



the pioneer

Established 1865

RAIPUR, MONDAY DECEMBER 23, 2024; PAGES 12 & 3

www.dailypioneer.com

PUBLISHED FROM: DELHI | LUCKNOW | BHOPAL | BHUBANESWAR | RANCHI | RAIPUR | CHANDIGARH | DEHRADUN | HYDERABAD | VIJAYWADA

INSIDE

MONEY 10

GOVT TO INFUSE ₹500
CRORE IN IFCI TO IMPROVE
ITS FINANCIAL HEALTH



IOC announces probe after bribery scandal

J GOPIKRISHNAN ■ NEW DELHI

After 'The Pioneer' exposed on US firms a penalty of more than 300 per cent for bribery abroad including HAL, Indian Oil Corporation and Railways, the Indian Oil Corporation (IOC) in a regulatory filing declared probe. Albemarle Corporation, a global specialty chemicals supplier that develops and sells catalysts used in the operation of oil refineries was caught by US Department of Justice for bribing officials in IOC and refineries Indonesia and Vietnam. Albemarle Corporation paid approximately USD 1.14 million in commission to India intermediary company relating to Indian Oil Corporation business and obtained approximately USD 11.14 million in profits on that business between approximately 2009 and 2011," according to a US Department of Justice order dated September 28, 2023. Albemarle was caught for bribery by the US authorities in 2017 and then settled the case in September 2023 by paying a hefty fine of more than USD 198 million to avoid prosecution. In a filing to National and Bombay Stock Exchanges dated December 20, the IOC said it is "neither party to nor is there any allegation against the company in relation to the proceedings" in the US authorities. "However, the company has initiated an internal fact-finding review concerning the incident, which allegedly occurred in



2009 to thoroughly understand the facts surrounding these allegations and to determine the appropriate steps to be taken," IOC said. The state-owned firm said it has "always upheld and is steadfastly committed to maintaining the highest standards of governance, transparency and regulatory compliance across all jurisdictions of its operations." "We assure our stakeholders, partners and employees that we are a law-abiding company, fully compliant with all laws," India's largest oil firm said in the filing. "The Pioneer on December 16 reported that the US Department of Justice's order dated September 28, 2023 says Albemarle Corporation bagged big contracts in Indian Oil Corporation and companies in Indonesia and Vietnam by corrupt practices and bribing of more than 63.5 million dollars. Albemarle is

Million Dollars in Indian Railways, UAE and Turkey to bag contract. The SEC order detailing bribery in HAL says in November 2021, Moog bagged \$ 1,399,328 valued contract for parts and services related to the April 2021 contract tender. Investigation found that 2.5% commission was received as a bribe by "a HAL official." As per the eight page order, Moog Inc paid more than 5,00,000 Dollars as bribe for getting contracts in HAL and Railways. The September 27, 2022 dated Order of Securities and Exchange Commission says that the IT giant Oracle Corporation was engaged in corrupt practices and bribery in India, UAE and Turkey. "In 2019, Oracle India sales employees also used an excessive discount scheme in connection with a transportation company, a majority of which was owned by the Indian Ministry of Railways... One of the sales employees involved in the transaction maintained a spreadsheet that indicated \$67,000 was the "buffer" available to potentially make payments to a specific Indian SOE (State Owned Entity) official. "A total of approximately \$330,000 was funneled to an entity with a reputation for paying SOE officials and another \$62,000 was paid to an entity controlled by the sales employees," states the 10-page order of Securities and Exchange Commission imposing hefty fine of Rs.23 Million Dollars on Oracle, caught for bribery amount of 6.8 Million Dollars.



Photo: Ranjan Dimri/The Pioneer

AAP opens registration for women, seniors aid

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Stepping up the election fever and in a bid to retain its core voter groups ahead of the high-octane Delhi assembly elections, AAP Convenor Arvind Kejriwal on Sunday announced that the registration for the Mukhya Mantri Mahila Samman Yojana, which will provide monthly assistance of Rs 1,000 to women in the city, and 'Sanjeevani Yojana', which will provide seniors over 60 access to free medical treatment at both private and government hospitals, will begin from Monday. In its 2024-25 budget, the Delhi government had announced this scheme to provide Rs 1,000 per month to all women aged above 18. However, Kejriwal recently announced that the amount would be raised to Rs 2,100 if his party returns to power in the assembly elections, slated for February next year. Further, countering the narrative around not implementing Center's 'Ayushman Bharat Yojana' in Delhi, the ruling party announced 'Sanjeevani Yojana' as a healthcare initiative aimed

at providing comprehensive medical care to senior citizens. The program will offer free medical treatment at both government and private hospitals to all Delhi residents aged 60 years and above who possess a Delhi voter ID. With no income-based restrictions, the scheme is designed to benefit over 25 lakh senior citizens. Addressing a press conference, the former Chief Minister stated, "Ever since we have announced this scheme we are getting numerous phone calls regarding the commencement of registration process for this scheme. Today, I am announcing that registration will begin from tomorrow itself." "You don't need to stand in any queues or waste your time. We will come to your doorstep. Across every area of Delhi, AAP has created thousands of teams. These teams will come to your home and will do registration of all the women of the house and give them a registration card (Kejriwal Kavach Card). For your convenience we are sending our teams door to door," he added.

Continued on page 2

Over 100 students from UP stranded in jungle in dark

PTI ■ BAHRAICH (UP)

Over 100 students and school staff accompanying them were left stranded for hours in the evening in the dense Katarniaghat forests in Uttar Pradesh while returning from an educational tour, officials said on Sunday. The children, aged 14-18, were forced to endure harsh cold during their stay under the open sky without food, water or appropriate clothing for the chilly temperatures after school authorities defied warnings by locals to halt their journey at a safe place, they said. There were 155 people in total, 130 of them children, they added. According to the district administration, the group from Gonda district had been on an educational tour organised by the New Standard Training Institute in Dhanapur. According to local social worker Jang Hindustani, the group first attempted to cross the Rupaidiha border to Nepal but was stopped because of border regulations. After being denied entry into Nepal, the managers redirected the buses towards the Katarniaghat Wildlife Sanctuary, known for its dense forests and dangerous wildlife, including leopards, tigers, and elephants. The buses traversed five forest checkpoints before reaching Amba village, deep inside the sanctuary.

Continued on page 2

A RIDE TO MAHAKUMBH



Sadhus of 'Panch Dashnam Avahan Akhara' take part in a religious procession called 'Peshwai', to reach the Mahakumbh ahead of Maha Kumbh Mela 2025, in Prayagraj



Delhi's Republic Day tableau rejected, AAP slams exclusion

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI/CHANDIGARH

In a surprise move, the proposal for Delhi's tableau for the Republic Day parade has been rejected by the expert committee. The committee, which is responsible for selecting the tableaux for the parade, found Delhi's proposal lacking in theme, concept, design, and visual impact. According to sources, the expert committee had shortlisted 15 States and Union Territories for the parade, but Delhi's proposal failed to impress the committee. The other two union territories, Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Lakshadweep, also failed to make the cut. On the other hand, Punjab and West Bengal, which were absent from last year's parade, have made a comeback this year. The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) had made a big issue out of Punjab and Delhi's

exclusion from the parade last year, and it remains to be seen how the party will react to Delhi's exclusion this year. The Republic Day parade, which is held every year on January 26, is a showcase of India's cultural diversity and military might. The parade features tableaux from various states and union territories, which depict their unique culture, history, and achievements. This year, 15 states and union territories will participate in the parade, including Bihar, Chandigarh, Dadra and Nagar Haveli, Goa, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal. The expert committee, which is headed by a senior defense ministry official, had evaluated the proposals from various states and union territories based on their theme, concept, design, and visual impact.

Continued on page 2

Raje's carcade crashes in Rajasthan's Pali

PNS ■ JAIPUR

Three policemen sustained minor injuries when a vehicle of former chief minister Vasundhara Raje's carcade overturned in an attempt to avoid hitting a motorcycle in Rajasthan's Pali district on Sunday, police said. The accident occurred while Raje was on her way to meet former minister Otaram Dewasi to express her



condolence over his mother's death. "Seven policemen were travelling in the car. Some of them have sustained minor injuries," Pali SP Chuna Ram Jat said. Raje left for Mundara village of Pali district by road. A police car which was escorting her between Bali and Kot Baliyan overturned while trying to save a bike rider. A BJP leader said that his car was behind the car which overturned thrice. He said he immediately got down and helped in sending the injured policemen to a hospital.



