The CM gave this information while chairing a review meeting for Metro expansion between Millennium City Center to Railway Station, Sector-22 and Cyber City on Tuesday. In the meeting, the CM was informed that the work of Metro expansion will be completed in four years. In this regard, the CM directed the officials to take the work of Metro forward at a fast pace

keeping in mind the convenience of the people.

Apart from this, he instructed the officials to make a good plan so that people do not face any inconvenience during the construction of the metro and the traffic runs smoothly. He said that whenever a big construction infrastructure is built, the officials should make such a plan that it lasts for a long time and people get benefits.

Under this project, a medium metro will be established, and it will operate on a standard gauge. Apart from this, this metro will be based on CBTC, i.e. communication-based train control signal and the maximum speed will be 80 kilometres per hour.

Initially, three coaches will be installed in this metro connectivity, and after that, it will be increased to six coaches. Five underpasses and flyovers are also to be built during the construction of the metro expansion," he said.

It may be noted that the detailed project report (DPR) of the metro rail running between

Millennium City to Cyber City, Gurugram, has been approved by the Haryana Government and the Central Government, and the foundation stone of this project was laid by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Rewari on 16 February 2024. It was informed in the meeting that there will be a total of 27 stations on this 28.50 km long metro rail line and a depot will also be built, out of which 8 stations will be model stations. The metro line will comprise 27 stations, including Mellnium City Centre, Sector 45, Cyber Park, Sector 47, Subhash Chowk, Sector 48, Hero Honda Chowk, Sector 72A, Hero Honda Chowk, Udyog Vihar Phase 6, Sector 10, Sector 37, Basai Village, Sector 9, Sector 7, Sector 4, Sector 5, Ashok Vihar, Sector 3, Bajghera Road, Palam Vihar Extension, Palam Vihar, Sector 23A, Sector 22, Udyog Vihar Phase 4, Udyog Vihar Phase 5, and Cyber City. The Basai village to Dwarka Expressway spur is included to ensure connectivity to the depot.

Traffic Police announce Christmas arrangements road diversions, checks

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Delhi Traffic Police on Tuesday said it has made "adequate" arrangements to deal with the rowdy elements during the Christmas celebrations in the national capital.

An officer said deployments have been made near churches, malls, and markets.

"Apart from this, a drive against drunken driving will be carried out till New Year," the officer said.

Another officer said, "We saw less number of people thronging to the Sacred Heart Cathedral near the Gol Dak Khana last year. However, we have deployed sufficient personnel in the area. They will keep clear the traffic

for a smooth movement in the area." Churches in the city expecting a heavy congregation of devotees include the Sacred Heart Cathedral, St Thomas church (Mandir Marg), St Martin's church (Delhi Cantonment), St Thomas church (R K Puram), and St Mary's Knanaya church (Vasant Kunj), police said.

They said traffic will be diverted on stretches according to the need.

A large number of people are expected to assemble at Select City Mall, Saket, where traffic will be restricted on certain roads, a police advisory said. Traffic diversion will begin at 2 pm Wednesday.

At the Sheikh Sarai to Hauz Rani

stretch, all median cuts will remain closed. Heavy vehicles and DTC/cluster buses will not be allowed on both carriageways of Press Enclave Road, it said. Commuters moving from Chirag Delhi to Qutub Minar via Press Enclave Road are advised to use Khanpur Red Light T Point via MB Road to Mehrauli. Traffic coming from IIT Flyover to PTS going towards Press Enclave Road is advised to continue on Aurbindo Marg towards Mehrauli and use TB Hospital Road Red Light to Lado Sarai via MB Road, it said.

No public transport buses will be allowed to go to Pushp Vihar from MB Road/Asian Market Red Light, the advisory said.

Manoj Tiwari courts controversy over old Kejriwal video

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

BJP MP Manoj Tiwari on Tuesday courted controversy by sharing on X an old clip of former Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal, alleging that he said framers of the "constitution" were drunk when they made it. Several users on X claimed the video was truncated and responded with a longer

video, in which Kejriwal is purportedly seen referring to the "constitution" of the Congress and not the country's.

"I found this video of the smiling chief of Delhi's Aam Aadmi Party. After listening everyone will be able to see the true colours of such an impersonator," Tiwari, the North East Delhi MP, said in a post with the hashtag

Dalit_Virodhi AAP. Sisodia, a former deputy chief minister of Delhi, taking umbrage over Tiwari's post, also shared the longer version of the video on X and said, "Tiwari ji you are an MP, have at least some shame. You are tweeting a lie. Stop behaving like a cheap troll. Maintain the honour of at least the post of MP if not yourself." Tiwari responded to Sisodia

with another post, advising him to maintain dignity in a debate. He said, "...You can run away to avoid the questions of the people of Patparganj, but we will not let you run away from here."

Sisodia who represented the Patparganj constituency thrice since 2013, is going to contest from the Jangpura constituency in the Assembly

elections due in February next year.

In the video Tiwari shared, Kejriwal is heard saying that he read the constitutions of all parties and Congress' constitution said no party worker will consume alcohol. He follows it up by saying, "Somebody said 'whoever wrote the constitution would have written the constitution after drinking liquor.'"

Shahpur Jat Festival inaugurated

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi Tourism Minister Saurabh Bharadwaj on Tuesday inaugurated the annual two-day Shahpur Jat Festival in Greater Kailash, stating that such events provide opportunity for the younger generation to connect with civilization and traditions.

Addressing the event, Tourism Minister Saurabh Bharadwaj said, "Such programmes should continue so that the heritage and customs passed down by our elders remain alive in the hearts of future generations. This ensures that our youth can pass on this rich culture to the gen-

erations to come." He added, "The primary objective behind organising this two-day Shahpur Jat Festival is to preserve and promote the legacy and traditions of our ancestors, ensuring they remain vibrant for centuries to come."

Delhi Government's Tourism Department organised the annual two-day Shahpur Jat which will run on till Wednesday from 2:00 pm to 7:00 pm. The event features Haryanvi folk dances, Ragini performances, stand-up comedy, magic shows, puppet plays, and a traditional ramp walk showcasing Haryana's cultural attire. The highlight of the festival is the performances by

renowned singers Ajay Hooda and Ruchika Jangid. As the name suggests, Shahpur Jat is a village predominantly inhabited by the Jat community. Keeping the local preferences in mind, the Delhi Tourism Department has curated performances that celebrate Haryana's rich cultural heritage, including Ragini, Haryanvi music, and folk dances.

In addition to the vibrant performances, the event also features food stalls offering a wide range of Haryanvi delicacies alongside other traditional Indian dishes. Visitors can savour these diverse culinary offerings while enjoying the cultural showcase.

BJP accuses Kejriwal of lying about voter names deletions

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi BJP President Virendra Sachdeva on Tuesday attacked the AAP supremo Arvind Kejriwal for being an 'expert at lying', stating that he is using a woman as a pawn to create a false narrative of a large-scale deletion of votes in Delhi.

"Yesterday, during a program in Kidwai Nagar, Kejriwal introduced a woman, claiming that despite possessing an EPIC card, her vote had been deleted. However, today, the woman, Ms. Chandra, clarified in an interview with a news agency that she was and continues to be a registered voter in the Trinagar constituency and has been voting regularly," the Delhi BJP chief said.

He stated that it is now proven that former Chief Minister of Delhi Arvind Kejriwal is an expert at lying. "Ms. Chandra stated to the news agency that she never mentioned anything about her vote being deleted to Arvind Kejriwal and speculated that he might have made the statement due to a misrepresentation or deliberately," Sachdeva added.

Kejriwal launches 24x7 water supply in Rajinder Nagar, ahead of Assembly polls

SAUMYA SHUKLA ■ NEW DELHI

Ahead of the Delhi Assembly elections, AAP convener Arvind Kejriwal on Tuesday launched round-the-clock water supply in Pandav Nagar Delhi Development Authority (DDA) flats in the Rajinder Nagar area. Accompanied by Chief Minister Atishi and MLA Durgesh Pathak, the AAP Chief reaffirmed his commitment to achieving the city's water requirement of 1,250 MGD in the coming years. "We promised clean water to every household in Delhi 24x7. Today, I am proud to announce that this mission has begun. Round-the-clock clean water supply has started in Rajinder Nagar and we will extend it to the entire Delhi in the coming times," he said.

When we came to power 10 years ago in Delhi, around 50-60 per cent of water was supplied by tankers. There used to be tanker mafia. I am happy to say that today, after 10 years, 97 per cent of Delhi gets water by pipeline," the former chief minister said.

"When our government was formed, Delhi used to face power cuts of 8-10 hours daily. At that time, I promised that I would ensure 24x7 electricity, and I delivered on that promise. Today, you get an uninterrupted power supply. Now, my mission is to ensure 24x7 clean water supplies



AAP National Convener Arvind Kejriwal drinks water from a tap during the commencement of 24 hours drinking water supply to houses, in Rajinder Nagar Assembly constituency in New Delhi. Delhi CM Atishi, left, is also seen.

directly from your taps, with full pressure, even on the third and fourth floors. Today marks the beginning of that mission," he added. Kejriwal claimed that while there has been a slight delay in delivering the promise of round the clock water supply because of the COVID-19 pandemic that lasted for 2.5 years, and the false cases they filed

against us during this time. "But we have overcome all these challenges. COVID-19 is behind us, and we have dealt with all their fake cases. Now that this initiative has started, I am personally very happy and confident that it will quickly spread across Delhi. In the next few years, we will ensure clean, 24x7 water supply to the entire city," asserted

Kejriwal. To show that the water was clean, Kejriwal drank water directly from the tap. The AAP chief was accompanied by Delhi Chief Minister Atishi and local MLA Durgesh Pathak. The AAP has fielded Pathak from Rajinder Nagar constituency for the Delhi assembly elections slated for February next year.

Central varsity teachers appeal to Delhi CM over firings of AUD faculty

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Teachers from central universities across the country on Tuesday appealed to Delhi Chief Minister Atishi to intervene in the recent termination of two faculty members from the Ambedkar University Delhi (AUD) and demanded their immediate reinstatement.

Describing the action as an attack on academic freedom and democratic spaces, they alleged that the professors were targeted for voicing dissent against the establishment. They called for solidarity from the academic community and warned of widespread agitation if their demand was not met. The Joint Forum for Movement on Education (JFME), along with representatives from the All India Federation of University and College Teachers' Organisations (AIFUCTO) and the Federation of Central Universities Teachers' Associations (FEDCUTA), held a press conference to address the issue. Professors Salil Mishra and Asmita Kabra, founding facul-

ty members of the AUD, a state government-run university, were terminated last month and allegedly denied severance benefits.

The termination stemmed from allegations related to their role in the regularisation of 38 contractual administrative staff in 2018-19, a decision made collectively by the university's board of management. The statement issued by the forum highlighted that three inquiry committees were formed by the AUD since 2020 to investigate alleged anomalies in the regularisation process.

While the first committee found no evidence of corruption, the subsequent committees accused the professors of actions "unbecoming of a public officer" and "misconduct", it said. The forum also raised concerns about the broader implications of the action, stating it was part of a disturbing trend to intimidate independent and secular academicians. "Democratic spaces are being eroded, and this will completely distort our public-funded institutions. We will not allow this to happen and have sought an appointment to

address the issue," said Nandita Narain, chairperson of the JFME.

Further, the forum alleged that the AUD administration ignored complaints of caste- and gender-based harassment by senior officials, raising questions about the university's commitment to fairness and justice.

They noted that the timing of the professors' dismissal coincided with protests by faculty and staff over these harassment cases. Drawing parallels with similar incidents at other institutions, the forum cited the suspension of a professor at Jamia Millia Islamia over procedural disagreements and the issuance of show-cause notices to faculty members at IIT Kharagpur for opposing administrative decisions. They warned that such actions threaten the autonomy and democratic functioning of universities across India. In their appeal to the Delhi CM, who also serves as the education minister, the teachers' organisations urged her immediate intervention to reverse the dismissals and address the university's governance issues.

Delhi HC seeks response on plea for Assembly session on CAG reports

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Delhi High Court on Tuesday sought the response of the Delhi government and Lieutenant Governor on a plea seeking a special sitting of the legislative assembly for tabling CAG reports.

Justice Sanjeev Narula said the prayer to direct the Delhi government and Chief Minister Atishi, who also holds the finance portfolio, to forward the 14 CAG reports to the

speaker stood satisfied.

The court issued notices to the Delhi government, chief minister, the office of the speaker, Lieutenant Governor and the office of the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) on the petitioners' prayer. The plea sought a direction to the speaker to perform their constitutional obligation and summon a special sitting of the legislative assembly and table the CAG reports pertaining to the Delhi administration.

During the hearing, the Delhi government counsel submitted the files had reached from the chief minister's office to the Delhi secretariat during the day.

The petitioners' counsel said being legislators, it was their right to debate the reports in the House and urged the court to allow their prayer. This is the second petition by the legislators in relation to the CAG reports. The court posted the matter on January 8, 2025.

Opposition leader Vijender Gupta and BJP MLAs Mohan Singh Bisht, Om Prakash Sharma, Ajay Kumar Mahawar, Abhay Verma, Anil Kumar Bajpai and Jitendra Mahajan had filed a petition on the issue of placing of CAG reports before the assembly. In the present plea filed through advocates Neeraj and Satya Ranjan Swain, the petitioners said despite the order passed in the earlier case, the speaker was yet to receive the reports for further action.

"Speaker informed the petitioners that he is not in receipt of the CAG Reports. On December 20, 2024, when petitioner number 1 again enquired about receiving the CAG reports, the speaker of the Delhi Legislative Assembly apprised he has not yet received the CAG reports till 12.51 pm," it said. The plea alleged a "clear violation" of the undertaking given by the senior counsel on behalf of the Delhi government in court.

Congress approaches Supreme Court against new Election Commission rules

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Congress on Tuesday filed a writ petition in the Supreme Court challenging the recent amendments to the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961 and expressed hope that the apex court will help restore the "fast eroding" integrity of the electoral process. 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.

AICC general secretary Jairam Ramesh, who filed the petition, said, "The integrity of the electoral process is fast



eroding. Hopefully the Supreme Court will help restore it." "A writ has just been filed in the Supreme Court challenging the recent

body charged with the conduct of free and fair elections cannot be allowed to unilaterally, and without public consultation, amend such a vital law in such a brazen manner. "This is especially true when that amendment does away with public access to essential information that makes the electoral process more transparent and accountable," he said.

Based on the recommendation of the Election Commission of India, 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.

Home Minister Shah stresses use of biometrics to identify unidentified bodies, persons

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Tuesday stressed the need for using biometrics technology to identify unidentified bodies and unidentified "found persons".

Chairing a review meeting on the implementation of the three new criminal laws with the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) here, Shah also emphasised the use of technology in all criminal investigation matters.

He said alerts should be generated for all the cases at predefined stages and timelines should be fixed - from the registration to disposal of the case - for the benefit of victims and complainants.

Biometrics technology should be adopted to identify unidentified bodies and unidentified found persons,

Shah asserted. According to an official statement, Shah said regular dispatch of alerts to investigating officers as well as senior officers as per predefined timelines will help expedite the process of investigation.

The meeting reviewed the implementation and integration of Crime and Criminal Tracking Network & Systems (CTNS) 2.0 and Inter-Operable Criminal Justice System (ICJS), the New Criminal Laws and National Automated Fingerprint Identification System (NAFIS), prisons, courts, prosecution and forensics with ICJS 2.0 at all India level.

