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ON FOREIGN FUND OUTFLOWS

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Congress, BJP spar over Ambedkar legacy

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

A massive confrontation broke out between the Bharatiya Janata Party-led Centre and other ruling parties, and the Congress-led Opposition over Home Minister Amit Shah's remarks on BR Ambedkar during his speech in Parliament on Tuesday, with the Congress and other opposition parties demanding resignation of the Home Minister on grounds of insulting the architect of the Constitution.

The attack from virtually all opposition parties, including Congress, Trinamool Congress (TMC), Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), Left parties and Shiv Sena-UBT, led to adjournment of both Houses of Parliament and prompted the BJP, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, to come out in stout defence of Shah.

The hullabaloo in Parliament also spilled on to the streets of the national Capital and places as far as Maharashtra, Bihar and Tamil Nadu.

Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge and senior leader Rahul Gandhi, TMC supremo Mamata Banerjee, DMK chief MK Stalin, Shiv Sena-UBT chief Uddhav Thackeray and RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav were among those who slammed Shah for his remarks.

Addressing a Press conference,



Congress SC ST cell workers stage a protest against Union Home Minister Amit Shah's remarks on BR Ambedkar in the Parliament, in Bhopal PTI

Shah alleged that the Congress in the past has also misrepresented his and even PM Narendra Modi's comments to spread confusion and mislead people. "I condemn the Congress for twisting facts. Why did it happen? It happened because BJP leaders spoke on how the NDA governments upheld the Constitution and established with facts that the Congress is anti-Ambedkar, anti-Constitution and anti-reservation," Shah told the media.

The senior BJP leader said the Congress also insulted VD Savarkar and blew to smithereens the values enshrined in the Constitution

notice to move a privilege motion against Shah in the Rajya Sabha where the Home Minister had said on Tuesday, evening that Congress leaders would have got a place in heaven had they chanted the name of God rather than following the fashion of repeating Ambedkar's name.

In the Rajya Sabha, Minister for Parliamentary Affairs Kiren Rijju accused the Congress of misleading the country by using only a part of Shah's remarks made in the Rajya Sabha and asserted that the Home Minister had in very clear words mentioned how the Congress party had insulted Ambedkar. "You (Congress) cannot use an 11-12 second clip out of Shah's entire speech and mislead the nation," Rijju said and stressed that for the BJP, Ambedkar is equivalent to God.

Leader of the House JP Nadra too stood up in Shah's defence, saying that Kharge was trying to "mislead" the nation through Parliament and accused the Congress of treating Ambedkar with disdain and disrespect. Nadra rejected Kharge's claim and alleged that it was the Congress that had disrespected Ambedkar during his lifetime due to which he had resigned from the Union Cabinet.

Modi asserted that the opposition party's "rotten ecosystem" and "malicious lies" cannot hide its misdeeds.

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13 dead, in ferry-Navy speed boat collision off Mumbai coast

T N RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

In a major mishap, as many as 13 persons, including a Navy man, lost their lives, while more than 99 other tourist passengers on board a private ferry boat were rescued after it was hit by a speed boat belonging to the Indian Navy in the Arabian Sea, off the Gateway of India in south Mumbai on Wednesday.

Confirming that the mishap took place due to a hit by a Navy vessel, a Defence spokesperson said late in the evening: "At about 1600 hours on December 18 a Navy craft undergoing engine trials lost control and collided with a passenger ferry Neel Kamal off Karanja, Mumbai. The ferry was carrying passengers from Gateway of India to Elephanta Island. The accident has reportedly led to the tragic loss of 13 lives including one Navy man and two Original Equipment Manufacturer (OEM) personnel onboard the Naval craft," the Defence spokesperson said.

The Navy pegged the number of survivors at 99. "The survivors -- picked up by the Navy and civil craft in the area -- have been transferred to jetties and hospitals in the vicinity," the Defence spokesperson said.

The private boat named "Neel Kamal" with many passengers on board was on its way from the Gateway of India to the Gharapuri Island, where there is UNESCO World Heritage Site of Elephanta Caves. The Indian Navy boat had six persons on board.



Passengers after being rescued in a joint operation by the Indian Navy and Indian Coast Guard PTI

Search and rescue efforts were immediately launched by the Navy in coordination with the Coast Guard and Marine Police. Four Naval helicopters, 11 Naval craft, one Coast Guard boat and three Marine Police boats are undertaking rescue efforts. Given that the collision between the two vessels was very intense, there were casualties from both the passenger boat and Navy vessel.

Owing to the impact of the hit, "Neel Kamal" broke down, overturned and sank with the passengers on board thrown into the sea. Before long, the videos of the tragedy, clicked by passengers from other ferries in the vicinity, showed gashly shots of people screaming for help, throwing their arms and legs to remain afloat or attempting to hold their near and dear ones from sinking in chilly sea waters.

The mishap took place off Uran-Karanja, which falls in the Raigad district, at around 4 pm, immediately after which a massive multi-agency Search and Rescue (S&R) operation was launched. "Accounting of all personnel is in progress along with S&R efforts in the area," the chief Navy spokesperson said. Teams of the Indian Navy, Indian Coast Guard, Mumbai Police and Jawaharlal Nehru Port Authority are involved in the operations. Eleven Navy boats, three Marine Police boats, one Coast Guard boat and four helicopters are involved in the S&R operations.

Talking to media persons, the owner of the vessel, Rajendra Padte, said that the "Neel Kamal" had departed on its regular tourism voyage to Elephanta Islands around 3.15 pm and barely a couple of hours later the mishap was reported. He claimed that his ferry vessel had no role to play in the mishap.

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Photo: Ranjan Dimri/The Pioneer

NCR's noxious numbers: AQI is over 445

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi woke up to yet another day of toxic air on Wednesday as the overall Air Quality Index (AQI) crossed a hazardous 445 (almost severe plus), landing in the 'severe' category. With a minimum temperature of 7.6 degree Celsius, dense fog enveloped the city, severely impacting visibility and making the already hazardous air quality even more dangerous. According to the Decision Support System for Air Quality Management, with 12.857 per cent transport sector is the key contributor to air pollution, followed by Industries (6.617 per cent), Road Constructions (1.85 per cent), Waste (1.23 per cent) and dust (0.913 per cent).

Delhi has been experiencing toxic air quality for the past few days due to drop in wind speeds, allowing local pollutants to concentrate in the atmosphere, according to experts. On Tuesday the city's 24-hour average AQI was 433 at 4 pm, against 379 on Monday.

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PTI

Katra locals resume protest against ropeway project

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ JAMMU

Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Sangarsh Samiti, Katra, relaunched their agitation on Wednesday by observing a peaceful bandh in the township in protest against the proposed Rs 250 Crore ropeway project connecting Tarakote Marg to Sanjhi Chhat, which leads to the cave shrine nestled in the Trikuta Hills.

To maintain the law and order situation and ensure the safety of the pilgrims the local police authorities conducted a march in the Katra town. During the day the pilgrims were seen facing hardships during the complete shutdown. The transport facilities also

remained suspended making it difficult for the pilgrims to commute from one place to another.

At the end of the first round of the four-day-long protests, the Sangarsh Samiti had given an ultimatum to the Jammu and Kashmir government to concede their demands by December 15, or else they would be left with no other option but to relaunch their agitation.

In the absence of any concrete assurance or dialogue between the different stakeholders, the Sangarsh Samiti decided to observe a peaceful bandh. A large rally, backed by various organisations, was held by the Samiti from the Shalimar Park to oppose the ropeway project.

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Outgoing US Govt relaxes H-1B visas rules

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE/ AGENCIES ■ NEW DELHI/ WASHINGTON

Scores of Indian professionals seeking a career in the United States (US) are likely to benefit the most as the Government there has announced a new set of rules for H-1B visas that makes it easier for American companies to hire foreign workers with special skill sets. It also facilitates a smoother transition from F-1 student visas to H-1B visas.

This positive development for highly qualified Indian professionals came late Tuesday in Washington by the outgoing Biden administration transferring power. Donald Trump will be the next president of the US after a swearing-in ceremony on January 20.

The updated rule, which takes effect on January 17, 2025, will streamline the approval process, provide greater flexibility for employers to retain top talent, and strengthen the integrity and oversight of the programme. This move is likely to benefit Indians the most.

In recent years, Indians have cornered a lion's share of H-1B visas. The update would also benefit Indian students on F-1 visas in the US as the new rules seek to help them transition to jobs.

The rule, announced by the Department of Homeland



Security (DHS), aims to provide greater flexibility to employers and workers by modernising the definition and criteria for special positions and nonprofit and governmental research organisations that are exempt from the annual statutory limit on H-1B visas. The changes will help US Employers hire as per their business needs and remain competitive in the global marketplace, an official release said.

According to the DHS, the rule also extends certain flexibilities for students on an F-1 visa seeking to change their status to H-1B to avoid disruptions in lawful status and employment authorisation for students holding F-1 visas.

It also will allow US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) to process applications more quickly for most individuals who had previously been approved for an H-1-B visa. It will also allow H1-B visa holders with a

controlling interest in the petitioning organisation to be eligible for H-1B status subject to reasonable conditions. The latest move by the outgoing Biden administration builds on its previous efforts to ensure that the labour needs of American businesses are met to reduce undue burden on employers while adhering to all US worker protections under the law.

"American businesses rely on the H-1B visa programme for the recruitment of highly-skilled talent, benefiting communities across the country," said Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro N. Mayorkas.

"These improvements to the programme provide employers with greater flexibility to hire global talent, boost our economic competitiveness, and allow highly skilled workers to continue to advance American innovation," he said.

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Photo: Ranjan Dimri/The Pioneer

Kejriwal promises free medical treatment for senior citizens, post win

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

In a significant announcement ahead of the upcoming Assembly polls, Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) chief Arvind Kejriwal has announced the Sanjeevani Scheme which promises free medical treatment in government and private hospitals for all senior citizens aged 60 and above, if his party returns to power in the National Capital.

If implemented, the scheme could prove to be a game changer in the competitive political landscape and will arguably be one of its kinds in terms of the welfare measures announced by state governments or the Centre.

The pre-poll announcement of the new health scheme can be seen as an effort to secure votes and drum up support for AAP which is eyeing a third consecutive term in power in the capital.

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Kailash Mansarovar Yatra to restart? India-China talk peace

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Signalling a thaw between the two countries for the last four years, India and China on Wednesday agreed for cross-border cooperation and exchanges including resumption of the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra, data sharing on trans-border rivers and border trade. They agreed on the salience of stable, predictable and amicable India-China relations for regional and global peace and prosperity.

Announcing this, ministry of external affairs (MEA) said in a statement here, the 23rd meeting of the Special Representatives (SRs) of India and China, respectively Ajit Doval, National Security Advisor (NSA) of India, and Wang Yi, Member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee and Minister of Foreign Affairs, was held in Beijing on Wednesday.

The SRs met in accordance with the decision taken during the recent meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping in Kazan for them to meet at an early date to oversee the management of peace and tranquility in border areas and



National Security Advisor (NSA) Ajit Doval with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi before their scheduled meeting, in Beijing PTI

to explore a fair, reasonable and mutually acceptable solution to the boundary question. The SRs reiterated the importance of maintaining a political perspective of the overall bilateral relationship while seeking a fair, reasonable and mutually acceptable framework for settlement of the boundary question, and resolved to inject more vitality into this process.

This was the first meeting of the SRs since frictions had emerged in the Western Sector of the India-China border areas in 2020. The SRs positively affirmed the implementation of the latest disengagement agreement of October 2024, resulting in patrolling and grazing in relevant areas.

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Had fun but it's time, says R Ashwin, announces surprise international retirement

PTI ■ BRISBANE

India's premier off-spinner R Ashwin, on Wednesday, stunned the cricketing world by bidding adieu to his international career in the middle of the ongoing Test series against Australia here despite having a "bit of punch left" in him.

The 38-year-old retires from the game as the second highest wicket-taker for India in Tests with 537 scalps in 106 games, placing him only behind the great Anil Kumble (619 wickets) in the overall statistics.

In the limited-overs format, being part of the 2011 World Cup and the 2013 Champions Trophy-winning teams would count among

the highlights of his career. He will continue to play club cricket, including the IPL, where he will return to compete for Chennai Super Kings next year.

"Today will be the last day for me as an India cricketer in all formats," Ashwin said at the end of the drawn third Test here in a joint press conference with captain Rohit Sharma during which he declined to take any questions and left after making the announcement.

The series is still alive with two more Tests to go in Melbourne and Sydney as the two teams are tied 1-1 after logging one win each.

Ashwin who would be headed back to India on Thursday, was seen having an

emotional conversation with star batter Virat Kohli in the dressing room hours before the announcement, sending social media into a frenzy. Kohli had his arm around the senior bowler's shoulder and Ashwin was seen wiping his eyes before breaking into a chuckle.

Ashwin played the day-night Test in Adelaide and picked up one wicket. He not being a sure starter in the playing eleven over the course of the three Tests prompted him to think about his future in the team and eventually call time on a remarkable career.

Ashwin was not just the master of his craft, he was also considered one of the brightest minds in world cricket. The Chennai-based



player, who holds an engineering degree, usually does well to hide his emotions but sitting alongside longtime teammate Rohit, Ashwin left the stage for the fear of getting overawed by the occasion.

"I do feel there is a bit of punch left in me as a cricketer but I would like to showcase that in club level cricket. I have had a lot of fun. I must have created a lot of memories alongside Rohit and several of my other teammates," he said.

"I have lost some of them over the last few years (in the team). We are the last bunch of OG's left in the dressing room. I would be marking this as my date of having played at this level," he said,

referring to the likes of the currently out-of-favour Ajinkya Rahane and Cheteshwar Pujara. Ashwin played 116 ODIs for India, claiming 156 wickets, while his 65 T20 International outings yielded 72 scalps. He expressed his gratitude towards the BCCI and other senior teammates for his career which began in 2010 in the one-day format before he made his Test debut a year later.

"A lot of people to thank but I would be failing in my duties if I did not thank BCCI and fellow teammates. I want to name a few of them. Most importantly Rohit, Virat, Ajinkya, Pujara who have taken those hundred catches around the bat to give me

those wickets I managed to get over the years.

"Big thank you to the Australian cricket team, I have enjoyed playing against them." Ashwin also thanked the media for its support over the years. "It is an emotional moment. Please pardon me for that (not taking questions). Thanks for writing good things about me and some nasty things on occasions," said Ashwin on a lighter note as he left the room to a standing ovation.

His retirement brought back memories of the 2014 series when the then captain Mahendra Singh Dhoni had quit Tests after conceding an unassailable lead to the home side.

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NDMC approves key proposals aimed at improving urban infrastructure

SAUMYA SHUKLA ■ NEW DELHI

The New Delhi Municipal Council (NDMC) on Wednesday approved several key proposals aimed at improving urban infrastructure and enhancing services for citizens including the establishment of the Urban Art & Culture Forum and the introduction of an Intelligent Integrated Parking System during the Council Meeting. The Council, presided over by New Delhi BJP MP Bansuri Swaraj, with NDMC Chairperson Keshav Chandra and Vice-Chairperson Kuljeet Singh Chahal, approved the formation of the Urban Art & Culture Forum. This body will advise on promoting culture, performing arts, and visual arts across the NDMC area, enhancing public spaces with art installations, and fostering community participation. "The initiative aligns with Prime Minister Modi's emphasis on preserving India's cultural heritage, combining Vikas Bhi, Virasat Bhi —development with legacy," Chahal said. In tandem, the Council also approved the launch of an Intelligent Integrated Parking System, designed to streamline parking management across 152 locations in New Delhi. This initiative sup-



ports Prime Minister Modi's Smart India vision by reducing urban congestion and improving mobility through high-tech solutions. "The Council accorded the approval for inviting RFP for selection of Agency to Design, Develop, Supply, Implement, Operate and Maintain "Intelligent Integrated Parking System" including revision of parking charges in NDMC area. The RFP will be issued for Single clusters having 152 parking sites/ locations for a term of 10 years including 3 months of implementation period," a statement by the council said. It added that the Agency shall run the parking lots in market areas at least from 8:00 hours to 24:00 hours, for non-market areas from 8:00

Elderly couple dies as fire breaks out at their house in southwest Delhi

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

An elderly couple died after a fire broke out at their home in southwest Delhi's Safdarjung Enclave on Wednesday morning. According to the police on Thursday, the deceased have been identified as 80 year old Govind Ram Nagpal and his 78 year old wife Sheela Nagpal. Govind was a retired employee of Kelvinator and his wife was a retired employee of Vidhya Niketan. According to a Delhi Fire Services (DFS) official, they received a call regarding a fire at 6:02 am from Safdarjung Enclave. The fire was on the second floor of a house. "Three fire tenders were rushed to the site. The fire was in domestic articles and two casualties were found," DFS chief Atul Garg said. Garg said that the matter was immediately informed to the police and the couple was transferred to a nearby hospital, where doctors pronounced them dead. Vinay Kumar, station officer, DFS, said, "When we entered the house, we found the people in separate rooms. I was told that Sheela Nagpal was bedridden and she could not move out of her room. Her husband was also trapped in another room." "Within 10 minutes, the fire



was brought under control but there was a lot of smoke inside due to which the duo choked to death, apparently," he added. A police officer said both husband and wife were retired. He said their son Vineet Nagpal resides in the US and their daughter lives in Paschim Vihar. The officer said crime and Forensic Science Laboratory teams were called in and legal action has been initiated under BNSS section 194 (police to enquire and report on suicide). The bodies have been shifted to a mortuary for post-mortem examination, the officer said. A neighbour said she spotted

smoke coming out of the house while she was out for her morning walk. "I immediately informed the police. Aunty was unwell and she could not walk. The couple mostly stayed indoors," she said. The police said the residents of the ground floor and the first floor exited the house after spotting the fire on the second floor. The officer said the cause of the fire is suspected to be an electrical short-circuit in the kitchen but a probe was underway. "The couple lived alone in the house but had not registered themselves in the Delhi Police Senior Citizen cell," the officer added.

Kejriwal led AAP leaders stage massive protest near BJP headquarters



STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Scores of AAP leaders and party workers, led by its convener Arvind Kejriwal, on Wednesday staged a massive protest near the BJP headquarters over Home Minister Amit Shah's alleged remarks on Dr B R Ambedkar, describing it as an insult to the architect of the country's Constitution. During the sit-in protest, Kejriwal condemned Shah's alleged remarks, claiming it has hurt the sentiments of crores of people across the nation. Sharpening his attack, he claimed that it was not just

an insult of Dr Ambedkar, but every underprivileged citizen and believer in equality. "Dr Ambedkar is the voice of the oppressed and the cornerstone of India's democracy," he said and further slammed the BJP for allegedly attacking the values that the architect of Constitution stood for. The AAP has sought an apology from Shah and also demanded strict action against the BJP leader. Kejriwal, attacking the BJP, claimed that the saffron party has made its position clear that it is against Ambedkar and the Constitution he gave to the country.

Kejriwal promises free medical treatment for senior citizens, post...

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The Sanjeevani Scheme came days after Kejriwal announced the launch of the Mukhya Mantri Mahila Samman Yojna to give monthly assistance of Rs 1,000 to women in the city and promised to raise it to Rs 2,100 after the elections. It is being seen as counter to the Bharatiya Janata Party-led Centre's Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PM-JAY), which provides financial protection for secondary and tertiary healthcare to economically vulnerable families. Kejriwal's announcement comes after the face-off between the opposition BJP and the ruling AAP over non-implementation of the Centre's Ayushman Bharat-Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PMJAY). Seven BJP MPs moved the Delhi High Court seeking directions to the Delhi government to implement

the scheme. It seems apart from other freebies, these two freebies announced by the AAP to counter the anti incumbency factor which has been dented by the corruption charges. "Today, I am announcing Sanjeevani Yojana for the senior citizens. In this, people above the age of 60 years will get free healthcare," Kejriwal said. We will introduce this scheme after Delhi Assembly elections, he added. "There will be no upper limit on the cost of treatment. Registration for this will start in a day or two... AAP workers will come to your home for registration. They will give you a card, keep it safe. It is now our duty to take care of you. You people have worked hard to take the country forward," the former Delhi Chief Minister said. Named Sanjeevani, the new scheme will focus on health

and financial assistance for elderly people in the national capital. The only eligibility criteria announced so far is the age limit. The AAP has released the names of its candidates for all 70 seats in the Delhi Assembly. AAP is seeking a third consecutive full term in Delhi, following its landslide victory in 2020, where it won 62 out of 70 seats. The upcoming elections will serve as a test of the party's governance model. The AAP and its leaders have ramped up their outreach to women and elderly voters ahead of the February 2025 Assembly elections. The term of the current assembly in Delhi expires on February 23, 2025. Meanwhile, Delhi BJP and Congress on Wednesday lashed out at the Kejriwal's announcement calling him 'a merchant of false dreams' and stated that the scheme

is an 'election scheme' ahead of the state assembly polls. Delhi BJP President Virendra Sachdeva stated that AAP chief's announcement today regarding free treatment for those above 60 years of age is yet another election gimmick. "Before the last Lok Sabha elections and again last week, Kejriwal announced a women samman allowance. During election campaigns, he even collected forms from women and announced this scheme in the 2024-25 budget. However, till now, not a single woman has received a penny," he said. Further, Delhi Congress President Devender Yadav said that Kejriwal should first improve the pathetic condition of Government hospitals and the handful of Mohalla Clinics before making such announcements, which are mere election stunts with no intention to fulfil them.