A day to remember for Indian womens' cricket

PTI ■ KUALA LUMPUR/ VADODARA

Opener G Trisha made a doughty fifty before the left-arm trio of Ayushi Shukla, Sonam Yadav and Parunika Sisodia spun web around Bangladesh batters as India scored a 41-run win to emerge champions in the inaugural Women's T20 U19 Asia Cup here on Sunday. Back home in Vadodara in Gujarat, stylish opener Smriti Mandhana extended her purple patch with a classy 91 off 102 balls, propelling India to 314/9 in the first Women's ODI against the West Indies, here Sunday. On a spongy pitch, Trisha's 52 off 47 balls (5x4, 2x6) guided India to 117 for seven, but Indian spinners cut through the Bangladesh line-up to bundle them out for 76 in 18.3 overs. The biggest partnership in Indian innings, in fact in the match itself, was between Trisha and her skipper Nikki Prasad - a 41-run alliance for the fourth wicket. India batters struggled against pacer Farjana Easmin, who took four wickets. Despite that, India were restricted to a below-par total, and Bangladesh seemed well on track for a win once they reached 44 for two in the seventh over. However, Ayushi (3/17), Sonam (2/13) and Parunika (2/12) took over from that point as Bangladesh lost remaining eight wickets for a mere 32 runs. Brief scores were shared as India's 117/7 in 20 overs (G Trisha 52; Farjana Easmin 4/32) while Bangladesh's 76 all out in 18.3 overs (Juariya Ferdous 22; Ayushi Shukla

3/17, Sonam Yadav 2/13, Parunika Sisodia 2/12). Mandhana, who recorded a 50-plus score for the fifth time in as many innings, got the bulk of the runs in her 110-run stand alongside debutant Pratika Rawal (40 off 69). The launch pad was provided by Mandhana from the middle-order to go big and that is what the likes of Harmanpreet Kaur (34 off 23), Harleen Deol (44 off 50), Richa Ghosh (26 off 12) and Jemimah Rodrigues (31 off 19) did to take India past 300. After dropping hard-hitting Shafali Verma, India have tried multiple batters to open alongside Mandhana and on Sunday it was the turn of Delhi cricketer Pratika, who batted at a strike rate of 57.97. The 24-year-old was also dropped at mid-off when she was batting on three in the 10th over. Her four boundaries came on the leg-side as she employed the sweep multiple times. Mandhana, at the other end, entertained the crowd with her trademark shots including a cover drive and pull. India changed gears after the arrival of fit-again skipper Harmanpreet who struck at close to 150 to give the innings a timely move on. The momentum was carried by Richa and Rodrigues who has been in top form of late. For the West Indies, the pick of the bowlers was left-arm spinner Zaida James who took five wickets for 45 runs in eight overs. India could have got a lot more in the death overs but the last three overs only yielded 20 runs with James picking three wickets in the final over.

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

SAUMYA SHUKLA ■ NEW DELHI

For years, 33 year old Bilal Ahmad Lone spun a web of deception, targeting those who dedicate their lives to the nation's security-para-military officers stationed in the sensitive regions of Jammu & Kashmir. Armed with false promises of easy bank loans, Lone convinced these men to trust him, only to betray them with forged documents and fake deals. However, his endeavor came to an end when Delhi Police's Crime Branch, in a carefully orchestrated operation, tracked him down in the bustling streets of Jama Masjid on Saturday. The police recovered seven Debit Cards of ICICI Bank

issued in name of Central Reserves Police Force (CRPF) Personals from his possession, along with a Lenovo laptop used to create fake documents, Realme phone used for communication, forged stamps, including those purported to be from the J&K Bank and other official agencies and fake documents and cheque books belonging to different banks. A 'Detention Order' was also issued against him by the District Magistrate of Anantnag in Jammu & Kashmir in an order dated December 13 and the same has also been approved by Government of Jammu & Kashmir (Home Department), Civil Secretariat, Jammu/Srinagar



on December 17. Lone, hailing from Kupwara, Jammu & Kashmir, through his schemes defrauded many officers, exploiting them to obtain loans in their names before disappearing with the money. He presented himself as a loan facilitator and preyed on paramilitary personnel who either were looking to buy vehicles or secure personal loans. His fraudulent activities spanned several years, with 14 cases of cheating registered against him in various police stations across Jammu & Kashmir. The Crime Branch received intelligence from the Anantnag police in Jammu & Kashmir about Lone's possible whereabouts in Delhi. "On the basis of technical surveillance

and two days hard ground work by the team, the location of above criminal was found to be in the area of Jama Masjid, Delhi. Accordingly, on December 21, the above team laid a trap at and around Jama Masjid Area and launched an operation to trace him out," Deputy Commissioner of Police (Crime) Vikram Singh said. After an intensive manhunt, the team finally succeeded to locate him and apprehended near Jama Masjid. "Initially, he resisted and tried to create a scene but he was explained about the operation and detention order issued against him by the District Magistrate, Anantnag, Jammu & Kashmir. Continued on page 2

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

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Demonstration of seed germination in outer space, a robotic arm to catch a tethered debris there, and testing of green propulsion systems are some of the experiments planned on the POEM-4 -- the fourth stage of ISRO's PSLV rocket that remains in orbit after launching a satellite. The PSLV-C60 mission, slated for an year-end launch, is scheduled to place the twin satellites 'Chaser and Target' to demonstrate the space docking technologies that are crucial for building India's space station. The PSLV Orbital Experiment Module (POEM) will carry 24 experiments -- 14 from various ISRO labs and 10 from private universities and start-ups -- to demonstrate various technologies in space. ISRO plans to grow eight cowpea seeds from seed germination and plant sustenance until the two-leaf stage in a closed-box environment with active thermal control as part of the Compact Research Module for Orbital Plant Studies (CROPS) developed by the Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre. The Amity Plant Experimental Module in Space (APEMS), developed by Amity University, Mumbai, plans to study the growth of spinach in a micro-gravity environment. Two parallel experiments will be carried out simultaneously -- one on POEM-4 in space and one on the ground at the university. The experiment's outcome will provide insights into how higher plants sense the direction of gravity and light. The Debris Capture Robotic Manipulator, developed by VSSC, will demonstrate the capturing of tethered debris by a robotic manipulator using visual servoing and object motion prediction in the space environment. The robotic manipulator will be capable of capturing free-floating debris in future POEM missions.

PM Narendra Modi receives Kuwait's highest honour



PTI ■ KUWAIT CITY

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

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

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

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

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

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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

Alleged J and K terrorist caught in West Bengal

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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

Delhi's Republic Day Tableau Rejected, AAP Slams Exclusion

From page 1

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

Over 100 students from...

From page 1

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

Woman found dead in Delhi

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

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

Tirumala eyes AI chatbot for pilgrim services

From page 1

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

NDMC chairman awards winners at All India Winter Rose Show



STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

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

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



Massive fire engulfs electronics manufacturing unit in Noida, no casualties

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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

AAP opens registration for women, seniors aid

From page 1

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

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

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

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

From page 1

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

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

Imposter grabs Mahatari Vandan Yojana money

STAFF REPORTER ■
RAIPUR

A fraudster in Chhattisgarh opened an account in the name of actress Sunny Leone and managed to get thousands of rupees disbursed monthly under the state government's Mahatari Vandan Yojana.

Virendra Joshi of Talur village in Bastar district committed the fraud and illegally withdrew money into his bank account, a government statement said on Sunday.

Joshi provided bogus information of a beneficiary as Leone with husband's name as Johnny Sins in the form filled up under the scheme.

He fraudulently received



Rs 1,000 each between March and December 2024.

After the incident came to fore, Bastar Collector Haris S asked the officials to probe into the matter and register a cheating case against the fraudster. The Collector also ordered Joshi's bank account to be withheld to recover the amount. Also, action has been ordered against the Talur Anganwadi worker Vedmati Joshi and a supervisor.

Under the scheme, financial assistance of Rs 1,000 per month is given to married women directly in their bank accounts. Apart from married women, widowed, divorced, abandoned women are also eligible to avail the benefits of the scheme.

Congress alleges BJP is benefiting favourites through official scheme

STAFF REPORTER ■
RAIPUR

Chhattisgarh Congress Chief Deepak Baij alleged on Sunday that the BJP government was using the Mahatari Vandan scheme to benefit its favourites.