During the discussion, the home minister asked the NCRB to facilitate the complete implementation of the new criminal laws in the ICJS 2.0, the statement said.

He emphasised the use of applications like eSakshya, Nyaya Shruti, eSign and eSummons in every state and Union Territory.

Shah said a team of officers of the Ministry of Home Affairs, NCRB should visit the states and Union Territories to increase the adoption of technical projects and assist them in all possible ways.

He emphasised regular interaction with senior police formations of states and Union Territories to monitor the progress of CTNS and ICJS regularly and provide impetus to the project.

The NCRB should create a data rich platform to benefit the investigation officers and other stakeholder of criminal justice system, he said. Shah appreciated the efforts of the NCRB in the technical implementation of the three new criminal laws and the NAFIS.

Congress to commemorate 100th anniversary of Belgaum session

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Congress will commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Belgaum session of the party that was presided over by Mahatma Gandhi with an extended session of the CWC which will decide on an action plan for the next year.

The opposition party asserted that the "insult" to B R Ambedkar by Home Minister Amit Shah will be strongly taken up at Belagavi and deliberated upon.

Addressing a joint Press conference along with Congress general secretary organisation K C Venugopal and AICC media and publicity department head Pawan Khara, Congress general secretary in-charge communications Jairam Ramesh said the extended Congress Working Committee (CWC) meeting on December 26 has been named 'Nav Satyagraha Baithak'.

He said two resolutions will be passed at the meeting. Congress has been marking Ambedkar Samman Saptah against the "insult" of B R Ambedkar by Home Minister Amit Shah, Ramesh said.

He said there is only one solution that the home minister be sacked and must apologise for his remarks. Ramesh said on December 27, a 'Jai Babu, Jai Bhim, Jai Samvidhan' rally will be held in Belagavi. Venugopal said the Congress has strongly taken up the issue of the "insult" of Ambedkar by the home minister and has been demanding the sacking of Shah as well as an apology from him. He said the issue would be strongly taken up in Belagavi and ways to take it forward in the future will also be deliberated upon, he said.

Tragedy repeats: despite SC Guidelines, abandoned borewell accidents continue to claim lives

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

After over 14 years the Supreme Court framed guidelines to prevent accidents involving abandoned borewells, the frequent spate of such incidents highlight the gaps in enforcement and creating awareness of the top court's order.

The issue has come to the forefront again following the spate of such accidents leading to desperate and dramatic rescue operations. Most recently, a minor, Chetna, aged around three years fell into a borewell in the Kotputli-Behror district of Rajasthan, and the NDRF and SDRF were deployed to rescue her from the 150-foot-deep borewell with efforts still underway at the time of filing this report. On December 9, Aryan, 5, fell into a 150-foot-deep



borewell in Rajasthan's Dausa while playing and after a 55-hour rescue operation, he was pulled out unconscious and was declared dead on arrival in a hospital. These instances occurred despite the top court's comprehensive

guidelines issued on February 11, 2010, aimed to prevent such tragedies. The guidelines were issued after the bench led by former Chief Justice of India K G Balakrishnan, took a suo motu initiative and issued notice to the various states to take immediate measures

petition bringing to its notice a spate of such accidents in the country on February 13, 2009.

The guidelines included setting up barbed-wire fencing around the well during construction, using a steel plate cover fixed with bolts over the well assembly and filling up of borewells from the bottom to the ground level among others. The top court had also asked the authorities to give wide publicity to its order. "It has been brought to the notice of this court that in a number of cases, children had been trapped and fallen into borewells and tube wells or abandoned wells. These reports have been coming from various states. Accordingly, we took suo motu initiative and issued notice to the various states to take immediate measures

to prevent such kinds of incidents," the top court said in its order dated February 11, 2010.

Further, the owner of the land or the premises, before taking any steps to construct borewells or tube wells, was directed to intimate in writing to the authorities concerned - district collector or district magistrate or sarpanch - or department officials of ground water or public health or municipal corporations at least 15 days in advance. It was directed that registration of all drilling agencies, government, semi-government or private, should be mandatory. "Erection of a signboard at the time of construction near the well with the following details: (a) Complete address of the

drilling agency at the time of construction or rehabilitation of well, (b) Complete address of the user agency or owner of the well," the apex court had said. The top court also directed the barbed-wire fencing or any other suitable barrier be erected around the well during construction, a cement or concrete platform measuring 0.5x0.5x0.6 metre (0.30 metre above ground level and 0.30 metre below ground) built around the well casing and the well assembly capped using welded steel plates or a similar cover fixed with bolts. It had said in case of a pump repair, the tube well should not be left uncovered and mud pits and channels should be filled after completion of the work. "Fill up

abandoned borewells by clay/sand/boulders/pebbles /drill cuttings, etc., from bottom to ground level," said the top court, adding on completion of the drilling operations at a particular location, the ground conditions would be restored to its original form. "The guidelines above mentioned shall be given wide publicity through national television channels. A copy of this order be sent to the chief secretaries of all the states/union territories who shall forward the same to the district collectors of all districts of their respective state," the bench said. On August 6, 2010, a three-judge bench led by former CJI S H Kapadia slightly modified the February 11, 2010 order and disposed of the petition.

President Murmu to confer Pradhan Mantri Rashtriya Bal Puraskar to 17 children on December 26



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

President Droupadi Murmu will on Thursday confer the Pradhan Mantri Rashtriya Bal Puraskar to 17 children from 14 states and Union territories.

The Union Ministry of Women and Child Development said in a statement that it would celebrate Veer Bal Diwas and the Pradhan Mantri Rashtriya Bal Puraskar with nationwide activities, highlighting the achievements and potential of India's youngsters.

This year, 17 children from 14 states and Union territories will be conferred with the prestigious Pradhan Mantri Rashtriya Bal Puraskar by President Droupadi Murmu, it added.

The award recognises exceptional achievements in seven categories - art and culture; bravery; innovation; science and technology; social service; sports; and environment. The honourees - seven boys and 10 girls - will receive a medal, certificate and a citation booklet as part of the recognition. The centerpiece of the celebration, the national programme for Veer Bal Diwas, will take place at Bharat Mandapam in Delhi. Prime Minister Narendra Modi will be present on the occasion, inaugurating the Suposhit Panchayat scheme that aims to bolster nutritional security at the grassroots. The event will also feature a march-past led by children, representing diverse cultures. Union Minister of Women and

Child Development Annapurna Devi will deliver the opening address, setting the tone for a day dedicated to nurturing young minds and fostering creativity, the ministry said in its statement. Approximately 3,500 children, including the awardees, will participate in the event, which will feature cultural performances showcasing India's rich heritage. Educational and creative activities will engage children around the country. Schools, childcare institutions and Anganwadi centres will host storytelling sessions, creative writing competitions, poster-making events, essay writing, poetry recitals and quizzes. Online platforms such as MyGov and MYBharat will also facilitate participation. Veer Bal Diwas is dedicated to inspiring young Indians to contribute to the nation's progress by upholding the values of courage, innovation and service. Through programmes such as the Pradhan Mantri Rashtriya Bal Puraskar and Suposhit Panchayat, the government reaffirms its commitment to empowering the next generation and fostering a culture of excellence, the ministry said.

Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar calls removal notice a 'rusted tool'

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar on Tuesday said one should not use a vegetable-cutting knife for bypass surgery and asserted that the notice for his removal from the post was actually a "rusted" tool.

In his first reaction on the notice submitted by the opposition INDIA bloc, Dhankhar said, "Just look at the notice against the vice president. Just look at the six links they have given. 'You'll be shocked. Chandra Shekhar ji once said, 'Never use a vegetable-cutting knife for bypass surgery.' The notice wasn't even a vegetable-cutting knife; it was rusted. There was haste." The notice was rejected by Rajya Sabha Deputy Chair Hariwansh. "When I read it, I was astonished. But what surprised me more was that none of you read it. If you had, you wouldn't have been able to sleep for days," he told a group of women journalists. Dhankhar said any constitutional position has to be vindicated by

commitment to sublimity, sterling qualities and constitutionalism.

"We are not in a position to settle scores. Because for the success of democracy, two things are inalienable: expression and dialogue," he said, according to an official statement.

Cautioning against orchestrated efforts to harm national interests, the vice president said these are fuelled in an orchestrated manner by forces that are determined to be inimical to the interest of the country. "Their objective is to destroy, brick by brick, our constitutional institutions, slur the presidency, and mind you, who is the president? The first tribal woman to become president of this country," he remarked. Referring to parliamentary debates, Dhankhar said the two Houses are in the news for the wrong reasons. "Accountability must be enforced by media, the only conveyance to the people at large. Media can strike a chord with the people and generate pressure on public representatives," he said.

Hospitals must treat victims of sexual violence and acid attacks: Delhi HC

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

In a significant ruling, the Delhi High Court recently said state-run and private hospitals cannot turn away survivors of sexual crimes, among others, and should treat them for free or face criminal action. A bench of Justices Prathiba M Singh and Amit Sharma said a medical establishment should not insist on identity proofs when such survivors are brought in an emergency and any medical professional refusing to provide necessary treatment would attract a complaint to be immediately registered by the police being a punishable offence.

The court passed the directions in relation to survivors of rape, gang rape, acid attack and minor survivors of sexual offences, among others, and said despite the legal mandate, they faced difficulties in availing free medical treatment. "Whenever any victim/survivor of any of the said offences approaches a medical facility, diagnostic facility, diagnostic lab, nursing home, hospital, health clinic, etc., whether private and public/government, such victim/survivor shall not be



turned away without providing free medical treatment," said the bench in its judgment made available on December 21.

The High Court said denying requisite treatment to survivors was a criminal offence and all doctors, administration, officers, nurses, paramedical personnel, etc., should be informed about the same.

The ruling allowed immediate examination of a survivor, who would be treated for sexually transmitted conditions such as HIV, if situation demands. The treatment would not only include first aid but also diagnosis, in-patient admission, continued out-patient assistance, diagnostic tests, lab tests, surgery,

physical and mental counselling, psychological help, family counselling, among other things.

The court clarified availing of free medical treatment by such victims/survivors from either government or private hospitals was not dependent upon a referral by the state or district legal services authority as it was a statutory right under Section 357C of CrPC, Section 397 of BNS and Rule 6 (4) of POCSO Rules, 2020. Notably, every medical facility was directed to put up a board at the entrance, reception, counters and all prominent places, in both English and vernacular, declaring the availability of free out-patient and in-patient medical treatment for such survivors.

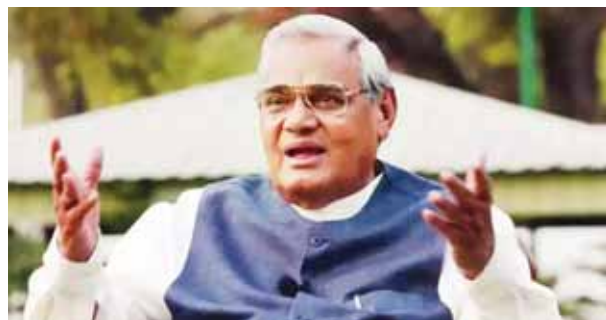
Atal Bihari Vajpayee's vision blooms: BJP's rise to power marks fruition of 1980 prediction

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Delivering one of his more famous speeches at the BJP's inaugural convention at Shivaji Park in Mumbai, Atal Bihari Vajpayee predicted on December 30, 1980 with his signature flourish: 'Andhera chhatega, suraj niklega, kamal khilega' (darkness will end, the sun will rise, lotus will bloom).

As his birth centenary arrives, his words have aged well, with the BJP returning to power for a third straight term at the centre and lotus in full bloom.

If Prime Minister Narendra Modi made the BJP's cultural agenda the centre of national politics, Vajpayee helped the party occupy this centre when its cultural agenda was considered an anathema. A statesman politician and a peels orator, India's first non-Congress prime minister to have served a full term



commanded respect and affection from across the political aisle and stood tall with his innate democratic spirit, honed through decades in opposition, in a politics crowded with powerful satraps. The three-time prime minister was the original builder of coalition politics at the national level, successfully running an alliance government for a full term while navigating some of the biggest national crises,

including the plane hijack in 1999 and the terror attack on Parliament in 2001, both with direct links to Pakistan. His government's measured handling of the two incidents drew criticism from some quarters, including right wing organisations considered ideologically affiliated to the BJP but less than friendly to him for not pushing their cultural and economic agenda, but his standing ensured that he faced no political threat or

popular backlash. And even as he was still smarting from the fall of his government by one vote in the Lok Sabha in April 1999, his firm military and deft diplomatic response to Pakistan's intrusion into Kargil as the head of a caretaker government earned him plaudits and powered the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance to a more stable majority, ensuring him a full term at the helm.

Ashok Tandon, media adviser to Vajpayee during his six-year stint as PM, said besides being an outstanding parliamentarian who did his bit in "strengthening the roots of parliamentary democracy" after entering the Lok Sabha for the first time in 1957, he brought "good governance" at the centre of agenda as the head of government. "Good governance was his landmark contribution. He

headed a diverse coalition of parties and kept them together, while pursuing policies which helped the country in every field," he told PTI, citing the launch of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, PM Gramin Sadak Yojna and the Golden Quadrilateral highway project under his stewardship. It was his boost to reforms, disinvestment and infra projects that made the idea of seven to eight per cent growth rate possible and his government legislated fiscal prudence through the FRBM Act in 2003.

However, the fruits of reforms came a little too late and this coupled with the BJP's political missteps, especially in the crucial state of Uttar Pradesh, and the Congress-led UPA's harnessing of rural distress delivered a shock defeat to Vajpayee in 2004 amid a decline in his health. His public appearances were

limited, he campaigned last for his party in the 2007 assembly polls in Uttar Pradesh before slowly fading away from the public eye as dementia hit him. He died in 2018. The Modi government began observing his birth anniversary as "Good Governance Day" and bestowed Bharat Ratna on him in 2015.

An impressive mix of tradition and modernity in his world view, Vajpayee, a full-time RSS worker before being sent by the Hindutva organisation to the Jana Sangh in 1951 when the party was founded, maintained a lifelong adherence to the Sangh's values even though he at times resented its methods. Unlike his lifelong companion L K Advani, who despite being an ideological hardliner and more invested organisational leader fell from the RSS's grace due to his public airing of views,

including his ill-fated praise of M. A. Jinnah, that were bound to antagonise the Hindutva organisation, Vajpayee used his cultivated ambivalence and gifted articulation to shape his image of a moderate while never crossing swords with it. The only time he openly denounced a polarising Hindutva cause was when the Babri mosque was demolished in 1992, but his stand was considered an act of political pragmatism necessary for the BJP to realise its political ambitions after fetching merely two seats in the 1984 polls.

With the moderate, poet-at-heart and statesman-like Vajpayee as the BJP's prime ministerial face and the party agreeing to put a moratorium on its contentious ideological planks of the Rem temple construction, Article 370 repeal and the Uniform Civil Code, regional parties from

across the country were drawn as he led them to poll wins. His passionate moves to improve ties with Pakistan resulted in his spectacular journey to Lahore in a bus in February 1999 and then hosting the Agra Summit with Pakistan's president Pervez Musharraf in 2001 but they met with little success. As the army chief before he deposed prime minister Nawaz Sharif, Musharraf was behind his country's misadventure in Kargil, which followed months after Vajpayee's bus journey. However, Vajpayee's famous invocation of 'Insiyaniyat, Jamhuriyat, Kashmiriyat' to resolve the issues afflicting Jammu and Kashmir won him lifelong admirers in the Muslim-majority Valley. Prime Minister Narendra Modi too recalled the phrase in his Independence Day speech in 2018 to reach out to people there.

