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SOMBER CHRISTMAS UNDER  
THE SHADOW OF WAR IN GAZA

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## Centre scraps no-detention policy for primary class V, VIII



**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI**

In a major change in the primary education system, the Centre on Monday directed for ending the "no-detention policy" for fifth and eighth class, which means that students in these classes who fail their annual exams shall not be promoted to higher grade and hence will need to repeat the same class. Failed students will have a chance to retake the test within two months, but if they fail again, they will not be promoted. The school will not expel a student until the 8th grade.

## Delhi Govt teachers to learn how to handle bomb threats



**SAUMYA SHUKLA ■ NEW DELHI**

In a way replicating the training reportedly given to school teachers in United States of America (USA) on 'how to shoot a gun, and handle a weapon' due to the rampant problem of gun shooting in schools, the Delhi Police joined hands with the Delhi Education Department, for training teachers and school staff of all government and private schools on how to handle bomb threats even as the fear of such threats through emails continue to loom among the school

authorities in the National Capital since May. This comes as an extension of the Delhi Lieutenant Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena's 'Samvaad' program where in a meeting with teachers, they raised the issue of Drug Abuse, Cyber Hygiene and recent Bomb threat emails. Multiple schools in Delhi have received hoax bomb threats in the last 10 days. The threats disrupted classes and triggered multi-agency search operations.

## Three Khalistani terrorists killed in Pilibhit encounter

**BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ PILIBHIT**

In a major anti-terror operation, three militants belonging to the Khalistani Commando Force were gunned down in a joint operation by Punjab and Uttar Pradesh police in Pilibhit's Purnapur area early Monday morning. The encounter left two policemen injured, while the police recovered a significant cache of weapons, including two AK-47 rifles and two Glock pistols, from the spot.

The operation was carried out around 5 am near the Hardoi Branch Canal after Punjab police traced the location of the wanted militants to Pilibhit. The three militants, all hailing from Punjab's Gurdaspur district, were accused of orchestrating a grenade attack on a police outpost in Gurdaspur on December 19. According to officials, the militants were traveling on a motorcycle when they were intercepted by the joint police team. Upon being surrounded, the trio opened fire indiscriminately using their automatic weapons. In the ensuing exchange of gunfire, all three were neutralized. Two policemen sustained injuries during the operation. The sounds of gunfire in the early hours sent shockwaves through nearby villages, with residents initially unsure of the nature of the operation. Bullet marks on police vehicles and the seizure of a motorcycle used by the militants indicated the intensity of the encounter.



This combo image shows arms and other items recovered at the site of an encounter of three terror suspects, allegedly involved in the grenade attack in Gurdaspur, by a joint team of Uttar Pradesh and Punjab police, in Pilibhit

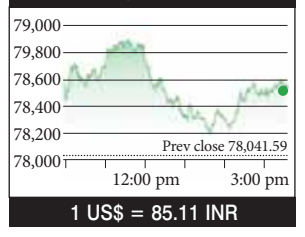
## Terror suspect planned escape to Pak via B'desh

**PNS ■ KOLKATA**

The arrested member of the 'Tehreek-e-Mujahideen' terror outfit from Kashmir was planning to use the river route to travel to Bangladesh and eventually escape to Pakistan, a senior officer of the West Bengal Special Task Force (STF) said on Monday. Bengal STF officials also believe that the arrested person, identified as Javed Munshi, has close ties with the Lashkar-e-Taiba terror group. Investigators are working to decode the notes seized from his possession to uncover more details about his plans, the officer added.

Munshi was arrested by a joint team of Jammu and Kashmir Police and West Bengal Police STF from near Canning in South 24 Parganas district on Sunday. The 'Tehreek-e-Mujahideen' group is controlled from Pakistan and has connections with other terror outfits in the valley, as well as in Pakistan and Bangladesh, the officer added. The 58-year-old man was considering multiple routes to reach Bangladesh, including traveling by road from Canning to Dhamakhali, and then using river routes through the Sunderbans.

## MARKETS



## WEATHER

AQI	421
MAX	18°C
MIN	12°C

## No lapse, says CISF on MPs scuffle



**PNS ■ NEW DELHI**

The Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) on Monday said there was "no lapse" on its part when asked about the scuffle that took place among MPs in Parliament complex during the recently concluded Winter Session and added it will choose to "keep quiet" when allegations are levelled by lawmakers. The CISF is tasked to guard the Parliament House Complex. "There was no lapse (on part of the force)...By lapse if you mean some weapons were allowed inside, then I can tell you that no weapon was allowed..." CISF Deputy Inspector General (operations) Shrikant Kishore said at a Press conference. Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Members of Parliament Prapad Chandra Sarangi and Mukesh Rajput had got injured during scuffle between the Opposition and ruling BJP MPs on the premises of Parliament who were discharged from the RML Hospital on Monday. Kishore said the force will choose to "keep quiet when the honourable members (MPs) make allegations." The officer was asked about the counter-allegations made by the parliamentarians on who pushed whom. He added the CISF was not conducting any inquiry into the incident that took place at the 'Makar Dwar' of the Parliament House Complex on December 19. Delhi Police had filed an FIR against Leader of the Opposition (LoP) and Congress MP Rahul Gandhi following BJP's complaint against him. Asked about complaints against the force since it took charge of Parliament security in June this year, the officer said the MPs, employees working in the complex and visitors are "very satisfied and happy" with their work. Kishore said the security department of Parliament will be competent to answer questions related to security, including recovery of cash from a seat in the House during the last session.

## Bangladesh wants Hasina back, sends note verbale to India

**PTI ■ DHAKA**

Bangladesh's interim government said on Monday that it has sent a diplomatic note to India to send back deposed prime minister Sheikh Hasina to Dhaka. Hasina, 77, has been living in exile in India since August 5 when she fled the country amid the student-led protests that toppled her 16-year regime. Bangladesh-based International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) has issued arrest warrants for Hasina and several former Cabinet ministers, advisers, and military and civil officials for "crimes against humanity and genocide". "We have sent a note verbale to the Indian government saying that Bangladesh wants her back here for the judicial process," Foreign Affairs Adviser Touhid Hossain told reporters at his office. Earlier in the morning, Home Advisor Jahangir Alam said his office has sent a letter to the foreign ministry to facilitate the ousted premier's extradition from India. "We have sent a letter to the foreign ministry regarding her extradition. The process is currently underway," he told reporters in response to a query. Alam said an extradition treaty between Dhaka and New Delhi already exists and Hasina could be brought back to Bangladesh under it. Last month, in an address to the nation on the completion of 100 days of the interim government, Bangladesh's Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus said it will seek the extradition of Hasina. "We must ensure justice in every killing... We will also ask India to send back fallen autocrat Sheikh Hasina," he said. Yunus, who assumed office on August 8, claimed that about 1,500 people, including



students and workers, were killed while 19,931 others were wounded during the protest against the Hasina government. In October, Law Adviser Asif Nazrul had reportedly said that Bangladesh would strongly protest if India tried to refuse Hasina's extradition by citing any provision in the treaty. In an interview with PTI in Dhaka in September, Yunus had said that Hasina making political remarks from India is an "unfriendly gesture", asserting that she must remain silent to prevent discomfort to both countries until Dhaka requests her extradition. "If India wants to keep her until the time Bangladesh (government) wants her back, the condition would be that she has to keep quiet," he said. In recent weeks, Hasina has accused the Yunus-led interim government of perpetrating "genocide" and failing to protect minorities, especially Hindus, since her ouster.



## ONOE JPC to meet on Jan 8

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI**

The first meeting of the 39-member parliamentary panel on the 'One Nation, One Election' initiative is scheduled for January 8, marking the start of discussions on a major electoral reform proposed by the Bharatiya Janata Party-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) Government. According to parliamentary sources, the Joint Committee on Bills for simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and state Assemblies, chaired by BJP MP PP Chaudhary, will likely have an introductory session where officials will brief the panel on two key Bills aimed at implementing the BJP's long-standing election reform agenda.

## Gig workers need targeted regulatory framework: NHRC

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI**

In the rapidly expanding gig economy of India, gig workers often endure grueling shifts that can exceed 10 hours a day, while contending with low, unpredictable incomes and the pressure of meeting unrealistic performance targets. However, things might change for the better for this workforce, which is estimated to be 65 lakh strong. At a recent session held by the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), stakeholders from the sector recommended a slew of measures including the need for targeted regulatory frameworks, setting up rest points, and the creation of grievance redressal mechanisms, particularly for women workers. These recommendations which come amidst Union Labour Minister Mansukh Mandaviya announcement in October to put in place a framework for social security of gig workers, including health insurance and pension were presented as part of the



meet addressing the challenges faced by gig workers. The issue holds importance given that India's top think tank panel Niti Aayog has estimated 65 lakh gig and platform workers in the country, but the number is likely to be over two crore as the segment is growing rapidly. Gig workers, also known as independent contractors, are individuals who undertake temporary or short-term work assignments, primarily within the service sector. They operate independently and are not regarded as employees of the organizations. Hence, they do not typically have access to common employee benefits that full-time staff members receive. However, irregular incomes, unexpected expenses, and limited access to credit have often left them at the receiving end. Taking serious note of their precarious condition, NHRC's acting chairperson, Vijaya Bharathi Sayani said that there is a "need for targeted efforts" through regulatory frameworks to address gig worker's challenges, including long working hours, financial strain, and physical exhaustion.

## No face cover allowed for women lawyers: J and K HC

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ SRINAGAR**

The High Court of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh recently observed that the rules dealing with the dress code for women advocates prescribed by the Bar Council of India (BCI) do not say that women lawyers can appear before courts with a face covering. The Court made the observation after a lady lawyer appeared with a face cover and turned down the Court's request to remove the cover. This led the Court to seek a report from the Registrar General on whether the relevant rules allow lady advocates to appear with their face covered.

## Shyam Benegal, pioneer of parallel cinema in India, passes away at 90

**TN RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI**

Veteran filmmaker, Padma Bhushan and Dadasaheb Phalke award winner Shyam Benegal, a pioneer of parallel cinema in India has died aged 90, after suffering from a chronic kidney disease. He will be remembered for his films like 'Ankur', 'Nishant', 'Zubeidaa', 'Manthan', 'Mandi' and 'Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose'. Shyam Babu, as he was affectionately known in the film circles, breathed his last at the Wockhardt Hospital in Mumbai, just nine days after he celebrated his 90th birthday with his family and friends. The legendary filmmaker is survived by his 85-year-old wife Nira Benegal, who has been into diverse fields of activities including films, literature, music architecture and design, and daughter Pia Benegal. Shyam Benegal, who made

significant contributions to India Cinema, introduced parallel cinema in the seventies. Rated at one stage next only to the all-time great Satyajit Ray as a filmmaker who made meaningful films, he made films like 'Ankur' (1973), 'Nishant' (1975), 'Manthan' (1976), 'Bhumika' (1977), 'Mammo' (1994), 'Sardari Begum' (1996), and 'Zubeidaa' (2001). He also made a children's film 'Charandas Chor' (Charandas the Thief) in 1975. Born on December 14 1934 in a Konkani-speaking Chitrapur Saraswat Brahmin family in Hyderabad, Shyam made his first film at 12 years of age, using a camera given to him by his photographer father Sridhar B. Benegal. He went on to earn a Master's degree in Economics from Osmania University, Hyderabad, where he also founded the Hyderabad Film Society. Having begun his career as a



DECEMBER 14, 1934 - DECEMBER 23, 2024

copywriter with Mumbai-based advertising agency, Lintas Advertising, where he steadily rose to become the creative head. Meanwhile, Benegal made his first documentary in Gujarati, 'Gher Betha Ganga' (Ganges at the Doorstep) in 1962.

He also taught at the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) between 1966 and 1973, and was the chairman of the FTII for two terms between 1980-83 and 1989-92. He began his career as a filmmaker by making documentaries. One of his early documentaries, 'A Child of the Streets' (1967), garnered him wide acclaim, and he went on to make over 70 documentaries. A versatile filmmaker, Shyam Benegal had made as many as 20 feature films during his illustrious career. Known for spotting talent, Shyam Benegal introduced actors - many of whom from FTII and National School of Drama (NSD) - introduced actors like Naseeruddin Shah, Om Puri, Anant Nag, Smita Patil, Shabana Azmi, Kulbhushan Kharbanda and Amrish Puri. Benegal was honoured by the Government of India with the Padma Shri in 1976 and the

Padma Bhushan in 1991. He has received several accolades, including eighteen National Film Awards, a Filmfare Award and a Nandi Award. In 2005, he was honoured with the Dadasaheb Phalke Award, India's highest award in the field of cinema. Apart from making films for the National Film Development Corporation (NFDC), he also served as the Director of the NFDC from 1980 to 1986. With the financial support of actor Shashi Kapoor, Shyam Benegal made commercial films like Junoon (1978) and Kalyug (1981). Benegal wrote the scripts and screenplays for his films, and authored three books based on his own films: 'The Churning with Vijay Tendulkar' (1984), based on 'Manthan'; 'Satyajit Ray' (1988), based on his biographical film, 'Satyajit Ray'; and 'The Marketplace' (1989), which was based on 'Mandi'.



# Daring bank heist in Lucknow: Three arrested after gunfight

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ LUCKNOW

Lucknow witnessed a high-stakes drama early Sunday when a gang of robbers pulled off a meticulously planned heist at the Indian Overseas Bank in the Chinhat area. The gang made off with valuables worth crores before a swift police operation led to the arrest of three suspects following a dramatic gunfight. Four of their accomplices, however, remain at large.

The robbery unfolded around 4 a.m., straight out of a crime thriller. The gang, hailing from Bihar, broke into the bank's strong room after cutting through the wires of the alarm system, rendering it silent. They moved with precision, suggesting a well-planned operation. By the time daylight revealed their audacious crime, they were already on the run, thinking they had left no trail.

But fate had other plans. Acting on a tip-off, the UP Police set up a checkpoint near Laulai's water bridge. When two cars matching the suspects' descriptions



approached, officers signaled them to stop. Instead of complying, the robbers responded with gunfire, triggering a dramatic chase. The intense exchange ended with one of the suspects, Arvind Kumar from Bihar's Munger district, being shot in the leg. His dramatic plea for mercy with folded hands didn't deter the police from taking him into custody. Two of his accomplices, Balrampur Kumar and Kailash Bind, were also nabbed.

From the trio, the police recovered Rs 3 lakh in cash, gold and silver jewellery, a country-made pistol, and

spent cartridges. The remaining four gang members managed to flee, leaving the police on a relentless manhunt. As investigators pieced together the crime, shocking security lapses at the bank came to light. No guards were stationed at the branch. Of the six CCTV cameras installed, only one captured usable footage, while others were poorly aligned. The robbers had entered through a vacant plot adjacent to the bank, bypassing the main entrance entirely. Adding to the intrigue, the bank's alarm system, supposedly designed to trigger at any

tampering, stayed eerily silent. Whether it was faulty or intentionally disabled remains a question the police are determined to answer. What is clear is that the robbers had done their homework. They knew the bank's layout, the exact location of the locker, and the weaknesses in its security measures. Saturday night was strategically chosen, knowing the bank would remain closed on Sunday, giving them a head start to escape.

DCP East Shashank Singh praised the swift police action but acknowledged the challenges ahead. "The gang's precise planning and execution show they are no amateurs. We are following all leads to apprehend the absconding members and recover the stolen assets," he said.

As investigators comb through 50 nearby CCTV recordings, Lucknow residents are left intrigued by this cat-and-mouse chase. With four suspects still at large, the city waits for the final chapter of this real-life heist drama to unfold.

# Key aide of Khalistani terrorist Lakhbir Singh alias Landa arrested by NIA

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

In a major breakthrough in the Punjab terror conspiracy case, the National Investigation Agency (NIA) on Monday arrested a key aide of Khalistani terrorist Lakhbir Singh alias Landa and gangster Bachitar Singh alias Pavitar Batala, according to an official statement.

Jatinder Singh alias Jyoti of district Gurdaspur, Punjab, had been absconding since the arrest of weapons supplier Baljit Singh alias Rana Bhai in July 2024. He was arrested on Monday from Mumbai after extensive technical and on-ground efforts by the NIA.

The anti-terror agency has identified Jatinder as a member of the terror gang formed by foreign-based Landa of the banned terrorist organisation, Babbar Khalsa International (BKI), and an aide of Batala, a close associate of Landa. Jatinder Singh was providing weapons to on-ground operatives of Landa and Batala in Punjab, as per NIA investigations. He was procuring weapons from Madhya Pradesh-based



supplier Baljit Singh alias Rana Bhai, who was recently chargesheeted in the case, said the statement issued by the NIA. Investigations also revealed that Jatinder Singh had brought ten pistols from MP and delivered them to operatives of Landa and Batala in Punjab. He had planned to smuggle more weapons from MP into Punjab but his plans were scuttled by NIA's search operations over the past several months, the statement said. Jatinder's arrest marks a major step forward in NIA's efforts to dismantle the terror-gangster nexus by preventing smuggling of arms, ammunition, explosives etc. And raising of funds for carrying out terrorist acts on the Indian soil, it added.

# SIA chargesheets terror operatives threatening Kashmiri pandit employees

PNS ■ JAMMU

The State Investigation Agency (SIA), Jammu, Monday filed a chargesheet against key operatives behind the notorious "Kashmir Fight", a social media handle used to issue chilling online threats to migrant Kashmiri Pandit employees, aiming to spread fear and unrest. The platform, operated by The Resistance Front (TRF)—a proscribed terrorist organization in February 2024 issued a series of threatening posts that were published on social media by the terror outfit's social media handle, following which an investigation was initiated by SIA Jammu. The charge sheet was filed before the 3rd Additional Sessions Judge, Jammu. According to a SIA spokesman,



"During the investigation, SIA apprehended Farhaan Muzaffar Mattoo, a resident of Srinagar, for his alleged role in gathering and sharing sensitive information about targeted employees". The spokesman further revealed that Mattoo acted as a conduit, using encrypted communication platforms to pass critical data about migrant employees to handlers based in Pakistan, who then issued threats through the "Kashmir Fight" platform. The chargesheet also identified Sheikh Sajjad Ahmad, alias Sajjad Gul, a Srinagar resident now operating from Pakistan, as the mastermind of this plot. Sajad is accused of coordinating the campaign to intimidate migrant employees and disrupt communal harmony in the UT.

# ONOE JPC...

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The two Bills in focus are the Constitution (129th Amendment) Bill and the Union Territories Laws (Amendment) Bill. Both were introduced in the Lok Sabha last week and were referred to the joint parliamentary committee on the final day of the Winter Session. The Government expanded the panel's size from 31 to 39 members after several political parties expressed interest in participating in the review of these draft legislations concerning simultaneous enactments.

Among the committee members are former Union ministers Anurag Thakur, Parshottam Rupala, and Manish Tewari, along with prominent first-term lawmakers such as Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, Bansuri Swaraj, and Sambit Patra.