Information came to light on Sunday that a man in Bastar was collecting the benefits of the scheme by registering as Bollywood actress Sunny Leone.



The Mahatari Vandan money is going to BJP's favourites in the name of Sunny Leone, he said.

Baij added that if a proper probe was conducted, more fraudsters might be revealed, collecting the benefits in the name of other actresses.

Meanwhile, BJP MLA Sushant Shukla said Mahatari Vandan was a revolutionary initiative aimed at giving economic independence to women. Congress leaders should stop spreading lies and baseless accusations, he said.

Two IAS officers get new postings



STAFF REPORTER ■
RAIPUR

The Chhattisgarh government on Sunday gave fresh posting to two Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officers here.

Amit Kataria (2004 batch) was posted as the Secretary,

Department of Public Health and Family Welfare as well as Medical Education, after his return from central government deputation, an official order said.

Mukesh Bansal (2005 batch) has been appointed the Secretary to Chief Minister Vishnu Deo Sai.

Five Maoist memorials razed in Sukma



STAFF REPORTER ■
SUKMA

Security forces on Sunday demolished five Maoist memorials in Sukma district in Chhattisgarh.

The District Reserve Guard, Special Task Force, Central Reserve Police Force and its CoBRA unit razed the Maoist memorials at Gompuda village.

Dy CM Sao opens 'Hamar Hatri'



STAFF REPORTER ■
DURG

Chhattisgarh Deputy Chief Minister Arun Sao inaugurated the 'Hamar Hatri' set up by the Jeevika Self Help Group in Durg district on Sunday.

The Hatri offers unique collections of handicrafts, regional

clothing and other art from across Chhattisgarh.

Sao said this was the first Hatri of Chhattisgarh, representing the entire art and culture of the state.

This work was a great gift for local artists, he said. There are many artists in Chhattisgarh who need encouragement, he said.

Farmers learn business, technical aspects of agriculture



STAFF REPORTER ■
MAHASAMUND

About 100 farmers in Chhattisgarh's Mahasamund district learnt about the technical and business aspects of agriculture as part of the National Agricultural Development Scheme.

An official communique said on Sunday that the scheme aims to strengthen farmers' efforts, reduce risks and promote agribusiness entrepreneurship.

They received the

training through a seven-day training and tour programme.

An Assistant Professor of agricultural economics, Dr. Mukesh Seth, gave a detailed lecture on crop cost management and profit-loss assessment.

They received guidance on spinach seed production technology, onion cultivation, propagation of fruit plants, vegetable nursery management, jackfruit, lemon and sapota cultivation, livestock feed production, quail rearing and poultry farming.



Glimpses of a mega health camp in Chhattisgarh's tribal-dominated Bastar district on Sunday as part of the National Urban Health Mission.

Many factors distort blood pressure readings: report

AGENCIES ■

Blood pressure readings are often distorted due to skipped steps in measurement, such as sitting posture, arm positioning, recent caffeine intake, or talking during the process. These factors can produce readings higher or lower than normal, highlighting the need for precise procedures to assess cardiovascular health accurately.

"To make meaningful

improvements in cardiovascular health, we need to screen and treat hypertension correctly," said Tammy Brady, a pediatric nephrologist at Johns Hopkins Children's Center, in an interview with The Wall Street Journal.

Accurate blood pressure readings are critical for preventing heart attacks, strokes, and other life-threatening conditions. Guidelines from the American Heart Association recommend

that patients sit with both feet on the ground, legs uncrossed, back straight, and arms supported on a surface. The cuff should be positioned over a bare arm at heart level, and distractions like talking or using a phone should be avoided.

The World Health Organisation reports that 1.28 billion adults worldwide have hypertension, with 46% unaware of their condition.

Last month, an

international study led by the University of Sydney and University College London suggested that even five minutes of daily physical activity, such as walking uphill or stair climbing, could significantly reduce blood pressure. Researchers estimate that replacing 20-27 minutes of sedentary behavior with exercise can lead to clinically meaningful reductions in blood pressure and reduce cardiovascular disease incidence by 28%.

First malaria vaccine shows promise amid rising cases

AGENCIES ■

The first blood-stage malaria vaccine, RH5.1/Matrix-M, has shown promise as a potential component in an evolving malaria vaccine strategy, according to a report.

The report by GlobalData, a data and analytics company, revealed that 11 other malaria vaccines are currently in Phase II development.

A recent study conducted by researchers in Burkina Faso and the UK found that RH5.1/Matrix-M is safe, effective, and highly immunogenic.

The double-blind, randomized, controlled Phase 2b trial involved 361 children aged 5 to 17 months. The findings demonstrated that RH5.1/Matrix-M is 55% effective against clinical

malaria when administered in a delayed third-dose regimen at 0, 1, and 5 months.

Moreover, the vaccine exhibited over 80% efficacy against high levels of malaria parasites, suggesting its potential to prevent severe disease. The trial, published in The Lancet Infectious Diseases, also confirmed that RH5.1/Matrix-M was generally safe and well-tolerated, with no serious adverse events reported.

"RH5.1/Matrix-M has the potential to be the first blood-stage malaria vaccine brought to market. This could serve as a vital addition to existing malaria vaccines and offer an important second line of defense for those most at risk," said Stephanie Kurdach, Infectious Disease Analyst at GlobalData.

Malaria, a mosquito-borne disease caused by Plasmodium protozoans, is primarily transmitted through the bite of infected female Anopheles mosquitoes. Symptoms can range from fever, chills, and headaches to severe manifestations such as confusion, seizures, and difficulty breathing.

Despite progress, including some nations being certified as malaria-free, the disease remains a significant burden, particularly in the World Health Organization's (WHO) African Region, Kurdach noted.

Currently, only two malaria vaccines are WHO-prequalified and recommended for use in children: GSK's Mosquirix and Serum Institute of India's R21/Matrix-M. These vaccines target the early

sporozoite stage of the parasite to intercept infection. However, as immunity wanes over time, sporozoites can infect the liver and lead to blood-stage clinical malaria.

The development of a blood-stage malaria vaccine like RH5.1/Matrix-M could provide a critical second line of defense and potentially replace existing vaccines.

"There are 11 other malaria vaccines in Phase II development, including pre-erythrocytic and blood-stage vaccines from manufacturers such as BioNTech, GSK, the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), and Vac4All SAS," Kurdach said.

However, she added, "No new malaria vaccines are currently in Phase III development or pre-registration."

Autism a significant health burden in India: Study

AGENCIES ■

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a significant health burden in India, according to a study, published in The Lancet Psychiatry journal.

Autism spectrum disorder is a neurological and developmental disorder. The condition majorly affects how people interact, communicate, and behave with others.

The study, based on the Global Burden of Diseases, Injuries, and Risk Factors Study (GBD) 2021, ranks autism among the top 10 causes of non-fatal health burden in youth under 20 years old.

The study showed that India had 708.1 case of ASD per 100,000 persons in 2021. Of these, 483.7 were females, while 921.4 were males. About



140 per 100,000 persons suffered poor health and disability due to ASD in India in 2021.

Globally, an estimated 61.8 million people, or one in every 127 persons were autistic in 2021. The study also showed stark disparities based on gender.

At 1,065 cases per 100,000 males, the global prevalence of

ASD was found to be significantly higher among males. It was almost double the global prevalence among females (508 per 100,000 females), the study showed.

While the high-income Asia Pacific, including Japan, recorded the highest prevalence globally (1,560 per 100,000 people), Tropical Latin America and Bangladesh

reported the lowest number of ASD cases.

"The findings underscore the urgent need for early detection and sustained support for autistic individuals and their caregivers worldwide," said the researchers, while urging the need to prioritise resources for early detection of the disease.

The researchers also called for developing improved diagnostic tools, particularly for adults and those in low and middle-income countries with limited access to care, caregiver support, and services tailored to the evolving needs of autistic individuals across their lifespan.

Further, the team also highlighted the need to improve geographic data coverage and targeted interventions for comorbidities and mortality risks, such as

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 requested 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.

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

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

Coaching Institutes and

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

On November 22, CCPA

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

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

Dhankhar calls for accountability of lawmakers

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI/ THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

STAFF REPORTER ■ GURUGRAM

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

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

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

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

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

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

Some other SIM cards pro-



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

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

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

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



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

body, is not behaving independently," he said.