PM Modi to lay foundation stone for Ken-Betwa river-link project today

PTI ■ BHOPAL

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will on Wednesday lay the foundation stone of the Ken-Betwa river linking project, the first such initiative under the national river inter-linking policy, at Khajuraho in Madhya Pradesh. Nearly 44 lakh people in 10 districts of Madhya Pradesh and 21 lakh in Uttar Pradesh will get drinking water under the project, which is estimated to cost Rs 44,605 crore, MP Chief Minister Mohan Yadav said on Tuesday. Nearly 7.18 lakh farmer families of 2,000 villages will be

benefitted from the project, which will also generate 103 MW of hydropower and 27 MW of solar energy, he said. "Prime Minister Modi is coming to Khajuraho in Chhatarpur district on December 25 to lay the foundation of this project which will change the image and destiny of Bundelkhand in Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh," Yadav said. The Ken-Betwa Link Project is a unique example of cooperation and coordination between the central government, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh, he said. Prime Minister Modi has

taken the initiative to realise the dream of former PM late Atal Bihari Vajpayee of the river linking campaign, Yadav added. Through this project, farmers will get ample water for irrigation and it will also provide sufficient water for drinking and industrial uses. Along with the economic and social development of the area, tourism will also be promoted and new employment opportunities will be created. The situation of groundwater in the drought-hit Bundelkhand region will also improve, the CM said. Yadav said Ken-Betwa is the



largest irrigation project in the country, adopting an underground pressurised pipe irrigation system. Under the project, a 77-metre

high and 2.13 kilometres long Daudhan dam and two tunnels (upper level 1.9 km and lower level 1.1 km) will be constructed on the Ken river

in the Panna Tiger Reserve. The dam will store 2,853 million cubic metres of water, the chief minister said. The surplus Ken water will be transferred to the Betwa river through the 221-km-long link canal from Daudhan dam, providing irrigation and drinking water facilities in both the states, he said. With the project, 8.11 lakh hectare area can be irrigated in 2,000 villages of 10 districts - Panna, Damoh, Chhatarpur, Tikamgarh, Niwari, Sagar, Raisen, Vidisha, Shivpuri and Datia. Nearly seven lakh farmer families will be benefitted from this, the chief

minister said. The Ken-Betwa project will provide an annual irrigation facility in 59,000 hectare area in Uttar Pradesh and stabilisation of the existing irrigation in 1.92 lakh-hectare area, which will provide irrigation facilities in Mahoba, Jhansi, Lalitpur and Banda districts of UP, he said. The project also includes the work of saving the historical Chandela era heritage ponds in Chhatarpur, Tikamgarh and Niwari districts of MP, where water can be stored during the rainy season. The Daudhan reservoir will provide drinking water to

wild animals in the Panna Tiger Reserve throughout the year, improve the forest ecosystem and bring relief to UP's Banda district from the flood menace, Yadav said. The water crisis prevalent in the Bundelkhand region will end and migration for employment will also be checked, he said. A tripartite Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed on March 22, 2021 by the chief ministers of MP, UP and the Union Jai Shakti minister in the presence of PM Modi for the implementation of the project.

Two suspects killed in separate police encounters following bank heist in Lucknow

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ LUCKNOW

Two suspects involved in the high-profile Indian Overseas Bank locker heist in Lucknow were killed in separate police encounters, one in Lucknow and the other in Ghazipur. The heist, which took place at the bank's Chinhath branch, saw 42 lockers looted, resulting in losses worth crores of rupees. The first encounter occurred late Monday night on Kisan Path in Lucknow, where the police confronted a suspect, Sobind Kumar. When intercepted, Sobind opened fire at the police. In the retaliatory firing, he was critically injured and later succumbed to his injuries during treatment at Ram Manohar Lohia Hospital. The second encounter happened at the Uttar Pradesh-Bihar border near Ghazipur. A team of Ghazipur police intercepted two suspects on a motorcycle during routine checks. When the suspects



tried to ram their motorcycle into the officers and escape, they opened fire at the police. One suspect, Sunny Dayal, a wanted criminal with a ₹25,000 bounty, was injured in the exchange of fire. He was taken to a local hospital but was declared dead on arrival. The other suspect managed to escape into the darkness. Superintendent of Police (SP) Ghazipur, Iraj Raja, confirmed the death of Sunny Dayal, a resident of Munger, Bihar. Police recovered a pistol, stolen jewelry, ₹35,500 in cash, and the suspects' motorcycle from the scene. So far, two suspects have been killed, and three others were arrested earlier in the week. Two members of the gang remain at large, and efforts are underway to track them down. The Indian Overseas Bank's Chinhath branch was targeted on Saturday night, where thieves broke into 42 lockers and made off with cash, gold, and silver worth several

crores. Early on Monday, three suspects were apprehended following an initial police encounter. Among them, Arvind Kumar, a resident of Munger, Bihar, sustained a gunshot injury during the operation. The arrested suspects confessed to orchestrating the heist with four other accomplices. Police have identified the mastermind as Vipin Kumar, a resident of Chinhath, who provided logistical support and insider information to the gang from Bihar. Police have so far recovered ₹3 lakh in cash, 1,889 grams of gold, 1,240 grams of silver jewelry, and firearms, including pistols and country-made weapons. Additional stolen items were seized during Monday night's encounters. Joint Commissioner of Police (Law and Order) Amit Verma stated that the bank's inadequate security measures facilitated the heist. The police are also investigating lapses in the bank's compliance with safety protocols.

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ LUCKNOW

Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath accused the Congress of harboring an anti-Ambedkar mindset and engaging in divisive politics. Speaking to journalists at his official residence, the Chief Minister launched a sharp critique against Congress and other political parties, particularly the Samajwadi Party (SP), for allegedly disrespecting Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's legacy. "The Congress has a history of depriving Dalits of their rights. Jawaharlal Nehru opposed Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's inclusion in the Constituent Assembly and worked to defeat him in elections," CM Yogi alleged. He added that Congress not only sidelined Dr. Ambedkar during his lifetime but also refused to honor him with a memorial after his demise. Recalling incidents from the UPA era, CM Yogi highlighted the controversy surrounding a caricature of Nehru whipping Dr. Ambedkar's portrait, which

Congress has an anti-Ambedkar mindset, says CM Yogi Adityanath

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ LUCKNOW

had prompted an apology from then HRD Minister Kapil Sibal. He also pointed to Dr. Ambedkar's resignation from the Nehru cabinet, accusing Congress of prioritizing Muslim appeasement over Dalit welfare. The Chief Minister praised Dr. Ambedkar as a visionary who overcame social barriers to make significant contributions to law, economics, and nation-building. "Dr. Ambedkar's work illuminated India's path forward, and his dedication remains an inspiration for generations," CM Yogi stated. Turning his attention to the Samajwadi Party, CM Yogi alleged that the SP's history mirrors that of Congress in neglecting Dr. Ambedkar. He claimed that SP leaders removed Dr. Ambedkar's name from institutions in Kannauj and Saharanpur, accusing them of using similar tactics to create confusion over BJP policies. "The Congress and SP have a history of misleading the public. Both parties need to apologize to the nation for their actions," CM Yogi demanded,



asserting that the public has consistently rejected their politics of appeasement and division. Highlighting BJP's initiatives, the Chief Minister said the party draws inspiration from Dr. Ambedkar's principles. He lauded the efforts of PM Narendra Modi's government to uplift marginalized communities through welfare schemes such as the Swachh Bharat Mission, PM Awas Yojana, and Ayushman Bharat. He also noted the establishment of "Panch Teerth" sites associated with Dr. Ambedkar to honor his legacy. "Unlike Congress, which denied Dalits their rightful opportunities, BJP has integrated the underprivileged into mainstream welfare initiatives. Our government is committed to Dr. Ambedkar's vision of equality and empowerment," CM Yogi emphasized. The Chief Minister concluded by reaffirming the BJP's dedication to preserving Dr. Ambedkar's ideals and working tirelessly to uplift all sections of society.

NC MP, Opp protest outside CM Omar's house against reservation policy

NC MP, Opp protest outside CM Omar's house against reservation policy

MOHIT KANDHARI ■ JAMMU

A war of words broke out on Tuesday between National Conference leaders a day after one of its Members of Parliament led the protest march outside the official residence of Chief Minister Omar Abdullah in Srinagar demanding rationalization of the existing Reservation Policy in Jammu and Kashmir. The protest led by Aga Syed Ruhullah Mehdi, National Conference MP from Srinagar, is being viewed, by many, as growing discord within the National Conference, as it was seen as defying the party's norms and discipline. Meanwhile, opposition party leaders from the Peoples Democratic Party and Bharatiya Janta Party took a jibe at the National Conference government and demanded an early resolution of the issue. On the other hand, the Congress party decided to bail out Omar Abdullah and termed Aga Syed Ruhullah's protest march a 'camera show'. Chief Minister Omar Abdullah had already set the record straight on Monday by ensuring the delegation of students that the channel of communication would remain open without any intermediaries or hangers-on. On Tuesday speaking to reporters at the National Conference headquarters in Srinagar party MLA from Hazratbal, Salman Sagar clarified the National Conference had nothing to do with the protest over the Reservation Policy. Referring to the presence of party MP Aga Syed Ruhullah Mehdi, Salman Sagar made it clear if the MP believes that he can do it, then that's his prerogative, however, this was not the National Conference's initiative. Salman said the protest was a platform for the party's adversaries. "It was a gathering of our adversaries, of our enemies. Unfortunately, one of our MPs was present there, allowing them to exploit the situation," Salman said, adding that such actions inadvertently strengthen the position of political rivals like the Peoples



Democratic Party (PDP). Salman accused the organizers of failing to consider better ways to address grievances. "If grievances truly needed redressal, there were better ways to address them. What happened yesterday, in my personal opinion, was pure drama. It didn't benefit anyone," he said. He also took a dig at political opportunism, stating that the protest gave a platform to individuals who have no real stake in the issue. "People with no mandate, those who have been rejected by the public with barely 200 votes, were speaking on behalf of thousands or even millions. This kind of behavior undermines genuine efforts," Salman said. Reacting to the assurances given by the Chief Minister to the delegation of the Open Merit Students Association after holding the first round of talks Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) chief Mehbooba Mufti Tuesday asked Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Omar Abdullah to find a way to resolve the issue of reservation saying leaving the matter for the courts was "very unfortunate". Speaking to reporters Mehbooba Mufti said "We do not want any politics in it but we are pushing open merit students to the wall. The chief minister has sought six months' time. They (NC) have three MPs, including the Ladakh MP and 50 MLAs, why do they need six months? They think a court decision will come by and they will not have to do anything," Mufti said. The former chief minister of the erstwhile state of J-K said the NC government could have brought an SRO to settle the issue of reservation like what she did in 2018 when she brought SRO-49 for 75

per cent reservation for open merit category in post-graduation. In Jammu, BJP general secretary and in-charge of the party's Jammu and Kashmir affairs Tarun Chugh accused Chief Minister Omar Abdullah of trying to deprive the underprivileged classes of their rights in the name of rationalization of reservation policy. Speaking to media persons, Tarun Chugh said, "Omar Abdullah Ji the country is run according to the Constitution and nobody will be allowed to fiddle with the rights of the Dalits, Gujjars, Paharis and other underprivileged classes of the society. INDIA bloc and the National Conference (NC) have deprived the underprivileged classes of their rights and they are again working on conspiracies to do the same. In Srinagar, the Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) Dooru and senior Congress leader, Gulam Ahmad Mir said that the Member of Parliament (MP) from Srinagar Lok Sabha constituency, Aga Ruhullah Mehdi, could have met the Chief Minister Omar Abdullah directly instead of resorting to "camera show". Addressing a news conference at party headquarters here in Srinagar, Mir said that the MP Ruhullah was just a five minutes away from CM Omar Abdullah and instead of opting for "camera show", the demands could have been raised with the Chief Minister directly. "It has become a fashion now to get the camera attraction, otherwise the responsible MP from NC, could have behaved seriously," he said while responding to a query on Ruhullah's protest on Reservation policy outside CM's residence.

Christmas Carols go silent in Kerala

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■ KOCHI

The month of December used to be a period of carols and cribs in Kerala way-back in the 1960s, 70s and 80s but not anymore. Carol singers visiting the houses of all communities in the State have become a thing of the past. There are no more drum beats or saxophone music. The small churches across the village squares too have fallen silent though they spot Christmas stars, trees and of course the cribs. "Nowadays we visit houses of community members only and the number of carol nights too have come down. Carol teams come alive only on 23rd and 24th December," said K T Paily of Karipra, a former Indian Railway official. This Christmas was marked by the demonstration staged by activists of Sangh Parivar in front of an Upper Primary School in Palakkad district questioning the propriety of holding a religious festival in a school with students dressed



up as Santas. "Will they allow Janmashtami festival with students dressed up as Lord Krishnas?" said R V Babu, leader, Hindu Aikyavedi. Babu said there was no untoward incident of any kind during the demonstration. He blamed the Marxist-Mullah funded media for spreading fake narrative.

Stanly Sebastian, a former professor who does not hesitate to speak his mind out was blunt in his reply to the news that carol team was attacked and cribs were vandalized. "Do you think the Sangh Parivar will resort to such acts when the party leaders are trying to strengthen the ties between the two communities

in the State? The BJP has included many influential Christians in the party and talks are underway with the spiritual leaders of the church. Last day we saw Prime Minister Modi visiting a Church in the national capital and holding discussions with the cardinals," said Prof Sebastian. He blamed a section in the Kerala BJP and the Marxist-Mullah axis for the fake news. Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan on Monday condemned the attack in harshest of words and have ordered a high-level probe into the incident. "The Sangh Parivar elements are out to destroy the communal harmony and peaceful atmosphere prevailing in the State," said Vijayan while addressing a public meeting near the capital city. Aisha Foucik Kadukkappilly, a young poet and budding lawyer at Kaladi said that there is a strange fall in the number of carol singers. But Stanly Sebastian attributed it to the decrease in Christian population over the last two decades as many families have migrated to Europe, USA, Australia and New Zealand. An eerie of silence marks the Christmas festival in the State which once reverberated with the cacophony of shopping, partying and fun-making. Peaceful Christmas all over the World!

Rajnath attends inaugural ceremony of 'Atal Yuva Mahakumbh'

PTI ■ LUCKNOW

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh on Tuesday attended the inaugural ceremony of the 'Atal Yuva Mahakumbh' here and said former prime minister and Bharat Ratna recipient Atal Bihari Vajpayee's enduring legacy is a guiding light for the country. Addressing the event organised to commemorate Vajpayee's birth centenary year, Singh reflected on the former prime minister's unique personality and shared personal memories of his association with him. "The sun that rose on the political horizon of India on 25th December 1924 has not set even today. I feel so. Not only India but the whole world is familiar with the personality and deeds of revered Atalji," he said. Sharing anecdotes from Vajpayee's life, Singh recalled an incident from the former prime minister's visit to Pakistan. "A female journalist told Atal ji she would marry him if he gave her Kashmir as dowry,



alongside him as a Cabinet colleague. When his government fell by a single vote, Atal ji's historic speech redefined patriotism and democracy. He famously stated, 'Governments will come and go, parties will form and disband, but this nation and its democracy must remain eternal.' His words were a testament to his vision and unwavering principles." The defence minister also appreciated the cultural programmes and tableaux presented by children during the event at the KD Singh Babu Stadium here highlighting Vajpayee's life.