# No face cover allowed for women lawyers: J and K...

From page 1

After examining the Registrar General's report, Justice Moksha Khajuria Kazmi on December 13 observed that the rules prescribed by the Bar Council of India (BCI) do not mention any such right. Referring to the rules under Section 49(1) (gg) of Chapter IV (Part VI), of the BCI Rules, which gives details of the permitted dress code for lady advocates, the Court noted, that "it is nowhere stated in the rules that any such attire is permissible". On November 27, a person appeared before the High Court, identified herself to be an advocate named Syed Ainain Qadri and informed the Court that she was appearing for the petitioners in a plea to quash a domestic

violence case. She appeared before the Court with her face covered although she was wearing an advocate's attire. At the time, the case was before Justice Rahul Bharti. When the Court requested her to remove her face cover, she insisted that it was her fundamental right to appear with her face covered and the Court cannot insist that she remove her face cover. However, the Court did not entertain her appearance as counsel for the petitioners that day, since it could not confirm who she is. "This court does not entertain the appearance of the person identifying herself to be Advocate Ms. Syed Ainain Qadri as counsel for the petitioners as this Court has no basis/occasion to confirm her actual identity

both as a person as well as professional," Justice Bharti said in the November 27 order. The Court proceeded to adjourn the case to another date, while also asking the Registrar General of the Court to confirm if there was any rule which gives women advocates a right to appear with their face covered or to turn down a court's request to remove her face cover. The Registrar General submitted his report on December 5. However, another lawyer stepped in to represent the petitioners later, who Justice Kazmi heard before reserving the case for judgment on December 6. The petition was eventually dismissed on December 13 after the Court found that there was an alternative remedy available.

# Delhi schools asked to prevent enrollment of illegal Bangladeshi migrants

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Directorate of Education of Delhi government on Monday issued a circular on document verification during admission, saying Delhi schools must prevent the enrolment of "illegal Bangladeshi migrants". According to the circular, "Schools must ensure strict admission procedures, verification of students' documentation to prevent illegal Bangladeshi migrants' enrolment, implementation of greater scrutiny to detect and prevent unauthorised admissions of illegal Bangladeshi migrants, in particular." It directed all heads of government, government-aided and unaided recognised private schools to refer cases to the local police and the revenue authority in case of



doubts. The Directorate of Education further instructed school heads to ensure that a careful process was followed to verify and handle all necessary documentation when enrolling migrant children. The District Directorate of Education (districts/zones) were directed to submit weekly reports of all such cases to the school branch headquarters and the Directorate of Education.

Earlier, the Municipal Corporation of Delhi has directed its schools to take steps to identify illegal Bangladeshi migrant students during the admission process, and asked the health department to ensure that no birth certificates are issued to them. The MCD has also directed all MCD zones to remove encroachments by illegal Bangladeshi migrants. An action taken report has been sought by the MCD deputy commissioner by December 31. The directive comes days after the Delhi L-G Secretariat ordered a crackdown on illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, with the issue becoming the latest flash-point between the ruling AAP and the BJP ahead of the Assembly elections in Delhi due in February.

# Retired Justice V Ramasubramaniam appointed as new chairperson of NHRC



Retired Supreme Court Justice V Ramasubramaniam has been appointed as the Chairperson of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC). The President of India's warrant was issued to him on Monday. The NHRC Chairperson is selected by the committee headed by Prime Minister, comprising Lok Sabha Speaker, Home Minister, Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha and Deputy Chairperson of Rajya Sabha. Justice Ramasubramaniam completed law from Madras Law College and started practice in 1983. He was appointed as Judge in Madras High Court in 2006. He served as Chief Justice of Himachal Pradesh High Court from June 22, 2019, until he was appointed as a judge of the Supreme Court on September 23, 2019. He demitted office on June 29, 2023. The appointment has been made consequent upon the retirement of Justice Arun Mishra from the post on June 1. NHRC member Vijaybhargathi Sayani was serving as the acting chairperson. The NHRC was established on 12 October 1993, under the Protection of Human Rights Act (PHRA), 1993, which was later amended by the Protection of Human Rights (Amendment) Act, 2006.

# Gig workers need targeted regulatory...

From page 1

She noted that over 83 per cent of app-based drivers work more than 10 hours daily. This puts them under the physical and mental strain added by policies like "10-minute deliveries" and unrealistic targets which also result in "avoidable accidents". NHRC Secretary General Bharat Lal echoed similar views stating that it is crucial to check the implementation of laws such as the Social Security Code 2020 and the various other labour laws in India to ensure Gig Workers welfare. He also noted that some states like Karnataka, Rajasthan and Jharkhand are focusing on providing social security to gig workers but more needs to be done to address their other major concerns relating to health insurance, minimum

wages, stress-free working conditions protecting their dignity. Other key suggestions from the session included expanding the e-Shram portal to support gig workers, offering maternity benefits, crèche facilities, and rest points for women, and building financial literacy to promote transparency. Additionally, the participants called for welfare schemes that provide health benefits, accident insurance, old-age protection, and unemployment safeguards. The need for a grievance redressal mechanism for women gig workers, awareness of POSH (Prevention of Sexual Harassment) policies, and enforcing minimum wage and income transparency were also emphasized. Furthermore, the discussion raised concerns about the arbitrary gig worker

rating system, which lacks a platform for workers to voice their concerns. At the same time, it was felt that there should be measures ensuring minimum wage enforcement and income transparency in all sectors engaging gig workers by the aggregators to bridge gender disparities. The session also saw discussion on threats posed by the climate change induced heat stroke and floods which are becoming a norm. In this connection, the experts batted for developing schemes addressing the risks posed by global warming to ensure workers' safety during extreme weather conditions by the employing companies. If these measures are implemented in toto, gig workers can look forward to a brighter future, feel experts. A recent survey by Borzo

(formerly WeFast a global same-day delivery company, from around 2,000 gig workers from Tier I and II cities, like Mumbai, Delhi, Bengaluru has revealed that approximately 78% of gig delivery workers employed with food delivery apps like Swiggy, Zomato, and platforms like Amazon earn less than Rs 2.50 lakh per annum. Thus, highlighting the pressing need for reform and improved welfare for this growing workforce. The NHRC session was attended by various gig employing companies like Big Basket, Urban Company, Zipp Electric and Ola Electric besides representatives from NITI Aayog, Labour Department of Karnataka and Rajasthan Governments, National Labour Cooperative Federation of India Ltd among others.

# Three Khalistani terrorists killed in Pilibhit encounter

From page 1

Police recovered two AK-47 rifles, two Glock pistols, and a large quantity of ammunition from the site. Visuals of the operation and the seized weapons have surfaced, highlighting the scale of the encounter. The militants were wanted for their involvement in the grenade attack on the Bakshival police outpost in Gurdaspur's Kalanur area. The Khalistan Zindabad Force had claimed responsibility for the attack on social media, naming Jaswinder Singh Baghi, alias Mannu Agwan, as the mastermind. Investigations revealed the attackers had

used an auto-rickshaw to reach the outpost, which was later seized by the police. Senior officials termed the operation a significant success in the fight against terrorism. "The militants posed a grave threat, and their neutralization is a crucial step in ensuring public safety," a senior police officer said. "The operation underscores the need for coordinated efforts among state police forces to tackle cross-border terrorism and neutralize threats posed by extremist groups," DGP Prashant Kumar said. Investigations are ongoing to trace the militants' network and potential accomplices.

# Terror suspect planned escape...

From page 1

During the arrest, the STF seized an Aadhaar card with an address in Srinagar, cash amounting to Rs 50,000, and two mobile phones. The STF has gathered sufficient evidence indicating that Munshi had traveled to Bangladesh multiple times and had maintained contact with senior members of Lashkar-e-Taiba, the officer said. Investigators are also analysing the call records from the two mobile phones seized from Munshi. "The call records could be crucial in identifying who he was in contact with and in understanding his motives for staying in the area," said an officer, noting that they suspect Munshi may have been trying to recruit people.

# Centre scraps no-detention policy for primary class V, VIII

From page 1

This new rule applies to over 3,000 Central government-run schools, including Kendriya Vidyalayas, Navodaya Vidyalayas, and Sainik Schools, as per senior education ministry officials. Following the amendment to the Right to Education Act (RTE) in 2019, at least 18 states and Union Territories have already done away with the 'no-detention policy' for the two classes. According to Ministry of Education officials, the notification will be applicable to over 3,000 schools run by the central Government including Kendriya Vidyalayas, Navaodyala Vidyalayas and Sainik Schools. Since school education is a State subject, states can make their decision

in this regard. Already 16 states and 2 UTs including Delhi have done away with the no-detention policy for these two classes. "If the child appearing in the re-examination fails to fulfil the promotion criteria again, he shall be held back in fifth class or eighth class, as the case may be. During the holding back of the child, the class teacher shall guide the child as well as the parents of the child, if necessary, and provide specialised inputs after identifying the learning gaps at various stages of assessment," the notification said. "The examination and re-examination shall be competency-based holistic development of the child and not be based on

memorisation and procedural skills. The Head of the school shall maintain a list of children who are held back and personally monitor the provisions provided for specialised inputs to such children and their progress with respect to the identified learning gaps," the notification read. States and UTs that have scrapped the no-detention policy include Assam, Bihar, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Punjab, Rajasthan, Sikkim, Tamil Nadu, Tripura, Uttarakhand, West Bengal, Delhi, Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Jammu and Kashmir. Asked about the delay in the notification since the amendment was approved in 2019, the official explained

that the new National Education Policy (NEP) was announced within six months of the amendment. "By the time the amendment was made, the NEP was announced within a few months. The department (school education and literacy) decided to wait till the recommendations of the new National Curriculum Framework (NCF) were ready to be able to take a holistic view. The NCF was ready in 2023 and subsequently the Ministry of Education took the decision and made some changes in rules of RTE implementation," the official added. The decision announced through an official notification now reverses the 2019 amendment to the Right to Education Act. In July 2018,

the Lok Sabha passed a bill to amend the Right to Education (RTE) Act, which aimed to end the 'no detention policy' in schools. The amendment introduced regular exams for Classes 5 and 8, with a provision for students who fail to have a re-examination opportunity within two months. In 2019, the Rajya Sabha approved the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (Amendment) Bill, which sought to remove the 'no detention policy' for up to Class 8 to improve learning outcomes. The bill granted state governments the discretion to either continue or abolish the policy, allowing them to hold students back in Classes 5 and 8 if they fail their year-end exams.

# Delhi Govt teachers to learn how...

From page 1

In an effort to empower teachers and school authorities, on Monday, the Delhi Police Shahdara District and Crime Branch Unit of Delhi Police in collaboration with Director of Education Department, Delhi, Veditha Reddy, IAS jointly organised a training program for teachers in Delhi. The program aimed to educate teachers from government and private schools on how to handle bomb threats in schools, the role of teachers in preventing drug abuse, and cyber hygiene (CyGene) awareness. Approximately 247 teachers from East Delhi participated in the program where they were sensitised about security and "Cyber Hygiene" (CyGene) in schools. The Delhi Police and the Delhi Education Department are committed to ensuring the safety and security of our schools. This training program is an important step

towards achieving this goal, and we are proud to have had the opportunity to work with the Delhi Education Department to make it a success." Deputy Commissioner of Police (Shahdara) Prashant Gautam said. In the training, teachers learned how to respond to bomb threats in schools, including evacuation procedures and communication protocols. They were also educated on the role they can play in preventing substance abuse among students, including identifying warning signs and providing support. Teachers learned about the importance of Cyber hygiene in schools, including how to protect student data and prevent cyber bullying. Retired ACP Prabhat Sinha, who is an expert in Cyber Crime, presented a detailed PowerPoint presentation on CyGene, sharing insights on the growing threats of

cybercrime, offered practical prevention measures, and discussed case studies to highlight the challenges teenagers face in the digital world. The session also focused on real-life case studies relating to issues faced by students concerning both cyber hygiene (CyGene) and drug abuse, providing teachers with tools to identify and address these problems effectively. "The teachers, as future influencers, have a direct impact on students. It is crucial that they are well-equipped with the knowledge of current issues such as cyber hygiene (CyGene) and drug abuse to ensure the safety and well-being of their students," said Gautam. The session concluded with a lecture and PowerPoint presentation on hoaxes, educating teachers on identifying hoaxes, scams and other malicious online activities that can pose risks to students.



# Chhattisgarh receives Rs 15,000 crore investment proposals

At CM's investors summit in New Delhi



**STAFF REPORTER**  
RAIPUR/NEW DELHI

Chhattisgarh on Monday received investment commitments of Rs 15,184 crore at the investors meet held in New Delhi during the presence of Chief Minister Vishnu Deo Sai.

The investments came in sectors like semiconductor, IT, electronics, food processing, EV, electrical and renewable energy.

A senior government official said key industrialists from India and abroad engaged in detailed discussions with Sai to explore investment opportunities in the state.

The discussions were focused on exploring potential investments that will boost the state's industrial growth and create thousands of employment opportunities.

Sai emphasized that the state's new industrial policy 2024-30 was highly favourable for investors and

extended a warm invitation to industrialists and investors to explore the opportunities and potential the state offers.

"Our new industrial policy provides tax, land and electricity exemptions as well as single-window clearance for industries. This policy not only emphasizes on setting up industries but also on employment generation," the Chief Minister said.

Highlighting some of the pro-investors features of the policy, he said the policy includes special subsidy and incentive packages for emerging sectors like AI, robotics, green hydrogen and data centers, streamlined approval processes through the Digital Single Window System 2.0 and a conducive environment with strong administration of the state.

To promote industrial growth, the government is offering a 30 per cent subsidy for private industrial parks under the "minimum government" concept.

Additionally, for industries looking to set up operations, ready and developed plots will be provided within 60 days of application, he added.

The Chief Minister announced incentives to boost industrial development in Bastar, including 50 percent royalty exemption on iron ore and 100 percent royalty exemption on coal for core sector industries.

He highlighted that the new industrial policy of Chhattisgarh prioritizes emerging and modern technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), Robotics, Green Hydrogen, and Data centers.

Additionally, key sectors like IT, pharma, electronics and food processing have been given special focus. Industries in these areas will receive 30 to 50 percent assistance, along with tax exemptions ranging from 5 to 12 years, ensuring a smoother setup and operational process for businesses.

# Top Maoist leader with Rs 25L bounty held

**STAFF REPORTER**  
KANKER

A senior Maoist leader, carrying a reward of Rs 25 lakh on his head and an associate of top insurgents, has been arrested in Chhattisgarh's Kanker district, police said on Monday.

Prabhakar Rao alias Balmuri Narayan Rao, a Dandakaranya Special Zonal Committee Member who joined the outlawed Maoist outfit in 1984, was caught on Sunday in Antagarh area, Bastar (Range) Inspector General of Police Sundarraj P said.

The 57-year-old was in-charge of logistics supply and

a close associate of top Maoist functionaries.

"For the past few days, police in Kanker had been receiving information about the activities of Rao. He is being questioned," the officer said.

The official said the arrest of Rao, an important cadre of the Maoist organization, was a significant success for security forces.

Rao was also in-charge of the Mobile Political School, the official said.

Dozens of criminal cases were registered against Rao in several states including Chhattisgarh. He was a close associate of Maoist leaders of Odisha, Bihar, Jharkhand,



West Bengal and Chhattisgarh. "He is a cousin of Maoist supremo Ganapati," said Sundarraj.

Rao is also said to have close links with senior Maoist leaders like Basava Raju, K Ramchandra Reddy alias Raju, Devji alias Kuma Dada, Kosa, Sonu and Mallaraja Reddy alias Sangram. His wife, Raje Kange, is in-charge of the Raoghat Area Committee, the official said.

Rao hailed from Birpur village in Telangana.

A total of 884 Maoists have been arrested this year in Chhattisgarh's Bastar administrative division, Sundarraj said.

## Government educates people on adoption regulations



**STAFF REPORTER**  
RAIPUR

Authorities in Chhattisgarh on Monday educated prospective parents about Adoption Regulations 2022 at a state-level event in Raipur.

They aimed to create public awareness about the adoption process to prevent the legal complications parents might face due to lack of information.

The Central Adoption

Resource Authority and the Chhattisgarh Adoption Resource Agency organised the event. More than 200 parents shared their experiences with their adopted children.

As of November 2024, there were 117 children eligible for adoption in Chhattisgarh and 836 registered prospective parents. The event also sought to promote adoption of children in foster care in their foster family to prevent illegal adoptions.

## Youth Congress attempts CM house gherao, bid foiled

**STAFF REPORTER**  
RAIPUR

The Chhattisgarh Youth Congress on Monday attempted a 'gherao' of the Chief Minister's House in Raipur to protest against the alleged insult of Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar by Union Home Minister Amit Shah.

Youth Congress activists marched to the house from Gandhi Maidan and courted arrest when they were intercepted ahead of their destination.

Earlier, former Chief Minister Bhupesh Baghel addressed the gathering at Nagar Nigam Garden.

The march was led by National President of Indian Youth Congress Uday Bhanu Chib, PCC chief Deepak Baj and Chhattisgarh Youth Congress President Akash Sharma. A large number of police personnel were deployed



near the Chief Minister's house to stop the Youth Congress workers, who were halted with water cannons.

A minor scuffle between the Congress workers and the police was reported.

The law and order situation in Chhattisgarh, sale of narcotics, drugs, high power tariff and unemployment were also raised by the marchers.



Authorities across Chhattisgarh honoured the beneficiaries of the Mahtari Vandan Scheme on Monday to mark the completion of one year of the state government. The women received a letter, Vishnu Ki Pati, containing Chief Minister Vishnu Deo Sai's message.

## C'garh acts on Mahtari Vandan Yojana fraud

**STAFF REPORTER**  
RAIPUR

The Chhattisgarh government on Monday sacked an Anganwadi worker and suspended two others after a man siphoned money from the Mahtari Vandan Yojana.

The fraudster has been nabbed and sent to jail for cheating.

Taluri village Aganwadi worker Vedmati Joshi has been dismissed while supervisor Prabha Netam and project officer Jyoti Mathrani have been suspended. The village is located in Bastar district.

A show cause notice has been served to the then district programme officer to seek his/her reply. Virendra Joshi



(37) was taken into custody on Monday, Bastar Station House Officer Chhabil Tandekar said. A court sent him to prison.

Joshi of Taluri village fraudulently opened an account in the name of actress Sunny Leone and illegally grabbed the money disbursed

## Chemists seek ban on online sale of medicines



**STAFF REPORTER**  
RAIPUR

The All India Organisation of Chemists and Druggists (AIOCD) has urged the Centre to rescind the special permission that allowed doorstep delivery of medicines during the COVID-19

pandemic.

The Chhattisgarh Chemists and Distributor Association supported the initiative and gave the details in Raipur on Monday.

In a letter to the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, the group said the misuse of the approval by online

platforms was a serious threat to public health.

The notification issued in March 2020 allowed door-to-door delivery of medicines to limit people's movements.

They said that digital platforms deliver medicines at home without following the necessary regulatory safeguards.