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

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

While documents such as

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

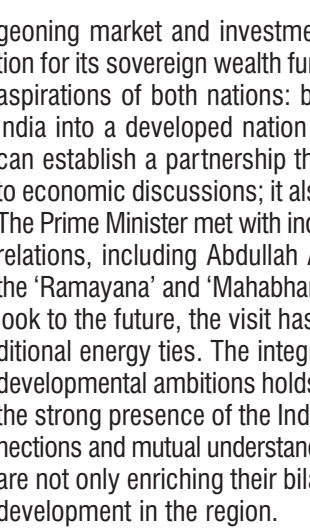
"CCTV coverage, webcasting of polling stations are not carried out under Conduct of Election Rules but are the result of steps taken by the ECI to ensure a level playing field," a former ECI official explained.

Outreach to Kuwait

With a focus on economic cooperation and cultural exchange, PM Modi's Kuwait visit strengthens the ties between the two nations

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent visit to Kuwait marked a historic moment, as he became the first Indian Prime Minister to visit the Gulf nation in over four decades. The visit, at the invitation of Kuwaiti Emir Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, underscores a renewed commitment to strengthening the ties between India and Kuwait. With a focus on economic collaboration, cultural exchange, and mutual prosperity, the visit paves the way for a deepened strategic partnership. India and Kuwait share a relationship that dates back centuries, built on the foundations of trade and cultural exchanges. Over time, this bond has evolved into a robust partnership, encompassing energy, trade and people-to-people connections. Today, Kuwait is a significant energy supplier for India, while Indian expertise and manpower have become indispensable for Kuwait's development. Prime Minister Modi highlighted the enduring solidarity between the two nations, citing instances of mutual support during times of distress. With over one million Indian expatriates residing in Kuwait, the Indian diaspora has played a crucial role in Kuwait's growth, contributing to various sectors including healthcare, engineering and education.

Addressing the expatriate community, Modi praised their efforts, stating, "Their energy, love, and unwavering connection to India are truly inspiring. Proud of their role in strengthening ties between our nations." The economic relationship between India and Kuwait is ripe for expansion. Kuwait, as a key energy supplier, holds strategic importance for India's energy security. Simultaneously, India, with its burgeoning market and investment opportunities, offers Kuwait an attractive destination for its sovereign wealth fund. During his discussions, PM Modi noted the shared aspirations of both nations: building a prosperous 'New Kuwait' and transforming India into a developed nation by 2047. By aligning these goals, the two countries can establish a partnership that drives mutual growth. Modi's visit was not limited to economic discussions; it also celebrated the cultural ties that bind the two nations. The Prime Minister met with individuals who have contributed to fostering Indo-Kuwaiti relations, including Abdullah Al-Baroun, a translator who brought Indian epics like the 'Ramayana' and 'Mahabharata' to Arabic-speaking audiences. As India and Kuwait look to the future, the visit has set the stage for a relationship that goes beyond traditional energy ties. The integration of India's technological expertise with Kuwait's developmental ambitions holds the promise of transformative progress. Furthermore, the strong presence of the Indian diaspora serves as a bridge, fostering deeper connections and mutual understanding. By strengthening this partnership, India and Kuwait are not only enriching their bilateral relationship but also contributing to stability and development in the region.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent visit to Kuwait marked a historic moment, as he became the first Indian Prime Minister to visit the Gulf nation in over four decades.

PICTALK



A woman plucks aster flowers at an orchard, in Nadia

The Role of Indigenous Knowledge in Combating Climate Change: A Legacy of Hope The discourse on climate change dominated discussions at COP 2024, the United Nations Climate Change Conference, held in Baku, Azerbaijan, from November 11 to 22, 2024. Rising global temperatures, depleting natural resources, and rampant environmental degradation have emphasised the urgency of adopting sustainable practices and advancing conservation efforts. Amid this pressing crisis, the role of indigenous communities in preserving the environment emerges as a beacon of hope. Often referred to as the "guardians of nature," these communities have safeguarded ecosystems for centuries through their traditional knowledge, sustainable practices, and deep connection to the land. One exemplary figure embodying this harmonious relationship with nature was Padma Shri Tulsi Gowda. Known as the "Encyclopedia of the Forest" and affectionately called the "tree goddess" by her Halakki Vokkaliga tribe in Karnataka, Tulsi Gowda's life and work illustrate the profound impact of indigenous wisdom on environmental preservation. With an unwavering commitment to nature, she planted 30,000 saplings during her lifetime, nurturing them with meticulous care.

Tulsi Gowda passed away on December 16, 2024, at the age of 86, leaving behind an inspiring legacy of environmental stewardship. Growing up in poverty, Tulsi Gowda's love for plants and forests remained unparalleled. From an early age, she worked in plant nurseries, demonstrating extraordinary skill in nurturing saplings. Her unique ability to identify the "mother tree" of any species exemplified her deep ecological understanding. Tulsi Gowda herself believed, "It's not important how many plants you have planted; what matters is how much care you've taken of those saplings." The contribution of indigenous communities to environmental conservation extends far beyond India. Globally, these communities represent less than 5 per cent of the world's population but protect 80 per cent of the planet's biodiversity, according to the United Nations. Their traditional ecological knowledge, passed down through generations, serves as a crucial tool for sustainable resource management. For instance, the Kayapo tribe in Brazil has successfully defended the Amazon rainforest from logging, mining, and industrial agriculture, preserving a vital carbon sink. Brazilian environmentalist and politician Dr. Marina Silva emphasised, "The Kayapo teach us that protecting forests is not just about climate, but about life itself." Similarly, the Sámi people of Scandinavia maintain ecological balance in Arctic regions through sustainable reindeer herding practices. In New Zealand, the Maori concept of kaitiakitanga (guardianship) promotes a cultural commitment to environmental stewardship, influencing national policies. The Ogiek of Kenya, through sustainable honey harvesting, continue to conserve the Mau Forest, a critical water catchment area. This echoes Wangari Maathai's belief that "The future of our forests lies in the hands of those who understand them best - indigenous communities."



Indigenous communities represent less than 5 per cent of the world's population but protect 80 per cent of the planet's biodiversity, according to the United Nations.



THE CHIPKO MOVEMENT OF THE 1970S, WHERE VILLAGERS IN UTTARAKHAND HUGGED TREES TO PREVENT DEFORESTATION, DREW INSPIRATION FROM THE BISHNOI'S SACRIFICE. IN 2021, A SIMILAR INITIATIVE SAVED OVER 500 SACRED OAK TREES IN JAAKHNI VILLAGE, UTTARAKHAND, NEAR FORESTS DEDICATED TO THE LOCAL GODDESS OF JUSTICE

India, too, has a rich tradition of indigenous environmental stewardship. The Bishnoi community of Rajasthan, one of the earliest champions of conservation, exemplifies this ethos. Their sacrifice during the 1730 Khejarli Massacre, where 363 Bishnois gave their lives to protect sacred Khejri trees, remains a cornerstone of ecological movements. Similarly, the Dongria Kondh tribe of Odisha has valiantly defended the Niyamgiri Hills from destructive mining activities, preserving their sacred land and biodiversity. The Apatani tribe of Arunachal Pradesh showcases innovative sustainability through wet-rice cultivation and fish farming, while the Soliga tribe of Karnataka safeguards the Biligiriranga Hills using indigenous forest management techniques. Such efforts have inspired broader environmental movements. The Chipko Movement of the 1970s, where villagers in Uttarakhand hugged trees to prevent deforestation, drew inspiration from the Bishnoi's sacrifice. In 2021, a similar initiative saved over 500 sacred oak trees in Jaakhni village, Uttarakhand, near forests dedicated to the local Goddess of Justice. From the hills of Uttarakhand to the sacred groves of Meghalaya, these movements highlight India's enduring envi-

ronmental heritage. Despite their invaluable contributions, indigenous communities face significant challenges, including marginalisation, land dispossession, and exploitation. Empowering indigenous communities to take leadership roles in environmental management has already shown promising results. For example, joint forest management initiatives have demonstrated effective resource management and biodiversity conservation. Combining indigenous knowledge with modern scientific approaches can create innovative strategies for addressing environmental challenges. Practices like the Zuni tribe's waffle gardens in New Mexico, which conserve water in arid regions, exemplify the sophistication of indigenous ecological wisdom. In an era of environmental crises, humanity must embrace the profound knowledge of indigenous communities to forge a sustainable future. Their traditions, deeply rooted in respect for nature, hold the key to restoring ecological balance. By integrating their wisdom into global conservation strategies, we can create a world that honors the delicate harmony between humanity and the natural world. (The writer is Programme Executive, Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti; views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