ED attaches Dawood's brother related property in Mumbai

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ MUMBAI

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) has taken possession of a flat worth Rs 55 lakh in Maharashtra's Thane, held in the name of an associate of fugitive gangster Dawood Ibrahim's brother Iqbal Kaskar, as part of a money laundering probe. ED Officials said Tuesday that the residential dwelling in Neopolis Building located in Thane West was attached as part of a provisional order issued under the PMLA in 2022 against its owner Mumtaz Ezzaz Shaikh. The adjudicating authority of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) had approved this provisional attachment order paving way for the ED to take its possession. The procedure for taking possession of the flat was completed recently. The ED had earlier said in a statement that this flat was extorted by Kaskar and others from a Thane-based real estate developer Suresh

Devichand Mehta. "Mehta was running the business of construction with his partner through his firm Darshan enterprises. The accused Iqbal Kaskar, Mumtaz Shaikh and Israr Ali Jamil Saiyad due to close proximity with underworld gangster Dawood Ibrahim Kaskar managed to extort one flat in Thane in the name of Mumtaz Ezzaz Shaikh," the agency had said. Besides the flat, it had then said, four cheques totalling Rs 10 lakhs "as demanded by them" were issued by the builder which has been "encashed" by the accused through cash withdrawals. The money laundering stems from a Thane Police FIR of September, 2017. The police had pressed charges under the Maharashtra Control of Organised Crime Act (MCOCA) against the accused. Kaskar is currently in jail under judicial custody. Dawood Ibrahim has been declared terrorist by India and is stated to be based in Pakistan.



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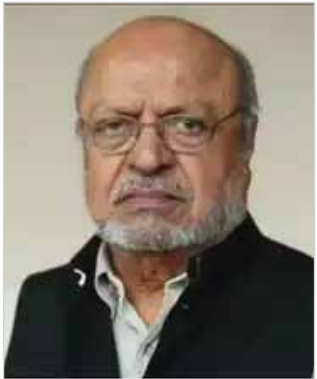
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PAPER WITH PASSION

Adieu Shyam Benegal

With passing of Shyam Benegal, Indian cinema has lost a luminary, but his films will continue to illuminate and educate

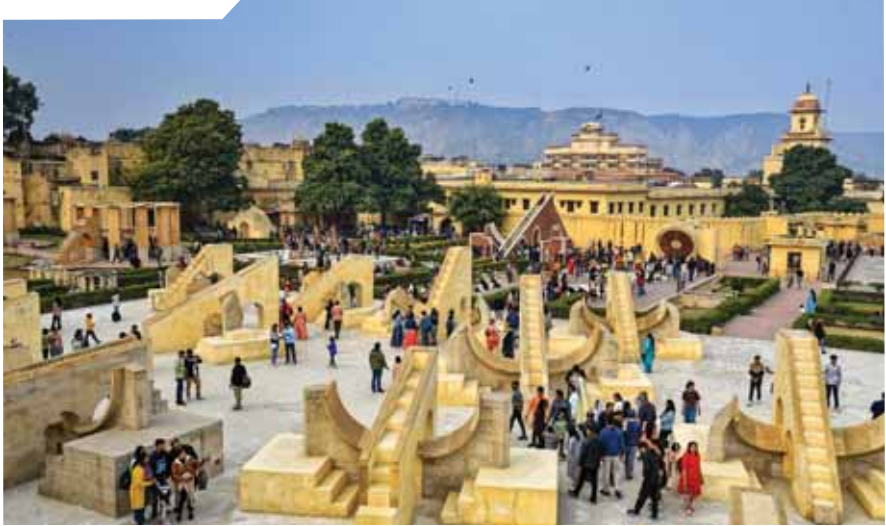
The curtains have fallen on one of the most illustrious chapters in Indian cinema. Shyam Benegal, the pioneering filmmaker who redefined storytelling in Indian cinema, passed away at the age of 90 on December 23, 2024. He succumbed to chronic kidney disease at Wockhardt Hospital in Bombay Central. Known as the father of Indian parallel cinema, Benegal's legacy remains etched in the heart of Indian filmmaking, his films celebrated for their realism, depth, and transformative impact on society. Born on December 14, 1934, Benegal celebrated his milestone 90th birthday just days ago, surrounded by close family and friends. Yet, even in his twilight years, the veteran filmmaker remained deeply connected to his art. Benegal's career was marked by his groundbreaking contribution to the Indian New Wave movement in the 1970s and 1980s. With films like 'Ankur' (1974), 'Nishant' (1975), 'Manthan' (1976), and 'Bhumika' (1977), he charted a new cinematic course that delved into realism and social commentary, a stark contrast to the formulaic escapism of mainstream Bollywood.



His films gave voice to the marginalised and explored themes of gender, class struggles, and rural India, bringing to light the unseen facets of Indian society. 'Nishant', a harrowing tale of oppression and resistance, and 'Manthan', inspired by Dr. Verghese Kurien's milk cooperative movement, became cult classics. The latter, crowdfunded by 500,000 farmers, stands as a testament to Benegal's ability to connect with grassroots realities. The film, India's official entry for the 1976 Academy Awards, exemplified his commitment to blending art with advocacy. Benegal's films also became a platform for some of India's finest acting talents. Actors like Shabana Azmi, Naseeruddin Shah, Smita Patil, and Om Puri found their early footing in his films. Azmi, who debuted in Benegal's 'Ankur', recently shared a poignant moment from his 90th birthday celebrations, underscoring the indelible bond they shared. His collaboration with screenwriter Vijay Tendulkar produced narratives that were both poignant and thought-provoking, winning multiple National Awards. From 'Junoon' to 'Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose: The Forgotten Hero', Benegal's oeuvre showcased an unmatched versatility, spanning historical dramas, rural sagas, and contemporary commentaries. Earlier this year, 'Manthan' was restored and screened at the Cannes Film Festival under the Cannes Classics segment, reiterating the timeless relevance of Benegal's vision. Despite his declining health, the event underscored his enduring influence on global cinema. Benegal's storytelling was never confined to entertainment. His films were instruments of change, questioning societal norms and sparking dialogues. His pioneering approach laid the foundation for generations of filmmakers who sought to marry art with social responsibility. Rest in peace, Shyam Benegal, the maestro who showed us the soul of India through his lens.

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PICTALK



Tourists visit the historical Jantar Mantar, in Jaipur

India recalibrates Myanmar strategy

The stakes are high for India, balancing its Act East policy, border security and competition with China, all against the backdrop of a fractured Myanmar



ASHOK K MEHTA

After four years of civil war in Myanmar, India has quietly changed its policy towards the Junta from one of total and unflinching support following its coup against democracy to one of nuanced support. Junta leader General Min Aung Hlaing has been advocating holding elections for the last four years but only now with China's assistance, they are slated for 2025. China is playing with both sides: supporting the Junta as well as some EAOs (Ethnic Armed Organisations) especially in the north contiguous with its Yunnan province. India too has shifted the goalposts but less perceptibly and engaging some EAOs and the National Unity Government (NUG) after the Junta lost its control in the Rakhine and Chin territories along India and Bangladesh borders.

Last week the Junta's control of the ground began crumbling further with the loss of Ann, Headquarters Western Military Command, the second military command to fall to resistance groups. Junta has lost two airports - Thandwe (Rakhine) and Lashio and 75 towns and cities out of some 340 of them. It has also lost control of six border trading posts. 40 of 70 towns in Rakhine have been captured by the Arakan Army which is part of the Three Brotherhood Alliance, the other two being MNDA and TNLA.

Two critical seaports on the west coast - India-operated Sittwe and Chinese-owned Kyaukphyu - are on AA's target list next year unless Beijing can dissuade it from attacking Kyaukphyu though the loss of Ann has opened the gates to it. Magaung is the other target in Rakhine.

On the Thailand border, the Karen National Union took Manerplaw, the Junta losing possession after 30 years. A humanitarian corridor with Thailand has existed with the help of the Junta. In the North, TBA has been persuaded by China to go slow against the Junta, and not support NUG and the People's Defence Force. The Kachin Independence Army has seized Bemo and Mansi, popular tourist areas in the



northeast. In the central Sagaing region, Mandalay, the second largest city after Yangon, came under rocket attack last month and National Highway 3 from Mandalay to China border, was under resistance control. In sum, the Junta controls less than 50 per cent of the land but has the majority of the population in it. These are Bamar-predominant areas in Sagaing, Irrawaddy Delta, the new capital Nyaung-U and Yangon. They are likely to lose more ground next year despite pressure from the Chinese on EAOs. Beijing is nursing the Junta and its leader, Hlaing.

He was invited to meet PM Li Qiang after attending the Greater Mekong Subregional Summit at Kunming last month. China is replenishing the Junta's military arsenal - so is Russia - including three fighter jets with assured ammunition supply. It wants to locate a private security company (like in Pakistan) for the protection of its strategic assets like China Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) containing oil and gas pipelines along with a railway link from Kunming to Kyaukphyu. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi is a frequent visitor to Myanmar though most people resent Chinese support for the Junta and its presence. The Chinese consulate in



LAST WEEK THE JUNTA'S CONTROL OF THE GROUND BEGAN CRUMBLING FURTHER WITH THE LOSS OF ANN, HEADQUARTERS WESTERN MILITARY COMMAND, THE SECOND MILITARY COMMAND TO FALL TO RESISTANCE GROUPS

Mandalay came under attack recently. Theoretically, an election could be held contingent upon the ground situation in November next year. Even with low turnout and rigging an election will be manipulated. ASEAN's problem is Myanmar after the failure of its five-point consensus peace formula. Many meetings have been held with and without Myanmar representation without any light at the end of the tunnel. During the 18 December talks in Bangkok, with Myanmar's neighbouring countries, Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri, a former Ambassador in Myanmar, discussed prospects for elections with Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Than Shwe.

There was a separate set of talks with stakeholders from non-neighbouring countries. India's stakes are high given competition with China, a disturbed situation in its northeast and a troubling relationship developing with Bangladesh. Myanmar is a pivotal land bridge for its Act East policy, the Asean Trilateral Highway and the security of its Eastern frontier.

The junta's loss of control in Rakhine and Chin states has created an adverse situation along the border with Mizoram and a broken Manipur. While India is not proactive like China, its new policy pronouncement - old wine in a new bottle - is "immediate cessation of violence, peaceful resolution of

the ethnic issue through a genuine federal democracy where the process should be Myanmar-owned and Myanmar-driven. While Delhi has taken its time to engage resistance groups, it did organise one-and-a-half track meetings with select EAOs and Junta separately. In November, it first engaged Junta officials followed by EAOs who met the Joint Secretary (Bangladesh- Sri Lanka- Myanmar) at the Indian Council for World Affairs. In September, it had met representatives from Chin, Rakhine, Sagaing and Magwe who are already in refugee camps in Mizoram.

While India has not opened humanitarian corridors to these areas it is providing food, fuel medicines across the border. But that is not enough as they also want weapons and cash. Delhi does not want to annoy the Junta with which it has little leverage, unlike China. NUG was not invited to Delhi though it is being engaged back channel. India has to get real; be proactive, take risks and support AA and Chin rebels as its Act East policy is pivoted in areas under their control. It can't dump the Junta as it will be a key constituent of any outcome.

(The writer, a retired Major General, was Commander, IPKF South, Sri Lanka, and founder member of the Defence Planning Staff, currently the Integrated Defence Staff. The views expressed are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

STRENGTHENING INDIA-KUWAIT TIES

Madam —The two-day visit of PM Narendra Modi to Kuwait will further boost the bilateral ties between two historically friendly nations. This is the first visit by any Indian prime minister to the Gulf nation in 43 years. Though India and Kuwait have enjoyed traditionally friendly relations, which date back to the pre-oil era of Kuwait when maritime trade with India was the backbone of its economy, India and most Arab countries, especially Kuwait, have enjoyed very cordial relations based on mutual trust and people-to-people contact, nurtured over several millennia. Till 1961, the Indian rupee was the legal currency tender of Kuwait till it introduced its currency, the Kuwaiti Dinar (KWD). This was a symbol of enduring economic and cultural centuries between two brother nations.

PM Modi was conferred with Kuwait's highest civilian honour, the prestigious "Order of Mubarak Al Kabeer". The Order of Mubarak Al Kabeer is a knighthood order of Kuwait. It is awarded to heads of state and foreign sovereigns and members of foreign royal families in a sign of friendship and has been previously awarded to foreign leaders like Bill Clinton, Prince Charles, George Bush, King Salman Bin Saud, and King Hussein of Jordan. This visit of PM Modi holds great significance as current global volatility requires better cooperation and stability among nations, especially among regional players, for energy security, and India's desire for stability in the Gulf region, beside Kuwait, holds significant strategic importance. The Kuwait Investment Authority (KIA) has the world's oldest and fifth largest sovereign wealth fund, valued around US \$1 trillion, which has US \$969 billion in assets under its management. This visit of PM Modi has heralded a new era of friendship, which will further boost trade, cooperation, and peace at a time when economic concerns and regional stability dictate are of the foremost importance in the formation of political alliances.

Ramesh G Jethwani | Bengaluru

PV Sindhu marries Venkata Datta Sai



Indian badminton star Pusarla Venkata Sindhu, a two-time Olympic (silver and bronze) medalist, is married to Venkata Datta Sai in Udaipur. Sindhu, a five-time World Championship medallist, a few days ago, clinched the Syed Modi India International title and announced her engagement via an Instagram post on December 14, 2024, that captured a memorable moment with the couple holding their rings and smiling from ear to ear. The wedding festivities began on December 20th

in the lake city of Rajasthan at the exclusive and majestic Raffles Udaipur Resort. Pre-wedding festivities included sangeet, haldi, and mehendi ceremonies. The families, long-time acquaintances, planned the wedding swiftly to accommodate Sindhu's training schedule.

Union Minister Gajendra Singh Shekhawat (shockingly, he was wearing a black kurta in an auspicious ceremony, even as a Hindu party leader) shared a captivating photo of the couple, offering his blessings. Now the reception is scheduled in Sindhu's native city, Hyderabad, on December 24. Congratulations to the darling daughter of Mother India, P. V. Sindhu, and her husband, Venkata Datta Sai. Best wishes to the newlyweds for a wonderful & eternal married life. Whatsoever, the first image of the wedding has already captivated hearts, setting the tone for the couple's happily ever after.

Bidyut Kumar Chatterjee | Faridabad

POPCORN PRICING DEBATE

Madam—The recent decision by the GST Council has turned popcorn from a simple snack into a focal point of economic debate. Under the new rules, salted popcorn is taxed at 5 per cent, packaged popcorn at 12 per cent, and sugar-flavoured popcorn at 18 per cent. This decision raises questions about the priorities of the tax structure while adding complexity to people's daily lives. Will samosas, tea, and water also be classified into tax categories based on taste and packaging? The tax determination for popcorn signals that the government is exploring every possible avenue to increase revenue. The aroma of popcorn in cinemas might now bring concerns about tax slabs before the joy of taste. Popcorn, once a symbol of social equality, has now become a marker of class division due to the 5 per cent and 18 per cent tax differential. This decision could negatively impact the Rs 1,200 crore popcorn industry, pushing people toward cheaper alternatives. The government must recognise that such decisions add to the burden on citizens already grap-

pling with inflation. Popcorn is no longer just a snack but a representation of the complexities of policymaking.