The goal was to enable licensed drug sellers to deliver medicine under specific circumstances, not to bypass important safety measures by online platforms, it said.

Selling medicines without any valid prescription has led to problems like self-medication, drug abuse and antimicrobial resistance, it said.

The group demanded strict adherence to prescription and other safety rules and an immediate prohibition on illegal and unregulated online sale of medicines.

## Three held for cheating people of Rs 4.83 Cr



**STAFF REPORTER**  
GARIABAND

Three men were arrested on Monday for cheating people of Rs 4.83 crore in Gariaband district in Chhattisgarh by promising him higher dividends through a business trading platform.

Sharadchandra Sharma, Yashwant Kumar Nag and Kamlesh Sahu have been taken into custody. Gariaband Superintendent of Police Nikhil Rakhecha said.

Sharma hailed from Durg district, Nag from Gariaband and Sahu resided in Mungeli district. They cheated Santosh Yadav and others. A court sent them to prison.

## Coffee, tea may protect against head & neck cancer: Study

**AGENCIES**

Consumption of coffee and tea can lower the risks of developing head and neck cancer, including cancers of the mouth and throat, claimed a study on Monday.

Head and neck cancer is the seventh most common cancer worldwide, and rates are rising in low- and middle-income countries.

The findings, based on an analysis of data from 14 studies, showed that compared with non-coffee-drinkers, individuals who drank more than 4 cups of caffeinated coffee daily had 17% lower odds of having head and neck cancer overall. It also led to a 30% lower risk of having cancer of the oral cavity, and 22% lower odds of having throat cancer.

Drinking 3-4 cups of caffeinated coffee was linked with a 41% lower risk of having hypopharyngeal cancer — a type of cancer at the bottom of the throat), revealed the study published in the peer-reviewed CANCER journal. "While there has been prior research on coffee and tea



consumption and reduced risk of cancer, this study highlighted their varying effects with different sub-sites of head and neck cancer, including the observation that even decaffeinated coffee had some positive impact," said senior author Yuan-Chin Amy Lee, from Huntsman Cancer Institute and the University of Utah School of Medicine. "Coffee and tea habits are

fairly complex, and these findings support the need for more data and further studies around the impact that coffee and tea can have on reducing cancer risk." The team examined data from 14 studies by different scientists and pooled information on 9,548 patients with head and neck cancer. They were then compared with 15,783 controls without cancer.

Study participants completed questionnaires about their prior consumption of caffeinated coffee, decaffeinated coffee, and tea in cups per day/week/month/year.

Notably, the researchers found that drinking decaffeinated coffee was associated with 25% lower odds of oral cavity cancer.

Drinking tea was linked with 29% lower odds of hypopharyngeal cancer. Also, drinking one cup or less of tea daily was linked with a 9% lower risk of head and neck cancer overall and a 27% lower risk of hypopharyngeal cancer, but drinking more than one cup was associated with 38% higher odds of laryngeal cancer.

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# Congress running smear campaign against Shah, accuses BJP

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI**

The BJP on Monday accused the Congress of running a smear campaign against Union Home Minister Amit Shah and said, instead of indulging in such "drama", it should apologise for always "insulting and humiliating" B R Ambedkar.

It also accused the Congress of using out of context a small portion of Shah's recent speech in the Rajya Sabha in a bid to "establish its political identity".

The Congress has launched a weeklong nationwide campaign against Shah, alleging that he insulted Ambedkar with his remarks while participating in a debate on the Constitution in the Rajya Sabha last week.

As part of the "Ambedkar Samman Saptah", Congress workers and leaders will hold marches and press conferences to remember Ambedkar's legacy, the party said on Saturday.

Hitting back, senior BJP leader and former Union minister Ravi Shankar Prasad alleged that the Congress, which "always" insulted Ambedkar during his lifetime, was doing a "drama" of remembering his legacy.

"The Congress, which always insulted B R Ambedkar, is holding press conferences across the country... Stop this drama. Stop this hypocrisy," Prasad said in a press conference at the party headquarters.

"The Congress must tender an unconditional apology for all the insults and humiliations



done to B R Ambedkar during his lifetime and to his legacy after his death. First of all, publicly apologise and then hold press conferences," he added. The BJP leader asserted that the people of the country were very mature. "Its (Congress) efforts will not succeed."

Prasad said the BJP would hold press conferences around the country to "expose" the Congress by telling people how the party and its leaders insulted Ambedkar. "We have all the proof," he added.

The BJP leader also slammed Congress general secretary KC Venugopal for describing as a "badge of honour" the FIR against Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi in connection with last week's face-off between

ruling and opposition MPs on the Parliament premises.

"A case was filed against Rahul Gandhi for pushing and shoving (BJP) MPs and a Congress general secretary, who is very close to him, said it was a badge of honour in their fight to honour the legacy of BR Ambedkar... What a bundle of lies," he said.

Rahul Gandhi is wearing "badge of dishonour for insulting and humiliating the legacy of Ambedkar", he charged.

Prasad said the BJP believed that all those who made "some honest efforts" to build the nation should be respected. "This is the difference (between the Congress and the BJP)... We honour even our staunch rivals who have tried to build the nation in their own ways. We published a book on EMS

Namboodiripad [CPI(M) leader and Kerala's first chief minister] when Atal Bihari Vajpayee was prime minister," he said.

After the BJP assumed power under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Lok Janshakti Party chief Ram Vilas Paswan was conferred with the Padma Bhushan and Nationalist Congress Party (Sharadchandra Pawar) supreme Sharad Pawar the Padma Vibhushan, he added.

Asked about Jawaharlal Nehru, Prasad said, "The biggest proof of honouring our rivals is the prime ministers' memorial and museum. Earlier, only Nehru's memorial was there. Now, there is (a memorial of) every prime minister. The country should remember all the prime ministers."

# Nearly 10 lakh Govt jobs provided in mission mode: PM Modi

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI**

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday said his government has provided nearly 10 lakh permanent government jobs to youths in the last one or one and a half years which, he asserted, is a record.

Addressing recruits at a Rozgar Mela through a virtual event, where over 71,000 people were given appointment letters, he said never before in the tenure of any previous government were jobs provided in such a "mission mode".

The young population is at the centre of his government's policies and programmes, he said, adding honesty and transparency have driven the recruitment process.

The prime minister said 'Rozgar Melas' (recruitment drives) are empowering the youth and unlocking their potential. "The youth of India today is full of new confidence, succeeding in every sector."

Noting that a large number of recruits are women, Modi said it is the endeavour of his government that they become self-dependent in every field. The government's decision to grant 26-week maternity leave to women has helped them a lot in their careers, he said and



underscored that women are the majority owners of the house constructed under the 'PM Awas Yojana'. Women-led development is taking place in the country, he said.

Modi said making maximum use of the Indian youths' abilities and talent is a priority of his government, and that they are at the centre of a host of schemes, be it start-up India, digital India or reforms in space and defence sectors.

The National Education

Policy has taken steps for the development of youngsters, he said, highlighting its emphasis on the use of mother tongues.

His government has ensured that language is not a barrier by ensuring that youngsters can take recruitment exams in 13 Indian languages, he added.

Noting that former prime minister Charan Singh, whose birth anniversary is being observed on Monday, stood

for the development of rural India and for the country's progress, Modi said his government has followed this by creating job and self-employment opportunities in villages. It was his government's good fortune to bestow Bharat Ratna on Singh earlier this year, he said.

Speaking at the event, Union minister Jitendra Singh said more than 29 per cent of the 71,000 recruited came from the Other Backward Classes

category.

The backward classes recruitment has seen a 27 per cent rise under the Modi government compared to the UPA's 10 years in power, he said. The Schedules Castes and Scheduled Tribes accounted for 15.8 and 9.6 respectively for Monday's recruitments, Singh added.

In his address, Modi said the development of a country relies on the hard work, capability, and leadership of its youth, and India is committed to becoming a developed nation by 2047 as its policies and decisions focus on empowering its talented youth.

He said India is now the world's fifth-largest economy and the third-largest start-up ecosystem. Similarly, youths pursuing careers in sports have confidence that they will not fail because they now are supported by modern training facilities and tournaments.

Modi said the country is undergoing a transformation across various sectors, becoming the second-largest in mobile manufacturing.

India is also making strides in renewable energy, organic farming, space, defence, tourism, and wellness, creating new opportunities and reaching new heights in each area, he added.

# CISF launches new transfer-posting policy to ensure 'better work-life balance'

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI**

The CISF on Monday said it has unveiled a new organisational transfer and posting policy in order to ensure a "better work-life balance" for its personnel who guard some of the most vital assets and infrastructure in the country.

The policy will "impact" over 98 per cent of the paramilitary force's about 1.70 lakh workforce with personnel to retire within two years being the first category to be given "choice or preference posting" followed by women staffers, working couples and the remaining falling in the fourth category.

The policy, to kick in from December 31, is meant for non-gazetted officials (NGOs) in the ranks from constable to inspector, as grievances related to this issue is "higher" in these ranks, officials said.

"The policy is aimed to satisfy the force members when it comes to their transfer and posting, and place of work... Without compromising on the operational requirements of the force," CISF Inspector General (Administration) K C Samantary briefed the media. The Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) has replaced the last such policy that was enacted in 2017. "The policy has been



made after conducting extensive consultations on the ground. We aim to make the CISF a future ready force to cope with emerging security challenges with training and building expertise in various security domains.

"We also see that there is a profound shift in social norms and family dynamics and work-life balance is not desirable but essential," the IG said. He said "more and more women" were joining the force and that "working couples" are increasing in the force and hence the policy is borne out after considering all such issues.

The IG said special care will be taken to ensure that the education of the children of the force personnel does not suffer and transfer orders will be issued in such a time that the academic cycle of their wards does not get affected.

"Choice-based posting in CISF has been made a rule as compared to being an exception earlier. Personnel who want to get a choice transfer or posting will have to opt for it," he said.

As per the CISF officials, personnel retiring within two years will be given the first preference while issuing posting orders followed by women personnel, then working couples and the rest will fall in the last category.

The IG said "domain experts and personnel who are highly talented" will also get preference in their choice posting due to their skills and demanding nature of work.

The domain experts are those who are adept in areas like information technology, cyber security, data science, aviation security, anti-drone solutions, weapons and tactics, among others.

# PM Modi, Dhankhar, Yogi pay tributes to Charan Singh on birth anniversary

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI/LUCKNOW**

Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Uttar Pradesh (UP) Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on Monday paid tributes to former prime minister Charan Singh on his birth anniversary.

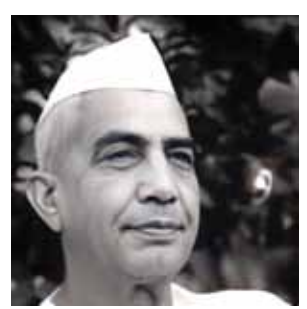
Dhankhar recalled Charan Singh's contribution to the agri sector. Talking to reporters at Kisan Ghat here after paying tributes to Singh on his 122nd birth anniversary, Dhankhar said it is an occasion for everyone to take a resolve that agriculture is necessary for India's rise.

Agro sector and farmer welfare are fundamentals for a passage to a developed nation at 2047," he said. Dhankhar said as Singh was committed towards holistic development of farmers, it was time for all of us to "converge our energies and get into the job that these celebrations are festive occasions for the farmer and would be game changer for the country's economy."

In his tributes, Prime Minister Modi described Charan Singh as a true well-wisher of the poor and farmers. In a social media post, Modi said Singh's dedication and spirit of service to the country will continue to inspire everyone.

Born in 1902 to a Jat family in western Uttar Pradesh, Singh went on to become a prominent leader, especially in north India, and an axis of anti-Congress politics after he quit the Congress. He also served as chief minister of Uttar Pradesh.

The Modi government bestowed the Bharat Ratna on him this year, acknowledging his contribution to public life. His grandson Jayant Singh is a minister in



the BJP-led NDA government. Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath said in a social media post "Humble tributes to former prime minister 'Bharat Ratna' Chaudhary Charan Singh ji on his birth anniversary. He dedicated his life to the upliftment of villages, poor and deprived and farmer welfare! Heartiest greetings of 'Farmers' Day' to the people of the state and the farmers who provide food!"

The chief minister also attended a programme marking the 122nd birth anniversary of the former prime minister. He said, "Chaudhary Charan Singh's birth anniversary has been observed as 'Kisan Samman Diwas' in Uttar Pradesh since 2002."

He recalled Singh's belief that India cannot prosper if its farmers remain poor, emphasising that the prosperity of the nation is integral to the well-being of its 'Annadata' farmers.

"The initiatives launched in 2014 are now recognised globally as a model for agricultural development", he stated.

Reflecting this vision, the double-engine government, under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has been relentlessly working to uplift farmers, he added.

Adityanath paid floral tributes to Singh's statue at the Vidhan Sabha and distributed new tractors to 11 farmers under the Chief Minister Krishak Uphaar Yojana.

# Swarnim Bharat: Virasat aur Vikas to be showcased at R-Day Parade 2025

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI**

Swarnim Bharat: Virasat aur Vikas will be showcased through tableaux at Kartavya Path during Republic Day Parade 2025, defence ministry said here on Monday.

Every year states/UTs and Union government ministries/ departments showcase their tableaux on Kartavya Path as part of Republic Day Celebration (RDC). For RDC-2025, the theme for tableaux has been decided as 'Swarnim Bharat: Virasat aur Vikas,' it said.

Since the beginning of this year, a consultative process has been adopted by the Ministry of Defence to decide on various aspects related to tableaux. A meeting at senior official level was held in April 2024 to deliberate on



important components of Republic Day Parade. Due to time allotted for tableaux in

improvement of tableaux quality. Various suggestions received during meeting has been included in process. Theme for tableaux was also decided based on suggestions from State/UTs.

There is a well-established system for selection of tableaux for participation in the Republic Day Parade as per which Ministry of Defence invites proposals for tableaux from all State/ UTs and central ministries/ departments.

The tableaux proposals received from various State/ UTs and central ministries/ departments are evaluated in a series of meetings of the Expert Committee, comprising eminent persons in the field of art, culture, painting, sculpture, music, architecture, choreography etc. Tableaux are one of the

Committee.

While evaluating the tableaux ideas presented by various states/UTs and ministries, key aspects like conceptual uniqueness and novelty, creative expression with a clear, communicable message, combining subtlety as well as directness, striking balance between Virasat and Vikas in each tableau, exclusion of repetitive ideas, special attention to details like colors, forms, textures, flow, rhythm, proportions and balance, ensuring a well-composed aesthetic experience of grand scale were taken into consideration for selection.

Following 15 states/ UTs have been selected for showcasing their tableaux on Kartavya Path for RDC-2025: Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chandigarh, Dadar Nagar Haveli & Daman and Diu, Goa, Gujarat,

Haryana, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, Tripura, Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal.

In addition, 11 Ministries/ Department of Union government have also been selected for RDC-2025.

All the states/UTs, irrespective of their selection for Kartavya Path, are invited to display their tableaux during Bharat Parv in Red Fort (26th-31st January 2025).

The entire selection process is robust, fair, transparent, based on merit and free from any bias. The selected tableaux would showcase India's diverse strengths and its constantly evolving cultural inclusiveness marching into glorious future, showcasing 'Swarnim Bharat - Virasat aur Vikas' to the world audience.

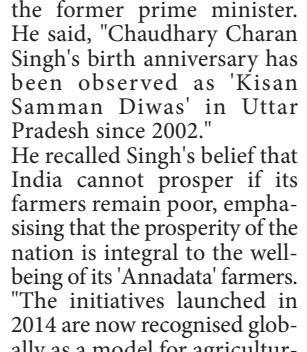
# Delhi HC denies anticipatory bail to former IAS probationer Puja Khedkar

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI**

Delhi High Court on Monday refused to grant anticipatory bail to former IAS probationer Puja Khedkar in the criminal case lodged against her for cheating and wrongly availing of OBC and disability quota benefits in the civil services examination.

"Anticipatory bail plea is dismissed. Interim protection from arrest is vacated," Justice Chandri Singh said while ruling on the plea.

Justice Singh said a strong prima facie case was made out against Khedkar and investigation was required to unearth the conspiracy. It was a classic case of fraud committed on a constitutional body as well as society, the judge said. Khedkar is accused of misrepresenting



information in her application for the UPSC Civil Services Examination, 2022, to get reservation benefits.

The counsel for the Delhi Police as well as the complainant, the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC), opposed the plea for pre-arrest bail.

The UPSC was represented by senior advocate Naresh Kaushik and lawyer

Vardhman Kaushik. The UPSC initiated a series of actions against Khedkar in July, including lodging a criminal case, for availing attempt in the civil services exam by faking her identity.

The Delhi Police registered an FIR under provisions of the Indian Penal Code, Information Technology Act and Right of Persons with Disabilities Act.

# NHRC questions TN Govt about death by electrocution of two labourers

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI**

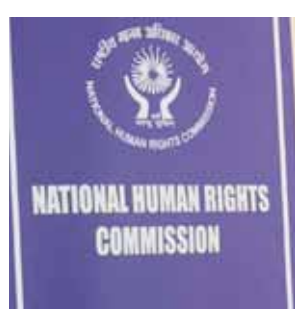
Taking suo motu cognisance of a media report that two persons, working as contract labourers with the Tamil Nadu Generation and Distribution Corporation (Tangedco) died due to electrocution, The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) has issued notices to the State Chief Secretary and the Director General of Police, Tamil Nadu calling for a detailed report in the matter within two weeks.

The NHRC noted that while repairing a high-tension overhead power line near Olaiyur Ring Road in KK Nagar, Tiruchi in the Southern State on December 18.

"The Commission has observed that the contents of the media report, if true, indi-

cate gross negligence on the part of the electricity department resulting in the death of two labourers," said the Rights body in a statement issued here. The Commission has also noted that such incidents have occurred earlier too in the state. This is a serious human rights violation and a matter of concern for the Commission, it further added.

The notice is expected to include the status of the FIR registered in the matter and



compensation, if any, provided to the next of kin of the two victims, said the statement.

The Commission would also like to know the steps taken/proposed by the State government and Tangedco to ensure that such incidents do not recur, it added.

According to the media report, as per the preliminary investigations, the power supply to the cable was not fully turned off during the repair work. The workers were on the job without any protective gear.

In a similar incident, a worker was electrocuted to death while repairing a transformer in the Theothukudi district of Tamil Nadu last year. Last month, a migrant worker was reportedly electrocuted during Cyclone Fengal and his body was found near an ATM in Muthialpet, pointed out the NHRC in a statement.



# Open merit aspirants protest outside J and K CM's residence, demand rationalisation of reservation quota

MOHIT KANDHARI ■ JAMMU

Demanding rationalisation of reservation quota in government jobs and scholarships, a large number of open merit aspirants led by a Member Parliament from Srinagar Aga Syed Ruhullah Mehdi Monday laid a siege to the official residence of Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Omar Abdullah for several hours.

Braving inclement weather conditions under sub-zero temperatures these aspirants staged a peaceful demonstration holding placards which read 'Stop Genocide Against Open Merit'.