SC CONDEMNS WITCHCRAFT PRACTICES

Madam—Recently the Supreme Court reprimanded the Patna High Court for staying proceedings in a case involving the abuse of women accused of witchcraft, highlighting the issue as a violation of Constitutional values. The Court condemned the practice of witchcraft as rooted in superstition and patriarchal control, urging for protective measures and social change to combat such discrimination against vulnerable women. The Supreme Court took a strong stance against the victimisation of vulnerable women under the guise of witchcraft, calling it a "blot" on the constitutional spirit. SC has rightly said that the incident that took place in the 21st century was shocking and underlined the failure of legislative, executive and judicial measures to protect vulnerable sections of society. In India, witchcraft allegations are often directed at women who are either widows or elderly. The Court has also observed that the incidents against women accused of witchcraft go against the spirit of the Constitution because they undermine dignity. SC has expressed shock at cases where women have been physically abused and directed in public over witchcraft allegations. The number of witchcraft-related cases reported to the NCRB has been increasing in recent years. The Prevention of Witch Practices Act in Jharkhand criminalises accusations of women as witches. Criminalisation and punishment of those involved in witch hunting is the most appropriate way to end superstition and harmful practices and provide redress to victims.

P Victor Selvaraj | Tirunelveli

DELHI NEEDS DEVELOPMENT

Madam—Apropos of the news 'BJP shortlists candidates for Delhi as manifesto campaign gains momentum' (Dec 21), it is a welcome sign and heartening that BJP prioritises and takes the lead to frame Sankalp Patra, as they call it a political manifesto, with public opinion. BJP has got over 40,000 suggestions, which shows public

Dhaka takes anti-India stance



India's relations with Bangladesh are passing through a difficult phase after the Sheikh Hasina government succumbed before violent protests led by students in the first week of August. All development after her fall is quite worrisome for New Delhi. No doubt it was a foregone conclusion that Dhaka will no longer follow a pro-India policy. But Bangladesh is hell-bent upon destroying the cordial and bilateral relations that New Delhi crafted with the Sheikh Hasina regime. The ouster of the liberal Sheikh Hasina regime has embold-

ened Jamat-e-Islami-led Islamic extremists who are now targeting not only religious minorities but also Sufi shrines and the press. Unfortunately, the Muhammad Yunus government is only interested in fanning up anti-India sentiments in the country instead of containing sectarian violence. The arrest of Hindumonk Chinmoy Krishna Das on sedition charges shows its true colours. Internationally too, Dhaka is interested in joining hands with anti-India forces, particularly China and Pakistan, and Yunus's second meeting with Shahbaz Sharif in the last four months. The anti-India approach of the Yunus government can be measured by a post of Yunus' close aide, Mahfuz Alam, in which he threatened to "annex" parts of India. Before Dhaka intends to go to Islamabad's way, it must not forget that New Delhi holds significant leverage over it in terms of both economy and geopolitics.

Manoj Parashar | Ghaziabad

association with its manifesto. BJP has a large number of MLA aspirants, so the delay in the declaration of candidates is directly proportional to the number of candidates. The manifesto should target the new generation and focus on implementations of the New Education Policy 2000, which echoes in the Lt. Governor's initiative in Samvad@Rajnivas. DDA, MCD and NDMC may be associated in setting up government libraries across Delhi for students and teachers. Traffic jam is the perennial issue for Delhiites, and it is easy to spot the trouble areas. Delhi needs more flyovers across Dwarka and East Delhi. The pollution in Delhi is also a serious concern, and anti-fogging machines need to be installed on major roads. The waste and garbage dumps, particularly in Gazipur Chowk and Janakpuri, deface and stink Delhi. Delhi Government needs to implement the plans. The beggar problem at road crossings is a nuisance. Illegal colonies and Bangladeshi and Rohingya immigrants are a big bane for Delhi. Delhi is not a poor state, and per capita income is much high-

er than in other states, so the freebies like free rations and electricity are not required, and the funds should be allocated to building the infrastructure of flyovers, schools, and hospitals.

Vinod Johri | Delhi

FOCUS ON CONSTRUCTIVE DEBATES

Madam—The parliamentarian should understand that they need to be more productive, constructive, and prolific during the start of the session of the houses. As the winter session of the 18th Lok Sabha ended with the least possible outcomes that Parliamentarians could deliver, causing a scuffle between the members themselves. It should be the moral and fundamental duty to abide by the constitution to uphold the dignity of the Parliament houses and meant it for possible constructive discussion on each and every issue rather than politicising them on personal and party grounds.

Dimple Wadhawan | Kanpur Nagar

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Challenges in CSR accounting: Pathways to meaningful impact

Implementing CSR initiatives effectively presents significant challenges, ranging from a lack of clear objectives to complexities in measuring their impact

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is a fundamental aspect of modern business strategy, reflecting a company's commitment to social equity, environmental sustainability and ethical practices. In India, CSR became a legal requirement in 2013, and companies are now expected to integrate these principles into their operations. However, while CSR initiatives are vital for societal and environmental progress, accounting for them presents unique challenges that businesses must address to achieve compliance and maximise impact.

Challenges in CSR Accounting:

- Lack of Clear Objectives** Many companies undertake CSR without clearly defined goals, resulting in misaligned initiatives that fail to resonate with stakeholders or address critical social issues.
- Insufficient Stakeholder Engagement** CSR initiatives often overlook the input of key stakeholders such as employees, customers, and community members. For instance, a clothing brand may launch a sustainable fashion line without consult-



ing suppliers or customers, leading to low adoption and minimal impact.

- Limited Resources** Smaller businesses face budget constraints and lack expertise to implement effective CSR programmes. A local coffee shop, for example, might abandon a recycling initiative due to insufficient funds for bins or awareness campaigns, missing the chance to enhance its brand.
- Fund Utilisation Issues** Companies often face compliance challenges regarding the disbursement of funds to implementing agencies. Under Section 135(5), mere fund transfer does not qualify as CSR spending unless the implementing agency utilises the funds appropriately. Companies must plan and monitor fund utilisation effectively.
- Difficulty in Measuring Impact** Assessing the out-

comes of CSR initiatives is complex, as many lack standardised metrics to measure their social and environmental impact. For example, a manufacturing firm may struggle to quantify carbon emission reductions from a green energy project, making it harder to demonstrate success.

- Reputation Risks** Greenwashing or poorly executed initiatives can damage a company's credibility. For instance, a beverage company that markets itself as environmentally friendly while engaging in unsustainable practices risks losing consumer trust and suffering long-term reputational harm.
- Strategies to Overcome CSR Challenges**
 - Define Clear Objectives** Companies should set SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) goals for their CSR initiatives.
 - Engage Stakeholders Early** Regular engagement with stakeholders ensures CSR initiatives address their needs and receive their support.
 - Start Small and Scale Up** Small businesses can begin with low-cost, high-impact

projects and expand as they gain experience. A local restaurant might start with a composting programme and later adopt a broader sustainability plan, including local sourcing and reduced waste.

- Utilise Metrics and Reporting** Establishing clear metrics allows companies to measure and report their CSR progress effectively. For instance, a tech firm could publish an annual report detailing energy savings, employee participation, and community engagement outcomes.
- Communicate Transparently** Openness about successes and challenges builds stakeholder trust.
- Conclusion:** Proactively addressing these issues helps businesses enhance their reputation, strengthen stakeholder relationships, and make meaningful societal contributions. Successful CSR initiatives ultimately benefit both companies and communities, driving sustainable growth.

(The writer is partner Audit and Corporate Tax, Bhuta Shah and Co.; views are personal)



RAJESH SHAH



FIRST COLUMN

MAKE A DIRECT CONNECT WITH GOD

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



RAVI VALLURI

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

Slowdown in growth: Is it a temporary blip?



UTTAM GUPTA

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



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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In today's digital era, people from all walks of life are increasingly drawn to the virtual world, spending countless hours glued to their screens rather than engaging in real-world activities. Social media platforms, online gaming, and streaming services have created an engaging yet addictive digital ecosystem. Among these, reels have emerged as a dominant form of entertainment, captivating users with short, visually stimulating content that ranges from dance challenges and comedy skits to educational snippets and senseless videos. While initially sought as a break from daily routines, reels often trap users in an endless cycle of mindless scrolling that detracts from productivity and long-term goals.