RK Jain | Barwani

TRIBES PROTECT NATURE

Madam —It is a great irony that all the well-educated and better-placed-in-life populations are destroying nature and damaging the environment; it is the indigenous tribes across the world who are supposedly backward and primitive who are doing their best to protect it. The bond between nature and her people has all but broken down in all urban centres, and the city dwellers do not think twice about their lifestyles, which is slowly destroying the environment. After all, we, the human race, are not the sole inhabitants of the planet, and other living creatures are co-inheritors too. It is time for all the nations with tribal populations to learn from them on how to care for and protect the planet.

Anthony Henriques | Mumbai

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Across cultures and ages: The beauty of unexpected friendships

The unexpected joy of forging meaningful friendships in middle age defies the common belief that the best opportunities for connection are behind us

Your hat is fantastic. It makes you look more Bavarian than any of us, the concierge quipped as I entered the venue for the coffee-and-cake event at a resort in southern Germany. Although he was stretching the truth — I have neither blonde hair nor blue eyes — I accepted the compliment with a coy smile. "Danke schön," I said, tipping my woolen hat. Just then, another guest remarked, "That's a pretty pin on your hat," pointing to the delicate hand-crafted Edelweiss flower. A cherished gift from my friends, Wolfgang and Amelie, the pin symbolised a friendship that began just a year ago, in this very Bavarian town of Schliersee.



The Wolfgang — a handsome, warm-hearted couple — are a testament to the unexpected joy of friendships made in middle age. Our bond didn't begin with shared childhoods or decades of history but with a simple "hello" and an open heart. The modest origins of our connection and the way it blossomed over the past year defy the notion that meaningful friendships are reserved

innocence of youthful camaraderie gives way to guarded interactions, and we convince ourselves that the window for profound friendship has closed. Yet, the Wolfgang remind me that this window is not sealed shut — it merely takes a little more effort to open.

Friendships formed in middle age are special not despite our life experiences, but because of them. We bring to these connections a deeper sense of self-awareness, empathy, and appreciation.

There's no rush to impress or to conform. The pressures of youthful identity-building are gone. In their place, we find sincerity, authenticity, and the willingness to value people for who they truly are. They remind us of the universality of human warmth and curiosity. Meeting someone from another country — someone whose life, traditions, and language are different — can feel like discovering an entirely new world. And when such encounters lead to genuine friendship, they break down the invisible walls that geography and culture often build around us. There is also a profound joy

in the intentionality of these connections. In our younger years, friendships are often born of proximity — classmates, neighbours, or college roommates. As adults, friendships require deliberate effort. This intentionality infuses middle-aged friendships with a depth and resilience that can be even more rewarding than the bonds of our youth. I think back to the pin on my hat — that delicate Edelweiss — and I see it as a metaphor for these kinds of friendships. The Edelweiss, a rare Alpine flower, thrives in challenging conditions.

It symbolises courage, devotion, and the willingness to climb new heights. Like the flower, friendships made in middle age might take more effort to cultivate, but they are hardy, resilient, and precious. A year after that first meeting, I found myself once again in Schliersee last month, sharing coffee and cake with the Wolfgang, laughing over our language blunders and cultural quirks. It is never too late to make friends.

(The author is a columnist and writing coach based in Dubai. Views are personal)



ASHA KUMAR IYER



NARENDRA MODI

Atal ji: The statesman with vision and resolve

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



FIRST COLUMN

THE ETERNAL WISDOM OF SUNDAR KAND

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



RAVI VALLURI

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dreaming of a White Christmas in New York City

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

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

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



SHREYA DAYAL

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

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

The Magic of NYC's Holiday Icons

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

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

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

The Broadway Moment That Changed Everything

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



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

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

Coming Full Circle

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

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

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

The Spirit of a NYC Christmas

There's something timeless

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

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

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

No justification in US curbs on Pak firms, says Shehbaz

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif on Tuesday defended Pakistan's nuclear and missile programme, saying the recent US sanctions against the country's four entities have "no justification". His remarks came days after the US slapped sanctions on four Pakistani firms, including the state-owned flagship aerospace and defence agency — National Development Complex (NDC) — on charges of contributing to ballistic missile programme. In addition to the NDC, the three other entities are Akhtar and Sons Private Limited, Affiliates International and Rockside Enterprise. All three are based in Karachi, while the NDC is in Islamabad. "The sanctions placed upon our National Development Complex and other entities have no justification," Prime Minister Shehbaz said while addressing a federal cabinet meeting.

"Pakistan has absolutely no intention for our nuclear system to be aggressive. It is 100 per cent for Pakistan's defence. It's just deterrence; nothing else," he added. The prime minister also said that Pakistan's ballistic missile programme was for defending itself "if God forbid there is aggression against Pakistan". Earlier, the Foreign Office termed the US decision to impose sanctions on NDC and three commercial entities as "unfortunate and biased". Shehbaz noted that the FO had given a "comprehensive response" and said that the missile programme belonged to the entire nation. "It's dearer to them (the public) than their hearts and there will be no compromise," he said, clarifying that the nation was united on the issue. Pakistan and the US have experienced an uneasy relationship in recent years due to issues related to human rights, terrorism, nuclear weapons and missile pro-

gramme. US expresses concern over sentencing of 25 civilians by Pakistan military court: Expressing concern over the sentencing of 25 civilians by a military court in Pakistan, the United States on Monday said that it lacked judicial independence, transparency and due process guarantees. "The United States is deeply concerned that Pakistani civilians have been sentenced by a military tribunal for their involvement in protests on May 9, 2023. These military courts lack judicial independence, transparency, and due process guarantees," said State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller. "The United States continues to call on Pakistani authorities to respect the right to a fair trial and due process, as enshrined in Pakistan's constitution," he added. However, a close aide of President-elect Donald Trump described it as too little and too weak. "You are late. And this is too little and too weak. Speak

normally. Free Imran Khan," said Richard Grenell, who served as acting director of national intelligence under President Trump in 2020 and was the US ambassador to Germany from 2018 to 2020. Indian American Congressman Ro Khanna joined Grenell in seeking freedom for Imran Khan. "I agree with Richard Grenell. It's time to free Imran Khan and allow the people of Pakistan to hold new democratic elections," Khanna said. "Free Imran Khan. This is bipartisan. We need to not recognize the rigged election in Pakistan and the new government. We need a new election in Pakistan and Imran Khan needs to be out of jail," Khanna said in a video posted on a social media platform. Former Trump envoy on Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, said it is time to put more pressure on Pakistan, especially the military, to facilitate reaching a balanced political agreement with PTI and the release of Imran Khan.

'We should try again': Punjab Assembly Speaker on Vajpayee's failed India-Pak peace initiative

PTI ■ LAHORE

"Even though the chance was missed, we should try again," says Punjab Assembly Speaker Malik Ahmad Khan when asked about Atal Bihari Vajpayee's 1999 'bus yatra', a bold attempt by the then Indian prime minister to put India-Pakistan relations on the peace track. Vajpayee took a bus ride to Lahore on February 19, 1999. He and Pakistan premier Nawaz Sharif signed the Lahore Declaration after a historic summit here. The agreement signalled a breakthrough, but just months later a Pakistani intrusion led to the Kargil War. Wednesday is Vajpayee's 100th birth anniversary. "Vajpayee's visit to Lahore in 1999 was a defining moment. Even though the chance was missed, we should try again. With Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who follows Vajpayee's vision, leading India, and Shehbaz Sharif, Nawaz's brother, in charge in Pakistan, there is a real possibility of restarting the peace process," says Khan, who is a senior member of the Pakistan Muslim League-

Nawaz (PML-N). Khan says the future of the region depends on free trade and unrestricted movement between countries. "Peace in the region is not just a good idea — it is necessary for growth and prosperity," the Punjab Speaker adds. Another senior PML-N leader from Punjab, Mohammad Mehdi, describes Vajpayee's Lahore visit as historic. He believes the visit could have led to lasting peace if the Kargil conflict had not happened. "The Western media paid a lot of attention to Vajpayee's visit because it came just months after both countries became nuclear powers," Mehdi says, referring to nuclear tests conducted by India and Pakistan in May 1998. "There was excitement, especially within PML-N ranks, when Vajpayee arrived in Lahore in February 1999. His speech, saying 'Pakistan is a reality, and both countries now need to move forward and leave the past behind,' gave hope to many," Mehdi recalls. Unfortunately, the Kargil conflict happened soon after, and the peace efforts were unsuccessful, he says.

Mehdi says Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) held protests during Vajpayee's visit, which many believe were organised by the military led by General Pervez Musharraf. "Jamaat-i-Islami workers even attacked the Turkish ambassador's car near Lahore Fort, mistaking it for an Indian delegation," he says. Mehdi believes back-channel talks between Pakistan and India are still happening. "Right now, relations between the two countries are at their lowest point. Neither country has an envoy in the other's capital. However, businessmen on both sides desperately want to restore ties to improve trade and use shorter routes through Pakistan to reach Central Asia and Europe," he says. Political expert Brig (ret.) Farooq Hameed says Nawaz Sharif should have involved the powerful Pakistan Army in the peace process. "The initiative failed because the military was not consulted, which led to the Kargil conflict and ended the peace process. If Nawaz Sharif had taken the military on board before Vajpayee's visit, the chances of the peace talks being success-

ful would have been higher." Hameed says Nawaz has repeatedly shown interest in improving ties with India, including his desire to meet Prime Minister Narendra Modi after returning to Pakistan last year from a four-year self-imposed exile in London. However, he pointed out, that Nawaz's younger brother, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, has not made any recent public statements indicating a similar desire. "Nawaz should first consult Shehbaz, who enjoys the military establishment's favour, to determine if he shares this vision for improved relations with India," he says. He also notes the lack of progress after Indian Foreign Minister S Jaishankar visited Pakistan recently. "Most Pakistanis are not anti-India. Unlike in India, politicians here do not need to criticise India to win elections," Hameed says. However, terrorism remains a major obstacle to reconciliation, he says. India has often accused Pakistan of supporting terrorism, while Pakistan now blames India for terror attacks in Balochistan.

Syria's new authorities 'very receptive' to probe of Assad war crimes

AP ■ UNITED NATIONS

The UN organization assisting in investigating the most serious crimes in Syria said Monday the country's new authorities were "very receptive" to its request for cooperation during a just-concluded visit to Damascus, and it is preparing to deploy. The visit led by Robert Petit, head of the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism for Syria, was the first since the organization was established by the UN General Assembly in 2016. It was created to assist in evidence-gathering and prosecution of indi-

viduals responsible for possible war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide since Syria's civil war began in 2011. Petit highlighted the urgency of preserving documents and other evidence before it is lost. Since the rebel overthrow of Syria's President Bashar Assad and the rebel opening of prisons and detention facilities there have been rising demands from Syrians for the prosecution of those responsible for atrocities and killings while he was in power. "The fall of the Assad rule is a significant opportunity for us to fulfill our mandate on the ground," Petit said. "Time is

running out. There is a small window of opportunity to secure these sites and the material they hold." UN associate spokesperson Stephane Tremblay said Monday the investigative team "is preparing for an operational deployment as early as possible and as soon as it is authorized to conduct activities on Syrian soil." The spokesperson for the organization, known as the IIIM, who was on the trip with Petit, went further, telling The Associated Press: "We are preparing to deploy on the expectation that we will get authorization." "The representatives from the

caretaker authorities were very receptive to our request for cooperation and are aware of the scale of the task ahead," the spokesperson said, speaking on condition of not being named. "They emphasized that they will need expertise to help safeguard the newly accessible documentation." The IIIM did not disclose which officials in the new government it met with or the site that Petit visited afterward. "Even at one facility," Petit said, "the mountains of government documentation reveal the chilling efficiency of systematizing the regime's atrocity crimes."

Hong Kong police issue arrest warrants, bounties for six activists

AP ■ HONG KONG

Hong Kong police on Tuesday announced a fresh round of arrest warrants for six activists based overseas, with bounties set at USD 1 million Hong Kong dollars for information leading to their arrests. According to the warrants, the six are wanted for national security offences such as secession, subversion and collusion with foreign forces. They include Tony Chung, the former leader of now-defunct pro-independence group Studentlocalism. UK-based Carmen Lau, a former district councillor and current activist with the Hong Kong Democracy Council, as

well as Chloe Cheung, an activist with the Committee for Freedom in Hong Kong, also had warrants issued against them. The latest round of warrants signals that the Hong Kong government is targeting vocal critics based abroad. The government had previously issued two rounds of arrest warrants and bounties for more prominent activists, including ex-lawmakers Ted Hui and Nathan Law. The increasing number of wanted individuals abroad come as Hong Kong continues to crack down on political dissent following massive anti-government protests in 2019 that resulted in a wave of pro-democracy move-

ments. Many outspoken pro-democracy activists have since been jailed, with others fleeing abroad. "The Hong Kong government's latest round of arrest warrants and bounties against six Hong Kong activists is a cowardly act of intimidation that aims to silence Hong Kong people," said Maya Wang, associate China director at Human Rights Watch. "The six — including two Canadian citizens — live in the UK and Canada. We call on the UK and Canadian governments to act immediately to push back against the Hong Kong government's attempts to threaten Hong Kongers living in their

countries." Tuesday's arrest warrants take the total number of wanted people to 19. Others on the list Tuesday are Chung Kim-wah, previously a senior member of independent polling organization Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute; Joseph Tay, co-founder of Canada-based NGO HongKonger Station; and YouTuber Victor Ho. Separately on Tuesday, the Hong Kong government issued orders for the cancellation of passports belonging to seven "absconders", including ex-lawmakers Hui and Dennis Kwok, who are wanted under the security law.

UK PM Keir Starmer hopes for peace in Middle East in Christmas message

PTI ■ LONDON

Keir Starmer has said he will be hoping for peace in the Middle East, the birthplace of the Christmas story, and a brighter future for all in his first festive message since being elected British Prime Minister. In a video message released by Downing Street ahead of Christmas Day on Wednesday, Starmer attempts to strike an optimistic tone and encourages people to "look after those around us". He extended his special gratitude to the armed forces and frontline workers who will be helping people up and down the country. "This Christmas, I will be hoping for peace, particularly in the Middle East as the birthplace of the Christmas story," said Starmer. "I'll be looking towards a better, brighter future for every person and celebrating the joy and



wonder that Christmas brings," he said. He said the festival was a reminder of what's really important, such as family, friendship and fellowship between all people. He added: "Being there for one another — in these celebrations, as well as the more difficult times. I'd like especially to thank those who will spend their

Christmas serving others this year. In our NHS [National Health Service] and emergency services, our Armed Forces and the churches and charities that will welcome every person this Christmas." "Because I know that this is not an easy time for everyone, and my thoughts are with all those who are lonely this Christmas. Having a tough time, missing a loved one. You are not alone, because as Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, the Christmas story reminds all of us to reach out to one another. To care for one another. And to look after those around us," he said. Earlier, Downing Street indicated that Starmer and his family would spend Christmas at the Prime Minister's country retreat of Chequers in Buckinghamshire. He is then set to travel abroad "for a few days" for his first family holiday since taking charge at 10 Downing

Street following the July general election. It comes as King Charles III set a new tradition for his customary Christmas Day message and chose Fitzrovia Chapel in London for its recording. It is understood that his speech will reflect on international, national and personal challenges and how they can be overcome by communities supporting one another. "The living Christmas tree shown in this year's broadcast was decorated with sustainable decorations including pinecones, metal bells, twisted glass and glass baubles," Buckingham Palace said. It added that 2024 marks the first time a British monarch's Christmas message has been filmed outside a royal residence since 2006 when the late Queen Elizabeth II filmed a message at Southwark Cathedral in London.