Kailash Mansarovar Yatra to restart?...

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Both SRs underlined the importance of maintaining peace and tranquillity in the border areas to promote overall development of the India-China bilateral relationship. They emphasised the need to ensure peaceful conditions on the ground so that issues on the border do not hold back the normal development of bilateral relations.

Drawing on the learnings from the events of 2020, they discussed various measures to maintain peace and tranquillity on the border and advance effective border management. They decided to use, coordinate and guide the relevant diplomatic and military mechanisms towards this purpose. The SRs exchanged views on bilateral, regional and global issues of mutual interest. They provided positive directions for cross-border

cooperation and exchanges, including resumption of the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra, data sharing on trans-border rivers and border trade. They agreed on the salience of stable, predictable and amicable India-China relations for regional and global peace and prosperity. Doval called on Vice President Han Zheng, and invited Wang Yi to visit India at a mutually convenient date to hold the next round of SR meeting.

13 dead, in ferry-Navy speed boat...

From page 1

"An Indian Navy speedboat first encircled my boat, then zoomed off, and returned again at high speed and rammed into 'Neelkamal'. All the tourists were wearing life-jackets which are now compulsory. More than a dozen other boats are engaged in the rescue operations," Padte said.

NCR's noxious numbers: AQI...

From page 1

Of the 36 monitoring stations in the city, 32 recorded AQI in the 'severe plus' category, while the readings surpassing 480 at several locations, creating an extremely hazardous environment for residents. The remaining stations reported 'severe' air quality. The worst affected areas were Jahangirpuri (466), Anand Vihar (465) and Bawana (465). Severe AQI levels were also observed in key areas including Rohini (462), Lajpat Nagar (461), Ashok Vihar (456), and Punjabi Bagh (452), all of which reported readings over 400. The pollution levels have spiked in the last few days due to low wind speeds which are not enough to clear the pollutants and low temperatures, with the minimum temperature remaining below 5 degrees Celsius for the past two days. The last time the AQI exceeded this level was on November 19, when it reached 460. The air quality is expected to remain in the severe range on Thursday. However, the meteorological department has issued

a yellow alert for moderate to dense fog over the next three days. This spike in pollution is due to a significant drop in wind speed, which allowed local pollutants to concentrate in the atmosphere, trapping pollutants close to the ground. The PM2.5 concentration is currently 59.1 times the World Health Organization (WHO) annual PM2.5 guideline value as top experts warn that India's toxic air will have a bigger impact on public health than the Covid-19 pandemic. According to IQAir, a Swiss air quality index, pollution in parts of Delhi surpassed the 550 mark on Wednesday morning, far exceeding even the "hazardous" level of 300. At 12.30 pm, IQAir real time data showed AQI stood at 890 at Vivek Vihar, 874 at Anand Vihar, 786 at ITO, 746 at Sonia Vihar, 707 at Burari Crossing, 702 at Punjabi Bagh, 680 at Rohini and 503 at DTU. As visibility across the region was significantly reduced, low-visibility procedures were implemented at Delhi airport after

visibility dropped to 50 meters at 6.30 am. Safdarjung airport recorded lowest visibility 50m during 6.30 am hours to 7 am, which improved thereafter becoming 100m at 7.30 am. Palam airport recorded lowest visibility 300 m between 6 am to 9.30 am which improved thereafter becoming 400m at 10 am. The maximum temperature settled 23 degrees Celsius, slightly above the season's average, but the evening felt colder than expected. The minimum temperature earlier in the day was recorded at 7.6 degrees Celsius, a notch below the season's normal. Neighbouring regions in NCR also faced poor air quality, with AQI levels in Haryana's Faridabad at 263, Gurugram at 392 and Uttar Pradesh's Ghaziabad at 390, Greater Noida at 330, and Noida at 364. A cold wave has hit India, leaving several states grappling with extreme cold conditions as temperatures drop to freezing levels. Among the worst-affected regions are Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Rajasthan, Punjab, Telangana, Odisha and Haryana.

Had fun but it's time, says R Ashwin...

From page 1

Ashwin's decision may seem like a bolt from the blue but Rohit revealed that he had a chat with the champion spinner on the sidelines of the Perth Test. "...This was on his mind and there are obviously a lot of things that went behind it, I am pretty sure Ash will be able to answer that but he understands what the team is thinking," Rohit said. "When I arrived in Perth, this was a chat we had and I somehow convinced him to stay for that pink ball Test match and then after that it just happened so that he felt that if I am not needed right now in the series, I am better off saying goodbye to the

game," the India captain added. India played Washington Sundar ahead of Ashwin in Perth before the veteran returned for the pink ball Test. Ravindra Jadeja played in the Brisbane Test. "It's important when a player like him who has had so many moments with the Indian team and he has been a truly big match winner for us, he is allowed to make those decisions on his own and if it was now, so be it," added Rohit. The BCCI was also quick to congratulate Ashwin on a special career. "A name synonymous with mastery, wizardry, brilliance, and innovation," said the BCCI in its tribute post on X.

Katra locals resume protest against...

From page 1

Carrying placards and wearing black armbands, protestors raised slogans against the shrine board and the project. "The Sangharsh Samiti is fighting for our rights as the board is out to snatch the bread and butter of over 60,000 families. Everyone - hoteliers, shopkeepers, pony operators, labourers and transporters - has come out to the streets against the ropeway project. We want the project to be shelved," Bhupinder Singh Jamwal, president of the Vaishno Devi Trek Mazdoor Union, told reporters. Last month, the Shri Mata

Vaishno Devi Shrine Board decided to install the ropeway to facilitate access to the temple for senior citizens, children and others who find it difficult to climb the 13-km-long track to the cave shrine. The leaders of the group announced that five of its members would observe a hunger strike to press for a written assurance from the lieutenant governor or the home minister that the ropeway project would be scrapped. Former minister Jugal Kishore Sharma, who also joined the rally, said the government had failed to fulfill its commitment to resolve the issue by December 15.

Outgoing US Govt relaxes H-1B visas rules

From page 1

"The H-1B programme was created by Congress in 1990, and there's no question it needed to be modernised to support our nation's growing economy," said USCIS Director Ur M. Jaddou. The changes made in the final rule will ensure that US employers can hire highly skilled workers they need to grow and innovate while enhancing the integrity of the programme, he said. The DHS said the rule also strengthens the programme's integrity by codifying USCIS' authority to conduct

inspections and impose penalties for failure to comply; requiring that the employer must establish that it has a bona fide position in a speciality occupation available for the worker as of the requested start date. It clarifies that the Labor Condition Application must support and properly correspond with the H-1B petition; and requires that the petitioner have a legal presence and be subject to legal processes in the courts of the United States. In order to implement the rule, a new edition of Form I-

129, Petition for a Nonimmigrant Worker, will be required for all petitions beginning January 17, 2025, which is the rule's effective date. The H-1B visa annual cap is set at 85,000. And for this financial year, the USCIS has announced that they have reached the annual quota. Of these 85,000 H-1B visas, 65,000 are for regular cap and the rest of 20,000 are for the US advanced degree or master's degree. But many non-profits are exempt from that cap. H-1B visa holders are primarily from India. In 2023,

Indians made up 72.3% of the 386,000 H-1B visas issued. US companies depend on H-1B visas to hire hundreds of thousands of employees each year from countries like India and China. H-1B visa applications often exceed the annual cap, and visas are awarded through a lottery system. This means many eligible applicants are denied simply due to chance. However, cap-exempt organisations, such as certain non-profits and government research institutions, can apply for H-1B visas year-round without being limited by the annual cap.

Congress, BJP spar over Ambedkar...

From page 1

"They are clearly stung and stunned by the facts he presented, which is why they are now indulging in theatrics. Sadly, for them, people know the truth," Modi said in a series of posts on social media. When it comes to Ambedkar, his government's respect and reverence are absolute, the PM asserted. Shah's Cabinet colleagues,

including Rajnath Singh, Ashwini Vaishnav and Kiren Rijiju, rallied to his defence and launched a fresh onslaught on the main opposition party for its alleged insults of the architect of the Constitution. He said his government has worked tirelessly to fulfil Ambedkar's vision over the last decade. For decades, Modi said, there was a pending issue involving land for "Chaitya

Bhoomi", where Ambedkar was cremated. "Not only did our Government resolve the issue, I have gone to pray there as well," he added. Kharge said if Prime Minister Narendra Modi had any respect for Ambedkar, he should sack the home minister today itself in case he does not quit on his own. West Bengal Chief Minister Banerjee alleged that Shah's remarks displayed BJP's "casteist and anti-Dalit

mindset". Accusing Shah of disrespecting the architect of the Constitution, Kharge said the home minister should apologise to the nation for the "insult" he caused to Ambedkar during his speech in Rajya Sabha on Tuesday. He also warned that if Shah is not removed from the Cabinet, people will take to the street. They are ready to give up their lives for Babasaheb, he said. Leader of Opposition in the

Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi said the country will not tolerate Babasaheb Ambedkar's insult and demanded that Home Minister Amit Shah should apologise for his remarks in the Rajya Sabha. Replying to a debate in Rajya Sabha on 75 years of the Constitution, Home Minister Shah Tuesday slammed the Congress for making it a "fashion" to take Ambedkar's name for "voter bank politics", triggering

criticism by the Congress and other opposition parties. He said that during the two-day debate on the Constitution, BJP MPs tried to show the Congress and the Gandhi-Nehru family in bad light. Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Stalin said, "Only those who commit more sins should be concerned about 'punya' (Good deeds). Those who are concerned about the country, its people and the protection of

the Constitution will only utter the name of Babasaheb Dr Ambedkar and they will have to utter only his name." Shiv Sena (UBT) chief Uddhav Thackeray claimed Amit Shah's remarks on Ambedkar show the BJP's "arrogance" and demanded that the PM take action against him. Addressing a Press conference in Mumbai, the former CM accused the BJP of insulting icons and

revered figures of Maharashtra, including Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj and Dr Ambedkar. Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) president Mayawati accused the BJP and Congress of exploiting BR Ambedkar's name for political gains while failing to genuinely respect or honour his contributions. Mayawati alleged that these parties have not done enough for Dalits and other marginalised communities.

Guru Ghasidas' preachings of harmony still relevant: CM

STAFF REPORTER ■ KORBA

Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Vishnu Deo Sai said on Wednesday that Guru Ghasidas' inspiring message 'Mankhe Mankhe Ek Saman' (All humans are equal) spread peace, unity and harmony in the country.

Sai addressed events held to commemorate the 268th birth anniversary of Guru Ghasidas in Korba and Mungeli districts.

Deputy Chief Minister Arun Sao, Food Minister Dayaldas Baghel and Union Minister of State for Housing and Urban Affairs Tokhan Sahu were



present. Sai said Guru Ghasidas taught the society the lesson of equality and humanity.

"He laid the foundation stone of social and spiritual awakening in Chhattisgarh."

He said his government was working towards welfare and development of all sections of society in accordance with Ghasidas' ideals.

On this occasion, he inaugurated a community building in Korba completed at a cost of Rs 90 lakh and announced the allotment of land to the Satnami community at a concessional rate.

Cong takes out protest march to Raj Bhawan

STAFF REPORTER ■ RAIPUR

The Congress in Chhattisgarh on Wednesday staged a protest march on multiple issues and handed over a memorandum to Governor Ramen Deka.

The protest march was taken out from Ambedkar Chowk. The issues raised by the party include continuing violence in Manipur, the indictment of business tycoon Gautam Adani in the United States and firing on tribal

children in Bastar region in Chhattisgarh.

Speaking on the firing on children, a Congress leader said the state government tried to hide the incident keeping in view the visit of Union Home Minister Amit Shah.

"We are consistently demanding that in the process of bringing peace, no innocent should be killed in Bastar but the state government has failed to do so," he said. According to the Congress, three to four innocent tribals died in the firing.



Suvarnaprashan camp immunises 2,702 children



STAFF REPORTER ■ RAIPUR

The Narayan Prasad Awasthi Government Ayurvedic College in Raipur administered an immunity booster called Suvarnaprashan to a total of 2,702 children under the age of 16 on Wednesday.

This takes to 22,390 the number of children who received the medicine this year.

The medicine is highly beneficial for the overall growth of children, and it also protects them from respiratory diseases and boosts their concentration and memory.

Under the National Ayush Mission, the college holds these camps on every Pushya Nakshatra date.

Along with this, the college distributed Bal Raksha kits made of five medicines to 350 children to prevent various diseases and further boost their immunity.

A total of 432 parents received Nature tests under the 'Desh Ka Prakriti Pariksha' Abhiyan.

Annual conference on obesity, diabetes held at AIIMS-R

STAFF REPORTER ■ RAIPUR

The Chhattisgarh Obesity Diabetes and Endocrine Society (CODE) in association with the Department of Endocrinology and Metabolism at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences - Raipur (AIIMS-R) organized an annual conference on obesity and diabetes.

A communique from AIIMS-R said on Wednesday that the event hosted prominent endocrinologists from all over India as guest faculties. It was attended by endocrinologists, physicians, specialists in other fields of medicine and general practitioners from all over Chhattisgarh and even neighbouring states.



The conference included discussions on endocrine-related disorders, management of diabetes, diabetes in pregnancy, disorders of thyroid function tests, osteoporosis, hyperparathyroidism, diabetes in pregnancy, obesity, fatty liver disease, male and female reproductive

disorders related to hormonal imbalances.

Challenging cases and recent research in above fields were presented and discussed at the conference. The event also hosted a quiz contest for postgraduate medical students on the subject of diabetes endocrinology and metabolism.

Chandigarh varsity launches CUCET for admissions

STAFF REPORTER ■ RAIPUR

Chandigarh University on Wednesday offered admission-cum-scholarship entrance examination for financially deprived students from Chhattisgarh.

Addressing a press conference at Raipur's Shankar Nagar, Prof (Dr) R.S. Bawa of the university invited students from the state to pursue quality education from their Mohali and Lucknow campuses of Chandigarh University.

Chandigarh University's Common Entrance Test CUCET-2025 opens the door for bright students who can't afford to bear the financial burden for higher education, he said.

Students can even earn 100 percent scholarship. For details, the students can contact the regional office of the university in Raipur, he said.

The university was ranked India's number 1 private



university in the QS Asia University Rankings 2025 and was among India's top 20 universities in the NIRF Rankings 2024, Dr Bawa said.

Talking about campus placements, Dr Bawa said owing to academic excellence the university has become the most sought destination for leading national and international brands and MNCs.

Out of 434 students from Chhattisgarh who have taken admission in different academic streams at Chandigarh University, 98 have secured job offers from leading brands, he said.

IDFC FIRST Bank Limited
(Formerly known as IDFC Bank Ltd.) | CIN : L65110TN2014PLC097792
Registered Office: - KRM Towers, 7th Floor, Harrington Road, Chetpet, Chennai- 600031. Tel : +91 44 4564 4000 | Fax: +91 44 4564 4022

APPENDIX- IV-A [See proviso to rule 8 (6) & 9 (1)] SALE NOTICE FOR SALE OF IMMOVABLE PROPERTIES

E-Auction Sale Notice for Sale of Immovable Assets under the Securitisation and Reconstruction of Financial Assets and Enforcement of Security Interest Act, 2002 read with proviso to Rule 8 (6) & 9 (1) of the Security Interest (Enforcement) Rules, 2002

Notice is hereby given to the public in general and in particular to the Borrower (s), Co-Borrower (s) and Guarantor (s) as per column (iii) that the below described immovable properties as per column (iv) mortgaged/charged to the Secured Creditor, the possession of which has been taken by the Authorised Officer of Formerly known as IDFC Bank Ltd, will be sold on "As is where is", "As is what is", and "Whatever there is" as described hereunder, for the recovery of amount due to IDFC FIRST Bank Limited (Formerly known as IDFC Bank Ltd) from Borrower (s) and Co-Borrower (s) as per column (i).

For detailed terms and conditions of the sale, please refer to the link provided on IDFC FIRST Bank website i.e. www.idfcfirstbank.com.

(i) S. NO	(ii) Demand Notice Date and Amount	(iii) AGREEMENT ID	(iv) Name Borrower (s) and Co-Borrower (s)	(v) Reserve Price Amount	(vi) EMD Amount	(vii) Date and Time of Auction	(viii) Date and Time of EMD Auction	(ix) Date and time of Inspection	(x) Name and Mobile No of Authorized officer
1	INR 17825238.53/- Demand Notice dated: 11-Feb-2020	13633561 & 13914676	Xtreme Agro Farms Pvt Ltd, Kriishi Capital Pvt Ltd, Krish Trade Link Pvt Ltd, Mr. Kunal Jaiswal & Mr. Vijay Kumar Jaiswal	INR 6449625.00/-	INR 644962.50/-	08-Jan-2025 11.00 AM to 1.00 PM	07-Jan-2025 10.00 AM to 5.00 PM	03-Jan-2025 10:00 AM to 4:00 PM	Name- Vinay Soni Contact Number- 8319378592 Name- Sandesh Jain Contact Number- 8839140796
				INR 7450586.55/-	INR 745058.66/-				

Disclaimer: Please note that the said notice is issued for sale of immovable property only and IDFC FIRST Bank Limited has no right to sale of the movable assets, if any, present at the immovable property.

Date: 19.12.2024

Authorized Officer
IDFC FIRST Bank Limited
(Formerly known as IDFC Bank Ltd)

HDFC BANK
We understand your world
Retail Portfolio Management at HDFC Bank Ltd, 1st Floor, I-Think Techno Campus, Kanjurmarg (East), Mumbai - 400042.

Registered Office: HDFC Bank House, Senapati Bapat Marg, Lower Parel (West), Mumbai - 400 013 and having one of its office at Kanjurmarg (East), Mumbai - 400042.

SALE INTIMATION AND NOTICE FOR SALE OF SECURITIES PLEDGED TO HDFC BANK LTD.

The below mentioned Borrowers of HDFC Bank Ltd. (the "Bank") are hereby notified regarding the sale of securities pledged to the Bank, for availing credit facilities in the nature of Loans/Overdraft Against Securities.

Due to persistent default by the Borrowers in making repayment of the outstanding dues as per agreed loans / facilities terms, the below loan accounts are classified as NPA (Non-Performing Asset). The Bank has issued loan recall notice to these Borrowers, including the final sale notice on the below-mentioned date whereby, Bank had invoked the pledge and provided 7 days' time to the Borrower to repay the entire outstanding dues in the below accounts, failing which, Bank would be at liberty to sell the pledged securities without issuing further notice in this regard.

The Borrowers have neglected and failed to make due repayments, therefore, Bank in exercise of its rights under the loan agreement as a pledgee has decided to sell / dispose off the Securities on or after 26th December, 2024 for recovering the dues owed by the Borrowers to the Bank. The Borrowers are hereby notified to treat this as a notice of sale in compliance of section 176 of the Indian Contract Act, 1872. The Borrowers are, also, notified that, if at any time, the value of the pledged securities falls further due to volatility in the stock market to create further deficiency in the margin requirement then Bank shall at its discretion sell the pledged security within one (1) calendar day, without any further notice in this regard. The Borrower(s) shall remain liable to the Bank for repayment of any remaining outstanding amount, post adjustment of the proceeds from sale of pledged securities.