GURDEEP KAUR

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

Physical and Cognitive Consequences

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

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

Breaking the Cycle

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

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

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

The Way Forward

They must be used responsibly to avoid their harmful consequences. Striking a balance between virtual and real-world experiences is essential for leading a fulfilling life. Individuals need meaningful relationships, emotional support, and real-life achievements to thrive. By fostering awareness and adopting healthier digital habits, we can harness the benefits of technology without compromising our wellbeing. (The writer has an experience of 17 years of teaching the under graduate students of Sri Guru Gobind Singh College of Commerce; views are personal)

2 US Navy pilots shot down over Red Sea in apparent 'friendly fire' incident

AP ■ DUBAI

Two US Navy pilots were shot down Sunday over the Red Sea in an apparent "friendly fire" incident, the US military said, marking the most serious incident to threaten troops in over a year of America targeting Yemen's Houthis rebels.

Command acknowledged the Truman had entered the Mideast, but hadn't specified that the carrier and its battle group was in the Red Sea. The guided missile cruiser USS Gettysburg, which is part of the USS Harry S. Truman Carrier Strike Group, mistakenly fired on and hit the F/A-18, Central Command said in a statement.

US has stepped up its airstrikes targeting the Houthis and their missile fire into the Red Sea and the surrounding area. However, the presence of an American warship group may spark renewed attacks from the rebels, like what the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower saw earlier this year.

about 100 merchant vessels with missiles and drones since the Israel-Hamas war in the Gaza Strip started in October 2023 after Hamas' surprise attack on Israel that killed 1,200 people and saw 250 others taken hostage.

Israeli strikes across Gaza kill at least 20

AP ■ DEIR AL-BALAH (GAZA)

Israeli strikes across the Gaza Strip overnight and into Sunday killed at least 20 people, including five children, Palestinian medical officials said.

Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital, which received the bodies. A man and his wife were killed in a strike in the southern city of Khan Younis on Sunday, just after midnight, according to the nearby Nasser Hospital.

where the light is. This is one of the places where the light is," Pizzaballa said.

Holocaust, adamantly rejects such allegations. It says it has made great efforts to spare civilians and is only at war with Hamas, which it accuses of genocidal violence in the attack that ignited the war.



Palestinians look at home destroyed by an Israeli strike late Saturday in Deir al-Balah.

AP/PTI

38 dead, over 100 missing in Congo after ferry capsizes in Busira river

AP ■ KINHASA

Thirty-eight people are confirmed dead, and over 100 remain missing in Congo after an overloaded ferry — full of people returning home for Christmas — capsized in the river Busira late on Friday night.

of Ingende, the ferry contained "more than 400 people because it made two ports, Ingende and Loolo, on the way to Boende, so there is reason to believe that there were more deaths."

town of Mbandaka, the capital of the Equateur province where the ferry sank, said he condemned the authorities for not properly handling the recent capsizings.

brate a pre-Christmas Mass with members of the territory's small Christian community. A strike on a school housing displaced people in Gaza City killed at least eight people, including three children, according to Gaza's Health Ministry.

Francis said Saturday that his envoy had been unable to enter the territory because of Israeli bombing.

Francis said Saturday that his envoy had been unable to enter the territory because of Israeli bombing.

ple, mostly civilians, and abducting around 250. Around 100 hostages are still in Gaza, at least a third of whom are believed to be dead.

Lara Trump drops out of race to be Florida senator

AP ■ WASHINGTON

Lara Trump, the daughter-in-law of President-elect Donald Trump, said on Saturday that she is removing herself from consideration to be a Florida senator — ending speculation that she could replace Republican Senator Marco Rubio, who has been tapped to be the incoming administration's secretary of state.

whether she might be vying for a Senate seat. If Rubio is confirmed, his replacement — who would be chosen by Republican Florida Governor Ron DeSantis — would serve for two years until the next regularly scheduled election in 2026.

Donald Trump taps 'Apprentice' producer Mark Burnett as special envoy to UK

AP ■ WEST PALM BEACH (US)

Mark Burnett, the producer who helped reintroduce Donald Trump to a national television audience with "The Apprentice," is being tapped by the president-elect as special envoy to the United Kingdom in his upcoming administration.

Trump severed ties with NBC in 2015, the same year he launched his first White House run.

his biography and political rise. The show presented Trump Tower to tens of millions of people as a symbol of power and success before Trump launched his first campaign from the building's lobby.

But Trump has announced a series of special envoy positions to several top loyalists ahead of Inauguration Day on January 20, including his former ambassador to Germany Richard Grenell who he chose as envoy for special missions.

Pickup truck driver killed by cops in Texas

AP ■ KILLEEN

A pickup truck driver fleeing police careened through the doors of a JCPenney store in Texas and continued through a busy mall, injuring five people before he was fatally shot by officers, authorities said.

The chase began around 5 pm on Interstate 14 in Belton, about 20 miles (30 kilometres) from Killeen, after authorities received calls about an erratic driver in a black pickup, Ofelia Miramontez of the Killeen Police Department said.

Sunak exits Downing Street, successor Starmer revives hope for FTA with India

PTI ■ LONDON

The year earmarked for general elections in both India and the UK was destined to throw up many new scenarios on the political front. Among them was a decision to relaunch a "mutually beneficial" Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between the two countries.

into a more uncertain phase until the new Labour Party-led government committed itself to "deepening our bilateral ties".

resignation speech at the doorstep of 10 Downing Street, British voters had given a "clear signal" in favour of change.

nearly 30 parliamentarians of Indian heritage — including Lisa Nandy as Culture Secretary and Seema Malhotra as immigration minister.

hiked minimum salary cut-offs. A simmering anti-immigration sentiment was behind a flurry of riots triggered by misinformation around the Welsh-born suspect behind a fatal stabbing of three schoolgirls in Southport, north-west England, at the end of July.

described the investment in an "iconic" British company as a "significant milestone" for Bharti Enterprises.

Starmer followed in the footsteps of his Hindu predecessor to light diyas on the doorstep of Downing Street but courted controversy when meat and alcohol were served during the festivity.

conclude in the new year. Also expected in 2025 is King Charles III's return to Bengaluru for a wellness retreat where the 76-year-old monarch and wife Camilla made a private stopover in October on their way back from the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Samoa.

ROUNDUP 2024: UNITED KINGDOM



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

SMART SNACKING FOR THE CHILLS

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

WHY SMART SNACKING MATTERS

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

SMART SNACKING RULES

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

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

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



SNACKING IN STYLE DURING FESTIVITIES

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

SIMPLE WAYS TO ROAST PECANS

BASIC ROAST

- Spread pecans evenly on a baking sheet.
 - Bake at 180°C for 7–10 minutes, stirring occasionally for even roasting.
- #### SPLICED ROAST
- Toss pecans with a mix of olive oil, paprika, and a pinch of salt.
 - Roast at 180°C for 10 minutes for a flavourful twist.

This winter, embrace mindful snacking by making smart choices like pecans. — The author is a nutritionist and has taken inputs from American Pecan



sweet—and choose a healthier alternative. If you love crunchy snacks, roasted pecans are an excellent choice. They retain their nutritional profile and are rich in antioxidants, even after roasting. **SNACK TO CURB HUNGER, NOT BOREDOM:** Snack mindfully when you're hungry, not out of habit or boredom. Avoid overindulging and balance high-calorie snacks with



lighter choices during other meals. A handful of pecans paired with fresh fruits can be a delicious and balanced winter snack. **BE PREPARED:** Keep healthy snacks handy—store nuts in your bag, desk drawer, or even your car. Pecans are a fantastic non-perishable option for when hunger strikes unexpectedly. This way, you'll avoid grabbing unhealthy, convenient options.



HOLISTIC APPROACH TO COMBAT DISEASES



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

Social norms and policies must achieve the following for a health-promoting eco-system. **Healthy Eating:** Healthy foods such as fruits and vegetables in their raw forms (and cooked), cheap, nuts, seeds, pulses, whole grains, and healthy oils must be made safer, cheaper, and more readily available, accessible, and affordable across access points such as public transport, at the workplace, and in educational institutes. Controlling portion sizes is critical. Large portions of unhealthy foods and beverages, especially at discounts, have been proven to push people to eat more. Large servings, large plates, supersized meals, and bottomless drinks must be de-incentivised, and smaller portions must be incentivised. Children must be protected from unhealthy foods and beverage advertising onslaught. Also, targeting children by extolling children to persuade them into unhealthy behaviours, food, and beverages should not be allowed.