PDP legislator Waheed Ur Rehman Parra along with other party leaders including Iltija Mufti also joined the peaceful protest outside the CM's residence.

Kashmir's chief cleric Mirwaiz



Umar Farooq had also extended support to a sit-in protest called to demand rationalisation in the reservation policy in Jammu

and Kashmir. While expressing concern, Mirwaiz said that the matter should be addressed with justice and fairness by those at

the helm. Reacting to the developments taking place outside his residence, the Chief Minister invited a group of students.

After briefing them on various steps initiated by his newly formed government Omar promised the student delegation that the government would address the reservation issue within the period of six months.

"Chief Minister Omar Abdullah assured the protesting student delegation that their demands would be addressed and the sub-committee would submit its report within 6 months", the Spokesman of the Jammu and Kashmir National Conference posted on X (earlier Twitter).

JKNC MP Aga Syed Ruhullah Mehdi also termed the time frame given by chief minister Jammu & Kashmir a 'positive development'.

"I'm thankful to Chief Minister Omar Abdullah who listened to students over the reservation issue and gave a time frame of six months to solve this grave and sensitive issue," MP Ruhullah said. He said the time frame set by CM Abdullah doesn't mean it will take a full six months. "It may take two or three months only. As one month has already passed, I'm hopeful that the matter will be resolved in the coming five months," he said.

## Shimla receives second snowfall of the season, brings cheer to tourists and farmers alike



PTI ■ SHIMLA

Himachal Pradesh's capital, Shimla, on Monday witnessed the second light snowfall of the season, bringing cheer to tourists, locals and farmers. Residents called in woolen clothes stepped out to enjoy the snowflakes under an overcast sky, as icy winds swept through the region. Tourists were seen reveling in the snowfall at The Ridge and mall road in town.

advance booking for New Year.

Meanwhile, intense cold wave persisted in the lower hills of Himachal Pradesh, with Una, Hamirpur, Chamba and Mandi experiencing cold wave conditions and Sundernagar reeling under severe cold wave. Shallow fog was witnessed in Mandi and Sundernagar areas, the meteorological department said. The department on Monday issued an orange alert for severe cold in Bilaspur, Una, Hamirpur and Mandi districts till Thursday.

## Defence Minister Rajnath Singh pays tribute to former Haryana CM Om Prakash Chautala



PTI ■ CHANDIGARH

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh on Monday visited Teja Khera in the Sirsa district and paid tributes to former Haryana chief minister Om Prakash Chautala, who passed away last week.

Chautala's younger brother and former Haryana minister Ranjit Singh Chautala and offered condolences to the Chautala family. Ex-chief minister Chautala was former deputy prime minister Devi Lal's eldest of the four sons. Chautala, who was a five-time chief minister, died in Gurugram on Friday. He was 89. Speaking to reporters at Teja Khera, Singh recalled his association with O P Chautala and said he shared "deep relations" with him. He said that as chief minister of Haryana five times, he not

only served people of the state, but the services which he rendered for the farming community can never forget that. "He was son of a great leader (Devi Lal), but in the political sphere, he carved out his own identity," said Singh about Chautala, whose party was part of the NDA earlier. He said that Chautala was a flag-bearer of the anti-Congress front all his life. He also said that Chautala walked the path shown by Sir Chhotu Ram, Chaudhary Charan Singh and Chaudhary Devi Lal (all of whom were considered the messiahs of farmers). On Saturday, Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar, Union Minister Manohar Lal Khattar, Haryana Chief Minister Nayab Singh Saini, Shiromani Akali Dal leader Sukhbir Singh Dal were among prominent personalities who reached Teja Khera to attend the last rites of the departed leader.

## Gurugram traffic police gear up for Christmas and new year celebrations, focus on curbing drunken driving

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ GURUGRAM

Ahead of Christmas Day and New Year celebrations the Gurugram Traffic Police has made special preparations for smooth traffic operation in the city. Traffic officials said special attention would be kept on drinking and driving. For this, the Deputy Commissioner of Police (DCP), Traffic Virender Vij, has assigned the duties of traffic police officers to celebrate Christmas Day and New Year safely and peacefully. The DCP has issued guidelines to all the officers posted in traffic to perform their duties with more vigilance during Christmas Day and New Year celebrations. He also gave necessary directions to the traffic personnel to keep an eye on drinking and driving.

Meanwhile, a total of 57 people, including 06 traffic inspectors, 12 zonal officers, 33 ORS and 06 RSOs, have been deployed in the traffic police during Christmas Day, which also includes 6 traffic check posts. Apart from this, a total of 105 traffic police officers will be appointed especially for the New Year, including 11 zonal officers, 83 ORS, and 11 other traffic employees, which also includes 10 traffic checkpoints. Traffic policemen would be deployed at ten traffic posts in Sector 29 and the MG Road, keeping traffic arrangements in mind. Notably, there are more than 150 pubs in the city, where young men and women attend in large numbers for the New Year celebrations. Cranes and ambulances have been put on standby in accident-prone areas, and arrangements have been made against drinking and

driving. Parking would be arranged along the Leisure Valley and adjacent areas. Also, concerned traffic official of the area will set up alcohol checkpoints in their respective areas so that Christmas Day and New Year 2025 can be celebrated with joy as well as safely and peacefully. According to data released by the Gurugram traffic police, a total of 25,615 drivers, including 218 female drivers, who were driving after consuming alcohol, have been challenged from 1 January 2024 to 22 December 2024. "We requested people to celebrate Christmas Day and New Year celebrations peacefully and give their cooperation to the Traffic Police Gurugram. Traffic Police Gurugram is always ready for their service and security. Be careful and be safe. It is important to follow traffic rules.

## Truck runs over people sleeping on footpath, killing three and injuring six

PTI ■ PUNE

Two toddlers and a man were killed and six other persons injured after a truck ran over people sleeping on a footpath in Maharashtra's Pune city in the wee hours of Monday, police said. The incident took place at 12.55 am on the footpath in Wagholi area where several persons were sleeping, they said. The victims comprised labourers and their family members hailing from Amravati. The labourers had come to Pune a couple of days back in search of jobs, the police said. The truck driver, identified as Gajanan Totre (26), was arrested after the incident and his medical test was being done to ascertain if he was driving under the influence of alcohol, an official said.

## NCP's Chhagan Bhujbal meets CM Devendra Fadnavis amid Mahayuti government row

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Senior NCP leader Chhagan Bhujbal, who is sulking over not being included in the new Mahayuti government in Maharashtra, met Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis here on Monday. Talking to reporters after the meeting, Bhujbal said he had an elaborate discussion with the CM on the prevailing political and social atmosphere in the state. The former state minister was accompanied by his nephew Sameer Bhujbal during the nearly 30-minute meeting with Fadnavis at the latter's 'Sagar' bungalow in Mumbai. "Fadnavis told me that the Other Backward Classes have played an important role in the landslide victory of the Mahayuti in the assembly elections (held on November 20) and he will take care that

the OBC community's interest is not harmed," Chhagan Bhujbal said. He also said Fadnavis has sought some time to think over the issues pertaining to OBCs. "He (Fadnavis) said he would arrive at some decision in 10 to 12 days," the NCP leader added. OBC leaders are opposed to activist Manoj Jarange's demand for reservation for the Maratha community in the Other Backward Class (Kunbi) category. Bhujbal has also been vocal about his opposition to the demand. Asked if he was planning to switch over to the BJP, Chhagan Bhujbal refused to elaborate and said he has already spoken his mind on the issue of him being ignored in the ministry expansion. On Sunday, representatives of OBC organisations from different parts of Maharashtra met him in the city.

## Brick kiln wall collapse kills four children in Haryana's Hisar



PTI ■ HISAR

Four children were killed when a wall of a brick kiln collapsed on them while they were asleep in Budana village of Haryana's Hisar district, police said on Monday. A girl was critically injured in the incident that took place on Sunday night in the Narnaund police station area. The deceased were identified as Nisha (3 months), Suraj (9), Nandini (5) and Vivek (9), they said. According to sources, many families of labourers from Uttar Pradesh work at the kiln

in Budana. The work of making bricks and installing pillars near the chimney is going on at the kiln. The children and some labourers were sleeping near the wall of the brick kiln when it collapsed on them. While Suraj, Nandini and Vivek died on the spot, Nisha succumbed on the way to the hospital, said Superintendent of Police (SP), Hansi, Hemendra Kumar Meena. The condition of a five-year-old girl, Gauri, is critical. She is undergoing treatment at Hisar Civil Hospital. All five children hail from Badhav village in Ambedkar Nagar district of Uttar Pradesh, police said. SP Meena visited Hisar Civil Hospital after the incident and met the families of the deceased. "The victims' families have not given any written complaint in the matter. If a complaint is received, action will be taken accordingly," he said.

## BJP revamps Tripura leadership, appoints over 90 per cent new faces as mandal presidents

PTI ■ AGARTALA

The BJP has brought in over 90 per cent new faces as presidents of 'mandal' committees in Tripura, replacing old-timers, a party leader said on Monday. The change in the assembly-level organisational set-up was introduced after the party's tally in the 2023 state elections had decreased to 32 from 36 seats. Party's returning officer (RO) for the selection of 'mandal' presidents, Samarendra Chandra Deb on Monday announced the names of 60 'mandal' presidents. "During the selection of the 'mandal' presidents for 60 assembly segments, we ensured representation of all sections of people because the party believes in 'Sabka Saath Sabka Vikash'. Women constitute three per cent of the newly selected 'mandal' presidents, 23 per cent belong

to ST, 18 per cent to SC and 36 per cent to the general category," he told reporters. Deb said almost all such committees got new heads as the party had put a restriction on the upper age limit at 45 for the post of 'mandal' presidents. BJP activists, who are below 45 years of age, are now eligible for 'mandal' presidents in Tripura as the party's central leadership instructed the state unit to bring new faces to strengthen the organisation in assembly segments. Those who had already completed two terms as 'mandal' presidents did not get another chance to lead the party at local levels, he said. "Around 90 per cent of the 60 'mandal' presidents are new faces. The party has followed a proper guideline to bring new faces to the forefront," he said. Chief Minister Manik Saha on Monday congratulated the

new 'mandal' presidents for all the 60 assembly constituencies. "Congratulations to newly appointed 'mandal' presidents. I firmly believe that under your able leadership, the party will be strengthened more," the chief minister wrote on Facebook. BJP's Tripura unit general secretary Amit Rakshit said the move to appoint new faces as 'mandal' presidents was introduced following instruction from Delhi to give a fair chance to young leaders to serve the party. According to him, over 11 lakh people have already enrolled their names online as BJP's primary and active members during a drive that commenced in October. Apart from online membership, the BJP has received over 2 lakh applications offline, seeking enrollment as primary members of the party.

## Kumbh Mela 2025: No more 'Kumbh mein bichchrey bhai' drama as UP gears up with tech-savvy systems

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ PRAYAGRAJ

The age-old cinematic trope of loved ones getting separated in the chaotic crowds of the Kumbh Mela is set to become a thing of the past. The Uttar Pradesh government is pulling out all the stops to ensure that the Maha Kumbh 2025 in Prayagraj will be a secure and seamless experience for crores of pilgrims. Through meticulous planning and cutting-edge technology, the state administration aims to eliminate the fear of separation at the mega event. The Prayagraj Mela Authority, in collaboration with the Police Department, is rolling out an advanced lost-and-found system that prioritizes prevention and rapid reunions. At the forefront of this initiative are digital Khoya-Paya centers, which will



feature a robust digital registration system. Missing persons' details will be swiftly recorded and shared across multiple platforms, including popular social media channels like Facebook and X (formerly Twitter). Officials believe this tech-driven approach will replace heart-wrenching tales

of separation with reassuring stories of timely reunions. "Announcements at regular intervals and the use of digital platforms will ensure no family has to endure prolonged anxiety," said a senior official overseeing preparations. "Our aim is to redefine the Kumbh as a place

of safety and cherished memories." Special measures are being implemented to protect vulnerable groups, especially women and children. Any individual claiming a lost child or woman must provide verifiable identification. In cases of uncertainty, police

intervention will be immediate, leaving no room for error or potential harm. "This system eliminates the fears depicted in movies where lost individuals are taken away by the wrong people. Instead, we are ensuring their safety through a secure and organized process," the official added. The theme of siblings or loved ones getting separated at the Kumbh has been a staple in Indian cinema, from the 1943 classic 'Aqbar and the 1970s hit Mela. The Maha Kumbh 2025, however, is poised to rewrite this narrative with its tech-powered approach. In cases where a missing individual remains unclaimed for over 12 hours, authorities will step in to provide shelter and care. "The dramatized chaos of separations will give way to a reality of safety and timely reunions," said a

government spokesperson. For the first time, advanced face recognition (FR) cameras, powered by artificial intelligence, will be installed at key railway stations catering to Maha Kumbh pilgrims. The Prayagraj Railway Division is spearheading this initiative, alongside the deployment of over 650 CCTV cameras and 100 FR cameras. "With nearly 10 crore devotees expected to travel by train, these FR cameras will play a crucial role in monitoring crowded areas and identifying suspicious individuals. This ensures prompt action in case of anomalies," said Amit Singh, PRO of Prayagraj Railway Division. The cameras, which will be operational by January, will cover all nine railway stations in Prayagraj, monitoring platforms, shelters, and access routes.

The comprehensive surveillance system is aimed at preempting security risks and ensuring the safety of pilgrims. The Uttar Pradesh government's proactive measures are set to transform the Maha Kumbh 2025 into a modern, secure, and unforgettable event. "With these advancements, pilgrims can enjoy a spiritually enriching experience without the fear of getting lost or encountering mishaps," said Rajesh Dwivedi, a senior police officer stationed in Kumbh Nagar. The Maha Kumbh, a confluence of faith and tradition, is now also becoming a showcase of technology and meticulous planning, ensuring that the 2025 event is not just memorable but also worry-free.





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PAPER WITH PASSION

## Attack and aftermath

Christmas market attack in Germany reigniting polarising debates about immigration and national security

A recent attack on a Christmas market in Magdeburg, Germany, has reignited contentious debates about immigration and national security, with far-right groups seizing the moment to push for mass deportation of immigrants. The tragedy, which claimed the lives of five individuals and left dozens injured, has sent shockwaves across Germany, leading to both solemn remembrances and polarising political rhetoric. On the evening of December 20, a car driven by Taleb al-Abdulmohsen, a 50-year-old psychiatrist originally from Saudi Arabia, careened into a crowded Christmas market. The attack lasted three harrowing minutes, during which over 200 people were struck, leaving 40 with critical injuries. Authorities arrested al-Abdulmohsen at the scene, and he now faces multiple charges of murder, attempted murder, and grievous bodily harm. Despite living in Germany for nearly two decades, the suspect's motives remain unclear. Investigators have yet to establish any ideological or political motivations.



In the wake of the tragedy, far-right groups have amplified their calls for stricter immigration controls and mass deportations. On December 21, approximately 2,100 demonstrators gathered in Magdeburg to voice their outrage. Protesters, some wearing black balaclavas, carried banners with slogans like "Reimmigration Now" and "migration kills." The term "reimmigration" has become a rallying cry for far-right factions advocating the forced removal of immigrants and individuals deemed non-ethnically German. Chants such as "Anyone who doesn't love Germany should leave" and "We must take back our cities, our villages, and our homeland" echoed through the streets. The incident has deepened divisions within Germany over immigration and integration policies. Critics argue that far-right groups are exploiting the tragedy to stoke xenophobia and advance their anti-immigrant agenda. Meanwhile, local communities have sought to counter the rhetoric of hate with acts of solidarity. A silent vigil was held at Magdeburg's Cathedral Square on the same evening as the protest, with participants lighting candles in memory of the victims. German authorities have called for calm and emphasised the need for a thorough investigation. Chancellor Olaf Scholz expressed condolences to the victims' families and condemned both the attack and the use of such tragedies to spread divisive ideologies. The attack has reignited debates over Germany's approach to immigration and the balance between openness and security. While far-right voices call for stringent measures, advocates for multiculturalism warn against the dangers of collective punishment. This incident underscores the fragility of Europe's social cohesion in times of crisis. As Germany mourns, the challenge lies in addressing security concerns without succumbing to fear-driven policies that erode the values of inclusivity and tolerance that underpin the nation's democratic fabric.

our villages, and our homeland" echoed through the streets. The incident has deepened divisions within Germany over immigration and integration policies. Critics argue that far-right groups are exploiting the tragedy to stoke xenophobia and advance their anti-immigrant agenda. Meanwhile, local communities have sought to counter the rhetoric of hate with acts of solidarity. A silent vigil was held at Magdeburg's Cathedral Square on the same evening as the protest, with participants lighting candles in memory of the victims. German authorities have called for calm and emphasised the need for a thorough investigation. Chancellor Olaf Scholz expressed condolences to the victims' families and condemned both the attack and the use of such tragedies to spread divisive ideologies. The attack has reignited debates over Germany's approach to immigration and the balance between openness and security. While far-right voices call for stringent measures, advocates for multiculturalism warn against the dangers of collective punishment. This incident underscores the fragility of Europe's social cohesion in times of crisis. As Germany mourns, the challenge lies in addressing security concerns without succumbing to fear-driven policies that erode the values of inclusivity and tolerance that underpin the nation's democratic fabric.

### PICTALK



People dressed as Santa Claus during Christmas celebration, in Chennai

# Macau: The glittering gem in Xi Jinping's China



SANTHOSH MATHEW

For the Chinese Communist Party, Macau is a beacon of controlled capitalism, showcasing the potential of the "One Country, Two Systems" framework

When Chinese President Xi Jinping landed in Macau, the world's gambling capital, the air was thick with anticipation. Macau, often dubbed the "Las Vegas of the East," is much more than a beacon of wealth and opulence. For Xi and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), it is a sparkling gem in the palm of China's vast and complex economic system—a model of the "One Country, Two Systems" framework that allows capitalist practices to thrive under the watchful eye of a socialist regime. Xi's visit underscored the stark contrasts between theory and practice in the CCP's governance and the lessons it offers not only for China's neighbours but for the world at large. Macau's significance lies in its unique identity. A former Portuguese colony, it returned to Chinese sovereignty in 1999 under the promise of autonomy. Today, its glitzy casinos, luxury hotels, and sprawling Special Economic Zone (SEZ) generate billions annually, contributing substantially to China's GDP. But while the dice roll and fortunes are made on Macau's gaming tables, the CCP's control remains unyielding.

The irony is palpable. The CCP, a party built on anti-capitalist ideology, oversees the largest SEZ in the world in Shanghai, nurtures capitalism in Hong Kong, and allows gambling—once condemned as a moral vice—to flourish in Macau. This duality reflects the pragmatic philosophy first espoused by Deng Xiaoping: "It doesn't matter if a cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice." This approach has been pivotal in transforming China into the world's second-largest economy. Yet it also lays bare the contradictions at the heart of CCP rule.