Sr. No.	Loan Account Number	Borrower's Name	Outstanding Amount as on 16 th Dec., 2024 (In Indian Rupees)	Date of Sale Notice
1	XXXX0522	TIKENDRA KUMAR SAHU	67,522.00	18-Dec-24
2	XXXX4625	LINGA RAJU SENAPATI	1,35,120.83	18-Dec-24

Date : 19.12.2024
Place : Chhattisgarh

sd/-
HDFC BANK LTD.

AU SMALL FINANCE BANK LIMITED (A Scheduled Commercial Bank)
Regd. Office: 19-A, Dhuleshwar Garden, Ajmer Road, Jaipur - 302001 (CIN:L36911RJ1996PLC011381)

APPENDIX IV [SEE RULE 8(I)] POSSESSION NOTICE

Whereas, the undersigned being the Authorized Officer of the AU Small Finance Bank Limited (A Scheduled Commercial Bank) under the "Securitization and Reconstruction of Financial Assets and Enforcement of Security Interest Act, 2002 (54 of 2002)" and in exercise of powers conferred under section 13 (12) read with rule 3 of the Security Interest (Enforcement) Rules, 2002 issued demand notice on the date as mentioned below calling upon the borrowers to repay the amount mentioned in the said notice within 60 days from the date of receipt of the said notice as per the details given in below table:-

Name of Borrower/Co-Borrower/Mortgagor/Guarantor/Loan A/C No.	13(2) Notice Date & Amount	Description of Mortgaged Property	Date of Possession Taken
(Loan A/C No.) L9001070426999081, Gaffar Khan (Borrower), Sattar Khan (Co-Borrower)	14-Aug-24 ₹ 3,11,427/- Rs. Three Lac Eleven Thousand Four Hundred Twenty-Seven Only as on 13-Aug-24	All That Part And Parcel Of Residential/Commercial Property Land / Building / Structure And Fixtures Property Situated At- Nagar Palika Ward No 54 Phno 19/23 Khasra No 183/4 Dakshin Ward Rnm Durg, Dist- Durg, Chhattisgarh. Admeasuring 810 Sqft	13-Dec-24
(Loan A/C No.) L9001060138025329, Shashi Kumar Banjare (Borrower), Bedkumar Banjare (Co-Borrower), Smt. Pushpanjali Banjare (Co-Borrower)	17-Aug-24 ₹ 16,33,217/- Rs. Sixteen Lac Thirty-Three Thousand Two Hundred Seventeen Only as on 13-Aug-24	All That Part And Parcel Of Residential/Commercial Property Land / Building / Structure And Fixtures Property Situated At- Part Of Khasra No 2259-4, Near- Govt School, Vill- Kawardha, Th- Pandariya, Dist- Kabeerdham, CG Admeasuring 530 Sqmtr	17-Dec-24

The borrower having failed to repay the amount, therefore notice is hereby given to the borrower and the public in general that the undersigned has taken possession of the property described herein above mentioned table in exercise of powers conferred on him/her under section 13(4) of the said [Act 2002] read with Rule 8 of the said rule on the date mentioned in the above table.

"The borrower's attention is invited to provisions of sub section (8) of section 13 of the Act, in respect of time available, to redeem the secured assets."

The borrower in particular and the public in general is hereby cautioned not to deal with the property and any dealings with the property will be subject to the charge of the AU Small Finance Bank Limited (A Scheduled Commercial Bank) for the amount and interest thereon mentioned in the above table.

Date : 18/12/2024
Place : Chattisgarh

sd/-
Authorized Officer AU Small Finance Bank Limited

GOVERNMENT OF CHHATTISGARH, WATER RESOURCES DEPARTMENT
OFFICE OF THE EXECUTIVE ENGINEER WATER RESOURCES DIVISION, JASHPUR (C.G.)

PROCUREMENT TENDER NOTICE
eProcurement Portal: <https://eproc.cgstate.gov.in>
(1st CALL)

Online Tenders are invited for the following works up to 03.01.2025 (17.30 hours IST).

System Tender No./NIT No./ Dated	Name of Work	Probable Amount of Contract
STN. 162673 NIT NO. 04/SAC/2024-25 Date:-13.12.2024	CONSTRUCTION OF PREMBANDH (NAGAR-BAND) STOPDAM SCHEME.	Rs. 292.54 Lakh
STN. 162674 NIT NO. 05/SAC/2024-25 Date:-13.12.2024	CONSTRUCTION OF TUBA ANICUT SCHEME.	Rs. 257.50 Lakh
STN. 162675 NIT NO. 06/SAC/2024-25 Date:-13.12.2024	EARTH WORK IN FILLING OF RAIN CUTS AND UNDER SECTION OF D/S SLOPE OF EARTHEN DAM REPAIR OF DAMAGED CREST WALL AND FLOOR OF OGEE WIER AND CHUTE FALL OF WASTE WEIR OF TAMTA TANK SCHEME RECONSTRUCTION DAMAGED DRAINAGE CROSSING AT RD. 250 M. CONSTRUCTION OF V.R.B. AT RD. 450 & 4750 M. PROTECTION OF WORK OF CANAL SECTION EARTH WORK FOR RESECTIONING BANK RAISING EXCAVATION IN OF SLEEPED EARTH IN BED OF MAIN CANAL AND MINOR CANAL OF TAMTA TANK SCHEME.	Rs. 365.98 Lakh
STN. 162676 NIT NO. 07/SAC/2024-25 Date:-13.12.2024	RENOVATION AND DIVERSION SCHEME LINING WORK OF SARAIPANI	Rs. 459.02 Lakh
STN. 162677 NIT NO. 08/SAC/2024-25 Date:-13.12.2024	CONSTRUCTION OF BANGAON ANICUT SCHEME.	Rs. 508.25 Lakh
STN. 162678 NIT NO. 09/SAC/2024-25 Date:-13.12.2024	CONSTRUCTION OF BARO ANICUT SCHEME.	Rs. 685.25 Lakh

The details can be viewed and downloaded online directly from the Government of Chhattisgarh Integrated e-Procurement Portal (<https://eproc.cgstate.gov.in>) from Date 20.12.2024, at 17.31 Hours, (IST) onwards.

NOTE:- 1. All eligible/intrested contractors/bidders are mandated to get enrolled on the Integrated e- procurement portal (<https://eproc.cgstate.gov.in>) and get approval on specific vendor class from PWD under Centralized Contractor/Supplier Registration in order to download the tender documents and participate in the subsequent bidding process.

2. Probable Amount of Contract (P.A.C.) is as per S.O.R. 01.08.2010. (As Amendments 01.08.2022).

Executive Engineer
Water Resources Division, Jashpur (C.G.)
For, Chief Engineer, Hasdeo Ganga Basin
Ambikapur (C.G.)

G-242504626/6

GOVERNMENT OF CHHATTISGARH, WATER RESOURCES DEPARTMENT
OFFICE OF THE CHIEF ENGINEER MAHANADI PROJECT, RAIPUR (CHHATTISGARH)

e-PROCUREMENT TENDER NOTICE
eProcurement Portal: <https://eproc.cgstate.gov.in>
(First Call)

System Tender No. 162861/NIT No.: 01/SAC/24-25
Dated: 17.12.2024

Online Tenders are invited for the following work up to 07.01.2025 at 17.30 Hours.

Name of work- Renovation of Protection work of Launching Apron at Downstream of Samoda Barrage from R.D. 0 m to 115.50 m and 289.50 m to 720.00 m in Block Arang, District Raipur.

Probable Amount of Contract: **Rs. 290.80 Lakhs**
(As per S.O.R dated 01.08.2010 and amended upto dated 22.08.2022).

The details can be viewed and downloaded online directly from the Government of Chhattisgarh Integrated e-Procurement Portal (<https://eproc.cgstate.gov.in>) from Date 24.12.2024, at 17.31 Hours, (IST) onwards.

NOTE All eligible/intrested contractors/bidders are mandated to get enrolled on the Integrated e- procurement portal (<https://eproc.cgstate.gov.in>) and get approval on specific vendor class from PWD under Centralized Contractor/Supplier Registration in order to download the tender documents and participate in the subsequent bidding process.

Executive Engineer
M.R.P. Phase II Work Division, Raipur
For, Chief Engineer, Mahanadi Project
Raipur (C.G.)

G-242504659/5

OFFICE OF THE SUPERINTENDING ENGINEER PUBLIC WORKS DEPARTMENT, CIRCLE NO-1 RAIPUR (C.G.)

Tender Notice
(1st Call)

Contractors, Registered appropriate class in Unified Registration System [e-Registration] invited Online tenders for the following works:-

NIT No. System Tender No.	Name of Work	Probable amount of contract
1	2	3
192/162946	Road Widening With Paved Shoulder Work At 209 Gad Colony Kachna, Sub Division No-3, P.W.D Division No. 3, Raipur	Rs. 79.66 Lakh

Last date of tender Download Date up to 05.01.2025 Time 17:30 PM
Note: All eligible interested contrac Ptors are mandated to get enrolled on the e Procurement portal <https://eproc.cgstate.gov.in> in order to download the tender documents and participate in the subsequent bidding process.

Superintending Engineer
PW.D. Raipur Circle No-1
Raipur (C.G.)

G-242504662/4

Although every possible care and caution has been taken to avoid errors or omissions, this publication is being sold on the condition and understanding that information given in this publication is merely for reference and must not be taken as having authority of or binding in any way on the writers, editors, publishers, and printers and sellers who do not owe any responsibility for any damage or loss to any person, a purchaser of this publication or not for the result of any action taken on the basis of this work. All disputes are subject to the exclusive jurisdiction of competent court and forums in Delhi/New Delhi only. Readers are advised and sought to verify and seek appropriate advice to satisfy themselves about the veracity of any kind of advertisement before responding to any contents published in this newspaper. The printer, publisher, editor and any employee of the Pioneer Group's will not be held responsible for any kind of claim made by the advertisers of the products & services and shall not be made responsible for any kind of loss, consequences and further product-related damages on such advertisements.

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BJP, Congress name nominees for simultaneous poll panel

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The BJP is considering the names of its seasoned MPs Ravi Shankar Prasad and Nishikant Dubey as nominees for the parliamentary panel that will scrutinise simultaneous poll bills, while Priyanka Gandhi Vadra and Manish Tewari are set to be among the Congress representatives, sources said. Sukhdeo Bhagat and Randeep Surjewala are the Congress' other choices for the joint committee of Parliament. Kalyan Banerjee and Saket Gokhale of the Trinamool Congress, Shrikant Shinde of the Shiv Sena, Sanjay Jha of the JD(U), and T M Selvaganapathi and P Wilson of the DMK are expected to be part of the panel which may have 31 members - 21 from the Lok Sabha and 10 from the Rajya Sabha. Sources said Anurag Thakur and P P Chaudhary are also being considered as the probable BJP choices for the panel in which the saffron party and its allies will be in a majority due

to their numerical superiority in Parliament. The two 'One Nation One Election' (ONOE) bills, including one requiring an amendment in the Constitution, that lay down the mechanism to hold simultaneous elections were introduced in the Lok Sabha on Tuesday after a fiery debate. Opposition parties dubbed the draft laws -- a Constitution amendment bill and an ordinary bill -- as an attack on the federal structure, a charge rejected by the government. Speaking to reporters on the Parliament premises, Congress MP Priyanka Gandhi had termed the bills "anti-constitutional". "It is against the federalism of our nation. We are opposing the bill," she had said. The BJP and its allies such as the TDP, JD(U) and Shiv Sena have stoutly defended the bills, saying frequent elections are an obstruction to development programmes and simultaneous polls will boost them by cutting down on election expenditure.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with NCP (SP) chief Sharad Pawar and farmers during a meeting in Delhi.

PTI

Sharad Pawar meets PM Modi

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

NCP-SP chief Sharad Pawar met Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday, weeks after the Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) was trounced in the assembly elections in Maharashtra by the BJP-led Mahayuti.

Pawar met the prime minister in his office in Parliament House along with two farmers from Phaltan in western Maharashtra and presented him with a box of pomegranates from their farm. Pawar had recently written to the prime minister, inviting him to inaugurate the 98th Marathi Sahitya Sammelan

scheduled to be held at Talkatora Stadium in the national capital in February. "I did not broach the topic of Sahitya Sammelan," Pawar said after the meeting with the prime minister. In a social media post, the Prime Minister's Office said Sharad Pawar, along with a group of farmers, met the

Prime Minister on Wednesday. It also posted pictures of the NCP-SP chief presenting pomegranates to PM Modi. In the Maharashtra assembly elections last month, the Congress-NCP (SP)-Shiv Sena (UBT) alliance -- MVA -- faced a humiliating defeat at the hands of BJP-Shiv Sena-NCP's Mahatuti alliance.

First Ganges river dolphin tagged in Assam



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Ganges River Dolphin, a national aquatic animal has been tagged for the first time in Assam, marking a historic achievement for wildlife conservation of the freshwater species in the state. The tagging was part of a collaborative project between the Union Ministry of Environment and the National CAMPA (Compensatory Afforestation Management and Planning Authority), with support from the Dehradun-based Wildlife Institute of India (WII). The project was executed in partnership with the Assam Forest Department and Aaranyak, a wildlife NGO based in Assam. Bhubender Yadav, the Union Cabinet Minister for Environment, Forest and Climate Change shared the information on his official X handle and stated, "Happy to share the news of the first-ever tagging of Ganges River Dolphin in Assam—a historic milestone for the species and India!" "This MoEFCC and National CAMPA-funded project, led by the Wildlife Institute of India (@wii_india) in collaboration with Assam Forest Dept and Aaranyak, will deepen our understanding of conserving our National Aquatic Animal," he further stated. The Ganges River Dolphin, once widely distributed across the major river systems of the

Indian subcontinent, has seen its population decline significantly in recent years. These tagging efforts have proven crucial in understanding the movement, behavior, and habitat preferences of these vulnerable species, aiding in their protection and management. "This data will be crucial for analysing the movement patterns of dolphins in response to changes in water flow within this carefully regulated river system. It will also offer insights into their habitat selection and behavioral preferences which is crucial for its conservation in the face of mounting environmental pressures," explained Syed Ainul Hussain, a WII scientist and an expert in aquatic wildlife. In January 2022, experts from the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), in collaboration with the Sindh Wildlife Department, successfully tagged three dolphins in Pakistan with satellite transmitters. This marked the first time such technology was applied to any river dolphin species in Asia. Satellite tagging of river dolphins was first pioneered in South America, where approximately 50 Amazon river dolphins have been successfully tagged. This initiative has provided essential data for the conservation of these dolphins and their habitats. Additionally, a Yangtze finless porpoise, the only species of freshwater porpoise, was tagged in China, marking a significant contribution to the study of freshwater species.

SJE ministry report slams allocation failures in tribal welfare

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

A parliamentary panel has taken exception to the Government's failure to allocate funds under the Development of Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) scheme during 2022-23 in states like Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Kerala, Uttar Pradesh, and Uttarakhand which have significant tribal populations. The parliamentary panel report on Social Justice and Empowerment for demand for grants by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs in its report tabled in Lok Sabha questioned how planned developmental projects could proceed effectively in the absence of financial resources, particularly in states with large tribal populations. It highlighted that the budgetary allocation for the PVTG scheme had been substantially reduced during the 2020-21 to 2022-23 period while no funds were released to states such as Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Bihar, Jharkhand, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Manipur, Uttar Pradesh, and Uttarakhand, despite the large tribal populations in these regions. The committee also flagged systemic inefficiencies, including delayed submission of utilization certificates by states and procedural bottlenecks that have hampered progress in previous years.

Panel meets to select next NHRC chairperson

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

A committee led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi met here on Wednesday to select the next chairperson of National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), sources said. They also said Congress president and party leader Rahul Gandhi attended the meeting as leaders of the opposition in Rajya Sabha and Lok Sabha respectively.

The post of NHRC chairperson has been vacant since Justice (retd) Arun Kumar Mishra completed his tenure on June 1. A former judge of the Supreme Court, Justice Mishra served as the eighth chairperson of the rights panel and was appointed to its top post in June 2021. According to the law governing NHRC, while the committee which selects the NHRC chief is headed by the prime minister, it has the Lok Sabha

Speaker, home minister, leader of opposition in Lok Sabha, leader of opposition in Rajya Sabha and deputy chairperson of Rajya Sabha as its members. Vijaya Bharathi Sayani, a member of the NHRC, became its acting chairperson after Justice Mishra demitted office. A former chief justice of India or a retired judge of the court is appointed as NHRC chairperson by the president on the recommendation of the selection committee.



The report also pointed out 74 sanitation workers out of 1,035 sanitation workers who died while cleaning the sewer and septic tanks are yet to be paid compensation.

PTI

Report highlights gaps in SC protection, welfare

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Amid growing demand by the Opposition for a national caste census, a Parliamentary panel has expressed concerns over the failure of several states to set up the necessary systems to effectively address atrocities against Scheduled Castes (SCs). The Standing Committee on Social Justice and Empowerment headed by Member of Parliament PC Mohan in its report tabled in Lok Sabha on Wednesday took exception to the persistent systemic gaps in the implementation of laws designed to protect SCs from violence and discrimination. The report pointed out that despite the availability of central government funds, many states have not effectively utilised these resources or established proper mechanisms to enforce the Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955, and the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989. The report also emphasised broader challenges in the implementation of welfare schemes under the Department of Social Justice and Empowerment. Significant allocations under key programmes like the Post-Matric Scholarship Scheme for SCs and the National Action Plan for Mechanised Sanitation Ecosystem (NAMASTE)

remained underutilised, with bottlenecks such as incomplete documentation, errors in Aadhaar seeding and delays in states releasing their share of funds. States like Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Bihar and Odisha were singled out for consistently lagging in fund utilisation and achieving implementation targets. Many eligible beneficiaries, it noted, remain unaware of their entitlements due to inadequate publicity. To address these issues, the panel recommended stricter monitoring, greater accountability, and more coordinated efforts between central and state governments. It also called for expanding outreach and awareness about welfare programs, especially in marginalized communities, and ensuring better implementation of schemes like SMILE (for transgender persons and beggars) and SHREYAS (for SC students in higher education). The report also pointed out 74 sanitation workers out of 1,035 sanitation workers who died while cleaning the sewer and septic tanks are yet to be paid compensation despite Supreme Court Judgement of 2014 which directed that the State Governments/UTs must ensure payment of compensation of Rs 10.00 lakh to the family of a victim in case of death of a worker while cleaning sewer/septic tank.

Jaishankar, Gideon Sa'ar talk amid ceasefire talks between Hamas-Israel

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

S Jaishankar, minister of external affairs, on Wednesday held a phone conversation with his Israeli counterpart Gideon Sa'ar amid signs of a possible ceasefire deal between Israel and Hamas in Gaza. There have been flurry of diplomatic engagements in the last few days for the proposed ceasefire and hostage release deal after months of deadlock in the negotiations between the two sides. Around 95 hostages are reportedly in the custody of Hamas in Gaza. "Pleased to speak to FM @gidonsaar of Israel today. Appreciate his briefing on the ongoing developments in the region. Also discussed our bilateral relations and efforts to strengthen them," Jaishankar said in a social media post.

"Look forward to meeting in person," he said. The two foreign ministers were understood to have also discussed the situation in Syria following the collapse of President Bashar Assad's regime 11 days back. Rebel forces overthrew Assad's authoritarian government on December eight after capturing several other prominent cities and towns. Assad fled to Russia after the rebel group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) took control of Damascus, marking the end of his family's 50-year rule. In its reaction, India pitched for a peaceful and inclusive Syrian-led political process in that country. "We underline the need for all parties to work towards preserving the unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria," the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said on December nine.