Eliminating trans fats and tobacco and decreasing artificial sugar and refined foods are universal goals from a scientific perspective. The unorganised sector dominates the Indian food market and is price-sensitive. Lower taxes on healthy oils, higher taxes on unhealthy oils, and cheaper fresh fruits and vegetables will boost healthy food production and consumption. **Health Promoting Town Planning Critical to Healthier Communities** Scientific research shows that providing wide sidewalks, large parks, and green forests within a 0.5 km radius of every household improves health in many ways, including preventing more than 50 chronic diseases and improving mental health for the residents and families staying in the vicinity. Trees also act as natural filters, reducing air pollution and creating a healthier environment. A study published in JACC Advances has shown that living in high-traffic, congested localities alongside highways increases the local population's blood pressure and chronic diseases. High air pollution is a public health crisis. Preventing air pollution should be a top priority across all ministries, as well as housing and development. High air pollution can shorten life-spans by 1.7 years and increase chronic diseases like diabetes, high blood pressure, lung diseases, and asthma, among those exposed to high levels of air pollution.

The holistic way to address the challenge of chronic diseases is to create a grid environment conducive to healthy eating and healthy living through multiple sectors. This leads to a healthy country, systems, societies, and happy people. — The author is the Deputy Director & Head, Health Promotion, Physical Activity & Obesity Prevention, Centre for Chronic Disease Control (CCDC)

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



SOLUTION TO POLLUTION

By ARUN DUGGAL

DELHI STRUGGLES TO MEET EV TARGETS

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

BEEN THERE, DONE THAT

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

LOOK EAST, LOOK WEST

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

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

REAL SOLUTION TO POLLUTION KEPT AT BAY

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

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

Rohit should change his tactics, be more attacking batting at No. 6: Shastri

PTI ■ MELBOURNE

With skipper Rohit Sharma struggling to decipher a way to score runs in the Border-Gavaskar Trophy, former India coach Ravi Shastri says the stylish batter should go in with a clear mindset, change his tactics, and attack the bowlers. Rohit missed the opening Test Down Under to be with his family for the birth of his second child. He was expected to reclaim the opener's spot but KL Rahul's impressive 77 in India's win at Perth prompted a rejig of the batting order with Rohit moving down to No.6. The change though has not been fruitful for Rohit as he has managed 10, 3 and 6 runs in the last three innings, while Rahul has cashed on the opportunity by notching up a fine 84 in the first innings at Brisbane in the third Test.

"I would like to see Rohit Sharma, his tactics change a bit because he can still be extremely dangerous at that number (six)," Shastri opined on ICC Review. "I think he's got to be very clear in his mindset to go out there and take the attack to the opposition and not worry about anything else," the cricketer-turned-commentator added. Shastri felt Rohit should shun the defensive mindset. "The last thing you want is him to be in two minds whether to defend or attack. In his case, it should be attack. He picks up length quickly, he should take the opposition on at that number. "Because if he gets away in the first 10-15 minutes, in any way, he's not got past that 15-20 minutes, half an hour. So why don't you play a natural game, go and take the attack to the opposition and take it from there?" Shastri felt it's the best way for



Rohit to get back into form and win games for India, adding that the best No.6 batters in the world are those who have the ability to counter-attack. "I think that is his best way of not just coming back into form, winning a game for India as well. Because that number is a crucial number." "The best No.6s in the world are the guys who know how to have the ability to counter-attack. They read the situation well. Yes, if a lot of wickets have fallen, maybe for a little while. You might have to be circumspect, but the intent has to be far sooner than later. "Especially when you have that kind of ability and especially when you open the batting for India and you have all the shots for Australian conditions." Rohit had made his Test debut in 2013 at No. 6 position, marking the occasion with a century. Shastri backed Rahul to retain the

opener's slot in the fourth Test following his two half-centuries so far in the five-Test series. "I would have asked him (Rohit) to open in the last Test match (Brisbane) but then the way Rahul has batted, he was a joy to watch and the way he's batting, I believe he struck a purple patch," Shastri said. "It could be a position he might just want to keep and enhance the way he's playing because his technique was faultless," said Shastri. The former India captain said Rahul was currently at the top of his game and his confidence level too was very high. "The way he left the ball, the way he allowed the ball to come onto the bat, some of his cover drives were as good as any played by anyone in world cricket at the moment. And so I think when there's that much confidence there, you know, let it be."



Wasn't looking to save the follow-on that day in Brisbane: Akash Deep

PTI ■ MELBOURNE

Akash Deep and Jasprit Bumrah saved India the blushes during the Brisbane Test with a resolute 10th wicket partnership but the rookie pacer on Sunday said his focus was on wholesome contribution to the team rather than looking to "merely save the follow-on." With the Indian batters, barring KL Rahul and Ravindra Jadeja, failing once again, the obstinate 47-run partnership between Bumrah and Akash took India past the follow-on mark during the Gabba Test, which ended in a draw. "We come to bat lower down the order, so contributions of 20-25-30 runs are very valuable. My mindset is just to contribute. I wasn't looking to save the follow-on that day; I was just looking not to get out. My mindset was this, God willing, we were able to save the follow-on," Akash told reporters here. Akash smashed Pat Cummins for a four to avoid the follow-on as the Indian dressing room broke into celebrations on day four. "When you save the match from such a situation, the entire team gets the confidence and our dressing room reflected just that. Everyone was having fun and enjoying." Salvaging a draw after being on the brink of losing in Brisbane, the Indian team is now filled with confidence, feels Akash.

"If you look at it, it's 50-50, even though we were behind in the last match. But the confidence we built on the last day, we still have that confidence. So, I can say it's 50-50, and this Test match (Melbourne) is very important for both the teams." Akash did not feature in the playing XI for the first two Tests against Australia but made his way into the team for the third Test. The 28-year-old gave a good account himself, and was unlucky to miss out on the wicket of veteran batter Steve Smith, whom he troubled no end. The pacer, who is playing on foreign soil for the first time, revealed tips from Bumrah helped him. "This is my first time playing in Australia. Jassi bhai keeps on telling us things about how we can go about our job; it makes our job easy." "He told me one thing, 'Don't get too excited. Just focus on your discipline. How you go about your job in Indian conditions, repeat that here.' He told me just this." Short-pitched balls against Head: Akash Travis Head continues to be a thorn in India's flesh. After being dismissed for 11 in his first innings of the series, he has gone on to score 89, 140 and 152 in his next three outings. Obviously, he did not detail the plans, but hinted at a bouncer strategy against the left-hander.

Joe Root returns to England's ODI squad for India tour, Champions Trophy

PTI ■ LONDON

Veteran batter Joe Root's return to 50-over format after more than a year headlined England's squad announcement for the ODI tour to India and the ICC Champions Trophy. Root's previous assignment in the format was the 50-over World Cup held in India in 2023. All-rounder and Test skipper Ben Stokes was not considered for selection as he has been recovering from a left hamstring injury sustained during the third Test against New Zealand earlier this month. Seasoned batter Jos Buttler will lead the side, and the Lancashire man will also captain England in the T20I series against India, which precedes the ODIs. England will play five T20Is and three ODIs during the



white ball tour to India. Leg-spinner Rehan Ahmed, who made his Test debut against India earlier this year, was included in the T20I squad. In-form Harry Brook will get another chance to play international bilateral cricket in India after pulling out of the Test series earlier this year due to personal reasons. England ODI squad: Jos Buttler (Captain), Jofra Archer, Gus Atkinson, Jacob Bethell, Harry Brook, Brydon Carse, Ben Duckett, Jamie Overton, Jamie Smith, Liam Livingstone, Adil Rashid, Saqib Mahmood, Phil Salt, Mark Wood. England T20I squad: Jos Buttler (Captain), Rehan

Ahmed, Jofra Archer, Gus Atkinson, Jacob Bethell, Harry Brook, Brydon Carse, Ben Duckett, Jamie Overton, Jamie Smith, Liam Livingstone, Adil Rashid, Saqib Mahmood, Phil Salt, Mark Wood. India vs England Schedule: T20I: 1st T20I: January 22, Eden Gardens, Kolkata. 2nd T20I: January 25, MA Chidambaram Stadium, Chennai. 3rd T20I: January 28, Niranjan Shah Stadium, Rajkot. 4th T20I: January 31, MCA Stadium, Pune. 5th T20I: February 2, Wankhede Stadium, Mumbai ODIs: 1st ODI: February 6, VCA Stadium, Nagpur. 2nd ODI: February 9, Barabati Stadium, Cuttack. 3rd ODI: February 12, Narendra Modi Stadium, Ahmedabad.