People celebrate with Christmas decorations in Haifa, Israel.

AP/PTI

Where does Santa live? It's a trickier question to answer than you may think

THE CONVERSATION ■ QUEENSLAND

Sending a letter to Santa can be difficult as no one can agree on where exactly Santa lives. Several countries are competing to claim Santa as one of their citizens. Finland's tourism industry suggests Korvatunturi in Lapland is where Santa keeps his workshop, and the link between Santa and Lapland brings in hundreds of millions of tourist dollars. Danes say Santa is in Greenland. Sweden suggests Mora is the place, and has built the theme park Santaworld. These places certainly look the part with white snow in winter and reindeer. They're also close to the North Pole. Not so jolly traditions: They also have old and often quite disturbing folklore about the man in red. Pagan Finns celebrated St Knut's Day in wintry January by having men in furry jackets, the nuuttipukki, go from house to house with a sack of presents. Except the nuuttipukki weren't giving gifts and would likely make children cry.

They came demanding gifts and would curse bad luck to any household not handing over a present. Eventually the gift grabbing nuuttipukki became the gift giving Joulupukki. Like other northern traditions such as the Yule Lads of Iceland, this visitor gave gifts but only to well behaved children. By the 19th century, Santa Claus was settled in popular awareness more or less what we think of now: a jolly old man with a beard, a sleigh, reindeer and presents, living somewhere northern and cold. That image built on but sanitised the more grotesque European folklores of elves, gnomes and other supernatural creatures who either brought or demanded gifts. But standardising Santa's appearance did not settle where he actually lived and worked. In the mid-19th century the illustrator Thomas Nast portrayed Santa as a jolly old man in Harper's Weekly, and the illustration and the archetype took off. But Nast just showed Santa in a wintry landscape. It could have been the North Pole, and no one in 1866 had actually



been to the Pole. No explorer reached there until 1926, leaving Santa, if he did live there, undis-

turbed in his workshop. Santa and territorial disputes: The medieval and pagan mytholo-

gies in Finland and Scandinavia give some credibility to these countries' efforts to claim Santa as their

own. After all, these are old legends. Other countries take a more modern approach. The Canadian government makes sure Christmas happens each year by allowing Santa to travel through Canadian airspace. Taking that a step further, in 2013 the Conservative government of Stephen Harper issued Santa and his wife with Canadian passports. That action might seem twee or whimsical or simply some Christmas fun for children, but it may also have shown that some governments want to claim a lot more than Santa. Harper's gesture came at a time of an international political dispute about ownership of the North Pole and specifically Canadian claims to Arctic regions. Somewhere hotter than the Pole: But are all these countries wrong, or being opportunistic? Despite what we think, where Santa really comes from is a lot hotter and a lot further east — and those red robes would be uncomfortable to wear. Santa Claus is a name derived from Sinterklaas or Saint Nicholas. Along with pagan elves and gnomes,

another element in the long and very complex history of Santa is the Christian bishop St Nicholas of Smyrna. Or is that Nicholas of Myra? Myra, now called Izmir in Turkey, and Myra, now Demre in Turkey, are both associated with Nicholas. Just as in northern Europe, different places in Anatolia compete to be associated with Santa. Nicholas is patron saint of seemingly everything including archers and brewers but also children and sailors. The link with children explains the later association as Santa, especially as Saint Nicholas gave children gifts. The link with sailors is why his legend is known around the world. A 2017 archaeological dig under the Church of Saint Nicholas in Turkey was believed to have found the burial place and therefore the body of Saint Nicholas. A grave full of old bones is not very Christmas-like, but it may be an authentic link between a place and a person which no amount of snow or reindeer in northern Europe could match.

Bangladesh launches \$5 billion graft probe against Sheikh Hasina in nuclear power plant case

Plant project were brought to light by Bobby Hajjaj, chairman of the National Democratic Movement (NDM). Hasina, 77, has been living in India since August 5 when she fled the country following a massive student-led protest that toppled her 16-year regime.

Bangladesh-based International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) has issued arrest warrants for Hasina and several former Cabinet ministers, advisers, and military and civil officials for "crimes against humanity and genocide".

US NSA Sullivan, Yunus discuss human rights' issue

Mid growing outrage here about the large-scale attack on Aminority Hindus and their places of worship in Bangladesh, US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan on Monday spoke with the interim government's Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus and both leaders expressed commitment to protect human rights in the troubled South Asian nation.

South Korea's opposition vows to impeach acting president

South Korea's main opposition party said Tuesday it will seek to impeach acting leader Han Duck-soo after he missed an opposition-set deadline to approve independent investigations into impeached President Yoon Suk Yeol and his wife.

reviewing Yoon's impeachment and will determine whether to dismiss or reinstate him. Filling the court's three empty posts could make conviction more likely, as it requires the support of six of the court's nine possible members.

of rebellion plot leader Yoon Suk Yeol or a public servant that has faithfully carried out the orders by the public," Park told a televised party meeting.

exercise of authority." Floor leader Kwon Seong-dong, a Yoon loyalist, said the Democratic Party's "politics of intimidation have reached their peak."

THE PIONEER CLASSIFIEDS CHANGE OF NAME

I R Arkesh S/o Sh. Rama Swami R/o H.No. 353, Block-16, Kalyan Puri, Delhi-110091 hereby declare that R Arkesh and R. Arkesh both are one and the same person.

PD(1137)C I, Reshma Devi, Mother of No.8432377H Hav/Clk Surendra Singh, R/o- Vill-Khemana, Post- Dokwa, Teh-Rajgarh, Dist- Churu, Rajasthan- 331023, have changed my name from Reshma Devi (Old Name) to Reshma (New Name) for all purposes, vide affidavit dated 24/12/2024 before Notary Public Delhi.

PD(1138)C I, Deepa Rajan S/o- JC-675012N Sub/MT KC Thamilarasan, R/o- H.No. W1/237, West Street, Vill-Dharmapuri, Kamatchipuram, Dist- Theni, Tamilnadu- 625520, have changed my name from Deepa Rajan to T Deepa Rajan, vide affidavit dated 24/12/2024 before Notary Public Delhi.

PD(1139)C I, KM. RACHNA KUMARIW/o Rajesh Kumar R/o N-18/133, L-Block, T-Huts, J.J. Colony, Wazirpur, Ashok Vihar, North West Delhi, Delhi-110052 have changed my name to RACHNA for all future purposes.

PD(1140)A

PUBLIC NOTICE CPJ College of Higher Studies & School of Law

PUBLIC NOTICE It is informed to the public at large that Jamnu and Kashmir Bank Ltd., D-63, Basant Lok, Vasant Vihar, New Delhi, is desirous of sanctioning loan facility in favour of Mrs. Saroj Kujur W/o Sh. Asit Wilson Kujur, for purchase of Portion / Unit No. UGF-1, on Upper Ground Floor (Front RHS South Eastern), measuring approx. 750 sq. ft., forming part of properties bearing No. (S) 899-B, 892/A-6, and 892/A-3, situated at Ward No. 8, Village Mehrauli, Tehsil Hazrat Nizamuddin, New Delhi. If anyone has any objection or claim, the title rights of the said property, please contact the undersigned, within 5 days from the date of publication hereof.

PUBLIC NOTICE Euro International School a unit of the Satya Educational Society

PUBLIC NOTICE Whereas Mrs. Swati Yadav D/o Sh. Satyavir Singh Yadav & Mr. Satyavir Singh Yadav son of Sh. Begraj Yadav owns 1.20 Acres Primary School Land situated at, Residential Group housing Colony Namely Countrywide Promoters Pvt.Ltd in Sector-86, Faridabad, Haryana - 121002.

PD(1139)C I, KM. RACHNA KUMARIW/o Rajesh Kumar R/o N-18/133, L-Block, T-Huts, J.J. Colony, Wazirpur, Ashok Vihar, North West Delhi, Delhi-110052 have changed my name to RACHNA for all future purposes.

PUBLIC NOTICE ON AUCTION OF PLEDGED GOLD ORNAMENTS

Table with columns: S. No., Account Name, Client ID, No. of Acc., Bal. Outstanding as on 23/12/2024, Weight (grams)

PUBLIC NOTICE To be known to all that my client WISHAL ARORA S/O SH. MANMOHAN ARORA, 210 HOUSE NO.614, SECTOR-11, PANCHKULA, HARYANA-134112. The Original Demand Letter/Allotment Cum Demand Letter of the DDA LG FLAT NO. 2, GROUNDFLOOR, POCKET-1, BLOCK-45, SECTOR-34, ROHINI, DELHI premises has been issued and received by my client on 15/12/2024. An FIR to this effect has been filed in the Police Station, Crime Branch Delhi Vile FIR No. 2427812/2024, Dated 23/12/2024. Any persons found in possession of original documents, FILE NO. L7353(216)2015/2014/RO, may please contact at above address/ Mobile No. 9815787756 within 15 days from the date of publication of this notice. The persons claiming any right/interest can personally inform or write to Dr. Director, (DDA 2014 Housing Scheme, (LIG), INA New Delhi-110023.

S&T WORK E-Tender Notice No. N-2024-K-28; dated: 20-12-2024. E-tenders are invited by the undersigned for the following work: Name of the work: Safety enhancement in block working by provision of HASSDAC in Kathihar-Mukuria and replacement of Diado with provision of UFSBI in Kathihar-Mukuria, Kathihar-Kumudpur in Kathihar Division, Tender Value: ₹5,68,48,331/-; Earnest Money: ₹4,34,300/-

PUBLIC NOTICE Euro International School a unit of the Satya Educational Society

PUBLIC NOTICE ON AUCTION OF PLEDGED GOLD ORNAMENTS

Table with columns: S. No., Account Name, Client ID, No. of Acc., Bal. Outstanding as on 23/12/2024, Weight (grams)

LOST & FOUND I, Ramesh Chander Sukhla S/O Hans Raj Sukhla, F-36/40 2nd floor Lajpat Nagar-II, South East Delhi-110024 My First & Second Year Marksheet for the passing year 1976 bearing roll number 277/DPH/74 College of Pharmacy Pusa Campus New Delhi-110012 have lost. have Aread FIR that document SO No. 430/2014, LR No. 2432094/2024 On Dated 15/12/24.

Can Fin Homes Ltd. Housing Finance Company requires space of 800-1000 sq. ft. in Ground /First/ Second Floor in a good locality on lease for 5 to 10 years at the following location:

Interested Premises Owner may send their offers in a closed envelope to Can Fin Homes Ltd. Zonal Office-North Zone, 112A, Part-B, Second Floor, NIT No.5, Nation Hut, Main Road (171 ft wide road), Faridabad, Haryana as per our format in our website www.canfinhomes.com on or before 06th January, 2025.

PD(1137)C I, Reshma Devi, Mother of No.8432377H Hav/Clk Surendra Singh, R/o- Vill-Khemana, Post- Dokwa, Teh-Rajgarh, Dist- Churu, Rajasthan- 331023, have changed my name from Reshma Devi (Old Name) to Reshma (New Name) for all purposes, vide affidavit dated 24/12/2024 before Notary Public Delhi.

LOST & FOUND I, Satish Kumar S/o Umed Singh VPO- Atali, Teh-Balabgarh, Faridabad Haryana-12004, My Property document Lost on 5 Aug 2024 Where my builder buyer Agreement was lost. My flat No. 907, D10 Tower, K/LJ Platinum hight, Sector-77, Faridabad HR-121004, have Aread FIR that document SO No.430/2014 LR No. - 2070127/2024 Dated 29/08/24.

Can Fin Homes Ltd. Housing Finance Company requires space of 800-1000 sq. ft. in Ground /First/ Second Floor in a good locality on lease for 5 to 10 years at the following location:

Interested Premises Owner may send their offers in a closed envelope to Can Fin Homes Ltd. Zonal Office-North Zone, 112A, Part-B, Second Floor, NIT No.5, Nation Hut, Main Road (171 ft wide road), Faridabad, Haryana as per our format in our website www.canfinhomes.com on or before 06th January, 2025.

PD(1139)C I, KM. RACHNA KUMARIW/o Rajesh Kumar R/o N-18/133, L-Block, T-Huts, J.J. Colony, Wazirpur, Ashok Vihar, North West Delhi, Delhi-110052 have changed my name to RACHNA for all future purposes.

NOTICE Registered Office Address : NTPC Bhawan, Core-7, SCOPE Complex, 7-Institutional Area, Lodhi Road, New Delhi-110 003 Corporate Identification Number -L401101L1975GOI009766

Table with columns: Particulars, Year-wise tariff sought to be determined (2024-25, 2025-26, 2026-27, 2027-28, 2028-29)

KSOLVES KSOVES INDIA LIMITED (CIN: L72900DL2014PLC269020) Regd. Office: 317/276, Second floor, Lane no.3, Mehrauli Road, Saldulajab, Saket, South Delhi, New Delhi, India, 110030

Postal Ballot Notice Members of the Company are hereby informed that pursuant to Section 110, 108 and other applicable provisions, if any, of the Companies Act, 2013 (the "Act") read with Rules 20 and 22 of the Companies (Management and Administration) Rules, 2014 (the "Rules"), read with the General Circular No. 14/2020 dated April 8, 2020, the General Circular No. 17/2020, dated April 13, 2020, the General Circular No. 22/2020 dated June 15, 2020, the General Circular No. 33/2020 dated September 28, 2020, the General Circular No. 39/2020 dated December 31, 2020, the General Circular No. 10/2021 dated June 23, 2021, the General Circular No. 20/2021 dated December 8, 2021, General Circular No. 3/2022 dated May 5, 2022, General Circular No. 11/2022 dated December 28, 2022 and General Circular No. 9/2023 dated September 25, 2023 issued by the Ministry of Corporate Affairs ("MCA Circulars") (including any statutory modification or re-enactment thereof for the time being in force, as amended from time to time), if any, the Company has completed dispatch of Postal Ballot Notice dated December 24, 2024 ("Notice") along with explanatory statement and remote e-voting instructions seeking consent of the Members for the below mentioned resolutions. The postal ballot notice dated December 24, 2024 has been sent only through e-mail to all those Members whose e-mail addresses were registered with the Company or Registrar and Share Transfer Agent or with their respective Depository / Depository Participant ("DP") and whose names appear in the Register of Members of the Company or in the Register of Beneficial Owners maintained by the Depositories as on "cut-off date" i.e. Friday, December 20, 2024 in accordance with the MCA Circulars.

Table with columns: S. No., Account Name, Client ID, No. of Acc., Bal. Outstanding as on 23/12/2024, Weight (grams)

UPI transactions jump 33 per cent at retail stores in India this year: Report

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

UPI transactions at retail stores have increased by 33 per cent in semi-urban and rural areas this year, reflecting the growing adoption of digital payments, says a report. Moreover, insurance policy purchases and premium collections saw a 127 per cent increase in transaction volume and a 96 per cent growth in new customer adoption during the year, the report by branchless banking and digital network PayNearby said. "The data highlights the role digital retail stores play in overcoming the challenges of insurance penetration across Bharat," it stated. The report is based on an analysis of real transaction data derived from over 10,00,000 small retailers (kirana stores, mobile recharge stores etc) offering financial and digital services spread across India in rural



and semi-urban regions. The findings compare business data from January to November 2024 with the same period in 2023. The report, Retail-O-Nomics, stated that there has been an impressive 297 per cent volume rise across credit

products, including business loans, gold loans, personal loans, and revolving credit in rural and semi-urban areas. This significant uptick reflects a growing awareness and demand for credit solutions at the grassroots level, it said.