SC terms low pension for retired judges pitiable

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Wednesday lamented the meagre pension, ranging from Rs 10,000 to Rs 15,000, being given to some retired High Court judges and termed it "pitiable". The top court asked the authorities to have a "humane approach" instead of adopting a "legal approach". A bench of Justices BR Gavai and KV Viswanathan was dealing with a batch of pleas raising the issue of different pension being payable to retired High Court judges. One of the key reasons was that the High Court judges, who have been elevated from District judiciary, were covered under the New Pension Scheme. While those, who have been elevated to the High Court from the Bar, were the beneficiaries of the Old Pension Scheme leading to the mismatch in the pension payable to two sets of high court judges. "You cannot have a legal approach in every matter. Sometimes, you need to have a humane approach," observed the Bench. "It is pitiable," the bench said, noting some retired High



Court judges were getting pension between Rs 10,000 and Rs 15,000. Attorney General R Venkataramani mentioned the matter before the bench and requested for a hearing in District judiciary, were covered under the New Pension Scheme. While those, who have been elevated to the High Court from the Bar, were the beneficiaries of the Old Pension Scheme leading to the mismatch in the pension payable to two sets of high court judges. "You cannot have a legal approach in every matter. Sometimes, you need to have a humane approach," observed the Bench. "It is pitiable," the bench said, noting some retired High

computing the pensionary benefits of retired judges of High Courts based on whether they were elevated from the bar or the District judiciary. Pension benefits of a retired High Court judge, who was elevated from the District judiciary, should be computed based on his or her last drawn salary as a High Court judge, it had said. During the hearing on one of the pleas in the matter in November, the top court expressed "shock" that some retired high court judges were getting a meagre pension ranging between Rs 6,000 and Rs 15,000. The bench was hearing a petition filed by a retired High Court judge who said he was receiving a pension of Rs 15,000. The petitioner, who was elevated as a judge of the Allahabad High Court after serving as a judicial officer in the district court for 13 years, claimed the authorities had refused to consider his judicial service while computing the pension. "If there are retired High Court judges before us who are getting Rs 6,000 and Rs 15,000 as pension, it is shocking. How can that be?" the bench had remarked while hearing the plea.

Gagan Gill and Easterine Kire among 21 recipients of Sahitya Akademi Awards

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Hindi poet Gagan Gill and English writer Easterine Kire are among the 21 recipients of the annual Sahitya Akademi Awards, the organisation announced on Wednesday. Recommended by jury members in 21 languages, the awards recognise works in different categories including novels, short stories, poetry, essays and plays. Gill was selected for her book on poetry "Main Jab Tak Aai Bahar", Kire made it to the coveted list for her novel "Spirit Nights". The winning list includes eight poetry books, three novels, two short stories, three essays, three works of literary criticism, one play and one research. Sohan Kaul will receive the award for her Kashmiri novel "Psychiatric Ward", while Paul

Kaur has been selected for her Punjabi book on poetry "Sun Gunvanta Sun Budhivanta: Itihaasnama Punjab". Other recipients of award in poetry include K Jayakumar (Malayalam), Haobam Satyabati Devi (Manipuri), Dileep Jhaveri (Gujarati), Sameer Tanti (Assamese), Mukut Maniraj (Rajasthani) and Dipak Kumar Sharma (Sanskrit). Apart from Kire and Kaul, Aron Raja also made it to the winning list in the novels genre for his fiction book "Swrni Thakhai" in Bodo. Yuva Baral's "Chhichimira" (Nepali) and Hundraj Balwani's "Purzo" (Sindhi) were the picks in the short stories section. Mukesh Thali (Konkani), Mahendra Malangia (Maitihili) and Baishnab Charan Samai (Odia) will receive the award for their essays, while AR Venkatachalapathy (Tamil), recognised for his research and

Maheshwar Sorn for his play "Seched Sawnta Ren Andha Manmi" (Santali), KV Narayana, Sudhir Rasal and Penugonda Lakshminarayana will be awarded for their literary criticism in Kannada, Marathi and Telugu, respectively. The awards were approved by the executive Board of the Sahitya Akademi which met on Wednesday under the chairmanship of its president Madhav Kaushik, the academy of letters said in a statement. The awards relate to books first published during the five years immediately preceding the year of the award, i.e. Between 1 January 2018 and 31 December 2022. The authors and poets will receive a plaque, a shawl and an amount of Rs 1 lakh in an award ceremony on March eight, 2025. Bengali, Dogri and Urdu language awards will be declared later.

Farmers disrupt train services in Punjab over MSP guarantee and other demands



Farmers in Patiala block railway tracks on Wednesday as part of their state-wide 'Rail Roko' protest to press the Union government for various demands including a legal guarantee for MSP.

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ CHANDIGARH

Train services in Punjab were affected as farmers squatted on rail tracks on Wednesday as part of their three-hour 'Rail Roko' protest to press the Centre into accepting their various demands, including a legally binding minimum support price for crops.

The call for the 'rail roko' was given by the Samyukta Kisan Morcha (Non-Political) and Kisan Mazdoor Morcha. Kisan Mazdoor Morcha leader Sarwan Singh Pandher said

farmers have been squatted on rail tracks at many places from 12 noon to 3 pm. Protesting farmers blocked train routes at many places, including Moga, Faridkot, Kadian and Batala in Gurdaspur; Phillaur in Jalandhar; Tanda, Dasuya, Mahilpur in Hoshiarpur; Makhu, Talwandi Bhai in Ferozepur; Sahnewal in Ludhiana; Shambhu in Patiala; Mohali; Sunam and Lehra in Sangrur, Rampura Phul in Bathinda and Devdaspura in Amritsar. The Humsafar Express from Jammu to Sealdah, Dadar

Express from Amritsar to Mumbai and Shan-e-Punjab Express from New Delhi to Amritsar were halted at different platforms of the Ludhiana railway station. The Shatabdi Express coming from New Delhi for Amritsar was halted at Khanna railway station. A protesting farmer said, "We are demanding a legal guarantee for MSP from the government." Farmers under the banner of Samyukta Kisan Morcha (Non-Political) and Kisan Mazdoor Morcha have been camping at Shambhu and

Khanauri border points between Punjab and Haryana since February 13 after their march to Delhi was stopped by security forces. For the past three weeks, Punjab farmer leader Jagjit Singh Dallewal has been on a fast-unto-death at the Khanauri border point between Punjab and Haryana to press the Centre to accept the agitating farmers' demands, including a legal guarantee of MSP on crops. A "jatha" (group) of 101 farmers made three attempts to enter Delhi on foot on December 6, December 8 and

again on December 14. Haryana security personnel did not allow them to proceed. Besides a legal guarantee on MSP for crops, the farmers are demanding a debt waiver, pension for farmers and farm labourers, no hike in the electricity tariff, withdrawal of police cases and "justice" for the victims of the 2021 Lakhimpur Kheri violence. Reinstatement of the Land Acquisition Act, 2013, and compensation to the families of the farmers who died during a previous agitation in 2020-21 are also part of their demands.



UP Congress chief Ajay Rai, as he tried to leave the party office for the planned siege of the state Assembly over issues such as farmer distress, unemployment, inflation, privatisation, and law and order, in Lucknow, Wednesday, Dec. 18

Congress leaders across UP placed under house arrest ahead of Assembly protests

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ LUCKNOW

Several senior Congress leaders heading to Lucknow to gherao the Uttar Pradesh Assembly were stopped in various districts on Wednesday, many were also placed under house arrest. Congress workers who managed to reach the party office in Lucknow were detained by the police and later taken to Eco Garden. Leaders attempting to reach the Vidhan Bhavan faced similar action.

Ajay Rai, the state Congress president, who led the protest, was arrested and fainting briefly during a scuffle with the police. Congress legislature party leader Aradhana Mishra Mona staged a protest near Chaudhary Charan Singh's statue at the Vidhan Bhavan, raising issues related to law and order and farmers' grievances. She too was arrested after voicing her concerns during the Assembly session.

As Congress leaders began arriving in Lucknow on Wednesday morning, authorities intensified security measures. Barricades were set up at multiple locations, and Rapid Action Force (RAF) personnel were deployed outside the Congress state headquarters. Police started detaining leaders gathered near the party office. Ajay Rai criticised the security measures, alleging that the government was using sharp barricades designed to cause harm. "This government wants

to kill our workers. We will enter the Assembly despite all obstacles," he said. Police also issued notices to over two dozen senior Congress leaders, including outgoing state general secretary Anil Yadav and Dinesh Singh, warning them against creating disturbances. According to police notices, the ongoing Assembly session and the presence of VIPs in the area necessitated strict law-and-order measures. Prohibitory orders were enforced under Section 163 of the Indian Civil Defense Code, with officials warning of "strict action" in case of any disruption.

Suresh Khanna, the UP parliamentary affairs minister, defended the administration's actions, asserting that steps were taken to prevent any breach of peace. "The administration is fully prepared to maintain law and order," he said. Despite the crackdown, Ajay Rai vowed that the Congress would not be deterred. "Just as the Modi government built walls of thorns against farmers, the Yogi government has laid thorns on the path of Congress workers. But these barriers will not shake our resolve," he asserted.

Meanwhile, a Congress worker, Prabhat Pandey, died during the protest in Lucknow. He had come from Gorakhpur to participate in the demonstration. The reason of his death is not known. His body was taken to Civil Hospital, where Rai met family members of the deceased.

Manipur CM seeks Naga support for peace in state

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ RAJGARH

Manipur Chief Minister N Biren Singh on Wednesday sought support from Naga bodies in Senapati district to help restore peace in the violence-hit northeastern state and asserted that his government was working hard to bring unity among communities.

Speaking at a cultural event - Robvena Ni - in Punanamei village, Singh said Manipur has been facing "hardship in the last 19 months and the situation is improving gradually by God's grace".

"This event is based on the theme of getting together, reconciliation and forgiveness, which are needed in Manipur," Singh said.

"The role of the people of Senapati district is huge. The role of the Naga Peoples' Organisation, Senapati District Students' Association, United Naga Council Headquarters and other civic societies is huge in protecting the unity and integrity of the state and strengthening the

indigenous communities of Manipur," the chief minister said.

The Go-to-Hills campaign of the state government was launched to initiate interactions between residents of the hills and people of the plains, Singh said.

He also said another objective of the campaign was to bring the government to the people of the hills.

"I came here today to seek help from the people of Senapati district to restore peace and normalcy in the state," he said.

The chief minister asserted that it would be "difficult to establish a united Manipur without equal development and mutual respect" among the people of the hills and the valley.

Singh also said the war on drugs campaign was aimed at saving the youths from the menace, while the identification of illegal immigrants was initiated "through constitutional provisions to protect the numerically less indigenous population".

Oxygen pipe theft leaves babies gasping for breath in MP

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ RAJGARH

The theft of an oxygen supply pipe at the state-run Rajgarh district hospital in Madhya Pradesh left 12 newborns in discomfort with breathing difficulties, officials said on Wednesday.

The theft of the 10 to 15 feet long copper pipe by unidentified persons on Tuesday late at night disrupted the oxygen supply to the Newborn Intensive Care Unit (NICU), triggering panic as newborns started crying due to breathing difficulty, officials said.

As the inbuilt alarm system in the NICU started beeping, medical staff scrambled to restore the oxygen supply. An official said they managed the potentially threatening situation by swiftly attaching a backup jumbo oxygen cylinder to the system.

NCP (AP) activist arrested in Beed sarpanch murder

TN RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

In what came as an embarrassment to the ruling MahaYuti, an activist belonging to its ally NCP (AP) was arrested on Wednesday in connection with the murder of Sarpanch of Massejog village Santosh Deshmukh in Beed district of Marathwada on December 9.

Identifying the arrested NCP (AP) activist as Vishnu Chate, Beed district's Additional Superintendent of Police Sachin S Pandkar said that Chate was arrested on the Beed - Chhatrapati Sambhajnagar highway as he attempted to flee the district. With the arrest of Chate, the total number of arrested accused has gone up to four. The police are on the look-out for three more absconding accused.

Chate, who was on the run for nine days before being taken into custody by the Beed police, has been charged with masterminding the killing of the Sarpanch.

Chate was earlier allegedly involved in an extortion case of Rs. 3 Crore. The police have found a link between the extortion case involving a windmill company and the Sarpanch murder case.

In the previous (extortion) case lodged by the local windmill company, one of the accused was Walmiki Karad, who is alleged to have been linked to a senior NCP (AP) minister.

The investigations have revealed that Sarpanch Santosh Deshmukh was allegedly killed for attempting to thwart the extortion bid on the windmill company. He was first abducted, brutally tortured and later killed in broad daylight near the windmill company office on the afternoon of December 9.

The Sarpanch's murder has brought to the fore a major caste-politics nexus in Beed district.

The killed sarpanch was a Maratha while the prime accused (Chate) belongs to OBC (Vanjarji) community. Both were bitter rivals. Their rivalry intensified during the ongoing reservation agitation. The Sarpanch's murder figured during the ongoing winter session of the Maharashtra Legislature for the third consecutive day, as the Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) constituents Congress-Nationalist Congress Party (SP)-Shiv Sena (UBT) staged a walk out from the State Legislative council.

On its part, the BJP-led MahaYuti government appointed a Special Investigation Team (SIT) to look into Sarpanch Santosh Deshmukh's murder.

Meanwhile, Leader of Opposition in the Council Ambadas Danve of the Shiv Sena (UBT) came down heavily on the MahaYuti for the total collapse of law-and-order in Beed and Parbhani districts.

State LoP close aide involved in Goa 'Share Market' scam

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ PANAJI

The Economic Offence Cell of Goa Police has fast tracked its investigation in the infamous 'Share Market' scam in Goa. It has registered an enforcement case information report (ECIR) against key accused Myron Rodrigues and others. According to the investigations, the accused's intention from the outset has been to deceive and defraud Goan investors. Myron Rodrigues and his wife, Deepali Parab, posing as experts, who deal in the stock market directly promised investors lucrative returns for their investment.

The moniker 'Fatorda to London' is increasingly being attached to the scam primarily because of the connections of the accused. Sushant Manohar Ghodse is a close associate of Goa Forward Party MLA and Former Dy CM of Goa Vijai Sardesai. He held the position of PS to the Minister, when Vijai Sardesai was Minister of Town and Country planning, Agriculture, Archives, Archaeology & Factories & Boilers, Govt of Goa. Even as the investigation is on, it is fast becoming evident that the accused planned to swindle the money of the investors and benefit from it.

Uttarakhand to implement UCC from January 2025

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ DEHRADUN

The Uniform Civil Code will be implemented in Uttarakhand from January, Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami said on Wednesday.

During a meeting of the Uttarakhand Investment and Infrastructure Development Board (UIIDB) in Dehradun, Dhami said that the state government has completed its "homework" and the UCC will be implemented across the state from January 2025.

With this, Uttarakhand will become the first state in the country to implement the Uniform Civil Code after independence.

On the last day of campaigning for the 2022 assembly elections, the chief minister had promised the people of Uttarakhand that if the BJP retained power, the UCC would be implemented in the state.

Dhami said that after the formation of the new government in Uttarakhand in March 2022, it was decided in the first meeting of the cabinet to form an expert committee to implement UCC in the state.

He said that a five-member expert committee was formed under the chairmanship of retired judge Ranjana Prakash

Desai. On the basis of its report, the Uniform Civil Code, Uttarakhand, 2024 Bill was passed in the state assembly on February 7, 2024. Dhami said that the Act was notified on 12 March 2024 after presidential assent.

He said that now the rules of the Uniform Civil Code Act have also been prepared and Uttarakhand is fully prepared to implement the UCC from January.

"The Uniform Civil Code Act of Uttarakhand will give a new direction to the society by following the basic spirit of 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas'. This law will open new doors of empowerment, especially for women and children of Devbhoomi," Dhami said.

Speaking in Rajya Sabha on Tuesday, Union Home Minister Amit Shah said that UCC will be implemented in all BJP-ruled states.

Dhami instructed the officials to provide proper training and facilities to the personnel for the implementation of the provisions of UCC.

The chief minister said that keeping in mind the convenience of the common people, a portal and a mobile app have also been prepared so that facilities including registration and appeal can be made available online.

Kerala doctor narrowly escapes Rs 5 Lakh virtual arrest scam

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ KOTTAYAM

A Kottayam-based doctor has been rescued in real time from a 'virtual arrest' by "fakesters" who were posing as Mumbai police officers to defraud him, Kerala police said on Wednesday.

The cyber cell of Kerala police and officials of State Bank of India (SBI) on Tuesday worked together to identify the fraud being committed on the doctor and managed to recover most of the Rs five lakh that was fraudulently taken from him by the culprits, Kottayam SP Shahul Hameed A said at a press briefing here.

Giving details of the incident, a cyber cell officer told a TV channel that SBI has a financial tracking system for monitoring suspicious transactions and they flagged a Rs five lakh transaction made by the doctor on Tuesday to an account in north India.

"They immediately informed the cyber cell, which forwarded the address of the doctor to the Changanassery police station and an officer was sent from there to his residence to find out what happened," the officer said.

Kottayam SP Hameed, in his press briefing, said that the officer who went to the doctor's home was not allowed inside by the doctor on the directions of the fraudster posing as a Mumbai police officer.

"The Inspector heard the person on the phone telling the doctor in Hindi not to go outside or allow anyone inside. So the Inspector entered the home by force and examined the phone. On examining the phone, it was found that the fakesters had put him under 'virtual arrest'.

When they saw the Kerala police officer, they cut the call," the SP said.

The SP further said that due to the prompt steps taken by the police and the financial tracking system of SBI, around Rs 4.65 lakh of the doctor's money was recovered and only Rs 35,000 was lost.

Giving details of the modus operandi of the fraudsters, the SP said that they sent fake letters with the letter head and emblem of the Reserve Bank of India and the Supreme Court of India to the doctor stating that he was under investigation for money laundering.

"When the doctor contacted them, one of them posed as a Mumbai police officer and said that he was under virtual arrest. They then asked him to send them Rs 5 lakh," police said.

The officials of the Changanassery branch of SBI, from where the doctor sent the amount to the fraudsters, said that they were suspicious of the transaction, but when they asked the doctor, he told them he was sending the money to a friend.

"Initially, he was not ready to believe that all of it was a fraud and it took some effort to convince him and lodge a complaint," the cyber cell officer said.

SP Hameed said that the central government, RBI and the police have been issuing advertisements cautioning people to be alert against such frauds.

"People should go through these advertisements and be vigilant and if anything happens, they should immediately call 1930 to block any suspicious online transaction," he said.

From timeless tradition to digital obsolescence, the journey of personal diaries

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■ KOCHI

Every year end is marked with the clamor of people looking for diaries. All business and commercial establishments make sure that their patrons, clientele and customers are kept in good humor and gifting of diaries and calendars is considered the ideal way to usher in the New Year.

For those who are taking journaling or note taking seriously, diaries they receive as gifts take them to cloud nine, particularly if they are well printed and bound in leather. Most such diaries are a ready reckoner for holiday lists, income tax rates, PIN Codes and other such general purpose lists.

The diary written by Ann Frank, a German born Jewish girl who was one of the victims of the Holocaust during the Second World War is proof of what a diary can do. Frank wrote in her diary about the hardships and cruelties suffered by her and fellow

Jews in concentration camps. Someone had saved Ann's diary from getting destroyed and later on it was published by her father as 'The Diary of a Young Girl', a 1952 book which continues to be published in more than 70 languages.

Diary notes by leading statesmen, literary figures, political leaders and artists have turned out to be the chronicle of their life story as they have expressed themselves in their writings. Every year-end people could be seen enquiring with their friends about the possibilities of getting diaries as gifts.

A number of avid diary writers have come down over the last few decades, while the new generation considers this an alien and outdated habit. Every day's personal experiences and major developments could be the topic of the diary. Jayaprakash Valliathan, a marine engineer with passion for globe-trotting keeps his more than six-decade habit of diary writing

intact. "I maintain two diaries. One for my personal jottings and the other for the money I spent on the day. It has helped me to keep a check on my habits and also to find out whether I have squandered money," said Valliathan who returned to his village in Mavelikkara and opened a school where education is free.

Literary critic MG Sasibhooshan learnt the art of diary writing from his father, Kerala's teacher par excellence Prof S Guptan Nair. "I owe a lot to my habit of diary writing. In addition to personal experiences, I also note down major developments that hog the limelight," said Sasibhooshan.

Prof PG Haridas, eminent historian and former principal of the Sree Sankara Vidya Peetam College, never goes to bed without completing his diary writing. "It is a great feeling to know what I was doing last year on the same day. I speak to my diary about my encounters with people and incidents," said the professor.

But diary manufacturers have a different story to tell. "The orders for diaries have down drastically over the years. It is a clear signal that demand for diaries too has fallen," said Imtiaz Khan of Kolkata whose main business is printing of diary and calendar. Sivakasi, the head quarters of printing industry is almost dead, says Santhosh Kumar, a printer of repute. "There was a time when diary printing commenced by March of every year. Not anymore. Now, it has become a ritual," said Santhosh who is slowly switching over to packing materials.