As Xi extolled Macau's success, he also warned against complacency and stressed the need for "long-term stability," a euphemism for unwavering allegiance to the CCP. For the CCP, Macau and Hong Kong are not just economic engines; they are experiments in controlled capitalism. The success of these regions bolsters the



party's narrative that socialism with Chinese characteristics can coexist with, and even benefit from capitalist mechanisms. The underlying contradictions are hard to ignore. The CCP's insistence on ideological purity clashes with its pragmatic embrace of market-driven policies. This duality is reflected in Xi's leadership, which combines Maoist centralisation with Dengist pragmatism.

For Maoists, Naxalites, and urban Naxals in India, as well as other ideologues clinging to rigid dogmas, Macau stands as a testament to the power of adaptation. The CCP's ability to evolve, to reconcile its Marxist-Leninist roots with the demands of a modern, globalised economy, has been the cornerstone of China's rise. This is a far cry from the ideological purism that often paralyzes leftist movements elsewhere. India, too, can draw inspiration from Macau. As the world's largest democracy grapples with its development challenges, it must consider the role of SEZs, MNC headquarters, and even industries like gambling in driving economic growth. While gambling remains taboo in much of India, the success of Macau shows how regulated gaming can become a major revenue source. Similarly, expanding SEZs and creating hubs for MNCs can



MACAU'S SIGNIFICANCE LIES IN ITS UNIQUE IDENTITY. A FORMER PORTUGUESE COLONY, IT RETURNED TO CHINESE SOVEREIGNTY IN 1999 UNDER THE PROMISE OF AUTONOMY

transform India into a global economic powerhouse. At the heart of this debate is the question of whether ideology should dictate policy. The CCP's approach—that opinion is not an iron rod—offers a compelling case for pragmatism. Yet, the party's intolerance for dissent, as seen in its suppression of Mao's "Let a Hundred Flowers Bloom" campaign, highlights the dangers of unchecked authority. The CCP's success in economic management is undeniable, but its human rights record and stifling of democratic aspirations serve as stark reminders of the cost of its iron-fisted rule.

As Xi Jinping departed Macau, the world was left pondering the paradoxes of modern China. Under his leadership, the CCP has doubled down on centralisation, curbing dissent while championing economic liberalisation. Macau's glittering casinos and towering skyscrapers are symbols of this duality, where capitalism thrives under the shadow of socialism. For Xi, Macau is more than a gem in China's palm; it is a symbol of the CCP's ability to adapt and endure. Whether in the neon-lit streets of Macau or the corridors of power in Beijing, the CCP's experiment in controlled capitalism continues to shape the future of China—and the world.

(The writer is an associate professor; views are personal)

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### CONTROVERSY OVER AMBEDKAR

Madam—The row over the insult to Dr Bhim Rao Ambedkar is neither factual nor logical since the home minister never insulted Dr Ambedkar in his speech by words or intention; rather, the fact is that no leader from the BJP has ever insulted Dr BR Ambedkar publicly or in Parliament or state assemblies, whereas Congress has a documented history of opposition to Ambedkar. It is no secret that the first PM, JI Nehru, was never on good terms with Dr Ambedkar, and MK Gandhi too had an uncomfortable equation with Ambedkar, while it may be argued that the twin Congress leaders (Gandhi and Nehru) were right when it comes to national interest and the movement of Indian independence to oppose Dr Ambedkar.

Unfortunately, the national politics has reached the spot where Dr BR Ambedkar has been established as a godly figure, though he never participated in any struggle for Indian independence for which the Congress claims sole credit and abuses Bharatiya JanaSangh and BJP for their nonparticipation, never mentioning Ambedkar for his nonparticipation because that would be politically incorrect. Neither making Ambedkar the god nor considering the Constitution a heavenly document would be democratically or even constitutionally correct.

Jai Prakash Gupta | Ambala Cantt

### APATHY AT ITS WORSE

Madam—This is our modern India. When a Jaipur gas tanker explosion left motor mechanic Radheyshyam Choudhary with 85 per cent burns. He bravely walked 600 meters while engulfed in flames, even calling his brother before succumbing to his injuries at SMS Hospital. Shockingly, by mid-morning, videos of the aftermath of the gas tanker explosion on the national highway were circulating online, with more than one showing a burning man struggling to stay on his feet as he scamped for help amid

## Indian diaspora remits \$129 billion



In 2024, Indian expatriates achieved a historic milestone by sending \$129 billion in remittances. This amount not only surpasses India's vast defence budget and foreign direct investment but also exceeds the combined budgets of Pakistan and Bangladesh. This flow of funds symbolises not just economic support but also the hard work, dedication, and unwaver-

ing love of Indians for their homeland. Remittances have unlocked new avenues for development in rural and urban areas, fostering investment in education, healthcare, and infrastructure. It has provided stability to rural economies while empowering small and medium enterprises.

Indians living abroad establish their identity on foreign soil through resilience and courage. By dedicating a significant portion of their income to the development of their families and nation, they exemplify cultural values and familial commitment. This inflow strengthens India's foreign exchange reserves and energises local businesses. With strong policy measures, the government can further enhance this success. Remittances are not merely economic contributions; they represent the collective effort and national pride of Indians across the globe.

RK Jain | Barwani

### ACTION AGAINST MINING MAFIA

Madam—The operation of the mining mafia is a well-known fact for a long time to both the governments of Rajasthan and Haryana, including the efforts put forth by the general public in complaining against such acts with no stoppage of the bringing down of the Aravalli hills. However, a common man hesitates to lodge an FIR, as he is aware of the consequences he will face with negligible police protection for a limited time and the creation of animosity with the mafia, resulting in a threat to his life and discouraging him from fighting with such a large force. Sending inspecting teams to the blasted site from both the government is purely an eyewitness in the eyes of the public until concrete action is taken at a national level involving the NIA. A strategic policy with amendments to the existing mining rules is required to be pondered upon to make it pragmatic and not theoretical to be effective.

RS Narula | Patiala

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## Navigating the intersection of technology, law and human rights

In a world increasingly shaped by digital technologies, the concept of 'digital arrest' has emerged as a controversial tool in cyberspace

The term 'Digital Arrest' often referred to as the restriction, monitoring, or apprehension of individuals through online mechanisms extends beyond the confines of traditional legal systems to encompass actions in cyberspace, such as freezing digital assets, blocking online accounts, or limiting access to certain platforms or limiting individual freedom in a virtual or online environment.

As technology permeates every aspect of life, the implications of digital arrest have grown even more significantly, offering both opportunities and challenges in governance, security, and individual rights in dismantling operations such as ransomware groups, hacking collectives, and online marketplaces for illegal activities. For instance, international efforts have led to the closure of dark web platforms such as Silk Road and the apprehension of their operators. Also, Cryptocurrencies and digital financial assets have brought about new forms of digital arrest, where govern-



ments or agencies freeze digital wallets associated with criminal activities thereby preventing the illicit flow of funds and supporting global financial regulations. While the concept is still evolving, digital arrest encompasses aspects of cybersecurity, legal frameworks, and the social consequences of living in a highly digitised world. At its core, this kind of arrest involves leveraging technology to enforce restrictions or punish actions taken in the digital sphere. Various government agencies, corporations, and even individual users can

participate in acts akin to digital arrest, raising questions about authority, power dynamics, and accountability in cyberspace. To balance security and individual rights in the digital era, taking measures such as establishing transparent and enforceable regulations that define the scope of digital arrest; overseeing the use of digital arrest mechanisms to ensure accountability and prevent misuse; developing universal guidelines for promoting fairness and consistency across jurisdictions and most importantly raising public awareness about digital rights and responsibili-

ties can equip individuals with the knowledge and tools needed to engage effectively and securely in the digital world. As the digital world continues to evolve, so too will the methods of enforcement and resistance. New technologies, such as artificial intelligence and blockchain, may influence how digital arrests are carried out and challenged. Transparency in enforcement, the right to appeal, and global cooperation on ethical standards are essential steps in creating a just digital society. There is no denying that digital arrest represents the intersection of technology, law, and human rights in the digital age. While it offers tools for enforcing order and combatting crime, it also poses risks to freedom and privacy. As society becomes increasingly reliant on digital infrastructure, the concept of digital arrest will likely continue to evolve, demanding thoughtful and ethical approaches to its implementation.

(The writer is an educator; views are personal)



SHAINY SHARMA

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## FIRST COLUMN

SUCCESS THROUGH  
WORKPLACE INTELLIGENCE

It is the ability to adapt to the work environment through emotional and cognitive intelligence



SAKSHI SETHI

In today's dynamic work environment, workplace intelligence has become a cornerstone for achieving personal growth, team cohesion, and organisational excellence. Workplace intelligence refers to the ability of individuals and organisations to navigate, adapt, and thrive in the professional environment through effective understanding, communication and decision-making. It encompasses emotional intelligence, social intelligence, and cognitive intelligence blended together with technological advancements thereby creating a comprehensive approach towards addressing the root causes of toxicity and fostering a positive workplace culture. There is no denying that such intelligence not only plays a pivotal role in creating a healthy, harmonious and productive professional environment but also equips individuals and organisations with the tools to identify, mitigate and prevent toxic behaviours that can undermine morale, collaboration and overall success.

It is often believed that employees with high workplace intelligence can manage their tasks efficiently and adapt to new challenges with minimal disruption. By leveraging cognitive and emotional intelligence, they can prioritize effectively and maintain focus, leading to improved productivity. Also, social and emotional intelligence enables them to work harmoniously with others, promoting effective communication and minimizing conflicts. Strong teamwork followed by leaders with workplace intelligence inspires trust, and motivation and navigate through complex challenges with clarity and empathy. It even enhances creativity, innovation and the achievement of their collective goals and even reduces stress, boosts morale, and contributes to overall job satisfaction. In an era of rapid technological advancements and shifting market dynam-



ics, workplace intelligence equips employees and organisations with the resilience and adaptability needed to stay competitive. By fostering emotional and social intelligence, workplace intelligence helps identify and mitigate toxic behaviours, thereby ensuring a positive and respectful work environment.

By promoting training and development, organisations can invest in training programmes that focus on emotional intelligence, communication skills and technological proficiency. Open and constructive feedback mechanisms help the employee grow and refine their workplace intelligence over time. Emphasising diversity and inclusion helps individuals develop social intelligence by interacting with people from different backgrounds and perspectives. Encouraging continuous learning and adaptability ensures that employees remain agile and open to new ideas and methods. Remember, a workforce with high workplace intelligence is more likely to generate creative solutions and drive innovation. Employees are more likely to stay in organisations where they feel valued, supported, and empowered. Today, companies such as Heineken, Cooley, Cruise Automation, Urban Company, Amazon, Chipotle and many more are known for fostering workplace intelligence to attract top talent and build trust with stakeholders.

By investing in the development of workplace intelligence, organisations can create environments that promote collaboration, innovation, and sustainable success, ensuring they remain agile and competitive in an ever-evolving world. As organisations continue to navigate the complexities of globalisation and digital transformation, the importance of workplace intelligence will only grow. Artificial intelligence, remote work and diverse teams are shaping new paradigms that demand a more nuanced understanding of interpersonal and technological dynamics but organisations that invest in fostering workplace intelligence will gain a competitive edge, as their employees will be better equipped to adapt, innovate, and lead in an ever-changing world.

*(The writer is an educator; views are personal)*

## A roadmap for financial sustainability of India Post



SUBHASH CHANDRA AGARWAL

India Post is at a crossroads. As private courier services continue to expand their market share with speed and convenience, it must adapt to stay competitive



India Post, a vital lifeline in connecting citizens across the country, needs to undergo a comprehensive review of its services. This reform should focus on introducing innovation, ensuring greater revenue generation for the Department of Posts (DoP), and maintaining affordability for the public. As private courier services continue to gain traction due to their convenience and efficiency, India Post must adapt to remain competitive and relevant in a rapidly changing environment.

**Rationalising Postal Tariffs and Eliminating GST on Select Services**

The current structure of postal services includes highly subsidised offerings, such as postcards priced as low as 50 paise. While such subsidies aim to make communication accessible, they are often exploited. For instance, during Lok Sabha elections in 2019, political parties used postcards extensively, resulting in significant costs to the public exchequer. Similarly, postcards are frequently misused for commercial purposes, such as reminders by chit-fund companies. These subsidised services, rarely used by the common man, burden taxpayers without corresponding benefits.

To address this, printed or rubber-stamped postcards should be discontinued unless they are sponsored. The introduction of sponsored Meghdoot postcards priced at Re1 and printed postcards priced at Rs10 could ensure a sustainable revenue model. Similarly, the tariff for registered newspapers could be rationalised to Rs1, reflecting the increased cost of inputs for small newspaper production.

Additionally, while normal postal services are exempt from GST, applying GST on premium services like Speed Post is counterproductive. It results in a redundant transfer of funds between government departments. Rationalising tariffs for Speed Post to Rs 20 or Rs 30 per 50-gram weight slabs and aligning other domestic and international postal tariffs in multiples of Rs 10 would streamline the system and reduce inefficiencies. International postal rates could follow a consistent structure, with uniform tariff increases per weight slab for air and sur-



THE 'MY-STAMP' INITIATIVE, WHICH ALLOWS INDIVIDUALS TO PRINT PERSONAL IMAGES ON POSTAGE STAMPS, HAS BEEN MISUSED. REPORTS INDICATE INSTANCES OF NOTORIOUS INDIVIDUALS OBTAINING STAMPS WITH THEIR PHOTOS, TARNISHING THE PROGRAM'S CREDIBILITY

face mail.

**Generating Revenue Through Sponsored Postal Stamps**

To boost revenue, the DoP should introduce sponsored postal stamps. These stamps, carrying advertisements or approved messages, could be issued in bulk to sponsors at a fixed charge per printed stamp. This initiative could attract businesses, encouraging them to utilise postal services over private courier companies.

Additionally, a new series of definitive postal stamps and stationery could be launched annually on the first day of the financial year. These stamps should maintain consistent color schemes for specific denominations while showcasing new designs based on a selected theme. Commemorative stamps, previously issued in arbitrary denominations like Rs 12 and Rs 41, should be standardised to denominations in multiples of Rs 10. Furthermore, the practice of printing stamps of different denominations on the same sheet, except for miniature sheets, should be discontinued as it complicates usage. Miniature sheets, being collectible items, should be priced higher than the face value of the stamps they contain. Such measures could not only enhance revenue through philately but also rekindle public interest in postal services.

**Replacing 'My-Stamp' with Sponsored Stamps**

The 'My-Stamp' initiative, which allows individuals to print personal images on postage stamps, has been misused. Reports indicate instances of notorious individuals obtaining stamps with their photos, tarnishing the program's credibility. Since no robust mechanism exists to screen applicants' backgrounds, the programme is susceptible to abuse. Discontinuing the 'My-Stamp' concept in favor of sponsored stamps could address this issue. Sponsored stamps would

not only ensure better regulation but also offer a significant revenue stream.

**Enhancing Consumer Convenience with Sticker Receipts**

Currently, receipts issued by the Postal Department include a sticker only on the portion retained by the Department, leaving the consumer without one. Adding stickers to consumer receipts would eliminate the need for gum to paste them onto dispatch registers or documents. This small change could save public resources and improve the user experience, especially for organisations that rely heavily on postal services.

**Introducing RTI Stamps and Rationalising Postal Orders**

Postal orders in low denominations such as Rs 1, Rs 2, Rs 5, and Rs 7 were discontinued due to high handling costs. For example, the handling cost of a postal order in 2011-12 was Rs 37.45, far exceeding its value. To minimise losses, higher denominations like Rs 100, Rs 200, and Rs 500 could be introduced. Furthermore, RTI-specific stamps in denominations of Rs 2, Rs 10, and Rs 50 could replace postal orders for fees under the RTI Act, streamlining the payment process. This approach aligns with recommendations from the Central Information Commission and addresses the issue of unfeasible copying charges below Rs10 due to the absence of lower-denomination postal orders.

**Managing Inoperative and Matured Accounts**

Unclaimed deposits in post office accounts often remain unnoticed due to deceased account holders failing to inform legal heirs. This creates a risk of fraud, as unscrupulous individuals may attempt to claim such funds in collusion with postal employees. To mitigate this risk, the Postal Department should send registered letters to account holders who have not operated

their accounts or claimed matured deposits for over three years. If no response is received within three months, the funds should be frozen in fixed accounts and made accessible only after rigorous verification. Publishing details of such accounts could help legal heirs claim their rightful amounts, subject to stringent scrutiny. The introduction of successive nominations, as practiced by LIC of India, would further safeguard deposits and simplify inheritance processes.

**Expanding Postal Services Through Bank Counters**

The closure of post offices in key commercial areas, such as Chandni Chowk in Old Delhi, has caused inconvenience for businesses that rely on Registered and Speed Post services. With banks increasingly adopting government savings schemes, their branches could be utilised for booking postal services. Offering banks a nominal commission for hosting these services would not only enhance accessibility but also integrate postal and banking ecosystems more effectively.

**Revamping the Postal Ecosystem for Sustainability**

India Post's transformation should emphasise efficiency, innovation, and customer-centricity. Rationalising tariffs, eliminating wasteful subsidies, and leveraging sponsored services are crucial steps toward financial sustainability. Additionally, addressing operational inefficiencies and improving service delivery will help India Post reclaim its position as a trusted and competitive communication medium.

By embracing these changes, India Post can not only secure its financial future but also continue serving as a cornerstone of India's communication network.

*(The writer is a Guinness World Record holder and RTI Consultant; views are personal)*

## India's math geniuses shine bright in international math competition 2024

India, a nation with a rich legacy of mathematical brilliance, added another feather to its cap by triumphing at the UCMAS International Competition 2024

India has long been a land of great mathematicians, from Aryabhata to Ramanujan to Bhaskara, each leaving an indelible mark on the world with their mathematical ingenuity. Today, India continues to excel in the field, as evidenced by its stellar performance at the Universal Concept of Mental Arithmetic System (UCMAS) International Competition 2024 in New Delhi, where the country bagged both the highest individual and team trophies.

The competition, the world's largest event for Abacus and Mental Arithmetic, brought together over 6,000 students from nearly 30 countries. Participants faced the challenge of solving 200 arithmetic questions in just eight min-



SARIKA JHA

utes, relying solely on the Abacus or mental math techniques—a feat that truly felt like magic. For the second time, the World's Largest Abacus & Mental Arithmetic Event- UCMAS International Competition 2024 was held in India at the Delhi University Multipurpose Hall. Students from across the world competed with each other showcasing their men-

tal prowess in solving a very large number of mathematics problems in the quickest possible time to win the awards. This landmark event reaffirms its global significance in nurturing young minds in mathematics.

The competition aimed at promoting brain development, enhancing cognitive skills, and demonstrating the incredible abilities students can achieve through Abacus and Mental Arithmetic. Presenting the trophies to top performers, former Union Minister Meenakshi Lekhi rightly said, "Smart brain produces smart solutions for every problem and prosperity is moving forward only when we have smart brains." Commending the efforts of the young participants, Lekhi emphasised

the importance of such initiatives and said, "UCMAS is enhancing cognitive skills and academic excellence." The blend of the ancient tool of the Abacus with modern teaching methodologies creates a unique educational experience.

