

'Cong has repeatedly insulted Ambedkar'

PNS ■ LUCKNOW Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on Tuesday launched a scathing attack on the Congress as he accused the party of repeatedly disrespecting the architect of India's Constitution...

duct of the Congress and other opposition parties against Ambedkar. "Dr BR Ambedkar played a monumental role during India's freedom movement, the drafting of the Constitution and the early years of independent India..."



UP Chief Minister addressing mediapersons in Lucknow on Tuesday

PTI

Committee. He credited Mahatma Gandhi's intervention for ensuring Ambedkar's position. "During the UPA regime, the Congress displayed its malice when a textbook portrayed a derogatory cartoon of Ambedkar being prodded by Pt Nehru..."

ment with BJP support that Ambedkar was finally awarded the Bharat Ratna, he said. Adityanath further highlighted the BJP's efforts under Modi's leadership to fulfil Ambedkar's vision through initiatives benefiting Dalits and marginalised communities...

Rajnath, Yogi inaugurate Atal Health Fair

PNS ■ LUCKNOW To commemorate the birth centenary of Bharat Ratna Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath inaugurated the two-day Atal Health Fair at Dilkusha Lawn here on Tuesday...



Defence Minister Rajnath Singh with Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath during the inauguration of the Atal Health Fair, in Lucknow on Tuesday

PTI

Referring to initiatives for empowering the differently-abled under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership, Adityanath emphasised the increase in their annual pension to Rs 12,000 and highlighted ongoing programmes for equipment distribution to support their needs...

2017, the government led by CM Yogi worked tirelessly to eliminate encephalitis, with Yogi ji personally overseeing the efforts. Today, the number of children dying from encephalitis in Purvanchal, across Uttar Pradesh and parts of Bihar has become negligible...

SP to launch 'PDA Charcha' in all assembly constituencies

Lucknow (PTI): The Samajwadi Party on Tuesday said it will organise 'PDA Charcha (discussion)' program across all assembly constituencies in Uttar Pradesh from December 26 to January 25. The initiative aims to safeguard the Constitution and propagate the ideals of Dr BR Ambedkar...

BJP running 'double blunder' government, says Akhilesh

PNS ■ LUCKNOW Samajwadi Party president Akhilesh Yadav took a jibe at the BJP-led governments at the Centre and in Uttar Pradesh on Tuesday, calling them a 'double blunder' instead of a 'double engine' government...

a 'double engine' government, but a 'double blunder' government. In the same post, he remarked, "BJP has even derailed the country's engine onto the wrong track..."

Bank of Baroda advertisement containing details for an E-auction of immovable assets under the Security Interest (Enforcement) Rules, 2002, with terms and conditions.

E-Auction Sale Notice under Section 54(3) of the Securitization and Reconstruction of Financial Assets and Enforcement of Security Interest Act, 2002, listing various properties for auction with details on borrowers, amounts, and terms.



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)

Atal ji: The statesman with vision and resolve



NARENDRA MODI

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



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

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

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

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



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

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

A wonderful example of Vajpayee Ji's leadership can be seen in the summer of 1998. His Government had just assumed office and on 11th May, India conducted the Pokhran tests, known as Operation Shakti. These tests exemplified the prowess of India's scientific community. The world was stunned that India had done the tests and expressed their anger in no uncertain terms. Any ordinary leader would have buckled, but Atal Ji was made differently. And what happened? India stood firm and resolute with the government calling for another set of tests two days later, on 13th May! If the tests of the 11th showed scientific skill, the ones on 13th showed true leadership. It was a message to the world that gone were the days when India would buckle under threats or pressure. Despite facing international sanctions, the then NDA government of Vajpayee Ji stood firm, articulating India's right to safeguard its sovereignty while simultaneously being the strongest proponent of world peace.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dreaming of a White Christmas in New York City

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

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

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



SHREYA DOYAL

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 trip—standing 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 (retd.) 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 criticize 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 IIM, 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 IIM 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 systemizing 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



reached 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? Smyrna, 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.

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 Prasidh Krishna came on, he was told to bowl on the "channel" as he wanted to leave balls. Prasidh 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.