Even public sector institutions such as banks and insurers have almost done away with diaries, which used to be their main public relations work. The world may not get any more Ann Franks as the next generation has switched to ephemeral media based on digital technologies. "We are left with no keys to unlock the past if diaries fall silent or become museum pieces," said Valliathan.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Not again!

Delhi air quality once again plummets to unbreathable 'severe' category despite GRAP IV

You may not be a smoker but you are still smoking 10 cigarettes a day if you happen to be in Delhi. This is what the doctors have to say about Delhi pollution. The capital witnessed a sharp decline in air quality on Wednesday, with the Air Quality Index (AQI) crossing the 400 mark and entering the 'severe' category once again. This alarming situation unfolded despite the implementation of Stage 4 of the Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP), which entails stringent anti-pollution measures. Monitoring Stations Report Severe-Plus AQI Out of the 37 monitoring stations listed on the Sameer app. These figures highlight the widespread and acute nature of air pollution across the city. GRAP, a tiered system of air quality management, categorises air quality into four stages based on AQI levels: Stage I (Poor, AQI 201-300) Stage II (Very Poor, AQI 301-400) Stage III (Severe, AQI 401-450) Stage IV (Severe Plus, AQI above 450) Under Stage IV, measures such as a complete ban on construction and demolition activities, including public infrastructure projects and the prohibition of diesel trucks carrying non-essential items entering Delhi are enforced. Offices—public, municipal and private—are advised to reduce staff attendance to 50 per cent, with the rest working from home. Additional measures like the closure of colleges, non-essential businesses and odd-even vehicular restrictions are considered during such extreme conditions. Despite these restrictions, Delhi's air quality has continued to deteriorate, raising questions about the efficacy and enforcement of these measures.



However, experts feel that it is more due to metrological conditions and not a failure of GRAP. They attribute the sudden spike in pollution levels to unfavourable meteorological conditions, particularly a significant drop in wind speeds. The stagnation allows local pollutants to accumulate, exacerbating the already critical air quality. During winters, Delhi's air pollution crisis is compounded by a combination of factors. Vehicle emissions is a primary contributor to the city's air pollution. Besides vehicular pollution, paddy straw burning adds to the pollution burden. Factories emit significant quantities of pollutants. But right now it is the dip in temperatures. During winters heavy air traps pollutants near the ground, creating a thick layer of smog. The hazardous air quality in Delhi poses severe health risks to its residents. Prolonged exposure can lead to respiratory ailments, cardiovascular issues and other chronic conditions. Vulnerable groups, including children, the elderly, and those with pre-existing health conditions, are at the highest risk. This is not the first time Delhi's air quality has entered the severe-plus category this season. In November, similar conditions led to the imposition of GRAP Stage IV. The recurrence of severe pollution highlights the cyclical nature of Delhi's air quality crisis, driven by a mix of local and regional factors. Unfortunately, authorities lack a comprehensive plan to address the issue, relying instead on knee-jerk reactions and ineffective quick fixes.

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PICTALK



Visitors click photographs of the frozen Drung waterfall, in Baramulla

What does the crystal ball reveal about the upcoming year 2025? The predictions are a mixed bag. Nostradamus, the famous French astrologer and seer, has made significant predictions regarding global affairs and India's future for 2025. The 16th-century seer has predicted significant events that have shaped our world, from the COVID-19 pandemic to the moon landing, lending credibility and a sense of awe to his predictions. People today are trying to interpret the 16th-century seer's prophecy, impressed by his historical accuracy. Nostradamus has predicted that the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war may end in 2025. He warned that both nations could face climate change and floods. According to the New York Post, Turkey and France could significantly facilitate the peace process between Ukraine and Russia. Nostradamus also foretold an 'ancient plague' in England in 2025, indicating a resurgence of a historical disease and the resolution of Brazil's involvement in the Russia-Ukraine conflict and various natural disasters. Additionally, Nostradamus has predicted that the earth may be hit by an asteroid. He said 'Rise from the cosmos, a fireball will rise, a harbinger of fate,' could engage us in potential future events with profound and concerning implications. As for India's future, the year begins with the 2025 Republic Day parade. The theme is 'Swarnim Bharat: Virasat aur Vikas. It is yet to be finalised who will be the chief guest. On the religious side, the next Maha Kumbh Mela will be held in Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh, from January 13, 2025, to February 26, 2025. The Mela is a grand and holy spiritual gathering every 12 years at a rotating location. Millions of pilgrims rush to the venue to take the holy bath. In 2025, India will likely see fast economic growth, social challenges and new technology. The government is making sig-

Year 2025: Prophecies, politics and progress

From hosting grand spiritual and political events to navigating economic growth and political turbulence, 2025 is poised to be a year of transformation and change



KALYANI SHANKAR



nificant improvements in technology education and renewable energy. These efforts and chances for economic development give a positive outlook for India's future prosperity. India is becoming more critical globally by working closely with other major economies in trade, defence, and climate efforts. This shows India's growing political power. At the domestic level, a critical issue facing the Opposition coalition, INDIA, is its cohesion. Already, some tensions have emerged. The Trinamool Congress and the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) have distanced themselves from the alliance. The AAP plans to contest the Delhi Assembly elections independently. The cracks within were visible in the latest Haryana, Maharashtra, and Jharkhand Assembly polls. While the Congress has done poorly in Haryana and Maharashtra, it is in coalition in Jharkhand with the JMM. The partners in the coalition are unhappy about the Congress's dismal performance. They are watching how Congress performs in the upcoming Delhi and Bihar polls scheduled for 2025. The upcoming Assembly polls will indicate the future



IN 2025, INDIA WILL LIKELY SEE FAST ECONOMIC GROWTH, SOCIAL CHALLENGES, AND NEW TECHNOLOGY. THE GOVERNMENT IS MAKING SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENTS IN TECHNOLOGY EDUCATION AND RENEWABLE ENERGY

of political realignment. Delhi will hold Assembly elections in February, with the BJP looking to unseat Aam Aadmi Party chief Arvind Kejriwal. The AAP has faced many challenges, including corruption allegations against several leaders in the recent past. As a tactic, the AAP has appointed Athish as a temporary chief minister for the polls. The AAP and Congress were partners in the Lok Sabha elections. While AAP performed reasonably well, the Congress got no seats. Bihar will also have elections this year. It is politically a critical state. The ruling NDA, led by Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, may face intense competition from the Mahagathbandhan, headed by Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) leader Tejashwi Yadav. The BJP and the JD(U) are working to retain the state. Two political organisations—the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS) and the CPI—will celebrate their birth centenary. The RSS will complete 100 years in September, while the CPI will begin its centenary celebrations in December this year. With its ups and downs, the RSS has strongly influenced Indian

politics and society now making it hard for future governments to weaken their power. At the same time, communist parties have less impact now, as right-wing parties are becoming more popular. On international affairs, India will hold the Quad Summit, originally scheduled to be held in New Delhi this September, which was relocated to New York due to a scheduling conflict among the attending leaders. Now, India will host the QUAD summit in 2025. The US President Trump will likely visit New Delhi for the summit, further revealing India's position in international affairs. Another important visit is that of Russian President Putin, in the first half of next year. The Kremlin has said it will set a date early next year. It will be Putin's first visit since the Ukraine conflict began. Overall 2025 will be a mixed year for India. The economy is progressing well, and foreign relations are stable, but the political situation remains unclear. By next year, Congress could recover, or the BJP and the regional satraps would have a further hold on the electorate. (The writer is a popular columnist; views expressed are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

DISTRACTING FORM ISSUES

Madam —The introduction of 'One Nation One election' bill is a conscious attempt to waste the precious time of the parliament, and it is definitely timed to divert the attention of all from crucial issues like Manipur, serious allegations over Adani Group's misconducts, inflation, declining growth rates, the stunningly widening gap between the haves and the have-nots, and the fast deteriorating relationship with many countries. The ruling dispensation, in spite of being aware of a lack of enough strength to get this amendment bill through, tabling it in the parliament displays the intention behind its introduction. Moreover, the reasons counted upon to place this bill do not sound either logical or rational. Losing majority support and deciding to refer the bill to the Joint Parliament Committee is a preplanned act deliberately meant to divert the course. It has already been explained by many quarters that the very idea of this proposal runs against democratic norms, as the demands of the people vary from a state and central government and are altogether different from local bodies. The narratives of national parties are sure to sway over the elections of state assemblies and the local bodies. The claims about expenditure do not deserve to be considered. Claims of hurdles to development programmes are not correct, as the restrictions are only for the launching of new projects during the notified period. Above all, the inability of the Election Commission to hold such a huge project is visible from the time schedule it keeps up to hold elections. Therefore it is not good to waste huge resources and take away the time of parliament sessions.

A G Rajmohan | Anantapur

SOLIDARITY WITH PALESTINIANS

Madam—Congress MP Priyanka Gandhi carrying a bag to Parliament that has 'Palestine' emblazoned on it proves that she is most concerned about the war, where the innocent people in Palestine are dying because of the deadly war. She has right-

Goa Liberation Day



Goa's Liberation Day is celebrated on December 19 and has its importance in the history of Goa. This is the day when Goa got her freedom from the dominant rule of the Portuguese with the help of the Indian armed forces and the navy. The Liberation of Goa was rather a historic event. The fight for Goa's freedom was dual—inside Goa and outside Goa—which was performed by the Indian government.

Towards the end of 1961, after various unsuccessful talks, the Indian government deployed armed forces. On December 17, 1961, more than 30,000 Indian ground troops with the help of the Indian Air Force and the army conquered the 3,000-member ill-prepared Portuguese navy. There were a few more armed acts following that. The rest of the Portuguese colonies of Daman and Diu were also overpowered. The complete build-up of the Portuguese colonies shaped the Union Territory of Goa, Daman and Diu. The total army operation 'Operation Vijay' was performed almost without any violence. Finally, the Portuguese Governor General Vassalo da Silva freed Goa on December 18. After three days of operations, on December 19, 1961, Goa, at last, became a part of India. The day is observed with a lot of celebrations in Goa.

Jubel D'Cruz | Mumbai

ly raised her voice against Israel's actions in Gaza and expressed solidarity with Palestinians. She has rightly said that it is the moral responsibility of every right-thinking individual, including all those Israeli citizens who do not believe in hatred and violence and every government in the world, to condemn the Israeli government's genocide actions and force them to stop. On her first day speech in Parliament, she raised the issues of Bangladesh and Modi's government's failure to negotiate with Bangladesh. In her 32-minute speech, she talked about key issues like the BJP's alleged attempt to change the constitution, the growing monopoly of the Adani Group, atrocities on women, incidents of violence in Sambhal and Manipur, and the demand for a nationwide caste census. She has also met the victims of the Unnao rape case, the father of the Hathras rape case, and the Sambhal violence victims. She has also raised the iconic frame of India's greatest military victory, a painting of the Pakistan army signing the instrument of surrender in Dhaka on December 16, 1971. We

deserve more leaders like Priyanka Gandhi. Zakir Hussain | Kazipet

DILJIT WANTS BETTER CONCERT INFRA

Madam —Punjabi superstar Diljit Dosanjh recently announced during his performance in Chandigarh that he would not hold any concerts in India until the government improves the country's concert infrastructure. India boasts a large number of talented singers who represent the nation globally and deliver phenomenal performances in international concerts. However, within their own country, they face inadequate concert infrastructure and a lack of basic facilities. This is concerning, as well-organised concerts could serve as a significant source of revenue and provide livelihoods to thousands. It is high time that the government recognises the potential of the music industry and invests in developing world-class infrastructure to support artists and their audiences.

Jakir Hussain | Kanpur

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Preparations underway in Prayagraj for Mahakumbh 2025

Prime Minister Modi visits the Triveni Sangam, offers prayers and reviews the arrangements for the world's largest spiritual gathering

Year 2025 is going to witness the largest religious gathering of humanity at Prayagraj - Mahakumbh. The preparations are already in full swing. Prime Minister Narendra Modi reached the holy city of Prayagraj, the land of pilgrimage, to oversee preparations for the grand Mahakumbh. This becomes even more significant at the confluence of three holy rivers—Ganga, Yamuna, and the mythical Saraswati. At this Triveni Sangam, the auspicious gathering of saints and sages during Mahakumbh elevates it into a grand event. The significance of Mahakumbh lies in its occurrence every 12 years, an event described in depth in our religious texts and Puranas. According to the estimates of government of Uttar Pradesh, over 45 crore people will attend the Mahakumbh Mela 2025. This makes it the world's largest religious gathering. Though everybody would like to take a dip at Sangam, but there are other centre of attractions too. Among the ancient temples of Prayagraj, the Nag Vasuki Temple holds a special place.



Worship of serpents or Nagas has been integral to Sanatan Dharma since ancient times. Among these, Vasuki, considered the king of serpents, is an essential figure. Vasuki Nag is also depicted as Lord Shiva's necklace. According to the legend of Samudra Manthan (churning of the ocean), Vasuki Nag was used as the rope during the churning of the ocean by gods and demons, with Mount Mandarachal serving as the churning rod. Vasuki Nag's body was injured during this process, and on Lord Vishnu's advice, he rested at Sangam and bathed at the Triveni Sangam to heal. It is believed that a visit to the Nag Vasuki Temple after a holy dip at Sangam completes the spiritual journey. This temple, located in the Daraganj area of Prayagraj

along the Ganga River, has its roots in ancient mythology. A story mentions that King Divodas of Kashi performed penance to bring Lord Shiva to Varanasi, and Vasuki Nag was requested to stay in Prayagraj by the deities. Vasuki Nag agreed, stipulating that devotees must visit him after bathing at Sangam and worship him on Nag Panchami. The temple was subsequently established under divine guidance. Preparations for Mahakumbh 2025: The grand Mahakumbh, to be held from January 13 (Pausha Purnima) to February 26 (Maha Shivratri) next year, is being meticulously planned. Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated projects worth Rs 5,500 crores aimed at improving pilgrim amenities and strengthening the

city's infrastructure. Key projects include: 1. Doubling and electrification of the Varanasi-Madhosingh-Prayagraj rail section, including a new rail bridge over the Ganga. 2. Construction of underpasses and overpasses to ease traffic. 3. Development of nine new ghats, 3,000 additional trains, 300 parks, and the planting of 300,000 trees over 4,000 hectares. While in Prayagraj PM Modi not only saw the preparation first hand but also performed rituals at the Sangam, prayed at the Akshay Vat tree, visited the reclining Hanuman Temple, and offered prayers at the Saraswati Koop. He also toured the Mahakumbh exhibition site. The Mahakumbh is expected to draw millions of pilgrims to the Sangam, where it is believed that a dip in the holy waters cleanses one of sins and leads to spiritual liberation (moksha). Apart from bathing rituals, devotees participate in prayers, discourses by saints, and spiritual enlightenment sessions. (The writer is a freelance journalist; views are personal)



BINOD TAKIAWALA



FIRST COLUMN

THE POWER OF POSITIVITY

By embracing spiritual self-reflection and cultivating positivity, we can rise above turmoil



RAJYOGI BRAHM KUMAR NIKUNJ JI

Nowadays there seems to be a crisis, disappointment and conflict of duality at every step of life. How do we deal with this? How do we prevent the self from becoming pessimistic or disheartened? Today the great modern disease of human consciousness is all about looking outward to find means to derive happiness without examining the inner self, values, attitudes and motives; relying and depending more on the external signals and hoping for the best. However, in practicality, life cannot be created with such hopes, as there are no shortcuts to achieving happiness. In today's world, no individual and nothing can create a permanent state of wellbeing within us, as it is our prerogative and responsibility. The external factors can contribute, guide and inspire us but ultimately our life is what we make out of it.

True happiness or a lack of it does not come from external things but from what is inside oneself. For example, money is not the means to happiness nor is it the cause of one's unhappiness. In reality, it is our attitudes and values that determine the use or misuse of external instruments, whether that is money, a person, an event or an object. A life that has value and is worthy of living is only possible when there is a reflective examination through which there can be illuminating change. So, to reorientate our consciousness, we would require a consciousness based on self-knowledge i.e the knowledge of the spiritual self which creates self-respect and positivity, enabling us to gain the right perspective on life which in turn would help us to deal with any kind of negativity in a balanced and less painful way. Accordingly, with positivity, we



experience inner strength to cope with external issues affecting the sense of balance in our lives. When we are more positive towards ourselves, obviously we express the same attitude towards others and in all situations. Inner strength also comes when we interact with others in such a way that love, peace and happiness are honestly expressed and experienced.

The pivotal point is "honesty" because there cannot be a sense of fulfillment through falsehood, imitation or duality expressed through attitude. Hence the need of the hour is to live a life based on "Eternal Spiritual Principles" that would allow us to keep a positive attitude towards the self and others, thereby making our life joyful rather than conflicting or a bundle of confusion. Spirituality is not a system or technique of worship or ritual, it is in essence, knowing how to lead a life and through this knowing there is happiness. A spiritual person has found that spark of eternal reference within, which gives him or her not only deep contentment but also a sense of purpose. The first prerequisite for spirituality is a life that functions appropriately and thinks and cares about one's self in the most decent way. Thinking and caring about one's self inappropriately creates too much dependence on others, too many needs, too many demands, too much possessiveness.

So the right way to proceed is to first examine oneself and then acknowledge the positive and the negative traits within us. By doing so, we get the courage to change whatever needs to be transformed without any kind of fear and, without pretence. The basis of successful change for betterment is to understand the attitudes, feelings and motives that drive us for the change by accepting the original positivity of the self, the immortal goodness of the soul. It is this goodness of the self that forms the foundation of our dignity as human beings. The expression of this original goodness in our life is what is called 'divinity' which makes us truly human. So let us awaken the expression of the divine within us to live a fulfilling joyful life amidst all the chaos & crisis around.

(The writer is a spiritual educator and popular columnist; views are personal)

Education: From Kothari Commission to NEP-2020



J S RAJPUT

The educators and policymakers are called upon to transcend ideological divides and lead India toward inclusive progress and innovation



The most comprehensive initiative in education in post-independence India was the report of the National Commission on Education, usually referred to as the Kothari Commission. It submitted its report entitled "Education for National Development" on June 29, 1968. The first two sentences say it all: "The destiny of India is now being shaped in its classrooms. This, we believe, is no rhetoric." It was this report that led to the first national education policy of 1968. For the first time, science and mathematics became compulsory for both boys and girls up to tenth standard!

Yes, it was generally believed that only boys could handle the tough subjects of science and mathematics, and girls could opt for lighter options of spinning weaving, home science; and the like! The compulsory study of science and math was resisted and opposed as being unjust and unfair to girls! This one change transformed the lives of millions of girls and has brought global accolades to the Indian advancements in the world of science, technology, ICT and space research. Policies once formulated and formalised deserve support in vigilant implementation, persistent monitoring, and scrutiny based on their relevance 'in the great enterprise of national reconstruction'. India today has great challenges ahead, both national as well as global.

It has the manpower and enough experience to confront these successfully. In the third decade of the 21st century, it's the quality of education and skill acquisition that would equip India shall remain its prime contributory tool against every challenge. The content and process of education shall have to specifically equip itself against nurtured negativity, increasing mutual distrust and ballooning bitterness in public life. Solutions shall certainly not emerge from those that thrive only on negativity and are ill-equipped to see light and positivity around them.



THE CONTENT AND PROCESS OF EDUCATION SHALL HAVE TO SPECIFICALLY EQUIP ITSELF AGAINST NURTURED NEGATIVITY, INCREASING MUTUAL DISTRUST, AND BALLOONING BITTERNESS IN PUBLIC LIFE

Who must come forward and accept responsibility to normalise such an unacceptable socio-cultural environment? Why not ask the Gandhiji? Once, before independence, one Dr Mote posed a query to Mahatma Gandhi: what he thought was the greatest problem facing his country! The expected answer could have been, in those days, related to slavery, poverty, illiteracy, ill health, or in the social context.

While narrating it in his Gandhi Katha, Narayan Desai tells the audience: that the answer was the 'callousness of the intellectuals!' Narayan Desai Goes ahead: "Give it a thought. If we stand by and watch the poor blaming their poverty on fate, Gandhi is relevant today. If we can see the callousness of the intellectuals, then Gandhi is relevant today. What are the problems according to intellectuals?"