Over 3 million children across the world have benefited from the Abacus and Mental Arithmetic curriculum, which encourages creativity, visualisation, and focus while developing strong arithmetic abilities.

In today's competitive academic environment, maintaining mental wellbeing has become an uphill battle for many children. The relentless pressure to excel often leads to stress, anxiety, and even depression. In some heartbreaking cases,



it drives students to take extreme steps, as seen in recent reports from Rajasthan's Kota district—a hub for competitive exam preparations. However, innovative educational programmes like the Abacus and Mental Arithmetic course are emerging as a ray of hope, helping children manage stress while fostering mental stability and

self-confidence.

According to Dr Snehal Karia, CEO of UCMAS India, the course is designed to enhance children's mental stability by boosting their concentration, focus, and memory. It equips them with the confidence to understand and embrace their individuality, effectively reducing anxiety and depression. The Abacus & Mental Arithmetic program's key lies in its structured approach to building self-assurance through innovative teaching methods.

The encouragement and skills imparted during the training play a pivotal role in shaping a child's bright future. The program comprises eight levels, each lasting three to four months. Children attend weekly classes guided by

trained instructors, working through specially designed books and activities. Unlike conventional education, the course serves as a supplementary learning system to enhance cognitive abilities. There is an urgent need to complement the school's curriculum by focusing on brain development. The course improves memory, sharpness, and alertness.

As a result, students perform better academically and approach challenges with greater confidence. In a world where competition often overshadows creativity and self-worth, programs like Abacus & Mental Arithmetic provide children with the tools they need to thrive—mentally, emotionally, and academically. Alexan Wong, CEO of

UCMAS International Corporation, said, "The competition not only tests their skills but also serves as a platform to demonstrate their creativity, visual memory, and focus—all of which will shape their future success." The competition itself is a testament to the transformative power of such programs, where students not only test their math skills but also demonstrate the broader cognitive benefits that shape their academic and personal growth.

Ultimately, the world needs such initiatives to nurture well-rounded individuals who are prepared to face the challenges of the future with confidence and creativity.

*(The author is a senior journalist. The views expressed are personal)*



# Bethlehem plans another somber Christmas under the shadow of war in Gaza

AP ■ BETHLEHEM (WEST BANK)

The Nativity Store in Manger Square has sold handmade olive wood carvings and religious items to people visiting the traditional birthplace of Jesus since 1927. But as Bethlehem prepares to mark its second Christmas under the shadow of the war in Gaza, there are almost no tourists, leaving the Nativity Store and other businesses unsure of how much longer they can hold on.

For the second straight year, Bethlehem's Christmas celebrations will be somber and muted, in deference to ongoing war in Gaza. There will be no giant Christmas tree in Manger Square, no raucous scout marching bands, no public lights twinkling and very few public decorations or displays.

"Last year before Christmas, we had more hope, but now again we are close to Christmas and we don't have anything," said Rony Tabash, the third-generation owner of Nativity Store.

Israel's war against Hamas has been raging for nearly 15 months, and there still is no end in sight. Repeated ceasefire efforts have

stalled.

Since the war began, tourism to Israel and the Israeli-occupied West Bank has plummeted. And after Israel barred entry to most of the 150,000 Palestinians in the West Bank who had jobs in Israel, the Palestinian economy contracted by 25% in the past year.

The yearly Christmas celebrations in Bethlehem — shared among Armenian, Catholic and Orthodox denominations — are usually major boons for the city, where tourism accounts for 70% of its yearly income. But the streets are empty this season.

Tabash said he continues to open the store every day, but often an entire week will go by without a sale. Tabash works with more than 25 local families who create hand-carved religious items out of the region's storied olive wood. But with no buyers, work has dried up for these families.

**Lots of room at the inn:** The number of visitors to the city plunged from a pre-COVID high of around 2 million visitors per year in 2019 to fewer than 100,000 visitors in 2024, said Jiries Qumsiyeh, the spokesperson for the Palestinian

tourism ministry.

According to the Christmas story, Mary was forced to give birth to Jesus in a stable because there was no room at the inn. Today, nearly all of Bethlehem's 5,500 hotel rooms are empty.

The city's hotel occupancy rate plunged from around 80% in early 2023 to around 3% today, said Elias Al Arja, the head of Bethlehem Hoteliers Association. At his own hotel, the Bethlehem Hotel, he said he has laid off a staff of more than 120 people and retains just five employees.

The city hosts more than 100 stores and 450 workshops dealing with traditional Palestinian handicraft, Qumsiyeh said. But just a week before Christmas, when the city should be bursting with visitors, Manger Square was mostly empty save for a few locals selling coffee and tea. Only two of the eight stores in the main drag of the square were open for business.

Qumsiyeh worries that when the war ends and tourism eventually rebounds, many of the families that have handed down traditional skills for generations will no longer be making the items that reflect



Palestinian heritage and culture. Many are leaving the region entirely. "We have witnessed a very high rate of emigration since the beginning of the aggression, especially among those working in the tourism sector," said Qumsiyeh.

**A Christmas without joy:** Almost 500 families have left Bethlehem in the past year, said Mayor Anton Salman. And those are just the families who moved abroad with official residency visas. Many others have moved abroad on temporary tourist visas and are working illegally, and it's unclear if they will return, Salman said.

Around half of the population in the

Bethlehem area, including nearby villages, works in either tourism or in jobs in Israel.

The unemployment rate in Bethlehem is roughly 50%, said Salman. Unemployment across the West Bank is around 30%, according to the Palestinian Economy Ministry.

Canceling Christmas festivities is one way to draw attention to the difficult situation in Bethlehem and across the Palestinian territories, said Salman. "This year we want to show the world that the Palestinian people are still suffering and they haven't the joy that everybody else in the world having," said Salman.

It is another blow to the Holy Land's dwindling population over the decade due to emigration and a low birthrate.

Christians are a small percentage of the population. There are about 182,000 in Israel, 50,000 in the West Bank and Jerusalem and 1,300 in Gaza, according to the US State Department.

**Finding the light in the night:** Father Issa Thalji, the parish priest of the Greek Orthodox Church in the Church of the Nativity, said many families are struggling financially, leaving them unable to pay rent or school fees, much less buy Christmas presents or celebrate the holiday in other ways. The church's social services have tried to help, but the needs are great, he said.

Thalji said his Christmas message this year focused on encouraging Palestinians in Bethlehem to stay despite the challenges.

"A church without Christians is not a church," he said, as workers hand-polished the ornate brass candelabras in the cavernous, empty church a week before the holiday. "The light that was born when Jesus Christ was born here is the light that

moves beyond darkness, so we have to wait, we have to be patient, we have to pray a lot, and we have to stay with our roots because our roots are in Bethlehem," he said.

Some families are finding ways to bring back pockets of joy. Bethlehem resident Nihal Bandak, 39, gave into her three children's requests to have a Christmas tree this year, after not having one last year. Decorating the tree is her favorite part of Christmas of her youngest daughter, 8-year-old Stephanie.

Mathew Bandak, 11 was thrilled his family brought back some of their traditions, but also torn.

"I was happy because we get to decorate and celebrate, but people are in Gaza who don't have anything to celebrate," he said.

Rony Tabash, the third-generation owner of Nativity Store, said he will continue to open the store, because it's part of his family's history.

"We are not feeling Christmas, but in the end, Christmas is in our hearts," he said, adding that the entire city was praying for a ceasefire and peace. "We have a big faith that always, when we see Christmas, it will give us the light in the night."

# Trump threatens to try take back Panama Canal

## Panama's president balks at the suggestion

AP ■ PHOENIX

Donald Trump suggested Sunday that his new administration could try to regain control of the Panama Canal that the United States "foolishly" ceded to its Central American ally, contending that shippers are charged "ridiculous" fees to pass through the vital transportation channel linking the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

Panama's conservative president José Raúl Mulino, who was elected in April on a pro-business platform, roundly rejected that notion as an affront to his country's sovereignty.

The Republican president-elect's comment came during his first major rally since winning the White House on Nov. 5. He also basked in his return to power as a large audience of conservatives cheered along. It was a display of party unity at odds with a just-concluded budget fight on Capitol Hill, where some GOP lawmakers openly defied their leader's demands.

Addressing supporters at Turning Point USA's AmericaFest in Arizona, Trump pledged that his "dream team Cabinet" would deliver a booming economy, seal U.S. borders and quickly settle wars in the Middle East and Ukraine. "I can proudly proclaim that the Golden Age of America is upon us," Trump said. "There's a spirit that we have now that we didn't have just a short while ago."

His appearance capped a four-day pep rally that drew more than 20,000 activists and projected an image of Republican cohesion despite the past week's turbulence in Washington with Trump pulling strings from his Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida as Congress worked to avoid a government shutdown heading into the holidays. House Republicans spiked a



bipartisan deal after Trump and Elon Musk, his billionaire ally, expressed their opposition on social media. Budget hawks flouted Trump's demand that they raise the nation's debt ceiling, which would have spared some new rounds of the same fight after he takes office on Jan. 20, with Republicans holding narrow control of the House and Senate. The final agreement did not address the issue and there was no shutdown. Trump, in his remarks in Phoenix, did not mention the congressional drama, though he did reference Musk's growing power. To suggestions that "President Trump has ceded the presidency to Elon," Trump made clear, "No, no. That's not happening."

"He's not gonna be president," Trump said. The president-elect opened the speech by saying that "we want to try to bring everybody together. We're going to try. We're going to really give it a shot." Then he suggested Democrats have "lost their confidence" and are "befuddled" after the election but eventually will "come over to our side because we want to have them."

Atop a list of grievances — some old, some new — was the

Panama Canal. "We're being ripped off at the Panama Canal," he said, bemoaning that his country "foolishly gave it away." The United States built the canal in the early 1900s as it looked for ways to facilitate the transit of commercial and military vessels between its coasts. Washington relinquished control of the waterway to Panama on Dec. 31, 1999, under a treaty signed in 1977 by President Jimmy Carter. The canal depends on reservoirs to operate its locks and was heavily affected by 2023 Central American droughts that forced it to substantially reduce the number of daily slots for crossing ships. With fewer ships using the canal each day, administrators also increased the fees that are charged all shippers for reserving a slot. With weather returning to normal in the later months of this year, transit on the canal has normalized. But price increases are still expected for next year.

Mulino, Panama's president, has been described as a conservative populist who aligns with Trump on many issues. Panama is a strong US ally and the canal is crucial for its economy, generating about one-

fifth of that government's annual revenue.

Still, Trump said, that, once his second term is underway, "If the principles, both moral and legal, of this magnanimous gesture of giving are not followed, then we will demand that the Panama Canal be returned to the United States of America, in full, quickly and without question."

"I'm not going to stand for it," Trump said. "So to the officials of Panama, please be guided accordingly."

He did not explain how that would be possible. Shortly after Trump's speech, Mulino released a video declaring that "every square meter of the canal belongs to Panama and will continue to belong" to his country.

Without mentioning Trump by name, Mulino addressed Trump's complaints over rising fees for ships crossing the canal, saying they are set by experts who take into account operational costs, and supply and demand factors.

"The tariffs are not set on a whim" Mulino said. He noted that Panama has expanded the canal over the years to increase ship traffic "on its own initiative," and added that shipping fee increases help pay for

improvements.

"Panamanians may have different views on many issues" Mulino said. "But when it comes to our canal, and our sovereignty, we will all unite under our Panamanian flag."

The canal aside, Trump's appearance at Turning Point's annual gathering affirmed the growing influence of the group and its founder, Charlie Kirk, have had in the conservative movement. Kirk's group hired thousands of field organizers across presidential battlegrounds, helping Trump make key gains among infrequent voters and other groups of people that have trended more Democratic in recent decades, including younger voters, Black men and Latino men.

"You had Turning Point's grassroots armies," Trump said. "It's not my victory, it's your victory." Trump on Sunday also announced several new members of his incoming administration, most notably: Stephen Miran, who worked at the Treasury Department in Trump's first term, to lead the Council of Economic Advisers, an executive branch agency charged with providing objective economic advice to the president.

Callista Gingrich to be the US ambassador to Switzerland. Gingrich was US ambassador to the Holy See in Trump's first term. She is married to former House Speaker Newt Gingrich. Separately, Australian billionaire Anthony Pratt announced he was donating \$1.1 million to Trump's inaugural fund to complement the \$14 million that he said he already had given to the Make America Great Again Inc. super political action committee — making him one of the president-elect's top donors.

Pratt is chairman of Pratt Industries, which uses recycled paper and boxes as a raw material in a process that produces new cardboard.

# Pak govt, Imran's party agree to continue talks to resolve contentious issues

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

The Pakistan government and the opposition Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party in their maiden meeting on Monday agreed to continue talks to address contentious issues, including the release of jailed former prime minister Imran Khan.

The long-anticipated talks between the committees representing the government and the PTI were chaired by the National Assembly (NA) Speaker Ayaz Sadiq, who had last week announced to facilitate the two sides in their effort to defuse the prevailing political tension.

Those who attended from the government side include Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar, PM's political aide Rana Sanaullah, Senator Irfan Siddiqui, former premier Raja

Parvez Ashraf, former minister Naveed Qamar, lawmaker Farooq Sattar and Privatisation Minister Aleem Khan.

PTI was represented by former speaker Asad Qaiser, Sahibzada Hamid Raza, and Senator Raja Nasir Abbas.

Sadiq thanked the government's leadership and senior leaders of the opposition for holding the talks. He announced that the next session would be held on January 2 and PTI's team would present a charter of their demands in the next meeting.

"We discussed things about past and present and I hope that if we work together for the country's betterment, it will strengthen the political stability, strengthen democracy and help in dealing with challenges faced by Pakistan," he said after the meeting.

Senator Irfan Siddiqui read out the communiqué regarding

the talks that both sides described the talks as a positive development and emphasised the importance of keeping the negotiations ongoing.

Both committees expressed goodwill, saying that Parliament is the appropriate forum for resolving issues, the handout said. PTI's Qaiser informed the members that several members of his committee could not attend due to court proceedings.

It was agreed that both sides stand united in the fight against terrorism. A tribute was also paid to the martyrs for their sacrifice. There was also a declaration of support for standing alongside the forces in the war against terrorism.

The talks began amidst the ongoing political tension between the government and PTI as the latter was demanding the release of all political leaders, including Imran Khan.

# Albanian prime minister says TikTok ban was not 'rushed reaction to single incident'

AP ■ TIRANA (ALBANIA)

Albania's prime minister has said that the ban on TikTok his government announced on Saturday was "not a rushed reaction to a single incident."

Prime Minister Edi Rama said Saturday the government will shut down TikTok for one year, accusing the popular video service of inciting violence and bullying, especially among children.

Authorities have held 1,300 meetings with teachers and parents since the November stabbing death of a teenager by another teen after a quarrel that started on social media apps. Ninety per cent of them approve of the ban on TikTok.

"The ban on TikTok for one year in Albania is not a rushed reaction to a single incident, but a carefully considered decision made in consultation with parent communities in schools across the country," said Rama on Sunday.

Following Tirana's decision, TikTok asked for "urgent clarity from the Albanian government" in the case of the stabbed teenager. The company said it had "found no evidence that the perpetrator or victim had TikTok accounts, and multiple reports have in fact confirmed videos leading up to this incident were being posted on another platform, not TikTok."

"To claim that the killing of the teenage boy has no connection to TikTok because the conflict

didn't originate on the platform demonstrates a failure to grasp both the seriousness of the threat TikTok poses to children and youth today and the rationale behind our decision to take responsibility for addressing this threat," said Rama.

"Albania may be too small to demand that TikTok protect children and youth from the frightening pitfalls of its algorithm," he said, blaming TikTok for "the reproduction of the unending hell of the language of hatred, violence, bullying and so on."

Albanian children comprise the largest group of TikTok users in the country, according to domestic researchers. Many youngsters in Albania did not approve of the ban.

# Israeli airstrikes on Gaza kill at least 20 people

AP ■ JERUSALEM

Palestinian medics say Israeli airstrikes on the Gaza Strip have killed at least 20 people. One of the strikes overnight and into Monday hit a tent camp in the Muwasi area, an Israel-declared humanitarian zone, killing eight people, including two children. That's according to the Nasser Hospital in the southern city of Khan Younis, which received the bodies. Hospital records show another six killed in a strike on people securing an aid convoy and another two killed in a strike on a car in Muwasi. One person was killed in a separate strike in the area.

The Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital in the central city of Deir al-Balah said three bodies arrived after an airstrike on a school-turned-shelter in the built-up Nuseirat refugee camp. The Israeli military says it only strikes militants, accusing them of hiding among civilians. It said late Sunday that it had targeted a Hamas militant in the humanitarian zone. The war began when Hamas-led militants attacked southern Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, killing some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and taking around 250 hostages. Around 100 captives are still inside Gaza, at least a third of whom are believed to be dead. Israel's air and ground offensive has killed over 45,200 Palestinians, according to Gaza's Health Ministry. The ministry says women and children make up more than half the dead but does not distinguish between civilians and combatants in its tally. The military says it has killed over 17,000 militants, without providing evidence. **Lebanon's caretaker**

er prime minister visits military positions in the country's south: Lebanon's caretaker prime minister has begun a tour of military positions in the country's south, almost a month after a ceasefire deal that ended the war between Israel and the Hezbollah group that battered the country. Najib Mikati on Monday was on his first visit to the southern frontlines, where Lebanese soldiers under the US-brokered deal are expected to gradually deploy, with Hezbollah militants and Israeli troops both expected to withdraw by the end of next month. Mikati's tour comes after the Lebanese government expressed its frustration over ongoing Israeli strikes and overflights in the country. "We have many tasks ahead of us, the most important being the enemy's (Israel's) withdrawal from all the lands it encroached on during its recent aggression," he said after meeting with army chief Joseph Aoun in a Lebanese military barracks in the southeastern town of Marjayoun. "Then the army can carry out its tasks in full." The Lebanese military for years has relied on financial aid to stay functional, primarily from the United States and other Western countries. Lebanon's cash-strapped government is hoping that the war's end and ceasefire deal will bring about more funding to increase the military's capacity to deploy in the south, where Hezbollah's armed units were notably present. Though they were not active combatants, the Lebanese military said that dozens of its soldiers were killed in Israeli strikes on their premises or patrolling convoys in the south. The Israeli army acknowledged some of these attacks.

# Palestinian security forces man killed

AP ■ JENIN (WEST BANK)

The Palestinian Authority says a second member of its security forces has been killed in the West Bank town of Jenin during clashes with Palestinian militants.

Brig Gen Anwar Rajab, the spokesman for PA security forces, said 1st Sgt Mehran Qadoos was killed on Monday by "outlaws" in the volatile northern town, where the security forces launched a rare crackdown earlier this month. A member of security forces also was killed on Sunday. An Associated Press reporter in Jenin heard heavy gunfire and explosions, apparently from a battle between the security forces and Palestinian militants. There was no sign of Israeli forces in the area.