However, micro ATM and Aadhaar Enabled Payment Systems (AePS) cash withdrawals saw a decline in 2024. Both transaction volumes and the average cash withdrawal per transaction saw a slight decline, with the latter dropping from Rs 2,624

in 2023 to Rs 2,482 in 2024, the report said. AePS withdrawals surged by 35-45 per cent during DBT releases, particularly under schemes like PM Kisan Yojana, compared to the rest of the year. "Cash withdrawals in Jammu and Kashmir recorded an impressive growth of 58 per cent in value and 74 per cent in volume," the report said. "By equipping local retailers with tools to offer diverse services like insurance, e-commerce, and lending, we are empowering them to become key enablers of financial access and economic progress at the grassroots," Anand Kumar Bajaj, Founder, MD & CEO, PayNearby, said. PayNearby is a branchless banking and digital network that operates on a B2B2C model. It has more than 10 lakh retail touchpoints comprising kirana stores, medical shops, travel agents and others.

Govt launches AI-enabled consumer helpline, e-commerce giants pledge safety

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Food and Consumer Affairs Minister Pralhad Joshi on Tuesday launched several initiatives to strengthen consumer protection, including artificial intelligence-enabled helpline and tools to detect deceptive marketing practices, while major e-commerce players pledged to enhance online shopping safety. Leading platforms, including Reliance Retail, Tata Sons and Zomato adopted a safety pledge as the government rolled out new consumer protection measures like the AI-enabled National Consumer Helpline, e-maap portal and Jago Grahak Jago mobile application. "Significant progress has been made in expediting resolutions of consumer disputes," Joshi said at the National Consumer Day event. The minister, who attended the event online, highlighted that out of 3,628 cases filed with the National Commission between January and November this year, 6,587 cases have been



disposed of through the country's three-tier consumer court system at district, state and national levels. The government's e-Daakhil Portal, launched in 2020 and expanded nationwide in June 2023, has achieved 100 per cent adoption for online complaint filing in states like Karnataka, Punjab and Rajasthan, as well as several districts. Addressing growing e-commerce concerns, Joshi said: "While this digital revolution offers incredible opportunities, the Indian government believes it is equally important for our

consumers to feel confident and make informed choices." The Consumer Protection Authority (CPA) is drafting new guidelines to regulate surrogate advertising and has issued notices to 13 companies for non-compliance with existing rules, he added. Minister of State for Consumer Affairs B L Verma, Telecom Regulatory Authority of India Chairman Anil Kumar Lahoti, All India Council for Technical Education T G Sitharam and Consumer Affairs Secretary Nidhi Khare were present at the event.

Puri, Varanasi, Haridwar top spiritual destinations in 2024, Hyderabad most-booked city: Travelopedia 2024 annual report

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Puri, Varanasi and Haridwar are the most travelled spiritual destinations while Hyderabad is India's top-booked city this year, according to OYO's "Travelopedia 2024" annual report unveiled on Tuesday. The report delves into travel patterns and trends, with its findings based on the booking data of the travel tech major for the entire year. "In India, religious tourism continued to be a key focus, with Puri, Varanasi, and Haridwar dominating the

pilgrimage sector. However, a significant trend emerged with Deoghar, Palani, and Govardhan experiencing substantial growth, indicating a shift towards less explored spiritual destinations..."OYO stated. Following Hyderabad, cities like Bengaluru, Delhi, and Kolkata rounded out the top spots for bookings, with Uttar Pradesh maintaining its position as the most popular state for travel. High volume of bookings were reported from Maharashtra, Telangana, and Karnataka, which continue to be dominant travel

contributors. Smaller towns like Patna, Rajahmundry, and Hubli have shown tremendous growth, with bookings increasing by as much as 48 per cent year-on-year. "The year also saw a surge in leisure travel, with Jaipur continuing to be a top tourist magnet, followed by perennial favourites Goa, Pondicherry, and Mysore. Interestingly, Mumbai saw a drop in bookings, with travellers preferring nearby locations for leisure," OYO stated. Shreerang Godbole, Global Chief Service Officer, OYO said, "2024 has marked

a year of transformation in the global travel landscape. We've seen how travellers are embracing flexibility and adaptability, whether for business or leisure. As remote work trends continue to shape how people approach travel, the demand for both quick getaways and long stays has been a significant driver of bookings this year." The fourth of July weekend saw the highest number of bookings, aligning with national celebrations, while the Christmas season was also notable for a sharp spike in travel.

Inflation continues to hit FMCG industry, urban growth expected to slow in H1/2025

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Heading towards a slowdown amid inflationary pressures, the FMCG industry's volume growth during August-October this year has dropped to 4.3 per cent from 6.4 per cent in the year-ago period, research and insight firm Kantar said in a report. Moreover, the FMCG volume growth was lower sequentially also as in the May-July period, this was 4.5 per cent, according to Kantar's latest FMCG Pulse report. "We are in that last quarter,

and the FMCG growth as of the quarter ending October is 4.3 per cent. This number is a far cry from the 6.4 per cent growth seen in Q/E Oct '23, but is also a tad lower than 4.5 per cent we saw in the last quarter, i.e. Q/E Jul '24," it said. Volume growth in the urban market was at 4.5 per cent in the August-October period, down from 6.9 per cent in the same period of 2023. However, the report added: "It is also true that a 4.5 per cent growth following a near 7 per cent growth in the previous term is extremely rare. In fact, over the last five

years, this has only happened in the quarters of 2024." Therefore, technically urban is in a slowdown, though "it is far from a slump." About the inflation, the report said that per-household average quarterly spending crossed Rs 6,000 for the first time in the August-October period of 2022, and two years since then, spending has seen a 13 per cent jump and is at Rs 6,761 during this quarter. In May-July 2024, shoppers were paying Rs 133 per KG of FMCG on average. Just one quarter since then, shoppers are paying Rs 137 per KG, a

jump of Rs 4 per KG in the latest August-October period. "In recent years, this kind of growth in a single consecutive quarter was only seen during the initial months of the 2022 inflation period," it said. With no signs of food inflation relenting in the immediate future, where value growth rapidly draws away from volume growth for some more time, it's hard to see urban (market) growing more rapidly than the rural levels. "We are expecting similar levels of growth to continue into the first half of the next year," it said.

Domestic air passenger traffic rises 12 per cent in November, IndiGo leads market share



PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Indian airlines carried 1.42 crore passengers on domestic routes in November, nearly 12 per cent more compared to the year-ago period, amid rising air traffic demand. In terms of domestic market share, IndiGo topped the list with a 63.6 per cent pie, followed by Air India (24.4 per cent), Akasa Air (4.7 per cent)

and SpiceJet (3.1 per cent). While all these carriers saw their share rise, the share of Alliance Air was unchanged at 0.7 per cent in November, according to the latest data from the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA). "Passengers carried by domestic airlines during January-November 2024 were 1,464.02 lakh as against 1,382.34 lakh during the corresponding period of the previous year thereby registering an annual growth of 5.91 per cent and monthly growth of 11.90 per cent," the watchdog said in its monthly report. Domestic air passenger traffic was at 142.52 lakh in November compared to 127.36 lakh in the same period a year ago. In October this year, domestic passenger stood at 1.36 crore. Air India completed the

merger of full service carrier Vistara with itself in November. The On Time Performance (OTP) of scheduled domestic airlines - computed for the four metro airports at Bangalore, Delhi, Hyderabad, and Mumbai - took a beating in November. IndiGo's OTP stood at 74.5 per cent while that of Akasa Air and SpiceJet touched 66.4 per cent and 62.5 per cent, respectively. The OTP of Air India and Alliance Air were at 58.8 per cent and 58.9 per cent, respectively, the data showed. Further, the data revealed that 2,24,904 passengers were affected by delays in November. Carriers shelled out nearly Rs 2.90 crore towards facilitation. Last month, a total of 624 passenger-related complaints were received by the scheduled domestic airlines.

Federation of retailer association of India urges government to empower kirana stores with enhanced tech platform

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Federation of Retailer Association of India on Tuesday asked the government to provide enhanced technology platform to Kirana stores to enable them to compete with quick commerce firms. "Such support would enable the kirana stores to remain competitive amidst the increasing encroachment into their space by quick commerce companies like Swiggy Instamart, Blinkit or Zepto," said Federation of Retailer Association of India (FRAI), which says that it represents about 80 lakh micro, small and medium retailers from across the country with a membership of 42 retail associations. Providing local kirana stores with a technology platform

would allow them to compete on equal terms with quick commerce players, effectively creating a level-playing field, it added. "With new technologies brought in by the government, like ONDC (Open Network for Digital Commerce), what is now required is a more focused approach in creating a specific solution for kirana stores that makes them as discoverable and accessible to customers, much like the way quick commerce companies are operating," FRAI Honorary Spokesperson Abhay Raj Mishra said. Essentially, the kirana stores should remain competitive by being empowered to tap into the growing digital market and meet new customer needs," said Mishra, who is also Member

& National Coordinator, Indian Sellers Collective. Kirana stores are facing steep challenges due to the rise of quick commerce players, Lok Sabha member Praveen Khandelwal said. "For shopkeepers, it is crucial to stay updated and embrace all channels to meet the evolving expectations of customers," he added. FRAI said quick commerce platforms have "unfair advantage" over Kirana stores, which cannot match the heavy discounts offered by quick commerce giants who benefit from deep pockets, large warehouses and a huge customer base. The increased competition from quick commerce players has resulted in stagnant sales for kirana stores, particularly during high-demand periods such as the festive season, it added.

Sensex, Nifty settle almost flat in highly volatile trade; metal, power stocks drag

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Benchmark equity indices Sensex and Nifty ended on a flat note in a volatile trade on Tuesday, as investors preferred to stay on the sidelines awaiting further triggers amid persistent foreign fund outflows. After gyrating between highs and lows, the 30-share index declined 67.30 points or 0.09 per cent to settle at 78,472.87. During the day, it dropped 142.38 points or 0.18 per cent to 78,397.79. The NSE Nifty dipped 25.80 points or 0.11 per cent to 23,727.65. As many as 2,019 stocks declined, while 1,977 advanced and 96 remained unchanged on the BSE. "The domestic market concluded flat ahead of the holiday, with metal and power stocks dragging performance while FMCG and auto sectors gained from recent corrections. "The near-term market trajectory hinges on the outcome of Q3 results and the Union budget, but caution prevails due to a strong dollar, high bond yields, and concerns over rate cuts. The rupee hitting an all-time low further evoked the caution," Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services, said. From the 30 blue-chip stocks,

Power Grid, State Bank of India, Titan, Tata Steel, IndusInd Bank, UltraTech Cement, Adani Ports and Infosys were among the laggards. In contrast, Tata Motors, ITC, Nestle, Tata Consultancy Services, NTPC and Zomato were among the gainers. The BSE smallcap gauge climbed 0.37 per cent, and the BSE midcap index rose 0.09 per cent. "The Nifty index saw a lacklustre start to the much-anticipated 'Santa Claus Rally Period,' with the index closing at 23,728, down 26 points. The sluggish session was attributed to persistent selling by FIIs, concerns over India's slowing economic growth, and a weakening Indian rupee, which hit a record low of Rs. 85.13 against the dollar. "These factors weighed on investor sentiment, keeping the market directionless and choppy throughout the day. Our earlier call suggested a low-volume trading session, and that prediction held true as Nifty traded in a volatile range," Prashanth Tapse, Senior VP (Research), Mehta Equities Ltd, said. Among sectoral indices, metal slumped 0.93 per cent, power declined 0.73 per cent, utilities (0.52 per cent), consumer durables (0.50 per cent) and commodities (0.33 per cent).

Indian IT hiring: 2025 promises rebound, AI/data science roles to dominate job market

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Indian IT hiring landscape is at a pivotal juncture as it transitions from a year of decline towards a more hopeful future. The focus on specialised skills, particularly in AI and data science, combined with geographical shifts towards Tier 2 cities, indicates a transformation within the sector. While the IT hiring landscape in India in 2024 was marked by delayed onboarding and a decline in overall hiring activity, the outlook for 2025 appears promising with expectations of recovery and growth fuelled by improvements in economic conditions and technological advancements.



In 2024, the Indian IT sector experienced approximately a 7 per cent decline in hiring compared to the previous year, largely due to broader macroeconomic challenges and global uncertainties. Sunil Chemmankotil, Country Manager of Adecco India, noted that while Global Capability Centres (GCCs) played a crucial role in boosting hiring - accounting for 52.6 per cent of job openings for tech professionals - they could not fully offset the significant downturn in the IT services sector. Despite this overall contraction, certain areas showed resilience and growth. The demand for roles in Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning (ML) surged by 39 per cent, reflecting a shift towards more specialised skill sets as organisations prioritised these technologies, according to Adecco research. There was notable growth in IT hiring within Tier 2 cities, which saw an impressive 48

per cent increase during the third quarter of 2024, indicating a trend of geographic diversification of job opportunities beyond traditional tech hubs. Hiring for professionals with mid- to senior-level experience increased by 35 per cent, suggesting that companies favour experienced candidates amid market fluctuations. The hiring landscape for fresh graduates remained subdued, with growth rates ranging from 2-15 per cent across various tech sectors, data from TeamLease Edtech showed.

Companies often delayed onboarding campus hires due to uncertain deal flows, which industry leaders believe was particularly influenced by the global political climate surrounding major elections. As India moves into 2025, there are encouraging signs that the IT hiring landscape may rebound significantly. According to the ManpowerGroup Employment Outlook Survey (MEOS) for first quarter of 2025, 53 per cent of the 3,150 employers in India surveyed expect an increase in hiring, the highest among the 42 countries studied. "In 2024, fresher hiring remained muted in general with several companies also choosing to delay the onboarding of their campus hires. This may change as the deal flow for large projects is expected to return in early 2025. The first set of deal flow will benefit the large players and as the buyer sentiment improves, the tier 2 and 3 players can expect a rise in orders," Jaideep Kewalramani, COO and Head of Employability Business at TeamLease Edtech, said.

As the macro headwinds slow down and the results of elections of large economies, the US being the last one in 2024 to come in, he said organisations will be confident about the economic outlook and start to make some bets on the capital investments, which will help jump-start the deal flow in early 2025. While fresh hiring may remain subdued initially, it is anticipated that as large projects commence in early 2025, there will be a notable increase in job opportunities for new graduates, Kewalramani said. Companies are expected to invest heavily in upskilling their workforce to meet evolving demands, particularly in areas such as AI and cybersecurity. Wipro CTO Sandhya Arun believes enterprises are set to accelerate the integration of AI and other advanced technologies to unlock significant business value. "Year 2025 promises to be a year of high-velocity technology disruptions, offering new opportunities and presenting unprecedented challenges. The future belongs

to enterprises that embrace technology and disruption..." Arun said. The demand for specialised tech roles is anticipated to surge by 30-35 per cent, driven by an increasing reliance on emerging technologies. "However, the shift towards AI and automation in India's IT sector has started and will continue to create increasing impact on recruitment through AI-driven tools machine learning, and redefined job roles by automating routine tasks while creating demand for highly specialised roles," said Sanju Ballurkar, President (Experis India), ManpowerGroup India. The sector is expected to rebound with projections indicating a 15-20 per cent growth in job opportunities across various industries, according to Chemmankotil. "Looking ahead, the combined hiring intent from GCC and IT services will be a welcome relief to job seekers. Employers are optimistic about recovery and growth as companies adapt to new technological landscapes and market needs," he said.