Atletico Madrid stuns Barcelona with a 2-1 win

AP ■ MADRID

Atletico Madrid coach Diego Simeone ran down the touchline in joy while Barcelona players sunk to the turf in dismay. Super sub Alexander Sorloth struck again deep in stoppage time to hand Atletico a 2-1 comeback win at Barcelona and ensure Atletico will spend La Liga's short winter break on top of the table. Atletico's 12th straight win in all competitions lifted it three points above Barcelona. Barcelona has only two wins in its last nine games and could find itself third on Sunday if Real Madrid beats Sevilla. Simeone, coaching Atletico since 2011, celebrated winning at Barcelona for the first time. "We finally did it," Atletico goalkeeper Jan Oblak said. "We are playing well, we started poorly but we knew our chances would come. And in the last minute Sorloth came through. Thanks to him we finally won here. He is the striker we needed." It was a much more impressive performance from Barcelona, which dominated for long periods and took a deserved lead in the 30th minute. Pedri started and ended the move, playing a one-two with Gavi, and firing an angled shot into the bottom right corner. Raphinha almost doubled Barcelona's lead in stunning

fashion in the 57th when he lobbed the goalkeeper but the ball came off the crossbar. Robert Lewandowski got to the rebound but sent it onto the head of Axel Witsel, who needed treatment. Barcelona was made to rue its missed opportunities when Atletico levelled just three minutes later, partly thanks to a defensive blunder. Barcelona midfielder Marc Casado tried to clear Julian Alvarez's cross but passed it straight to Rodrigo De Paul, who fired into the bottom right corner. Casado put his hands to his head and dropped to his knees in dismay. Worse was to come for Barcelona as, in the sixth minute of stoppage time, Nahuel Molina made a fantastic run to latch onto a through ball and cross in for Sorloth to fire into the back of the net. It was Sorloth's eighth goal of the season, five of them after he's come off the bench. BILBAO'S UNBEATEN RUN Athletic Bilbao came from behind to beat Osasuna 2-1 and extend its unbeaten run to 14 matches and remain just five points behind Atletico. Gorka Guruzeta and Alex Berenguer sealed the comeback win for fourth-placed Bilbao after Lucas Torro gave Osasuna a 25th-minute lead at El Sadar. Guruzeta headed Bilbao level in the 31st and Berenguer struck the winner in the 74th. Mallorca won at Getafe 1-0 and moved up to fifth.

Women's players arrested over racist incident in Brazil soccer semifinal

AP ■ SAO PAULO



Four River Plate women's players were arrested by Sao Paulo police and accused of making a racial slur, Sao Paulo's public security secretariat told The Associated Press. On Friday, a Brazil Ladies Cup soccer semifinal between Argentina's River Plate and Brazilian team Grêmio was stopped in the first half after River Plate's Candela Diaz was accused of making monkey gestures to a ball boy, according to broadcast footage and local media reports. Diaz was detained along with teammates Juana Cangaro, Milagros Naiquen Diaz, and Camila Ayelen Duarte, the players' lawyer, Thais Sankari, told The AP. They remained in custody on Saturday. Sankari said the River Plate players reacted only after being provoked. "We see in this decision a

great arbitrariness and the Brazilian judiciary's desire to send a message. They used this case for that purpose," she said. After Diaz's gestures on Friday, the Grêmio players walked off in protest. The referee showed red cards to six River Plate players following an on-field fight and ended the match because there was no longer the minimum number of players required to continue. The score was 1-1 but the

referee awarded the match to Grêmio, which will play in the tournament final on Sunday. The Brazil Ladies Cup banned River Plate from the tournament for two years on Saturday. Tournament organizers said in a statement on Saturday that future editions will immediately ban any participating team whose athletes or staff "engage in racist gestures on the playing field."

"The organisation reaffirms its anti-racist stance and emphasises that it will never tolerate such incidents." Grêmio said on X it was supporting its players, who would file a police report. "We regret what happened and condemn any discriminatory acts," the team said in the statement. Grêmio coach Thaisan Passos said her players told her River Plate players had previously called them "monkeys." "Incidents like this cannot keep happening. How long will we keep pretending racism doesn't exist?" she told local broadcaster SporTV. Diaz has not commented publicly. River Plate also condemned the discriminatory gestures. The club said in a statement on X it was "taking the appropriate disciplinary measures and will continue working to eradicate such behavior."

Manchester City crisis deepens after losing to Aston Villa 2-1 in the Premier League

AP ■ MANCHESTER

Manchester City's stunning slump deepened after losing to Aston Villa 2-1 in the Premier League. Goals from Jhon Duran and Morgan Rogers at Villa Park consigned the four-time defending champion to a ninth defeat in 12 games in a season that is unravelling. Pep Guardiola's team has won just once during that run. "We don't have a defense for the results. They are not good," Guardiola said. Third-placed Arsenal closed the gap on league leader Liverpool to three points with a 5-1 win at Crystal Palace, but has played two games more. City dropped to sixth in the standings, nine points below Liverpool, and has played two games more. "It's about what I can do with my people to get the results back and continue," Guardiola said. "If there is a moment that I cannot overthink, it is right now. Try to be simple, stick to my principles

and give certainty to the team." TITLE HOPES FADING After winning six titles in seven years and an unprecedented four in a row, City's remarkable fall shows little sign of stopping. Guardiola admitted last week he had not been good enough to turn his team's form around. City was without a win in any of its last eight away games in all competitions. While it looks unlikely to win a fifth straight title, a place in the top four and Champions League qualification could also be in jeopardy after fourth-placed Nottingham Forest won at Brentford 2-0 to move four points clear of City. Only once under Guardiola has City managed to win the title when losing six times in the league. That was in 2021, when it lost two of its last three games, having already been confirmed as the champion. City lost nine times when Liverpool won the title in 2020, but its sixth defeat didn't come until February. Guardiola also lost six times in his first season in English soccer in 2016-17 and



City finished third. The latest defeat could have been even more emphatic from a dominant Villa, which moved up to fifth. Duran scored his sixth goal in as many starts in the 16th minute from Rogers' assist. Duran had a goal disallowed for offside in the second half and Rogers hit the post before doubling Villa's lead in the 65th.

Phil Foden pulled a goal back for City in stoppage time, but it wasn't enough to spark a late comeback. "We have to stay positive, even though it's difficult, and we have to keep working hard," City striker Erling Haaland said. JESUS STREAK It's five goals in a week for Gabriel Jesus against Crystal Palace. After scoring a hat trick in Arsenal's 3-2 comeback win against Palace in the English League Cup quarterfinals on Wednesday, the Brazil striker hit another two goals when the teams met again on Saturday. Going into Wednesday's game, Jesus had only scored once for Arsenal since the end of January. Jesus struck twice in a frantic start at Selhurst Park. He opened the scoring in the sixth, with Ismaila Sarr leveling five minutes later. Jesus restored Arsenal's lead in the 14th and was denied back-to-back hat tricks when hitting the post and then having another close range effort saved by Palace goalkeeper Dean Henderson. Kai Havertz, Gabriel Martinelli

and Declan Rice also scored for Arsenal. FOREST FLYING HIGH If City's demise is a surprise story of the season, so is Forest's rise. After battling relegation for much of last term, Forest is in contention to qualify for the Champions League and possibly more. Facing a Brentford team that was unbeaten at home, goals from Ola Aina and Anthony Elanga secured another statement win on the road for Nuno Espirito Santo's side, having already won at Anfield and Old Trafford this year. ISAK TREBLE Alexander Isak hit a hat trick in Newcastle's 4-0 win at Ipswich. The Sweden international, who has 10 goals in his last 11 games, wrapped up his treble inside 54 minutes at Portman Road, including one in the opening minute. Jacob Murphy also scored. Brighton was 1-0 up at West Ham through Mats Wieffer, but Mohammed Kudus levelled for the draw.