Militant groups had earlier called for a general strike across the territory, accusing the security forces of trying to disarm them in support of Israel's half-century occupation of the territory. The Western-backed Palestinian Authority is internationally recognized but deeply unpopular among Palestinians, in part because it cooperates with Israel on security matters. Israel accuses the authority of incitement and of failing to act against armed groups.

# Biden gives life in prison to 37 of 40 federal death row inmates

AP ■ WASHINGTON

President Joe Biden announced Monday that he is commuting the sentences of 37 of the 40 people on federal death row, converting their punishments to life imprisonment mere weeks before President-elect Donald Trump, an outspoken proponent of expanding capital punishment, takes office.

The move spares the lives of people convicted in killings, including the slayings of police and military officers, people on federal land and those involved in deadly bank robberies or drug deals, as well as the killings of guards or prisoners in federal facilities.

It means just three federal inmates are still facing execution. They are Dylann Roof, who carried out the 2015 racist slayings of nine Black members of Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, 2013 Boston Marathon bomber Dzhokhar Tsarnaev and Robert Bowers, who fatally shot 11 congregants at Pittsburgh's Tree of life

Synagogue in 2018, the deadliest antisemitic attack in US history.

"I've dedicated my career to reducing violent crime and ensuring a fair and effective justice system," Biden said in a statement.

"Today, I am commuting the sentences of 37 of the 40 individuals on federal death row to life sentences without the possibility of parole. These commutations are consistent with the moratorium my administration has imposed on federal executions, in cases other than terrorism and hate-motivated mass murder."

The Biden administration in 2021 announced a moratorium on federal capital punishment to study the protocols used, which suspended executions during Biden's term. But Biden actually had promised to go further on the issue in the past, pledging to end federal executions without the caveats for terrorism and hate-motivated, mass killings. While running for president in 2020, Biden's campaign website

said he would "work to pass legislation to eliminate the death penalty at the federal level, and incentivize states to follow the federal government's example."

Similar language didn't appear on Biden's reelection website before he left the presidential race in July. "Make no mistake: I condemn these murderers, grieve for the victims of their despicable acts, and ache for all the families who have suffered unimaginable and irreparable loss," Biden's statement said. "But guided by my conscience and my experience as a public defender, chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, vice president, and now president, I am more convinced than ever that we must stop the use of the death penalty at the federal level."

He took a political jab at Trump, saying, "In good conscience, I cannot stand back and let a new administration resume executions that I halted." Indeed, Trump, who takes

office on Jan. 20, has spoken frequently of expanding executions. In a speech announcing his 2024 campaign, Trump called for those "caught selling drugs to receive the death penalty for their heinous acts." He later promised to execute drug and human smugglers and even praised China's harsher treatment of drug peddlers. During his first term as president, Trump also advocated for the death penalty for drug dealers.

There were 13 federal executions during Trump's first term, more than under any president in modern history, and some may have happened fast enough to have contributed to the spread of the coronavirus at the federal death row facility in Indiana. Those were the first federal executions since 2003. The final three occurred after Election Day in November 2020 but before Trump left office the following January, the first time federal prisoners were put to death by a lame-duck president since Grover Cleveland in 1889.



# UN 2024: India calls for change at UN as conflicts persist

**AP ■ UNITED NATIONS**

As the United Nations prepares to celebrate its 80th anniversary next year, India stressed that reform is "key" to the organisation's "relevance" in addressing current and future global challenges, as world leaders signed off on an ambitious pact in 2024 to transform global governance and drive sustainable action.

When world leaders descended at the UN Headquarters in September for the high-level 79th session of the General Assembly, they adopted by consensus the landmark 'Pact of the Future' - a document that covers themes from peace and security, sustainable development to climate change, digital cooperation, human rights, gender, youth and future generations, and transformation of global governance.

Underlining the need for reform, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said, "We don't need a crystal ball to see that 21st Century challenges require problem-solving mechanisms that are more effective, networked and inclusive. We can't create a future fit for our grandchildren with systems built for our grandparents." India has been at the forefront of years-long efforts calling for reform of the Security Council, including expansion in both its permanent and non-permanent categories, saying the 15-nation Council, founded in 1945, is not fit for

purpose in the 21st Century and does not reflect contemporary geo-political realities. Delhi has underscored that it rightly deserves a permanent seat at the horse-shoe table. A polarised Security Council has failed to deal with current peace and security challenges, with Council members sharply divided on conflicts such as the Ukraine war and the Israel-Hamas war.

Guterres noted that many of today's pressing issues were not foreseen when the UN's multilateral framework was created 80 years ago. India's message to the international community was that reforms in global institutions are essential for global peace and development.

"Reform is the key to relevance... Global action must match global ambition," Prime Minister Narendra Modi said in his address to the UN's Summit of the Future, where the Pact was adopted. Modi's clarion call for change from the UNGA lectern came amid ongoing global conflicts, including the Ukraine war entering its third year, the Israel-Hamas war, and escalating global threats like terrorism, climate crises, economic inequality, and attacks on women's rights.

Amid these global challenges, India consistently advocated dialogue and diplomacy to arrive at solutions and resolve conflicts. When Modi met Ukraine's President Volodymyr

# Internet rife with fake reviews; will AI make it worse?

**AP ■ WASHINGTON**

The emergence of generative artificial intelligence tools that allow people to efficiently produce novel and detailed online reviews with almost no work has put merchants, service providers and consumers in uncharted territory, watchdog groups and researchers say.

Phony reviews have long plagued many popular consumer websites, such as Amazon and Yelp. They are typically traded on private social media groups between fake review brokers and businesses willing to pay. Sometimes, such reviews are initiated by businesses that offer customers incentives such as gift cards for positive feedback.

But AI-infused text generation tools, popularized by OpenAI's ChatGPT, enable fraudsters to produce reviews faster and in greater volume, according to tech industry experts.

The deceptive practice, which is illegal in the US, is carried out year-round but becomes a bigger problem for consumers during the holiday shopping season, when many people rely on reviews to help them purchase gifts.

**Where are AI-generated reviews showing up?:** Fake reviews are found across a wide range of industries, from e-commerce, lodging and restaurants, to services such as home repairs, medical care and piano lessons.

The Transparency Company, a tech company and watchdog group that uses software to detect fake reviews, said it started to see AI-generated reviews show up in large numbers in mid-2023 and they have multiplied ever since. For a report released this month, The Transparency Company analysed 73 million reviews in three sectors: home, legal and medical services. Nearly 14% of the reviews were likely fake, and the company expressed a "high degree of confidence" that 2.3 million reviews were partly or entirely AI-generated.

"It's just a really, really good tool for these review scammers," said Maury Blackman, an investor and advisor to tech startups, who reviewed The Transparency Company's work and is set to lead the organisation starting Jan 1. In August, software company DoubleVerify said it was observing a "significant increase" in mobile phone and smart TV apps with reviews crafted by generative AI. The reviews often were used to deceive customers into installing apps that could hijack devices or run ads constantly, the company said.

The following month, the Federal Trade Commission sued the

company behind an AI writing tool and content generator called Rytr, accusing it of offering a service that could pollute the marketplace with fraudulent reviews. The FTC, which this year banned the sale or purchase of fake reviews, said some of Rytr's subscribers used the tool to produce hundreds and perhaps thousands of reviews for garage door repair companies, sellers of 'replica' designer handbags and other businesses.

**It's likely on prominent online sites, too:** Max Spero, CEO of AI detection company Pangram Labs, said the software his company uses has detected with almost certainty that some AI-generated appraisals posted on Amazon bubbled up to the top of review search results because they were so detailed and appeared to be well thought-out. But determining what is fake or not can be challenging. External parties can fall short because they don't have "access to data signals that indicate patterns of abuse," Amazon has said.

Pangram Labs has done detection for some prominent online sites, which Spero declined to name due to non-disclosure agreements. He said he evaluated Amazon and Yelp indepen-

# Magdeburg mourns Christmas market attack victims as fears swirl of deeper social divisions

**AP ■ MAGDEBURG (GERMANY)**

Mourners laid flowers near the scene of the deadly Christmas market attack on Monday as investigators puzzled over the motive of the suspect and fears swirled that the rampage could deepen divisions in German society.

The Johanniskirche, a church a short walk from the scene of the attack, has become a central place of mourning since the suspect drove a car into the busy market on Friday evening, killing five people and injuring 200. A carpet of flowers now covers the broad sidewalk in front of the church.

Authorities had identified the suspect as a Saudi doctor who arrived in Germany in 2006 and had received permanent residency. They say he does not fit the usual profile of perpetrators of extremist attacks.

The man described himself as an ex-Muslim who was highly critical of Islam and in many posts on social media expressed support for the far-right. A picture has emerged of someone who had come to authorities' attention in the past for threatening behaviour and been the subject of tipoffs, but was not known to have committed any violence.

German Interior Minister Nancy Faeser said Sunday that "the views and statements that the perpetrator expressed are being investigated, as are the tipoffs and proceedings with various authorities and the justice system." She said "the right conclusions" will then have to be drawn.

The country's vice chancellor voiced fears that the attack will fuel online misinformation ahead of a national election expected in late February. He urged people to "take time for the truth" and said: "Don't let yourselves be infected by hatred."

"There is still a lot we don't know and a lot is unexplained,

including the exact motive," Robert Habeck said in a video posted Sunday. "All the same, I fear that the distrust that was immediately propagated on the net against Muslims, foreigners and people with a history of immigration will entrench itself deeper in society."

On Sunday night, police in the port city of Bremerhaven said they detained a man who threatened crimes at a Christmas market there in a TikTok video. German news agency dpa reported that he had said he would stab any people of Arabic appearance there on Christmas Day.

**Public Notice**  
Change in Partnership  
Maruti Authorized Service Station  
M/s. Wig Automobiles, Delhi  
(Mass Code 8012) as below:

**Public Notice**  
Information is given to general public at large that Mohd. Hekhar & Mid Zuhair Alam who is/are purchasing the Property No. 923 E/A, Gali No. 8 (part of Property No. 923/B), area measuring 30 sq. yds., comprised of Khassa No. 820/33, Gendpur Kalka, New Delhi-110019 from Ali Hassan S/o Fida Hassan & Gurdul Ali S/o Lykath Hussain who was the owner of property by virtue of Sale Deed dated 07.05.2006 (Doc. No. 8520) executed by Mr. Amir Singh S/o Late Mr. Dull Ram Intend to mortgage the same against the financial assistance from Shubham Housing Development Finance Company Limited. Original registered General Power of Attorney dated 08.05.1997 (Document No. 6287), Agreement to Sell Notarized on dated 16.05.1997 & Will of the subject property are not available with Seller i.e. Ali Hassan S/o Fida Hassan & Gurdul Ali S/o Lykath Hussain. To comply the requirements of BANK/NFC, we give this public notice that if any person(s) having any objection regarding ownership and/or creating mortgage of the said property is/are hereby requested to intimate in writing to the undersigned within 07 days at below address:

**Public Notice**  
Region: C1, Mass Code: 8012  
Mass Name: Wig Automobiles,  
Location: Delhi.  
Constitution: Partnership, Old  
Partners: 1. Mr. Jatinder Nath Wig  
2. Mr. Bhola Nath Wig  
3. Mr. Virender Nath Wig  
4. Mrs. Renu Bala S. Mrs. Alka Wig  
5. Mrs. Prem Kumari,  
New Partners with Shareholding  
1. Mr. Virender Nath Wig - 55%  
2. Mrs. Alka Wig - 10%  
3. Mrs. Pia Wig Kochhar - 35%

**Public Notice**  
It is hereby informed that despite this notice, if dues not cleared and locker is not operated by **MANREET SINGH** within 90 days from the date of this notice, break open of the said locker will be done on **March 25, 2025** at around **12p.m.**

**Public Notice**  
It is hereby informed that despite this notice, if dues not cleared and locker is not operated by **PARVEEN KAUR** within 90 days from the date of this notice, break open of the said locker will be done on **March 25, 2025** at around **12p.m.**

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# China warns Philippines over mid-range missile deployment plan

**AP ■ BEIJING**

China said a plan by the Philippines to deploy midrange missiles would be a provocative move that stokes regional tensions. The Philippines top army official told reporters in Manila earlier on Monday that the military plans to acquire a mid-range system to defend the country's territory amid tensions with China in the South China Sea.

"Yes, there are plans, there are negotiations, because we see its feasibility and adaptability," Lt Gen Roy Galido said.

The US deployed its Typhon mid-range missile system in the northern Philippines in April and troops from both countries

have been training jointly for the potential use of the heavy weaponry. China opposes US military assistance to the Philippines and has been particularly alarmed by the deployment of the Typhon system. Under President Joe Biden, the US has strengthened an arc of military alliances in the Indo-Pacific to counter China, including in any confrontation over Taiwan.

China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said that deployment of the weapon by the Philippines would intensify geopolitical confrontation and an arms race.

"It is an extremely irresponsible choice for the history and with people of itself and the whole of Southeast Asia, as well as for the security of the region," she told a daily briefing.

The Philippines would not necessarily buy the Typhon system, Galido said.

The army is working not only with the United States but with other friendly countries on a long list of weapons platforms that it plans to acquire, he said.

The Philippines defence plan includes protecting its exclusive economic zone, which reaches 200 nautical miles (370 km).

**Public Notice**  
Entire Second Floor without Roof Rights along with 25% undivided share on Lower Ground Floor referred to as "said floor" of Property Bearing No. F-713, built on Plot Nos. 8 & 9, area measuring 102 sq. yds., falling in Khassa No. 401, situated in the area of Village Shakarpur, in the abadi of Sri Nagar, District-10004, hereinafter referred to as "said property".

**Public Notice**  
Be it known to all that our client, Mrs. Nidhika Bathia (hereinafter called the "Purchaser") intends to purchase the said floor of the second floor (11) Mrs. Mestu Arora and Mrs. Dimple Agrawal (hereinafter called the seller). In this connection, the seller have informed the purchaser that they are the joint owners of the said floor. The seller have further informed the purchaser that a Sale Deed was executed by Mr. Vimal Pruthi, Mrs. Neelam Alias Neelam Khurana, and Mrs. Shashi Bala on 31.05.2010 registered as document No. 7613 and Mrs. Shashi Bala and Mrs. Neelam Alias Neelam Khurana owned the first floor with roof rights vide Sale deed dated 31.05.2010 registered as document No. 7612. Subsequently, they demolished the entire structure and reconstructed the above said property. Thus they became the joint owners of the said property and sold the vacant roof of first floor, as aforesaid, to the present seller. The seller have further informed that earlier Mr Vimal Pruthi owned the Ground floor without roof rights vide sale deed dated 31.05.2010 registered as document No. 7613 and Mrs. Shashi Bala and Mrs. Neelam Alias Neelam Khurana owned the first floor with roof rights vide Sale deed dated 31.05.2010 registered as document No. 7612. Subsequently, they demolished the entire structure and reconstructed the above said property. Thus they became the joint owners of the said property and sold the vacant roof of first floor, as aforesaid, to the present seller. The seller have further informed that earlier Mr Vimal Pruthi owned the Ground floor without roof rights vide sale deed dated 31.05.2010 registered as document No. 7613 and Mrs. Shashi Bala and Mrs. Neelam Alias Neelam Khurana owned the first floor with roof rights vide Sale deed dated 31.05.2010 registered as document No. 7612. Subsequently, they demolished the entire structure and reconstructed the above said property. 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# Sensex climbs 500 points after five days of fall

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Equity benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty rebounded sharply on Monday after five days of steep decline amid value buying at lower levels and a rally in global markets. Besides, hectic buying in blue-chip stocks ITC, HDFC Bank and Reliance Industries also helped in market recovery.

The 30-share BSE benchmark Sensex jumped 498.58 points or 0.64 per cent to settle at 78,540.17. During the day, it soared 876.53 points or 1.12 per cent to 78,918.12. The NSE Nifty surged 165.95 points or 0.70 per cent to 23,753.45. From the 30 blue-chip stocks,



ITC, Tech Mahindra, HDFC Bank, Reliance Industries, IndusInd Bank, Titan, State Bank of India and ICICI Bank were the biggest gainers. New entrant Zomato, Maruti,

Nestle, HCL Tech, Bajaj Finserv and Tata Motors were among the laggards. In Asian markets, Seoul, Tokyo, and Hong Kong settled in the positive territory while Shanghai

ended lower. European markets were trading mostly lower. Wall Street ended higher on Friday. In the past five sessions last week, the BSE benchmark tanked 4,091.53 points or 4.98 per cent, and the Nifty slumped 1,180.8 points or 4.76 per cent.

Foreign institutional investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth Rs 3,597.82 crore on Friday, according to exchange data. Global oil benchmark Brent crude climbed 0.44 per cent to USD 73.26 a barrel. The 30-share BSE benchmark tumbled 1,176.46 points or 1.49 per cent to settle at 78,041.59 on Friday. The Nifty tanked 364.20 points or 1.52 per cent to 23,587.50.

# Nissan, Honda announce plans to merge

AP ■ TOKYO

Japanese automakers Honda and Nissan have announced plans to join forces, forming world's third-largest automaker by sales as the industry undergoes dramatic changes in its transition away from fossil fuels.

The two companies said they had signed a memorandum of understanding on Monday and that smaller Nissan alliance member Mitsubishi Motors also had agreed to join the talks on integrating their businesses.

"We anticipate that if this integration comes to fruition, we will be able to deliver even greater value to a wider customer base," Nissan's CEO Makoto Uchida said in a statement. Automakers in Japan have lagged behind their big rivals in electric vehicles and are trying to cut costs and make up for lost time.

News of a possible merger surfaced earlier this month, with unconfirmed reports



saying that the talks on closer collaboration partly were driven by aspirations of Taiwan iPhone maker Foxconn to tie up with Nissan, which has an alliance with Renault SA of France and Mitsubishi.

A merger could result in a behemoth worth more than \$50 billion based on the market capitalisation of all three automakers. Together, Honda and the Nissan alliance with Renault SA of France and smaller automaker Mitsubishi Motors Corp would gain

scale to compete with Toyota Motor Corp and with Germany's Volkswagen AG. Toyota has technology partnerships with Japan's Mazda Motor Corp. And Subaru Corp.

Even after a merger Toyota, which rolled out 11.5 million vehicles in 2023, would remain the leading Japanese automaker. If they join, the three smaller companies would make about 8 million vehicles. In 2023, Honda made 4 million and Nissan produced 3.4 million. Mitsubishi Motors made just

over 1 million. Nissan, Honda and Mitsubishi announced in August that they would share components for electric vehicles like batteries and jointly research software for autonomous driving to adapt better to dramatic changes centred around electrification, following a preliminary agreement between Nissan and Honda set in March.

Honda, Japan's second-largest automaker, is widely viewed as the only likely Japanese partner able to effect a rescue of Nissan, which has struggled following a scandal that began with the arrest of its former chairman Carlos Ghosn in late 2018 on charges of fraud and misuse of company assets, allegations that he denies. He eventually was released on bail and fled to Lebanon.