People For Animals (PFA), Noida, an animal welfare organization received an animal ambulance with hydraulic jack and a ventilator by Can Fin Homes Limited CSR initiative. On this occasion, Marketing Head of Can Fin Homes Limited Himanshu, Senior Manager Sameer flagged off the ambulance. Shilpi, Naveen, Jagmohan and Ravi Dubey from People For Animals Trust were present.

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

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



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

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

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

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



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

Valencia fires coach Rubén Baraja after setback in La Liga

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

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

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



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

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



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

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

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

Hero MotoSports names Nacho Cornejo as new rider

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



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

Buhler, a German living in Portugal, has given consistent performances this year, marking his biggest achievement by securing his first FIM World Championship race podium at Rally Raid Portugal, where he finished second overall.
At the 2024 Dakar Rally, Buhler came close to winning his first Dakar stage.
Young Chilean rider Cornejo boasts of an impressive Dakar record, including a fourth-place finish in 2020 and nine stage wins.
The 47th Dakar Rally will kick off in Bisha, featuring a prologue and 12 stages spanning 7,700 km across the vast desert. For the first time,

five stages will have separate courses for FIM and FIA vehicles, covering 45 per cent of the timed distance.
Dakar 2025 will also be the opening race of the fourth edition of the World Rally Championship (W2RC).
Hero MotoSports is a Rally GP-class participant at the W2RC 2025, and will attend its five rounds starting with the Dakar, followed by the Abu Dhabi Desert Challenge (February), South African Safari Rally (May), BP Ultimate Rally Raid in Portugal (September), and finally closing the season with the Rallye du Maroc (October).

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

PTI ■ MELBOURNE
With a smile, India captain Rohit Sharma on Tuesday played down concerns around Virat Kohli's struggles outside the off-stump in Australia and backed his longtime teammate to the hilt, saying "modern-day greats figure out their own path."
Kohli's five innings in this series Down Under read 5, 100 not out, 7, 11 and 3 for a total of 126 runs at an average of 31.50, not something the team or the batting maestro himself had hoped for before embarking on the challenging tour.
But Rohit, who is also battling poor form, is not losing his sleep over the lack of runs and is confident of a turnaround. When a question about Kohli's struggles was posed to him with some sugar-coating, the skipper added a dash of his own humour in his response.
Do you say something or leave a modern-day great alone, the scribe asked.

"You only said he is a modern-day great. Modern-day greats figure out their own path," said a smiling Rohit as others broke into a peal of laughter.
Kohli was one of the earliest to enter the nets at MCG and Rohit was last among the recognised batters to get a knocking. The India skipper played just two shots in the last 20 minutes and left everything else, as he tried to curb his natural instinct to push forward.
The desperation to control his conditioned reflex of moving hands towards the fourth stump delivery was evident.
"Harshit, is jagah se jaa rahi hai (the ball is landing here)?" he pointed out at an imaginary fourth stump line while trying to know from the young pacer about the line which looked just around six inches outside off-stump. This line has been Kohli's Achilles Heel in the ongoing tour.
When Prasadh Krishna came on, he was told to bowl on the "channel" as he wanted to leave balls. Prasadh dug one short and



he just about defended. Then, the lanky Karnataka man hit the channel, and the batter withdrew his willow in the nick of time.
The 500-odd people present inside would let out a collective sigh. They made noise and once Kohli was also seen telling them to keep quiet and let him concentrate.
When Rohit batted, he was heard telling throwdown specialist

Raghavendra, "Tappa sahi pakadna padega (get the length right)." He also got beaten by a throw that reared from length.
"Rohit bhai, pull maaro naa (play the pull shot)," yelled one of the demanding young fans from outside. Rohit just left the next delivery.
With the chatter about his form gaining decibels and rumours about an imminent retirement post Sydney gaining traction, Rohit's answers about himself were short. When someone has one double digit score in five innings, he wants to be left alone but then commitments needed to be honoured.
Asked about his batting position, he was borderline irritated.
"Let's not worry about that. I think who bats where, we should be discussing that within ourselves and I shouldn't be answering this question in every press conference," the skipper said, trying to hold his composure.
At the onset, he informed that his knee which was hurt while batting on an old practice track, was

"fine".
Then next question was a "flighted query" on where he stood with regards to his batting form.
"After last Test (in Brisbane) we had two sessions. What could have possibly changed in two days?" he countered with a wry smile.
As usual, he didn't give away anything about whether playing two spinners while factoring in the Melbourne heat was feasible or not.
The inimitable Rohit was back lacing everything with a bit of humour when asked what led to the selection of Tanush Kotian over Kuldeep Yadav.
"Well Kuldeep didn't have visa," he smiled before informing that the wrist spinner is still not hundred percent fit.
"Axar couldn't travel as he has had a baby. I am not saying Tanush is bad but he is here more as a cover," he said.
The five-match series is levelled at 1-1 with all to play for in the remaining two matches in Melbourne and Sydney.



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

PTI ■ MELBOURNE
India top-order batter Shubman Gill has made far too many changes in his batting approach, which is hindering his run-scoring ability on away tours, feels former Australian captain Ricky Ponting, adding that the way out for the young cricketer is to trust his instincts.
Gill missed the opening Test of the Border-Gavaskar Trophy in Perth due to a thumb injury he suffered during India's simulated training game. In the second Test at Adelaide, he failed to convert good starts into big scores as Australia levelled the series 1-1.
The third Test at Brisbane saw him getting out for one in the first innings, putting India in a spot of bother before KL Rahul and Ravindra Jadeja struck half-centuries to halt the slide.
"I love watching him play. When you're watching him bat and bat well, he looks as good as anyone in world cricket. But the numbers don't really stack up, do they, away from home?" Ponting said on ICC Review on Tuesday.
Ponting said he had observed several changes in Gill's technique during the second Test at Adelaide, which were impeding his ability to score runs.
"I watched him a little bit in Adelaide and it almost looked like he changed things up too

much.
"Scott Boland was bowling and he changed his guard, he moved across to the off stump, presented his front pad to Boland, and Boland got him out with a full straight one," he said.
The Australian legend added that rather than making wholesale changes in his technique, Gill should fall back upon trusting his instincts to improve his batting.
Gill's composed 91 at the Gabba during the 2021 tour had helped India clinch a historic series win, but since then he has scored just one Test ton away from home - in Bangladesh in 2022.
The 27-year-old has managed scores of 37, 1, 21, 28, and 9 in his five innings across three Tests so far.
Known for his aggressive approach, Pant has often prioritised attacking shots regardless of the match situation. His adventurous decision to charge down the pitch against pacer Scott Boland on the very first ball of his innings in the Adelaide day-night Test drew considerable attention.
"What Rishabh Pant has to do, like everybody else, respect the first half an hour; respect a little bit when he gets in there, whatever the position, unless, of course, India is 525 for 3; then he can tee off," Gavaskar told Star Sports.
Commenting on the challenges posed by

ICC announces Champions Trophy schedule, India-Pakistan clash on Feb 23

PTI ■ DUBAI
India will play all their matches of the Champions Trophy in Dubai with the marquee clash against arch-rivals Pakistan scheduled on February 23, the International Cricket Council (ICC) announced on Tuesday.
PTI had reported last week that India will play all their matches in Dubai including the semifinal and final if they qualify.
As has been the case with ICC events, India and Pakistan have been clubbed in the same group which also has New Zealand and Bangladesh.
Group B comprises South Africa, Australia, Afghanistan and England.
The tournament opener will be played in Karachi on February 19 when hosts Pakistan face New Zealand and the final is scheduled for March 9. The premier 50-over event, last played in 2017, will have 15 matches with at least 10 games scheduled in



Pakistan. Rawalpindi, Lahore, and Karachi will be the three hosting venues in Pakistan with the second semifinal to be staged at the refurbished Gaddafi Stadium in Lahore.
"Lahore will also host the final on 9 March, unless India qualify, in which case it will be played in Dubai. Both the semi-finals and the final will have reserve days," said the ICC in a statement.
India will open their campaign against Bangladesh on February 20 before taking on Pakistan three days later. Their final league fixture will be against New Zealand on March 2.
Group B action begins on February 21 when Afghanistan square up against South Africa in Karachi. A big weekend then kicks off with rivals England and Australia clashing in Lahore on February 22.
The eight sides in the Champions Trophy are the teams that finished in the top

eight in the points table at ODI World Cup in India last year.
The ICC has kept reserve days for both the semifinals and the final.
The schedule was announced after a deadlock over the hosting of the tournament ended with the ICC keeping India's games at a neutral venue as desired while having a similar arrangement for Pakistan for ICC events in India till 2027.
The hybrid arrangement will also apply to the 2025 women's ODI World Cup in India and the T20 World Cup in 2026 in India and Sri Lanka before being extended to the 2028 Women's T20 World Cup which Pakistan will host.
India had refused to travel to Pakistan for the event due to security concerns. The Indians have not played in Pakistan since the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks in which 150 people were killed. The two countries' last bilateral engagement was back in 2012.



Respect first half an hour: Gavaskar's advice to Pant

PTI ■ MELBOURNE
Legendary cricketer Sunil Gavaskar has advised India's flamboyant wicketkeeper-batter Rishabh Pant to "respect" the conditions before launching into his attacking strokes in the remaining two Tests of the ongoing Border-Gavaskar Trophy against Australia.
Pant, who famously scripted a match-winning knock at the Gabba in 2021, has shown flashes of brilliance but has struggled to make a significant impact in the ongoing series.
The 27-year-old has managed scores of 37, 1, 21, 28, and 9 in his five innings across three Tests so far.
Known for his aggressive approach, Pant has often prioritised attacking shots regardless of the match situation. His adventurous decision to charge down the pitch against pacer Scott Boland on the very first ball of his innings in the Adelaide day-night Test drew considerable attention.
"What Rishabh Pant has to do, like everybody else, respect the first half an hour; respect a little bit when he gets in there, whatever the position, unless, of course, India is 525 for 3; then he can tee off," Gavaskar told Star Sports.
Commenting on the challenges posed by

Australian bowlers, Gavaskar added, "... They get the ball to angle across. Pat Cummins and even (Josh) Hazlewood give him a little bit of a problem; Scott Boland will give him a little bit of a problem because Boland bowls around that area as well."
He should have no fear in these conditions: Hayden Australian legend Matthew Hayden, a self-confessed admirer of Pant, urged the Indian batter to embrace his fearless approach, saying it could be a game-changer for the visitors.
"I have always been a fan of his. He's kind of a different cheese; there is no doubt about it. And I would like to just see him explore that as well because he should be coming in a situation where, as I mentioned before, there are lots of runs; and if so, that's a perfect scenario for him to be (in).
"But it's also the perfect scenario for Team India. A little bit like Rohit Sharma, I think we haven't seen some counter-punching efforts from Rishabh, but he should have no fear in these conditions. I think in the absence of fear comes a great opportunity for Rishabh and Team India," said Hayden.
India will face Australia in the third Test at the MCG starting December 26.

Shaheen Afridi had requested PCB to not include him for Tests against SA

PTI ■ KARACHI
Pakistan's premier fast bowler Shaheen Shah Afridi had requested the team management and national selectors to not consider him for the Test matches in South Africa because of workload management since he wants to be "100 percent fit" for the ICC Champions Trophy in February-March.
After the Pakistan squad was announced for the two Tests in South Africa without Shaheen, the interim head coach and senior selector, Aaqib Javed, said that the left-arm pacer's workload is being managed to keep him fresh for the Champions Trophy.
"The truth is Shaheen



himself requested he not be considered for Test matches until the Champions Trophy is over," a source said.
He said Shaheen had also apparently informed the team management and Pakistan board that he had got a lucrative offer from a franchise in the Bangladesh Premier League and he would manage his workload during the T20 league which will be

held from December 30 to February 7.
"He assured the management and board the money was very good and he would look after his fitness and workload during the event so he should be permitted to play in the league," the source said.
During this period Pakistan is playing two Tests in South Africa and two Tests at home against West Indies.
"Shaheen said he would be fully fit in time for the tri-series ODIs against New Zealand and South Africa followed by the Champions Trophy at home," the source said.
"Shaheen told Aaqib he can be selected for tests once the Champions Trophy is completed," he added.

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

PTI ■ MELBOURNE
Australia head coach Andrew McDonald on Tuesday defended the selection committee's decision to drop Nathan McSweeney in middle of the series for Sam Konstas, saying the talented teenager will post a "new challenge" for India.
McSweeney, a makeshift opener, was dropped because of a string of low scores in the first three Tests.
Former Australia skipper Michael Clarke was very critical of the decision to sideline McSweeney. However, McDonald said tough calls have to be taken at times.
"We wanted to throw a new challenge at India. We believe

Nathan is good enough for the Test level. We weren't sure about how the top order is functioning. So yeah we challenged ourselves with that decision," said the head coach ahead of the fourth Test.
"Whether it works or not, time will tell. There will be debate around this should he or shouldn't he. Selections are highly debated."
Konstas, 19, will become the 468th Australian men's Test cricketer to don the Baggy Green when he takes the field in the Boxing Day game beginning on Wednesday.
Konstas, 19, will become the youngest Test debutant for Australia since 18-year-old Pat Cummins broke into the squad in 2011.

"We wanted clarity for our batting unit before the team meeting," McDonald said.
Selector Tony Dodemaide informed Konstas about his inclusion during training at the MCG here on Thursday.
Dodemaide informing Konstas about his inclusion was a departure from protocol as traditionally it's the Australian skipper who confirms the playing XI on match eve.
"It's (breaking the news) something we don't usually do because haven't had too many moving parts, but we thought we'd get that out of the way so everyone knows that he's in the team," said McDonald.
"He (Konstas) has been very similar to what I've seen on the



outside within (the team) - composed, relaxed, knows his game. And what he's shown is an array of shots, the ability to put pressure back on to opponents and he gets his opportunity," he added.
Khawaja will get runs McDonald also brushed aside concerns over Usman

Khawaja's form.
"I think Usman is not a concern. The way he is preparing runs will come. He knows his methods and any good player following methods will return among runs."
Head clear for coach but medical team nod needed.
Head, one of the in-form batters in the series with two centuries, experienced "a small strain to the quad" during the last day of the third Test at the Gabba.
The 'player of the match' in the last two Tests faced only throw-downs from assistant coach Brad Hodge rather than his fast-bowling teammates at the nets on Tuesday.
"I thought he looked good

with the bat in his hands so obviously the skills are in good order. It will just be what risk is associated with that," said McDonald.
"But no concerns from my end, he's been able to do his running so I think he'll be functional come game time."
The coach did not speculate on who could fill the spot in the middle-order if Head fails to prove his fitness. The uncapped pair of Josh Inglis and Beau Webster are the stand-bys in the squad.
However, pacer Scott Boland has been all-but confirmed to replace Josh Hazlewood, who is nursing a calf strain.
McDonald said with temperatures expected to soar to over 40 degrees during the

Boxing Day Test, the pitch could end up being more batter-friendly.
"This wicket might offer the batters a little bit more in terms of the surface as the game draws on. If we didn't pick Scotty (Boland) here - and I know I'm not allowed to declare the team because that's Pat's (Cummins) job tomorrow - but I don't think I'm coming to the ground Boxing Day if Scotty's not in the eleven.
"We've got great depth in our bowling, and (all-rounder) Mitch Marsh is fully fit and able to bowl. But he (Boland) is ready to go and he'll play a role in this Test match with the ball more so than the previous ones."