"Why X or Y has become Vice-Chancellor and not me! They think only of this and are unaware of other social issues". Their concerns for critical social, cultural, social cohesion and religious amity are minimal.

One's obvious inference would be that solutions to major national concerns shall - and must - emerge from institutions and the educated and the learned responsible for attaining their stated objectives. It includes the dilapidated structures running Sarkari schools, much sought-after private schools, and the universities. It also includes the glittering campuses of national institutions that have brought international repute to our educational enterprise.

So, mainly it points out to teachers; from primary schools to

professors of the universities, and researchers working in institutions of science, technology, psychology, social sciences and every other area.

One wishes each one of them recalls the assessment of Gandhi shuns away the dreaded callousness and strives to create centres of dialogue and discussions on improving the life and living standards of our people, particularly the 'last man in the line' who was so dear to the Mahatma! At first glance, the existing climate makes such a transformation rather impossible!

Despite all the odds, sincere attempts must be launched to create institutional think tanks with open boundaries that provide for healthy academic, scholarly and intellectual deliberations, not constrained but individual ideological affiliations. For an academic, who shapes the lives of numerous individuals, it is the well-being of others that must precede his own!

And this is no rhetoric or a cliché in the Indian context and culture. For a broad-minded person, this becomes a must, an integral part of his thought and action and hence, an achievable premise.

This is the main task of every teacher preparation institution, from where it shall percolate to schools via teachers trained there, and then to the establishment and the society. After the education policies of 1968, 1986 and 1992, and a gap of around three decades, another policy formulation comes before the nation in the shape of the National Education Policy; NEP-2020. It has been under implementation for the last four years. Having

been associated with the implementation and also policy formulations, one could venture to infer that the NEP-2020 was prepared with unprecedented enthusiasm from teachers, scholars academics institutions, organisations and individuals.

As the process was long overdue and rightly very extensive, it inspired active participation from practically every section of society. Unfortunately, its implementation stands hampered in certain states on grounds that may not necessarily be academic.

India has a developed well-knit interactive system of the national and state-level bodies and institutions that have learnt over the years how to arrive at a national consensus in the sectors of education and teacher education. This institutional strength of consultation, collaboration and cohesion need not be diluted in cases where the union and state governments belong to different ideological affiliations.

Intellectuals in education and research must convincingly internalize that they are making the future of individuals and creating the future of India. No one else is destined and better placed than them to reconstruct India. The moment each one of them expands his horizons, thinks holistically, and takes a long-term view, the road ahead would emerge very clearly; how to proceed individually and also collectively to sed the intellectual callousness and lead the nation on the right path.

(Professor Rajput works in education, social cohesion and religious amity. He is Atal fellow with the PMML, New Delhi; views expressed are personal)

Guarding digital India: The urgent need for cybersecurity in a rapidly evolving digital space

India has the potential to lead the world in cybersecurity innovation, but achieving this requires more than technological solutions

In the fast-evolving digital landscape of India, a silent battle is being fought—not with traditional weapons but through malicious code, complex algorithms, and increasingly sophisticated cyberattacks. As the country embraces its "Digital India" initiative, the rise of cyber threats demands immediate attention. Protecting the digital future requires strong cybersecurity frameworks, skilled professionals, and widespread public awareness. The call for "Digital Guards" or "Cyber Warriors" has never been more urgent.



VINAY PATHAK

2023, this number soared to an alarming 1.32 million—a twentyfold increase that exposes critical national vulnerabilities. Globally, the situation is no less concerning. Operations like INTERPOL and AFRIPOL's 2024 Operation Serengeti, which arrested over 1,000 cybercriminals across 19 African nations, underscore the scale of the problem. These operations identified over 35,000 victims and uncovered

financial losses nearing \$193 million, demonstrating the global reach and devastating impact of cybercrime. Phishing remains a primary weapon for cybercriminals, accounting for 22 per cent of all incidents. These attacks manipulate victims into revealing sensitive information or downloading malicious software. Credential theft, responsible for 16 per cent of incidents, further exposes individuals and organisations to system breaches, financial fraud, and corporate espionage. Emerging threats like mobile app malware are amplifying risks. For instance, 15 SpyLoan malware apps on Google Play, downloaded over 8 million times, went beyond data theft to harass and extort victims, underscoring cybercriminals'

growing ingenuity. The economic toll of these attacks is devastating. About 65 per cent of Indian enterprises have been forced to pay ransoms to recover critical data, with average demands reaching \$4.8 million. Recovery costs add another \$1.35 million per incident, straining even large corporations. Smaller businesses, lacking resources for robust cybersecurity measures, are particularly vulnerable. This systemic vulnerability has been termed the "cybersecurity poverty line," where approximately 60 per cent of Indian companies lack the infrastructure and expertise to defend themselves against cyber threats. High-traffic online shopping periods, such as Black Friday and Cyber Monday, are prime



targets for cybercriminals. During these events, fraudsters employ phishing scams, fake e-commerce websites, and malware to exploit consumers and businesses alike. Recent high-profile incidents highlight these vulnerabilities. In November 2024, a ransomware attack on Blue Yonder disrupted Starbucks' operations, forcing a return to manual processes. Similarly, McLeod Russel's system com-

promise sent shockwaves through the corporate sector, emphasising the interconnectedness of digital systems and the widespread disruptions that a single attack can cause. India's cybersecurity preparedness is worryingly insufficient. Only 4 per cent of Indian enterprises have robust infrastructure capable of withstanding advanced attacks. This shortfall is a national security concern, as cyberattacks transcend corporate interests, threatening essential services and critical infrastructure. Initiatives like the Cyber Challenge 2024, a joint effort by the Delhi Police and CyberPeace Foundation, offer hope. This programme engages developers, engineers, and cybersecurity experts to

craft innovative solutions using cutting-edge technologies such as AI, blockchain, and quantum computing. Collaboration with institutions like DRDO, MeITY, and the National Forensic Science University underscores the comprehensive approach needed to address these challenges. Experts emphasise that cybersecurity must move beyond being an IT department's responsibility to become a core component of every organization's strategy. This shift involves continuous employee training, regular security audits, investments in advanced technologies, and fostering a culture of vigilance. Drawing inspiration from global models like the European Union's GDPR, India could implement strin-

gent cybersecurity standards, offering subsidies for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to invest in security measures and penalising negligence in cyber protection. As digital transformation accelerates across sectors such as finance, healthcare, education, and government services, robust cybersecurity is no longer optional—it is a fundamental necessity. The path forward demands a collaborative effort. Government agencies, private enterprises, educational institutions, and cybersecurity professionals must unite to build a resilient digital ecosystem.

(The writer is Assistant Professor Indian institute of information technology sonapat Haryana; views are personal)

Trump says India charges lot of tariff, threatens to impose reciprocal tax

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

US President-elect Donald Trump has said that India charges “a lot” of tariff, reiterating his intention to impose reciprocal tariffs in retaliation for what New Delhi will impose on the import of certain American products.

Trump made these remarks on Tuesday and also said that India and Brazil were among countries that impose high tariffs on certain US products.

“Reciprocal. If they tax us, we tax them the same amount. They tax us. We tax them. And they tax us. Almost in all cases, they’re taxing us, and we haven’t been taxing them,” Trump told reporters on Monday.

He made the remarks while responding to a question on a potential trade agreement with China. Trump said India and Brazil were among countries that impose high tariffs on certain US products.



“The world reciprocal is important because if somebody charges us — India, we don’t have to talk about our own — if India charges us 100 per cent, do we charge them nothing for the same?” Trump said.

“You know, they send in a bicycle and we send them a bicycle. They charge us 100 and 200. India charges a lot. Brazil charges a lot. If they want to charge us,

that’s fine, but we’re going to charge them the same thing,” Trump said at a news conference at Mar-a-Lago.

Responding to a question, his Commerce Secretary pick Howard Lutnick said “reciprocity” is something that is going to be a key topic for the Trump administration. “How you treat us is how you should expect to be treated,” he said. During his election campaign in October, Trump has

In 2019, Trump has repeatedly claimed that India is a “tariff king” and imposes “tremendously high” tariffs on American products.

He has criticised India’s “big tariffs” on American paper products and the iconic Harley-Davidson bikes.

The US is the largest trading partner of India in 2023-24. India’s exports stood at USD 77.51 billion, while imports aggregated at USD 42.2 billion in the last fiscal.

During April-October this fiscal, the country’s exports to America rose by 6.31 per cent to USD 47.24 billion, while imports grew by 2.46 per cent to USD 26 billion.

Between FY 2020 and FY 2024, India’s merchandise exports to America rose by 46 per cent from USD 53.1 billion to USD 77.5 billion.

Imports from the US also grew to USD 42.2 billion last fiscal from USD 35.8 billion in 2019-20. On the other hand, trade in services between the two nations expanded 30.3 per cent from USD 54.1 billion in 2018 to an estimated USD 70.5 billion in 2024.

India is also a key destination for American businesses such as professional, scientific, and technical services, manufacturing, and IT. Washington is the third largest investor. India received USD 66.7 billion of FDI inflow between April 2000 and June 2024.

‘Confident of weathering challenges to India-US ties arising from indictments’

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

The outgoing Biden administration on Tuesday exuded confidence that India and the US will be able to “weather” the challenges to their relationship that arose after two recent indictments — one related to a Sikh separatist and the other to an Indian billionaire.

“I’m confident that we will be able to weather this appropriately,” a senior administration official said responding to a question that the two indictments cast a shadow on the India-US relationship.

In a New York court, the US Department of Justice has accused an Indian official of

being involved in a plan to kill a Sikh separatist leader Gurbat Singh Pannun. The other indictment charges Indian billionaire Gautam Adani of corruption. “Many people say that that kind of casts a shadow on the relationship and it raises questions about trust (between India and US) once again,” the official was asked. “I would just simply say the relationship is increasingly complex, increasingly diverse and increasingly deep. It is the case that invariably, we will reach occasions of challenges on both sides, and the key is how we deal with those,” said the official.

“I can just assure you that

we’ve had the deepest possible appropriate consultation between the two sides, and I’m confident that we will be able to weather this appropriately,” said the official.

A second senior administration official described the indictments as regulatory and law enforcement issues that are best left to the agencies directly involved to speak to. “It wouldn’t be appropriate for us to comment from either the White House or the State Department,” the official said. “But we stand by and strongly believe in the view ... that this relationship is in a very strong position,” said the second administration official.

Leaving India-US ties in a very good place, expect continuity in Trump era: Biden admin

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

The outgoing Biden administration said it was leaving the India-US relationship “in a very strong place”, and exuded confidence that it will continue to have bipartisan support during the Donald Trump presidency as well.

“We continue to be very ambitious about the US-India relationship. We’ve had very high-level engagement over the course of the last several months with the QUAD summit in Delaware, and we are anticipating a high-level engagement in the last few weeks of the Biden administration,” Kurt Campbell, Deputy Secretary of State, told reporters during a conference call here on Tuesday.

Campbell joined by Principal Deputy National Security Advisor Jon Finer and Indian Ambassador to the US Vinay Mohan Kwatra, were in Houston on Tuesday to meet with astronauts from the Indian Space Research Organisation who are training at NASA’s Johnson Space Center to execute a joint effort to the

International Space Station in partnership with NASA next year.

“We are quite confident that we’ll be handing the bilateral relationship off to the incoming Trump team at its strongest possible apex, with key support from stakeholders in the industry, in technology, in finance and defence. As we were here today, it was inspirational to see the manifestations of engagement between the United States and India in critical endeavours associated with space,” Campbell said.

Observing that the US-India partnership is an “anchor of stability”, not only in the Indo-Pacific, but increasingly for the world, Finer said from southeast Asia to Africa, the two countries can play a leading role in building prosperity, driving development and contributing to security.

“To a large degree, there has been bipartisan consensus on the importance of this relationship. Over the last two decades, different administrations in Washington and New Delhi have helped strengthen our cooperation. While no

relationship is without challenges, we believe that we are leaving this partnership in a very strong place as we prepare to pass the baton to the incoming team,” Finer said.

Responding to a question, a senior administration official exuded confidence that the India-US relationship will have the same speed and scale with bipartisan support from both sides as has been the case under the several previous administrations. The same goes for QUAD as well, the official said. “The QUAD originated in the George W Bush administration. It was continued on at the foreign ministry level and through other venues in the Trump administration. We have engaged closely with the incoming team, and I think there is substantial interest in continuing the QUAD given its remarkable achievements in such a short period of time,” a senior administration official said.

“We all recognise that a driving force, increasingly in all areas of QUAD endeavour, is the ambition of India. They’ve made clear in a variety of state-

ments and engagements with the incoming team their desire to continue there. I do not think the ambition, though, for the US-India relationship stops there. You are going to see a variety of areas of continuing activity,” the official said.

The official described the progress made by India and US in various fields, including space. “I expect technology work will continue at a pace. We are engaging more in the Indo-Pacific. We are sharing information and intelligence on matters of critical concern, including along the line of actual control. We are also very much focused on increasing our cooperation and collaboration in the Indian Ocean. These are new avenues for important dialogue,” said the official.

“My expectation is that this work will continue and that it will receive broad support in a bipartisan manner, not only in Congress, but frankly, it is one of the arenas of engagement that is broadly supported across the Indo-Pacific as well,” said the official.

A second senior adminis-

tration official said that the Biden Administration has found the QUAD to be an extremely valuable format, including at the head-of-state level, befitting relationships that are as consequential as those among the four countries involved.

“That said, the US-India relationship is bigger than any particular format. It’s really much more about common interests, and the interests that we’ve described .. and that we have worked on together over the last four years, from technology cooperation to an increasing defence relationship, to our broader economic engagement to increasing collaboration on global and regional issues, is going to be unbounded by any particular administration, frankly, in either country.”

“We expect a degree of continuity here that may not be the case across the whole set of issues we face. But that has been the case for the US-India relationship, and we have no reason to believe that won’t continue,” said the second senior administration official.



President Joe Biden and grandson Beau walk to Marine One to depart from the South Lawn of the White House in Washington. AP/PTI

Biden admin makes it easier for US companies to hire foreign workers with H-1B visas

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

The outgoing Biden administration has relaxed rules for H-1B visas that will make it easier for American companies to hire foreign workers with special skills and facilitate a smoother transition from F-1 student visas to H-1B visas, a move that is likely to benefit thousands of Indian tech professionals.

The most sought-after H-1B visa is a non-immigrant visa that allows US companies to employ foreign workers in speciality occupations that require theoretical or technical expertise.

Technology companies depend on it to hire tens of thousands of employees each year from countries like India and China. The rule, announced by the Department of Homeland

Security (DHS) on Tuesday, aims to provide greater flexibility to employers and workers by modernising the definition and criteria for special positions and nonprofit and governmental research organisations that are exempt from the annual statutory limit on H-1B visas.

The changes will help US employers hire as per their business needs and remain competitive in the global marketplace, an official release said.

President-elect Donald Trump will take charge as the next president of the US after his swearing-in ceremony on January 20.

According to the DHS, the rule also extends certain flexibilities for students on F-1 visas seeking to change their status to H-1B to

avoid disruptions in lawful status and employment authorisation for students holding F-1 visas. It also will allow US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) to process applications more quickly for most individuals who had previously been approved for an H-1B visa. It will also allow H-1B visa holders with a controlling interest in the petitioning organisation to be eligible for H-1B status subject to reasonable conditions. The latest move by the outgoing Biden administration builds on its previous efforts to ensure that the labour needs of American businesses are met to reduce undue burden on employers while adhering to all US worker protections under the law.

Sunita Williams’ return delayed till late March

AP ■ CAPE CANAVERAL

NASA’s two stuck astronauts just got their space mission extended again. That means they won’t be back on Earth until spring, 10 months after rocketing into orbit on Boeing’s Starliner capsule.

NASA announced the latest delay in Indian-origin Sunita Williams and Butch Wilmore’s homecoming on Tuesday. The two test pilots planned on being away just a week or so when they blasted off June 5 on Boeing’s first astronaut flight to the International Space Station. Their mission grew from eight days to eight months after NASA decided to send the company’s problem-plagued Starliner capsule back empty in September.

Now the pair won’t return until the end of March or even April because of a delay in launching their replacements, according to NASA.

A fresh crew needs to launch before Wilmore and Williams can return and the next mission has been bumped more than a month, according to the space agency. NASA’s next crew of four was supposed to launch in February, followed by Wilmore and Williams’ return home by the end of that month alongside two other astronauts. But SpaceX needs more time to prepare the brand new capsule for liftoff. That launch is now scheduled for no earlier than late March.

NASA said it considered using a different SpaceX capsule to fly up the replacement crew in order to keep the flights on schedule. But it decided the best option was to wait for the new capsule to transport the next crew.

NASA prefers to have overlapping crews at the space station for a smoother transition, according to officials.

Most space station missions last six months, with a few reaching a full year.

Hundreds of N Korean troops killed in Ukrainian battles

AP ■ WASHINGTON

A couple hundred North Korean troops fighting alongside Russian forces against Ukraine have been killed or wounded during battle in the Kursk border region, a senior military official said Tuesday.

The official didn’t provide details on exactly how many have been killed, but said the North Korean forces don’t appear to be battle-hardened, which contributes to the number of casualties they’ve had. The official was providing the first significant estimate of North Korean casualties, which comes several weeks after Ukraine announced that North Korea had sent 10,000 to 12,000 troops to Russia to help it in the almost 3-year war.

The White House and Pentagon on Monday confirmed that the North Korean forces have been battling on the front lines in largely infantry positions. They have been fighting with Russian units and, in some cases, independently around Kursk.

The casualty disclosure comes as the Biden administration is pressing to

send as much military aid as possible to Ukraine before President-elect Donald Trump takes over. But a senior defense official told reporters Tuesday that the Defense Department may not be able to send all of the remaining USD 5.6 billion in Pentagon weapons and equipment stocks intended for Ukraine before Jan. 20, when Trump is sworn in. Both officials spoke on condition of anonymity to provide a US assessment of the war.

According to the Pentagon, there is about USD 1.2 billion remaining in longer-term funding through the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative, which is used to pay for weapons contracts that would not be delivered for a year or more. The official said the administration anticipates releasing all that money by the end of this year.

The USD 5.6 billion is in presidential drawdown authority (PDA), which allows the Pentagon to take weapons off the shelves and send them quickly to Ukraine. That is a substantial amount of money, the defense official said, and while the US will continue to

provide weapons to Ukraine until Jan. 20, there may well be funds remaining that will be available for the incoming Trump administration to spend.

Trump has talked about getting some type of negotiated settlement between Ukraine and Russia, creating some unease about whether he will provide Ukraine all the weapons funding approved by Congress.

Ukrainian and Russian forces have been in a fierce battle around Kursk, and the official said Russia has been able to take back about 20% of the territory gained there by Kyiv. They said it will be possible for Ukraine to hold ground there for some time, but it will depend on how the rest of the fight is going, including the long-range strikes that Kyiv has been launching.

The officials said it’s not clear if Moscow has asked Pyongyang for additional forces, but acknowledged that Russia continues to lose as many as 1,200 troops a day in casualties — including both dead and wounded. But so far, Russia has been able to generate enough forces to replace them.

B’desh HC commutes ULFA leader’s death sentence

PTI ■ DHAKA

A Bangladeshi High Court on Wednesday commuted the death sentence of ULFA leader Paresch Barua to life imprisonment and acquitted a former junior minister and five others in a 2004 case of attempted smuggling of weapons to the separatist outfit in northeast India.

A total of 10 truckloads of weapons were seized in April 2004 despite alleged efforts of certain “influential quarters” for its safe passage to United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) hideouts in northeast India through Chattogram, which was then spelled as “Chittagong”.

The seized weapons included over 27,000 grenades, 150 rocket launchers, over 11 lakh ammunition, 1,100 sub machine guns and 11.41 million bullets.

The two-member High Court bench commuted the punishment of ULFA leader Paresch Barua, who was sentenced to death after a trial in absentia — now assumed to be living in China — and sentenced him to life imprisonment, said a government attorney at the bench.

The High Court bench comprising Justice Mostafa Zaman Islam and Justice Nasrin Akhtar acquitted former state minister for home Lutfuzzaman Babar and six others, who were handed down capital punishment following the death reference hearing, he added.