Gill averages 23.8 across nine Tests in England, Bangladesh, the West Indies, South Africa and Australia but at home he has accumulated 1,177 runs and four centuries across 17 Tests at an average of 42.03.

"If anything, I think he needs to back himself a little bit more, needs to back his defensive technique a little bit more here in Australia and still find a way to be able to score and score quickly," Ponting said.

"I'm sure when he's at home or when he's generally scored runs anywhere around the world, he scores them in a nice, attacking mode and almost to the point where he's not really thinking about getting out – he's only thinking about scoring runs."

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



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 assured that 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."

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 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.

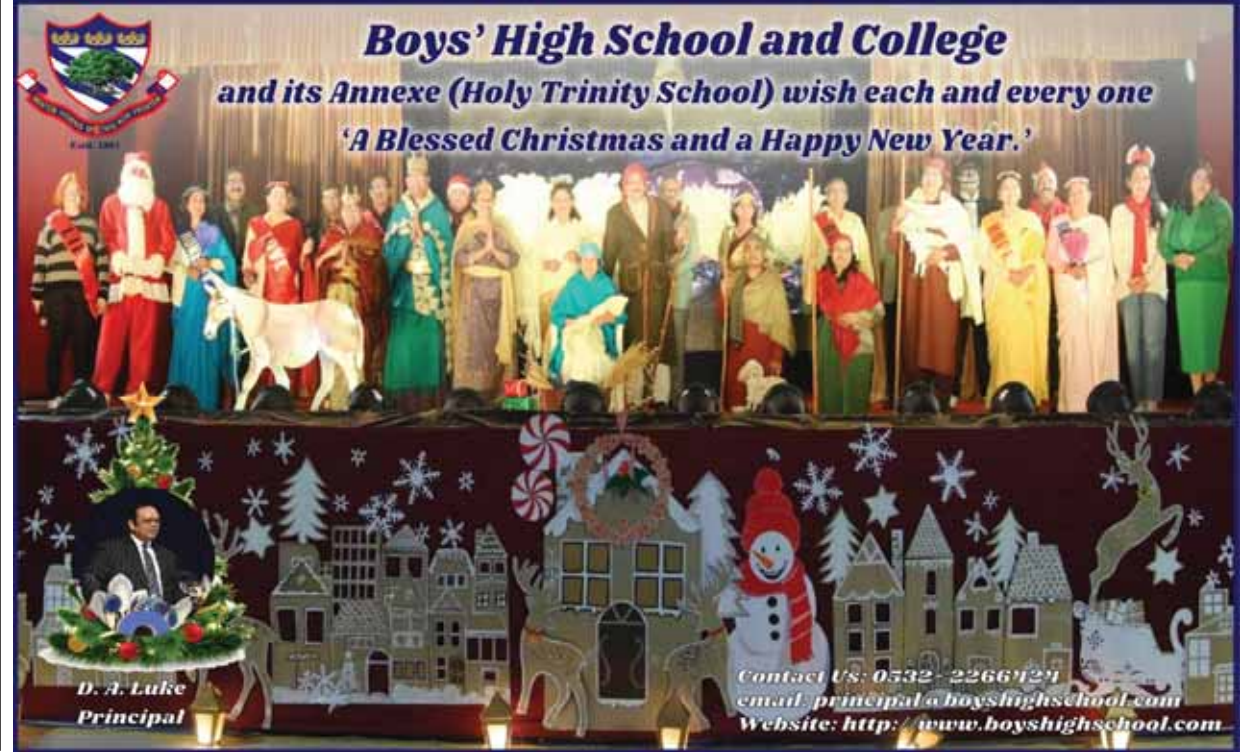
In the women's singles final, Devika took control of the match tempo quickly and then maintained her dominance to win in straight games.

Valencia fires coach Rubén Baraja after setback in La Liga

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 equalizer to salvage the result that left the club second to

last in the standings. The home draw prompted criticism from fans who have complained about administration of Lim, whom they accuse of using the club only as a business endeavor.



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 Dhyani 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.

"Regardless of the award I shall remain motivated to win more medals for my country. It is a request to everyone, please do not speculate on this," she said. Rana and Ramkishan lambasted the sports ministry and the selection committee for overlooking her despite her monumental achievements.

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