The five others to escape the gallows are former director general of forces Intelligence (DGFI) retired major general Rezzakul Haider Chowdhury, former managing director of a state-run fertilizer plant (CUFL) Mohsin Talukder, its general manager Enamul

Hoque, former additional secretary of industries ministry Nurul Amin and Jamaat-e-Islami leader Motiur Rahman Nizami.

The plant site was said to have been used for trans-shipment of weapons for ULFA.

Former chief of Bangladesh’s National Security Intelligence ex-brigadier general Abdur Rahim, a former DGFI director as well, was also sentenced to death but he died a normal death in prison as the appeal and death hearing process was underway.

Nizami, a former minister in the past Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)-Jamaat alliance government, however, was hanged several years ago on charges of crimes against humanity during Bangladesh’s 1971 Liberation War siding with the Pakistani troops while his party was opposed to the country’s independence.

Battered by regional tensions and energy crisis, Iran’s rial hits record low

AP ■ TEHRAN

The Iranian rial on Wednesday fell its lowest level in history, losing more than 10% of its value since Donald Trump won the US presidential election in November and signalling new challenges for Tehran as it remains locked in the wars raging in the Middle East.

The rial traded at 777,000 rials to the dollar, traders in Tehran said, down from 703,000 rials on the day Trump won.

Iran’s Central Bank has in the past

flooded the market with more hard currencies as an attempt to improve the rate.

In an interview with state television Tuesday night, Central Bank Gov. Mohammad Reza Farzin said that the supply of foreign currency would increase and the exchange rate would be stabilised. He said that \$220 million had been injected into the currency market.

The currency plunged as Iran ordered the closure of schools, universities, and government offices on Wednesday due to a worsening

energy crisis exacerbated by harsh winter conditions. The crisis follows a summer of blackouts and is now compounded by severe cold, snow and air pollution.

Despite Iran’s vast natural gas and oil reserves, years of underinvestment and sanctions have left the energy sector ill-prepared for seasonal surges, leading to rolling blackouts and gas shortages.

In 2015, during Iran’s nuclear deal with world powers, the rial was at 32,000 to \$1. On July 30, the day that Iran’s reformist President



Masoud Pezeshkian was sworn in and began his term, the rate was 584,000 to \$1. Trump unilaterally withdrew

America from the accord in 2018, sparking years of tensions between the countries that persist today.

Iran’s economy has struggled for years under crippling international sanctions over its rapidly advancing nuclear program, which now enriches uranium at near weapons-grade levels.

Pezeshkian, elected after a helicopter crash killed hard-line President Ebrahim Raisi in May, came to power on a promise to reach a deal to ease Western sanctions.

Tensions still remain high between the nations, 45 years after the 1979 US Embassy takeover and the 444-day hostage crisis that followed. Before the revolution, the rial traded at 70 for \$1.

Iran remains deeply involved in the Middle East conflicts that have roiled the region, with its allies battered — including the militant groups and fighters of its self-described “axis of resistance,” such as Palestinian Hamas, Lebanon’s Hezbollah and Yemen’s Houthis rebels.

Sensex, Nifty extend losses into 3rd session on foreign fund outflows

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Equity benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty stayed on the back foot for the third straight session on Wednesday as investors offloaded utility, capital goods and metal stocks amid foreign fund outflows. Besides, investor sentiment remained subdued ahead of the outcome of the US Federal Reserve's policy meeting, scheduled for Wednesday, traders said. The 30-share BSE benchmark tumbled 502.25 points or 0.62 per cent to settle at 80,182.20, taking its downtrend to the third day. During the day, it tanked 634.38 points or 0.78 per cent to 80,050.07. As many as 2,563 stocks declined while 1,442 advanced and 94 remained unchanged on the BSE. The NSE Nifty declined 137.15 points or 0.56 per cent to 24,198.85.

"The near-term market construct has turned weak, with FIIs turning sellers on rallies. Yesterday's massive FII sell figure of Rs 6,410 crore in the cash market indicates that more selling is in store on market bounces. "The focus of global markets today will be the Fed decision expected tonight. A 25 bps rate cut is priced in by the market. So, the attention will be on the Fed commentary," VK Vijayakumar, Chief Investment Strategist, Geojit Financial Services, said. From the 30-share blue-chip pack, Tata Motors, Power Grid, NTPC, Adani Ports, JSW Steel, ICICI Bank, Larsen & Toubro and Bajaj Finance were the main laggards. In contrast, Tata Consultancy Services, Reliance Industries, Tech Mahindra and HCL Technologies were the gainers. "Nifty fell for the third consecutive session, losing 137



points amid selling pressure ahead of the US Fed's interest rate decision later on Wednesday. Over these three sessions, Nifty dropped by 2.3 per cent. "FII selling intensified on Tuesday as they offloaded equities worth Rs 6,400 crore, inducing cautiousness in Indian markets. Investors will also watch out for interest rate

decisions of Japan and England as well as US Q3 GDP data to be released tomorrow. We expect markets to remain sideways with the Fed commentary determining the near-term direction," Siddhartha Khemka, Head - Research, Wealth Management, Motilal Oswal Financial Services Ltd, said. The BSE smallcap index declined 0.76 per cent, and the midcap gauge dipped 0.61 per cent. Among sectoral indices, utilities tanked 2.06 per cent, power (1.78 per cent), capital goods (1.56 per cent), metal (1.44 per cent), industrials (1.30 per cent) and financial services (1.20 per cent). BSE Focused IT, healthcare and IT were the gainers. The rupee dropped 3 paise to close at an all-time low of 84.94 (provisional) against the US dollar on Wednesday. "Investors shunned stocks led by banking ahead of the out-

come of the US rate decision with a focus on the Fed chairman's commentary on inflation and growth outlook in the backdrop of the worsening global economic situation. "The rupee continuing its downward trajectory and hitting fresh lows also dampened the sentiment, as extended fall could further worsen trade deficit and hit inflation going ahead," Prashantha Tapse, Senior VP (Research), Mehta Equities Ltd, said. Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth Rs 6,409.86 crore on Tuesday, according to exchange data. In Asian markets, Seoul, Shanghai and Hong Kong settled higher, while Tokyo ended lower. European markets were trading in the positive territory in mid-session deals. Wall Street ended lower on Tuesday. Global oil benchmark Brent crude climbed 0.48 per cent to

USD 73.67 a barrel. "15 companies are set to launch their IPOs by December 20, 2024, with many more in the pipeline. This surge in IPO activity is drawing substantial liquidity from the market, adding pressure to major indices. "FIIs, who are major participants in the Indian equity markets, often wind down their trading activities towards the end of the year due to the Christmas Holiday in Europe and North America. This reduced participation can lead to lower demand for Indian equities, adding pressure to the Nifty," Vinit Bolinjkar - Head of Research at Ventura Securities, said. Falling for the second day in a row, the BSE benchmark tanked 1,064.12 points or 1.30 per cent to settle at 80,684.45 on Tuesday. The Nifty tumbled 332.25 points or 1.35 per cent to 24,336.

Bihar to host 2nd edition of investor meet on Dec 19-20

PTI ■ PATNA

After an impressive maiden show, Bihar will on December 19-20 host the second edition of Bihar Business Connect - the global investor summit that looks at boosting industrial and entrepreneurial growth in the state. The prestigious event, curated by the state's Department of Industries, seeks to showcase Bihar as a vibrant investment destination. "The inaugural edition in 2023 witnessed participation from over 600 entrepreneurs from India and abroad. Bihar Business Connect 2023 was a landmark initiative. During the two-day summit held last year, a total of 278 investment proposals amounting to Rs 50,530 crore were signed as MoUs, out of which 244 projects worth Rs 38,000 crore have already been implemented on the ground," an official statement said. This investment has significantly accelerated industrial development in the state and created numerous employment opportunities. "Considering the success of last year's Bihar Business Connect, the Department of Industries, Government of Bihar, is once again organising this event," it said. "Bihar, once known for its agricultural heritage, is now emerging as a hub for industrial transformation, entrepreneurship, and infrastructure



development." The event will feature Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, senior ministers of the state government, prominent industrialists, policymakers, and regional experts. This two-day conference aims to establish Bihar as a premier destination for industries and investors while showcasing the state's economic and industrial growth potential. The Bihar government has introduced several reforms and policy initiatives to encourage investment across various sectors. The Bihar Industrial Investment Promotion Policy 2016 offers tax exemptions, subsidies, and incentives to promote

industrial growth. Besides, there are sector-specific policies that target investments in high-potential industries like textiles, leather, logistics, biofuels, IT, and renewable energy. Under the Startup Bihar Policy, a fund of Rs 500 crore dedicated to fostering innovation and entrepreneurship has been set up. The state's Export Promotion Policy looks to boost global trade through facilities like Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and export packhouses. With a Single-Window Clearance System and an investor-friendly administration, Bihar prioritises ease of doing business to attract

domestic and international investors, the statement said. Key focus areas of Bihar Business Connect 2024 include manufacturing sector, infrastructure and connectivity, and exports. Bihar's manufacturing sector is undergoing rapid development, with a focus on textile cluster and bag manufacturing, military footwear exports, ethanol plants and food processing units. The state has implemented several initiatives to empower MSMEs and startups. Under the Mukhyamantri Udyami Yojana, financial assistance of up to Rs 10 lakh for entrepreneurs from marginalized groups, including women,

scheduled castes/tribes, and persons with disabilities is provided. Over 21 incubation hubs are fostering innovation and providing a platform for startups. Also, affordable plug-and-play workspaces in Patna and Purnia are supporting emerging enterprises. Bihar has witnessed unprecedented growth in infrastructure development. The state ranks third in road density in India, facilitating smoother trade and transport. Its energy capacity has expanded from 700 MW to 7,000 MW. IT parks and upcoming data centers are propelling digital growth across the state. Projects like the Multi-Modal Logistics Park (MMLP) in Patna provide integrated supply chain solutions. "Bihar is positioning itself as a hub for global trade with focused infrastructure and policies," it said. Bihar's Industry & Tourism Minister Nitish Mishra will inaugurate the two-day event. The session will include the signing of initial MoUs and 4-5 sector-specific sessions, with a special focus on MSMEs and startups. A CEO roundtable is planned on the second day. "Significant MoUs will be signed in the presence of Nitish Kumar," the statement said adding during plenary sessions, key insights will be shared regarding Bihar's industrial potential and policy framework.

Tata Power-DDL awarded prestigious 'Certificate of Merit in DISCOM sector'



Tata Power Delhi Distribution Limited (Tata Power-DDL), a leading power utility supplying electricity to a populace of around 9 million in North Delhi, has been awarded with the prestigious 'Certificate of Merit in the DISCOM sector' at the 34th National Energy Conservation Awards (NECA) 2024. The award ceremony was organised by the Bureau of Energy Efficiency (BEE) under the Union Ministry of Power (MoP) on the occasion of National Energy Conservation Day at Vigyan Bhavan in New Delhi. The 'Certificate of Merit' was

received by Kiran Gupta, Chief - Customer Experience, Commercial, Govt. Affairs, EAC & Consumer Litigation, Shashank Sharma, HoD - G&I, E&S, NBS & Street Light Projects and Kapil Kumar, HoD - PSC, BD & Storage on behalf of Tata Power-DDL. The award was presented in the esteemed presence of Minister of State for Power and New & Renewable Energy, Shripad Naik. The event was attended by many dignitaries from the government and private industries. Tata Power-DDL has been a pioneer in energy conservation, actively participating and advocating in demand-side management programs. The company's flagship initiatives, including Urja Arpan and

behavioural demand response programs, aim to optimize energy usage while empowering consumers to reduce their carbon footprint. Commenting on the accolade, Gajanan S. Kale, Chief Executive Officer, Tata Power Delhi Distribution Limited said, "At Tata Power-DDL, energy efficiency and sustainability are at the core of our operations. We are honored to receive the 'Certificate of Merit' at the prestigious 'National Energy Conservation Awards 2024'. This recognition motivates us to continue driving impactful energy conservation initiatives and inspires us to lead by example in building a greener, more sustainable future for all."

Gold falls Rs 200 to Rs 79,100 per 10 gm; silver rises Rs 500

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Gold prices fell Rs 200 to Rs 79,100 per 10 grams in the national capital on Wednesday amid a firm trend in international markets, according to the All India Sarafa Association. The precious metal of 99.9 per cent purity settled at Rs 79,300 per 10 grams in the previous session. Snapping a three-day losing run, silver climbed Rs 500 to Rs 92,000 per kg on Wednesday. It closed at Rs 91,500 per kg on Tuesday. In the last three sessions, the white metal plunged Rs 5,500 per kg. The price of gold of 99.5 per cent purity slipped Rs 200 to Rs 78,700 per 10 grams from the previous close of Rs 78,900 per 10 grams on Tuesday. Gold remains on the defensive as the market braces for the outcome of the US Federal Reserve's (Fed) meeting, which can provide forward guidance for bullion prices, experts said. Meanwhile, in futures trade on the MCX, gold contracts for February delivery went up Rs 74, or 0.1 per cent, to trade at Rs 76,945 per 10 grams. "Gold continues to trade within a range as market participants await the Fed's policy announcement tonight, with increased focus on the 2025 outlook and concerns surrounding the job market," Jateen Trivedi, VP Research Analyst of Commodity and Currency, LKP Securities, said. In MCX, gold is trading near Rs 76,950. The policy



statement is expected to set the tone for the next leg of movement in gold prices, Trivedi added. However, silver contracts for March delivery slipped Rs 45, or 0.05 per cent, to Rs 90,830 per kg on the exchange. Comex gold futures in the Asian trading session rose 0.08 per cent to USD 2,664.10 per ounce. Gold prices declined on Wednesday as the US dollar's strength and better-than-expected US retail sales data weighed down on bullion, Saumil Gandhi, Senior Analyst - Commodities at HDFC Securities, said. "The solid consumer spending, along with the US economic resiliency and warmer inflation data in recent months, implies that the Fed may stop its rate-cutting cycle at the January meeting, which acts as negative for precious metals, Gandhi said. Meanwhile, silver traded flat

at USD 30.92 per ounce in the global markets. "Gold and silver slipped under pressure from a strengthening US dollar, climbing Treasury yields, mixed US economic data and ceasefire updates," Manav Modi, Analyst, Commodity Research at Motilal Oswal Financial Services Ltd, said. Traders will focus on macro-economic data such as the US housing, GDP and inflation, which could provide more insights on the trajectory of the gold and silver prices, Modi said. According to traders, investors will be looking for clues about the outcome of the FOMC rate decision and focus on the Fed Chair Jerome Powell's commentary at the post-meeting news conference and the updated economic estimates. This, in turn, will influence the dollar and provide some impetus to the gold price, they said.

We have to wait and watch to see how it pans out: Official on Trump's tariff threat

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Imposing reciprocal duties violates global trade rules but one has to follow a "wait and watch" approach to US President-elect Donald Trump's remarks on imposing reciprocal tariffs, a senior official said on Wednesday. US President-elect Donald Trump has said that India charges a lot of tariffs, reiterating his intention to impose reciprocal tariffs in retaliation for what New Delhi will impose on the import of certain American products. Trump made these remarks on Tuesday and also said that India and Brazil were among countries that impose high tariffs on certain US products. "It will be very difficult to decipher from one or two sentences which Mr Trump makes but if I understood from what he was saying, His main intent is that reciprocity will matter in future. So if you are putting a tax on Harley-Davidson (bikes) we will also put a tax on your motorbike exports. So from that point of view, this will be in clear violation of the WTO (World Trade Organization) norms but there are instances when Mr Trump has used measures like Section 232 of the Tariff Act which allows the US to take unilateral measures against countries on national security grounds. "So one will have to wait and watch and see," Director General of Foreign Trade (DGF) Santosh Kumar Sarangi said here at CII's export competitiveness event. He said that there are many areas where India has tariff peaks but the country does not necessarily export those to the



American products. He has criticised India's "big tariffs" on American paper products and the iconic Harley-Davidson bikes. The US was the largest trading partner of India in 2023-24. India's exports stood at USD 77.51 billion, while imports aggregated at USD 42.2 billion in the last fiscal. In FY2024, India's top exports to the US included medicines (USD 8 billion), Garments and Made-ups (USD 7.5 billion), Cut and Polished Diamonds (USD 5.6 billion), Smartphones (USD 5.6 billion), Solar Cells (USD 1.9 billion), Shrimps (USD 1.7 billion), Gold Jewellery (USD 3.3 billion), Auto Parts (USD 2.1 billion), Steel (USD 475 million), and Articles of Steel (USD 2.8 billion). Commenting on the Trump remarks, think tank GTRI said while Indian tariffs comply with WTO rules, the proposed Trump tariffs would violate them. In 2019, Trump repeatedly claimed that India is a "tariff king" and imposes "tremendously high" tariffs on

Reliance Nippon Life starts negotiation with IndusInd Bank on bancassurance tie up

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Reliance Nippon Life Insurance, a subsidiary of debt-ridden Reliance Capital (RCAP), has initiated talks with IndusInd Bank for bancassurance partnership as the IIHL and RCAP deal has reached the final lap. Mauritius-based IndusInd International Holdings Ltd (IIHL), the parent entity of IndusInd Bank, won the bid to acquire RCAP and entities under it. "IIHL and Japan-based Nippon Life have struck a good understanding and they are absolutely clear about promoting the insurance business. This augurs very well for the business and policyholders as IIHL has a very strong capital base and a solid global aspiration in BFSI space," Reliance Nippon Life Insurance CEO Ashish Vohra told PTI. Hinduja Group company IIHL is expecting to complete the acquisition of RCAP by next month nearly a year after the National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT) approved its rescue plan. "Bancassurance was a missing link in our structure and we have started exploring the possibility with IndusInd Bank and we are already in dialogue to strike a win-win deal for all stakeholders," he said. At the same time, he said, the company has started talks with other financial institutions as the regulation allows more than one such tie-up. IndusInd Bank serves about 41 million customers through 3,040 branches/banking out-



lets and 3,011 ATMs across India. "Most of the approvals and procedures related to the resolution process of Reliance Capital are complete. Couple of the procedures at the end of the administrator and CoC are to be completed. We hope that all these will be over in the next 4-6 weeks and RCAP should come into the fold of Hinduja Group by the end of January," IIHL Chairman Ashok P Hinduja had said earlier this month. As soon as delisting of shares is over, money will be handed over to RCAP debtors, he said, adding that delisting usually takes 4-6 weeks. Sharing the road map for business expansion, Hinduja had said the focus will be on value creation, bancassurance and digitalisation to improve customer and policyholder experience. He emphasised that the bancassurance model creates value for all stakeholders - banks as well as the insurance companies. "We aim to establish relationships on terms that are beneficial for all parties involved," he had said.

Vinicius Júnior and Aitana Bonmati win FIFA best player of the year awards

AP ■ DOHA

Real Madrid star Vinicius Júnior finally got his hands on a big global player award on Tuesday. Vinicius was named the men's player of the year at the FIFA's "The Best" awards, where Barcelona playmaker Aitana Bonmati continued to clean up in the prizes for women's soccer. The 24-year-old Vinicius was so disappointed to lose out to Manchester City midfielder Rodri for the Ballon d'Or in October that he and his Madrid team snubbed the ceremony in Paris in protest. This time Rodri ended up second to Vinicius by five points. The Brazil forward was at the FIFA ceremony to collect his award having travelled to Doha on Monday with Madrid for the Intercontinental Cup final against Pachuca. "I don't even know where to begin," Vinicius said in Portuguese. "It was so far away that it seemed impossible to get

here. I was a kid who only played football barefoot on the streets of São Gonçalo, close to poverty and crime. "Getting here is something very important to me. I'm doing it for many children who think that everything is impossible and who think they can't get here." Vinicius echoed those sentiments in an Instagram post, where he took a thinly-disguised dig at presumably the Ballon d'Or voters — journalists from the top 100 countries in the FIFA rankings. "Today I am writing to that boy who saw so many idols lift this trophy... Your time has come," he wrote. "Or rather, my time has come. The time to say... Yes, I am the best player in the world and I fought hard for it. "They tried and still try to invalidate me, to diminish me. But they are not prepared. No one is going to tell me who I should fight for, how I should behave." Vinicius has been subjected to racist abuse in Spain and at one point earlier this year said he was "losing my desire to play" but



added "I'll keep fighting." Bonmati won the award for best women's player of the year



making it back-to-back prizes at FIFA's version of the older and more prestigious Ballon d'Or prize. The 26-year-old Spain midfielder has won the Ballon d'Or for two

straight years, and won the Spanish league, Spanish cup and Champions League with Barcelona in 2024. "I am grateful to receive this award. As I always say, this is a team effort," Bonmati said. "It was a great year, very difficult to repeat. I am grateful to the people who help me to be better every day, from the club, to my teammates, who always help me to be better." FIFA said the award winners were decided by an "equally weighted voting system" by fans, the current captains and coaches of all national teams, and media representatives. There was an 11-player shortlist for both awards, with the contenders selected based on their performances from Aug. 21, 2023, to Aug. 10, 2024. Vinicius had the best season of his career, scoring 24 goals in 39 appearances for Madrid and helping the Spanish team to a record-extending 15th European Cup — and his second Champions League trophy.

He also netted in the final, becoming the youngest player to score in two Champions League finals. Madrid teammate Jude Bellingham was third, ahead of Dani Carvajal and Lamine Yamal, with Lionel Messi — who had won the award the previous two years — sixth. Madrid manager Carlo Ancelotti was named best men's coach, and United States coach Emma Hayes took the women's prize. Hayes steered the USWNT to Olympic gold in Paris in August. Their shotstopper, Alyssa Naeher, was given the women's goalkeeper award. Aston Villa and Argentina goalkeeper Emiliano Martínez won the men's prize for the second straight year. Alejandro Garnacho won the FIFA Puskás Award for the best goal, for his sensational overhead strike for Manchester United against Everton in November 2023. Marta won the award that is named after her — the inaugural FIFA Marta Award — for her goal for Brazil against Jamaica in June.



Six teams pick 48 players in draft for World Pickleball League

PTI ■ MUMBAI

A total of 48 players were picked by six franchises in the player draft for the inaugural edition of the World Pickleball League which will be held here next month. While the players draft consisted of 75 players from 20 countries, the tournament will feature men and women players from 14 countries including India, Japan, Spain, South Korea, Australia and the United Kingdom. The WBPL, which works closely with All Indian Pickleball Association (AIPA), is co-founded by former Indian tennis players Gaurav Natekar and Arati Ponnappa Natekar and will be held from January 24 to February 2. The six franchises in the tournament will represent Chennai, Mumbai, Pune, Hyderabad, Bengaluru, and Delhi. The owners were guided by the league during the player draft here on Wednesday. "To ensure that the draft process was smooth, fair and transparent, we curated a special in-house software that consisted of all the necessary information about the players," Natekar said. "We wanted to pick some of the best players across the globe and have a combination of players who are experienced as well as new, young talent. We also wanted to give our Indian players a chance to shine so we had mandated each team that one player should be from India in each team," Natekar told PTI. A total of eight players will be in each team including four men and as many women including a mandatory Indian

player. The league format will comprise of a round-robin stage, where each team plays against the other resulting in 15 ties. Each tie featuring five games including men's singles, women's singles, doubles in each category and mixed doubles," the league said. "Each team will play a total of 5 ties, at the group stage, the top four teams going forward to semi-finals and finals. Giving fans the opportunity to witness a total of 90 matches during the entire duration of the league," it added. Squads: Delhi: Alexa Schull, Isha Lakhani, Eduardo Irizarry, Willy Chung, Lauren Mercado, Leander Lazaro, Kenta Miyoshi, Aiko Yoshitomi. Pune: William Sobek, Molly Knaggs, Vanshik Kapadia, Brooke Revuelta, Louis Laville, Molly O'Donoghue, Mateusz Matysik, Rocio Cardo. Mumbai: Brandon Lane, Glauca Carvahal Lane, Mayur Patil, Sabrina Dominguez, Mihae Kwon, Kim Eung Gwon, Bartosz Karbownik, Katie Morris. Bengaluru: Jack Foster, Katerina Stewart, Vrushali Thakare, Trang Hyunh McClain, Marcelo Jardim, Alejandra Bobaria, Felix Grunert, Mauro Garcia. Chennai: Maria Klokotzy, Etienne Blaszkewycz, Sonu Vishwakarma, Tanner Tomassi, Thaddea Lock, Edward Perez, Tyra Calderwood, Sarah Jane Lim. Hyderabad: Max Freeman, Ava Cavataio, Kuldeep Mahajan, Ross Whittaker, Madalina Grigoriu, Karolina Owczarek, Ben Cawston, Ludovica Sciaky.

India to face Pakistan in opening match of inaugural Kho Kho World Cup on Jan 13

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Hosts India will face arch rivals Pakistan in the opening match of the inaugural Kho Kho World Cup on January 13, the organisers announced on Wednesday. As many as 24 countries have confirmed their participation in the week-long event (January 13-19), which will be organised at the Indira Gandhi Indoor Stadium in the national capital and at the Noida Indoor Stadium. "The league matches will start on January 13. There will be an opening ceremony on that day and after that the most exciting match of the season, the match between India and Pakistan men's teams will be played," Kho Kho World Cup CEO Vikram Dev Dogra said during a media interaction. "Thereafter, on 14th, 15th and 16th January, the remaining league matches will carry on, following which the



quarterfinals will be held on January 17 and semifinals on January 18 and final on January 19." The tournament will see 21 men's and 20 women's teams competing for the top prizes. Dogra said the national camp for 60 men and 60 women is currently underway at the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium, and the Indian teams for the event will be selected from among these players. Kho Kho Federation of India (KKFI) president and

chairman of the tournament's organising committee, Sudhanshu Mittal announced that Bollywood megastar Salman Khan will be the brand ambassador of the World Cup. "I am announcing with pride that the brand ambassador of the event will be Salman Khan," Mittal said. "I am proud to be associated with the first-ever Kho Kho World Cup 2025. This is not just a tournament — it's a tribute to India's soil, spirit, and strength. All of us,

including me, have played Kho Kho at one point in our lives," Khan said in a message. "It is a sport with non-stop action and relentless spirit that has already captured the global attention. Let's come together and celebrate the soul of Kho Kho on the global stage," he added. USA, England, Germany, Australia, New Zealand and Brazil are among the teams that have confirmed their participation in the tournament. The event will take place in a league-cum-knockout format, for both men and women. Among Asian countries, Indonesia will send only their women's team while all other nations will send both their men and women's squads. Mittal had said that 615 players and 125 support staff will take part in the event. Each team will comprise 15 players, one coach, one manager and international technical officials.



India look to make all-round amends against West Indies

PTI ■ NAVI MUMBAI

India will look to make amends in all areas and counter the West Indies' power game when the two teams face off in the decider of the women's T20I series on Thursday, with regular skipper Harmanpreet Kaur's participation still shrouded in uncertainty. A comprehensive 49-run win in the series opener helped India extend their dominance in the format to nine consecutive victories but West Indies crushed the hosts by nine wickets to level the terms in the second game. The manner in which West Indies cruised to win with 26 balls and nine wickets to spare, hitting a total of 27 fours and two sixes, the visitors left India scrambling for answers. None of the Indian bowlers could pose any threat as heavy dew made their job only tougher. On their part, the West Indies used the conditions to their benefit. They send the balls to the ropes more times rather than attempting to hit sixes which also worked in their favour. The conditions aren't expected to change much in a day's time but India will be required to change a lot in terms of their collective batting and bowling, aside from concerns over the availability of Kaur. Kaur didn't take part in India's fielding innings in the first match last Sunday and missed the second on Tuesday owing to a "niggle in her knee." Her unavailability for the series decider will certainly

rob India off an in-form batter, for Kaur has struck two fifties in her last three T20I outings. Stand-in skipper Smriti Mandhana's second fifty of the series gave India a platform to push on for a competitive total but the rest of the batters could not carry their form from the first game in which they had put a collective show. A visible improvement in the West Indies' tactics to bowl tighter lines and not give width made the batters' job difficult but beyond Mandhana and Richa Ghosh (32), no one else could find their way through a phase where the ball was also losing pace off the surface. In Kaur's absence, the seniors in Jemimah Rodrigues and Deepti Sharma will have to shoulder extra responsibility in the middle order which featured debutant Raghvi Bisht at the number 4 slot in the second game. India will also have to watch out for the all-round threat posed by West Indies veteran Deandra Dottin, who has made a strong impression on this series. The pair of Hayley Matthews and Qiana Joseph provide West Indies a lot of firepower at the top, which again will be a challenge for India to manage. "It would mean a lot to the group if we were able to win this series. But we know in order to do that, we've got to come back and play just as good as we played today or even better. We know it's not going to be easy work," Matthews said after the second game.

India waiting on Harmanpreet's fitness update: Smriti Mandhana

PTI ■ NAVI MUMBAI

Harmanpreet Kaur's participation in India Women's T20I series decider here on Thursday is under doubt after the regular captain was sidelined from the second match having suffered a niggle in her knee during the first game. Smriti Mandhana, who stood in for Kaur as the West Indies levelled the series 1-1 on Tuesday, said the team is awaiting update on Kaur's availability for the third match. "Harman's fitness, (the) BCCI medical team is observing on day-to-day basis. They'll be at a better place to answer that question. I think we'll have to wait for the update from their side," Mandhana told media after India's crushing nine-wicket loss here on Tuesday. Kaur, who turned up for practice here last Saturday with her knee strapped, scored 13 not out in India's big total of 195/4 but she did not take the field in the series-opener here. "Harmanpreet Kaur sustained a niggle in her knee while batting during the first T20I against West Indies. Hence, she remains unavailable for selection for the second T20I. The BCCI Medical Team is monitoring her progress," the team issued a statement ahead of the second T20I



here. Mandhana, meanwhile, brushed aside any concerns regarding her after she copped a blow to her hand towards the end of the second match. "I think (the) finger is fine now. Just that initial impact, where you think that 'oh, it can be wrong,' but it's all good now," Mandhana said. Mandhana, who struck a 41-ball 62 to lead India's charge, said her side did not bowl enough dot balls to put pressure on the free-flowing West Indies batters. "We did try everything to stop them. But Hayley (Matthews) is definitely a quality

player. The executions were not at the mark," she said after her counterpart Matthews hit a 47-ball 85. "As a as a bowling unit, our execution can be better. The only way we can get them out is to put pressure by dot balls. We couldn't do that, even in the start or maybe even after six overs. We couldn't create a lot of dot balls and the pressure was never there." "As a bowling unit we did give a lot of width," Mandhana added. Windies skipper Matthews hailed West Indies' nine-wicket win as a "massive feat." "I think that's our first win against India, as far as I remember probably since (the) 2016 World Cup here, so that's a massive feat for us. However, we feel like it's just the beginning. These are the kind of performances we want to be consistent with," she said. Matthews, who cracked 17 fours in her knock in a brutal display of power-hitting, emphasised on hitting boundaries for a long innings. "T20 cricket is a game where it's probably very boundary oriented. Anytime you are scoring 80 plus, you're probably going to have a lot of boundaries. It's quite motivating coming down here after the first game especially, and being able to level the series one all," she added.

Will await with interest India's bid for 2029 World Championships: WA chief Coe

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

World Athletics President Sebastian Coe says his organisation will "await with interest" India's expected bid for the 2029 World Championships but indicated that there will be tough competition from other countries to get the hosting right of the showpiece. The Athletics Federation of India (AFI) is set to formally express its interest to host the 2029 World Championships when the process is launched in the next few months, in line with the country's plan to stage a series of high-profile events to mount a serious bid for the 2036 Olympics. "The 2029 World Championships, look, we will await with interest (India's

expected bid). I have to tell you, we've got a lot of interest in those Championships already, and the process will open shortly," Coe replied to a PTI question during a virtual conference with the global media. It was in December last year when the AFI first revealed its intention to bid for the 2029 World Championships. The bidding process is expected to start in January-February 2025 along with the publication of a time-line. World Athletics is expected to announce the host city in 2026. Distance running powerhouse Kenya has also declared its interest to host the 2029 World Championships while Britain, which staged the showpiece

in 2017 when the legendary Usain Bolt ran his last international race in London, has also done the same, though not formally. The bidding process for the 2027 World Championships to be held in Beijing, China, began in January 2023 and the announcement of the host city was made in March 2024. The 2025 World Championships will be held in Tokyo. Earlier, the AFI officially submitted its expression of interest to host the World U20 Championships in 2028 when Coe made a two-day visit to India last month. He met Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Sports Minister Mansukh Mandaviya, besides AFI officials.



"I had a very good discussion with Prime Minister (Narendra Modi) and actually was comforted by the recognition that sport, particularly athletics, is probably the most or one of the most accessible sports," Coe said about his discussion with PM Modi. "He (PM Modi) sees (it) as a very key element in the

growth and development of healthy communities, particularly among young people, both mentally and physically. And that was in large part the discussion. "I have to say that I spend a lot of time talking to senior politicians and political leaders. I've rarely found such a commitment to that concept. I was very pleased to hear that commitment." Coe, who is one of the frontrunners to become International Olympic Committee president in the March 2025 elections, said Indian athletics is moving ahead in the right direction, with javelin superstar Neeraj Chopra's achievements being the key to its growth. "AFI chief Adille Sumariwalla is a very

ambitious federation president. We will continue to have good dialogue with India, both at governmental level and certainly at federation level. "And yes, Indian athletics is moving in the right direction. And it's not unhelpful that Neeraj (Chopra) is there on the scene, just reminding people that there is occasionally an alternative to cricket." A few days back, the AFI announced that India will host its maiden World Athletics Continental Tour event -- a bronze level meet -- on August 10 in Bhubaneswar, and Coe said he is delighted with the development. Continental Tour is an annual series of track and field

competitions held under the aegis of World Athletics and it forms the second tier of international one-day meetings after the prestigious Diamond League. "While I was in Mumbai just recently, I received a letter of intent for the the Under 20 World Championships in 2028. "I know Bhubaneswar well. It's a city that staged successful Asian Championships (in 2017). And it's a city that has a commitment to sport and legacy. So, that's a good thing," said Coe, who had attended the Asian Championships in 2017. The host city for the 2028 World U20 Championships will be announced by September next year.

Third Test between India and Australia ends in a draw

PTI ■ BRISBANE

India escaped with a crucial draw in the weather-hit third Test against Australia after intermittent rain wiped out majority of play on day five, leaving the five-match series tantalisingly locked at 1-1. Resuming the day at 252 for nine, India batted for 24 balls and were all out for 260 in their first innings. With limited time left in the day to force a result after majority of the morning session was rained out, the Australian batters came out all guns blazing and stuttered to 89 for seven in 18 overs before making a brave declaration, giving India at least 54 overs to chase down 275. Bad light and rain forced an early tea break soon after with India at 8 for no loss in 2.1 overs. The rain got heavier as the time passed and no play was possible thereafter. The absorbing series is nicely poised going into the Boxing Day Test in Melbourne. India would have fancied chasing 275 on day five but weather

helped them immensely in the game controlled by Australia. Jasprit Bumrah (3/18) was brilliant as usual in the second innings with Mohammed Siraj (2/36) and Akash Deep (2/28) offering good support. Australia's approach in the second essay was brave and questionable at the same time. Nathan McSweeney (4) and Marnus Labuschagne (1) went after balls outside the off-stump and perished while Usman Khawaja (8) and Mitchell Marsh (2) fell to good deliveries. Wickets falling in a heap did not impact Australia's approach as they kept going for the big hits. Skipper Cummins chipped in with two sixes and as many fours before the declaration. In the morning session, lightning and subsequent rain allowed only 24 balls to be bowled. The warning of severe weather was flashed on the digital scoreboard at the Gabba shortly after India were bowled out for 260 in their first innings, handing Australia a lead of 185 runs. Akash Deep (31) was the last man



out, stumped off a Travis Head delivery, bringing an end to a 47-run stand with Jasprit Bumrah (10 not out). The duo had done well to avoid the follow-on on day four. Players were asked to remain in the dressing room and fans were requested to take shelter away from the fence after the visitors were all out. The forecast was largely clear for Brisbane from Thursday onwards but the entire game has been adversely impacted by bad weather with rain forcing multiple stoppages for four out of five days. Only day two of the game was not impacted by weather as Australia coasted to 405 for seven on the back of memorable hundreds from Head and Steve Smith. Going into the fourth Test beginning December 26, India have major concerns in both batting and bowling department which they must address. Barring K L Rahul, who has been India's standout batter on the tour, the star-studded line up has not found a way to negotiate the threats posed by the Australian

pace attack. Skipper Rohit Sharma has been woefully short of runs and after the hundred in Perth, superstar Virat Kohli has struggled with ball outside the off-stump. Majority of the batters have been guilty of playing away from their bodies in challenging conditions. They will need to curb their white-ball instincts to make an impact at MCG. On the bowling front too, it has been effectively a one man show with Jasprit Bumrah doing the heavy lifting in all the games. Mohammed Siraj bowled in the Brisbane Test with a niggler, leaving a question mark over his fitness ahead of the Melbourne game. Akash Deep, who played ahead of Harshit Rana, bowled well in the game but did not have a lot of luck, especially against Smith. He is expected to retain his place the eleven. India have picked three different spinners in the first three Test. It remains to be seen what strategy they adopt for the Boxing Day Test.

Australian captain Cummins denies momentum in India's favour after draw

PTI ■ BRISBANE

Australia captain Pat Cummins is not bothered if India walked away with momentum from the drawn third Test but is pleased that they did not let the visitors exploit better batting conditions in the first innings. Australia, who largely controlled the third Test, declared their second innings at 89/7 to set India a 275-run target but rain prevented an exciting climax. "I can't say I've ever been scared of momentum — don't really care about that. I think we can take a lot from this week," he told media after the end of the contest. "A couple of great partnerships, to be sent in on a (fresh) wicket and

score 450 (445) and then managing to bowl India out for 250 (260) when the conditions were probably a little bit better. We can take a lot from that," he said. Ashwin is one of the all time greats. While the contest expectedly ended in a draw with the series tied 1-1, India's spin great Ashwin announced his immediate retirement from international cricket. Cummins said Ashwin's decision midway through the series was surprising. "Yeah, (the timing was) a bit of a surprise. He's obviously been a fantastic player all around the world really. There aren't too many finger spinners that have that kind of longevity. He'll go down as one of the all-time


greats." (He was) always a fantastic competitor, (we) had a lot of battles against him over the years here in Australia as well over in India. Just a massive respect from our change room to the career that he's had," he said. The home skipper said the Brisbane Test was one of the most frustrating games due to the number of times players were forced off the field. "It's right up there. I can't remember (in the past) even coming close (to) the amount of times we were on and off throughout the five days," he said. "Especially here in Brisbane, I feel like it normally just pelts down for a couple hours and then you're back on and it's clear... yeah, frustrating. (It) felt like we




were ahead of the game for pretty much all of it, but not to be," he added. Hazlewood to miss remainder of series, Head will be fine. Cummins lamented that pacer Josh Hazlewood has been ruled out of the series due to injury but said Travis Head would be fine from a "tight quad" trouble. "Joshy won't be part of the series, which is a real shame. Travis, he'll be fine. It's a bit of a tight quad. He'll be fine for Melbourne," Cummins said. "It's really tough. It's kind of in the story of the last few summers. The extra layer to that is probably one of the most disciplined, professional sports people you'd ever meet," Cummins said while talking further on Hazlewood.



"The way he trains and prepares and goes about... when he's at home, he's in the gym every second day, every day doing whatever it needs to take to try and minimise injuries." "That's an extra kind of blow knowing how much he has put into his body over the last few years to try and play as many Test matches as he can." He continued, "We value him. Unfortunately, he'll miss this series. I don't know when exactly he'll be right to go again. Even in the little snippets you've seen this series, how much we rate him, how much of an impact he can have." Cummins said it has been a tough series for top-order batters while backing Australia rookie Nathan McSweeney ahead of the

team's selection for the remaining two Tests. "The trend in world cricket, pretty much all around the world, is (that) the top three is really hard place to bat at the moment. Particularly here in Australia, the wickets are tough," he said. "I've been really impressed with the way he's (McSweeney) gone about it even today. Someone's starting out his career still being selfless enough to go out there and try and play shots rather than just trying to preserve and get a score." "I'm really impressed with him. Again, (he) hasn't probably scored the runs that he would (have) liked, but he has played some important knocks that have set up a win in Adelaide and a really good result here," he added.





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