Speaking Monday to reporters in Tokyo via a video link, Ghosn derided the planned merger as a "desperate move".

# Sebi to auction 28 properties of five companies next month

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Capital markets regulator Sebi will auction 28 properties of five companies, including Bishal Group and Sumangal Industries, on January 27, to recover money illegally collected from investors by these companies.

The properties will be auctioned for a reserve price of Rs 28.66 crore. Ravi Kiran Realty India, Mangalam Agro Products, and Purusattam Infotech Industries are the other companies, whose properties will be auctioned. The properties that will go under the hammer include flats, residential property and flats, land parcels, plots, and land with building structures located in West Bengal and Odisha.

Of the 28 properties being put on the block, 17 are linked to Bishal Group, 6 to Mangalam Agro Products, 3 are related to Sumangal Industries, and 1 each to Purusattam Infotech Industries and Ravi Kiran Realty India.



Sebi said the auction will be conducted online on January 27, 2025, from 11 am to 1 pm. The regulator has asked the bidders to make their independent enquiries regarding the encumbrances, litigations, title of the properties put on auction and claims before submitting their bid.

These entities had mobilised money from the investors without complying with the market regulations. Going by Sebi's earlier orders, Mangalam Agro had raised Rs 11 crore from the illegal issuance of secured non-convertible debentures (NCDs) to around 4,820 investors during 2011-2012, while Sumangal had collected Rs 85 crore from investors through illegal collective investment schemes (CIS). Bishal Distillers had raised funds of Rs 4 crore, Bishal Agri-Bio Industries and Bishal Horticulture and Animal Projects mobilised Rs 3 crore and Rs 2.84 crore, respectively.

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# Claims ratio of non-life insurers dips to 82.52 per cent in FY24: Irdai report

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Net incurred claims to net earned premium (claims ratio) of non-life insurance industry stood at 82.52 per cent during 2023-24 as against 82.95 per cent in the preceding fiscal year, as per the Irdai's annual report.

According to the Annual Report 2023-24 of the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (Irdai), during 2023-24, the non-life insurance industry underwrote a total direct premium of Rs 2,90 lakh crore in India registering a growth of 12.76 per cent from previous year.

The contribution of public sector general insurers increased 8.88 per cent from Rs 82,891 crore in 2022-23 to Rs 90,252 crore in 2023-24. Private sector insurers, including standalone health insurers, have underwritten Rs 1.88 lakh crore as against Rs 1.58 lakh crore in 2022-23. The aggregate profit of the



non-life insurance sector was Rs 10,119 crore as against a net loss of Rs 2,566 crore in 2022-23.

During 2023-24, the aggregate net incurred claims saw a 15.39 per cent increase to Rs 1.72 lakh crore from Rs 1.49 lakh crore.

"The incurred claims ratio (net incurred claims to net earned premium) of the non-life insurance industry was 82.52 per cent during 2023-24 as against 82.95 per cent of the previous year," the report said.

The incurred claims ratio for public sector insurers was 97.23 per cent for 2023-24 as against the previous year's incurred claims ratio of 99.02 per cent.

The incurred claims ratio for private sector general insurers, standalone health insurers and specialised insurers were at 76.49 per cent, 63.63 per cent, and 66.58 per cent, respectively, for 2023-24 as compared to the previous year's ratio of 75.13 per cent, 61.44 per cent and 73.71 per cent, respectively.

The report also said that the life insurance industry paid total benefits of Rs 5.77 lakh crore in 2023-24, constituting 70.22 per cent of the net premium.

The benefits paid on account of surrenders/withdrawals increased 15.29 per cent to Rs 2.29 lakh crore in 2023-24 of which public sector life insurer accounted for 58.36 per cent.

During 2023-24, a total of 18 life insurance companies reported profits. Profits of the life insurance industry grew 10.79 per cent in 2023-24 with profit after tax (PAT) of Rs 47,407 crore as against Rs 42,788 crore in 2022-23.

Public sector life insurers reported an 11.75 per cent increase in profits while private sector life insurers reported a rise of 5.32 per cent in profit in 2023-24. Irdai said in 2023-24, the country's insurance penetration was at 3.7 per cent as compared to 4 per cent in 2022-23.

# Gold climbs ₹570 to ₹78,700 per 10 gm

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Gold prices recovered Rs 570 to Rs 78,700 per 10 grams in the national capital on Monday amid value buying by stockists and investors following a firm global trend, according to the All India Sarafa Association. The precious metal ended at Rs 78,130 per 10 grams on Friday.

Silver surged Rs 1,850 to reclaim the Rs 90,000 per kg mark on increased offtake by industrial units and coin makers. The white metal finished at Rs 88,150 per kg in the previous trading session. The price of gold of 99.5 per cent purity also jumped Rs 570 to Rs 78,300 per 10 grams on Monday. It closed at Rs 77,730 per 10 grams in the previous session on Friday.

Value buying by stockists and jewellers for the ongoing wedding season supported the uptrend in both gold and silver prices, traders said. In futures trade on the Multi Commodity Exchange (MCX) on Monday, gold contracts for February delivery slipped Rs 48, or 0.06 per cent, to Rs 76,372 per 10 grams.

However, silver contracts for March delivery climbed Rs 637, or 0.72 per cent, to Rs 89,029 per kg on the commodities exchange. Comex gold futures fell USD 6.70 per ounce, or 0.25 per cent, to USD 2,638.40 per ounce in the overseas markets.

"Gold and silver prices recovered from one-month and three-and-a-half month lows in a highly volatile session. The dollar index and the bond yields showed profit taking which supported precious metal," Rahul Kalantri, VP Commodities, Mehta Equities Ltd, said.

# India's data centre capacity to more than double by FY27, on rising digitalisation: Crisil Ratings

PTI ■ MUMBAI

India's data centre capacity is set to more than double to 2-2.3 GW by 2026-27, led by increasing digitalisation as organisations increase their investments in cloud storage, Crisil Ratings said in a report on Monday.

Further, the report stated that rising penetration of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) will drive the demand over the medium-term.

To support the strong demand, the incremental capital expenditure would be supported by a higher proportion of debt funding, which will result in a moderate increase in debt levels, it said.



Data centres cater to the computing and storage infrastructure demand as enterprises rapidly shifting their businesses to digital platforms, including cloud, a trend that has accelerated post Covid-19 pandemic, it said.

The other major factor is that increased accessibility of high-speed data has led to a surge in internet usage, including social media, over-the-top (OTT) platforms and digital payments, it added. Notably, mobile data traffic logged a compound annual

growth rate (CAGR) of 25 per cent over the last five fiscals, standing at 24 GB per month at end-fiscal 2024, and is expected to rise to 33-35 GB by FY26, the Crisil Ratings report said.

In addition to the ongoing demand, it said that the rapid advancement of GenAI, which requires higher computational power and low latency than traditional cloud computing functions, will also provide tailwind to the data centre demand in India. "To meet the growing data centre demand, an investment of Rs 55,000-65,000 crore is required over the next three fiscals, primarily towards land and building, power equipment and cooling solutions.

# Dhanuka Agritech hosts Farmers' Day programme to honour farmers

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

To honour farmers of the country on the occasion of KisanDiwas, Dhanuka Agritech Limited successfully hosted a Farmers' Day program at the Dhanuka Agricultural Research and Technology Centre (DART) at Palwal.

The event aimed to provide insights into modern farming techniques to facilitate knowledge sharing and to discuss the future of Indian agriculture with leading scientists.

The event showcased Dhanuka's unwavering and continuous commitment to empowering farmers and promoting sustainable agricultural practices. It



included demonstrations and training sessions focused specifically on Rabi crops such as wheat, vegetables, and mustard. Farmers had the unique opportunity to learn advanced techniques and engage with experts in the agriculture field.

Speaking on the occasion, Vipul Goyal, Minister for Revenue & Disaster Management, Urban Local Bodies & Civil Aviation,

Cabinet Minister, Haryana inaugurated the program. The Guest of Honour Dr. P.K. Singh, Agriculture Commissioner, Deptt. Of Agri & Farmers' Welfare, Govt. of India was elated to see the huge gathering of farmers and their willingness to learn new techniques.

Their presence highlighted the significance of initiatives like these in supporting the agricultural community by making farmers aware of new and advanced farming practices.

This program also encouraged practical solutions that contribute to the growth and sustainability in agriculture, ultimately benefiting farmers and the broader farming ecosystem.

# FMCG industry expects consumption revival in 2025

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The FMCG industry hopes for a revival in consumption growth in 2025 with some 'green shoots' already visible, after having a challenging year amid escalating input costs and a double-digit rise in food inflation, which ultimately slowed down the pace of the urban market growth in the second half of 2024.

Soaring prices of commodities such as palm oil, coffee, cocoa and wheat forced FMCG players to go for a hike of 3 to 5 per cent or resort to shrinkflation by reducing pack sizes and grammage to retain attractive price points, fearing a volume loss.

The makers also expect a shot in the arm in the upcoming annual budget, which would help the stressed middle-income group and stimulate consumption, besides a good monsoon and continued rejuvenation of the rural market. A resurgence of high food

inflation once again in 2024 disrupted consumption patterns, particularly among mass-segment consumers, said Emami Vice Chairman & MD Harsha V Agarwal, adding elevated food inflation continues to pose a significant challenge. "Consumption among the lower-middle and middle-class segments has remained subdued, with approximately 75 per cent of average retail spending directed towards food and grocery, leaving only 25 per cent for discretionary purchases," he said.

Agarwal, who is also the President of industry body FICCI, said 'positive signs' are emerging on the consumption front as food inflation has begun to ease. "A revival in consumption growth looks promising, supported by a good crop and increased government spending on large-scale infrastructure projects and rural schemes in the December quarter," he said.

Dabur India CEO Mohit



Malhotra also said that rising food inflation and a squeeze in urban demand were the key concerns during 2024. "While rural demand has been growing quarter on quarter, we expect a recovery in urban demand as the new year progresses. Premiumisation is expected to continue, and this will help improve value growth in 2025," he said.

Moreover, the FMCG makers also expect the trends of premiumisation, where a customer is ready to pay extra

for better quality products, particularly in urban India along with a high growth coming from quick commerce channels, which has transformed the grocery market. "Consumers are willing to pay a premium for products that offer better quality, unique features, or enhanced experiences. Premiumisation is expected to continue, and this will help improve value growth in 2025," said Malhotra.

Tata Consumer Products Ltd (TCPL) MD and CEO Sunil D'Souza said he is 'optimistic' about 2025 and maintains a sharp focus on driving profitable growth and building future-ready capabilities. "In India, consumer trends such as premiumisation, health & wellness and convenience are expected to gather pace. Quick commerce has seen exponential growth, but physical distribution continues to stay extremely relevant at the same time," said D'Souza.

Gen Z and millennials are expected to contribute to an increasing share of consumption, by some estimates, 76 per cent of consumption by 2030. "This presents an opportunity for cooking aids, packaged food, healthier and guilt-free snacking and mini-meal options, all of which we have added to our portfolio in the last few years. It will also require shorter innovation cycles," he said.

Marico MD & CEO Saugata Gupta said shifts in consumer

behaviour have been profound, with sustainability, premiumisation and personalisation emerging as key trends.

"The direct-to-consumer ecosystem continues to thrive, with digital-first and premium brands demonstrating resilience and growth. The channels are undergoing a tremendous transformation with the consumer shifts that the industry is witnessing. The medium-term growth outlook for the industry is very much intact," he said.

Gupta expects rural consumption to steadily grow and urban consumption to revive in a couple of quarters. "Innovation, affordability, and availability will be key drivers of growth going forward," he said.

Godrej Consumer Products Ltd (GCPL) CFO Aasif Malbari said: "Despite these challenges, we remain committed to navigating near-term headwinds while investing strategically for long-term growth."

# Tata Power Club hosts National Urja Mela

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Reflecting the spirit of National Energy Conservation Day, Tata Power on Saturday hosted the National Urja Mela 2024 at New Delhi, bringing together 1000+ students and teachers comprising 150 schools from 10 states across India to champion innovation and sustainability, while fostering the next generation of leaders to drive energy conservation efforts.

This annual event is a flagship initiative under Tata Power's award-winning Club Enerji program, highlighted the pivotal role of youth in creating a sustainable future in line with the company's 'Sustainable is Attainable' movement. The event featured an exciting array of activities, including competitions, workshops, and cultural performances designed to inspire students to become eco-conscious leaders. Mr. Himlal Tewari, CHRO,



Chief-Sustainability & CSR at Tata Power, said, "Sustainability begins with awareness, and the National Urja Mela reflects our commitment to nurturing innovation and responsibility in young minds. This initiative emphasizes the critical importance of energy conservation and environmental protection, empowering youth from across the country to drive a greener, more sustainable future. In collaboration with Tata Power, they will shape the new energy landscape, advancing a future centered on sustainability and the goal of achieving carbon net-zero."



# Real Madrid's 4-2 win over Sevilla in the Spanish league

AP ■ MADRID

Kylian Mbappé added to his scoring streak with a superb strike in Real Madrid's 4-2 win over Sevilla in the Spanish league to finish the year on a positive note after hitting what he called "rock bottom" in early December. Mbappé sent a right-footed shot into the upper corner 10 minutes into the match for his fourth goal in as many games with Madrid in all competitions. It was Mbappé's sixth goal in his last eight matches with Madrid. He struggled early on with his new club, and Mbappé said his lowest point came when he missed a penalty kick in the team's 2-1 league loss at Athletic Bilbao on Dec. 4. "I know I have a lot more to give," Mbappé said Sunday. "The last few games I've played better, I took a lot of positives from the Bilbao game, when I hit rock bottom." The France star said that made him realize "I have to give my all for this jersey and play with personality."

Mbappé said he feels his period of adjustment with the club is finally over. "I think we now know each other better," he said. "I've joined the team and that changed a lot of things. The settling-in period is over, as the coach says. I feel very comfortable in the team and I play better with the others on the field. The team is playing much better." Federico Valverde, Rodrygo and Brahim Díaz also scored in the comfortable home victory that allowed Madrid to finish the year one point behind Spanish league leader Atletico Madrid. Atletico rallied to shock Barcelona 2-1 Saturday with a stoppage-time goal by Alexander Sorloth. Third-place Barcelona is two points behind Madrid, having played an extra game. Valverde scored in the 20th and Rodrygo in the 34th before Sevilla got on the board with Isaac Romero in the 35th. Díaz extended Madrid's lead in the 53rd and Dodi Lukebakio got the visitors' other goal in the 85th at the Santiago Bernabeu Stadium. "It was a well-played game, with



many scoring situations, a good end to the year," Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti said. "That was what we wanted, to be near the top and get some good rest for 2025." Madrid next faces Valencia on Jan. 3 in a match postponed because of the deadly floods that

hit Valencia in October. Sevilla, sitting in 14th place, had won two of its last two games in all competitions. Navas' farewell</h2>It was the last game for Sevilla and Spain great Jesús Navas, who is officially retiring at the end of the year. The defender was honored by Sevilla and Madrid players and fans at the Santiago Bernabeu. Players from both teams made a guard of honor for Navas before the match, lining up as he entered the field, and Madrid's veteran midfielder Luka Modric handed him a jersey of the club signed by players. Fans gave Navas a standing ovation during the ceremony. Substitute Navas came on midway through the second half. "What happened today was spectacular," the 39-year-old Navas said after the match, unable to hold back tears. "I had never seen anything like it in my life on a rival field. It was crazy. In those last few minutes I couldn't see anything. I was looking at the ground recalling all the moments I've went through and the joy I've been able to give to Sevilla and

the national team." Navas helped Sevilla win four Europa League titles and Spain clinch the 2010 World Cup and the 2012 and 2024 European Championships. He was with Manchester City when it won the 2014 Premier League. "Navas really deserves it," Ancelotti said. "Navas is an example for everyone." Valencia draws late Second-to-last Valencia salvaged a 2-2 home draw with Alaves, thanks to a goal by Dani Gómez eight minutes into second-half stoppage time after the visitors had taken the lead with Joan Jordán in the 88th. The setback drew more protests from Valencia fans who have been unhappy with the administration of team owner Peter Lim. Other results Thierno Barry scored a hat trick and Gerard Moreno and Pau Cabanes added one goal each as fifth-place Villarreal won 5-2 at Leganes, while Las Palmas won 1-0 against 18th-place Espanyol. Ninth-place Real Betis was held by 12th-place Rayo Vallecano to a 1-1 draw at home.



## Manu Bhaker missing from Khel Ratna nominees; Sports Ministry says no final list yet

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Amid reports that double Olympic-medallist Manu Bhaker has been shockingly ignored for this year's Dhyan Chand Khel Ratna award, a top sports ministry source has asserted that the names are yet to be finalised and she is likely to be there when the list is unveiled in a week's time. In August, Bhaker became independent India's first athlete to win two medals in a single edition of the Olympics with her bronze-winning show in the 10m air pistol individual and 10m air pistol mixed team events. Reports of her omission from the national honours evoked shock with her family insisting that application was duly submitted. "There is no final list of nominees at this point. Sports minister Mansukh Mandaviya will decide on the recommendations in a day or two and her name, in all likelihood, will be there in the final list," a ministry source said. The award selection committee is a 12-member panel headed by retired Supreme Court judge Justice V Ramasubramaniam. It includes former athletes like women's hockey captain Rani Rampal among others. The ministry norms allow athletes to self-nominate instead of relying on federations and other institutions for it. The

selection committee is, however, allowed to consider names which may not be among the applicants. While the ministry claimed that Bhaker did not apply for the award, her father Ram Kishan Bhaker, a chief engineer in Merchant Navy, said the youngster had followed the due process. "There is no worth of playing Olympic sports in India because despite winning two medals in an Olympics, Manu has been ignored for the Khel Ratna award. There is no point in playing and winning rewards for your country and in turn beg for recognition," Ram Kishan told PTI. "She had been applying for all awards, say Khel Ratna, Padma Shri, Padma Bhushan for the last 2-3 years continuously and I have proof of that. This time too, I am confident she would have applied but I can't show anything as I am at sea right now. "But even if she hasn't, the committee should consider her looking at her achievements," he asserted. He blamed bureaucracy for the mess-up. "We form a committee but it is the bureaucrats who call the shots. This is not how sports function," he said. It is learnt that the committee has recommended India hockey captain Harmanpreet Singh, who led the country to a second consecutive Olympic bronze medal, for the Khel Ratna.

## Olympian PV Sindhu marries entrepreneur Venkat Datta Sai

PTI ■ UDAIPUR

Two-time Olympic medallist PV Sindhu embarked on a new journey in life as she tied the knot with entrepreneur Venkata Datta Sai in a private ceremony here. The 29-year-old shuttler from Hyderabad, who won a bronze at the 2016 Rio Olympics and a silver at the Tokyo Olympics three years ago, married Datta, an executive director at Posidex Technologies, on Sunday in a traditional ceremony attended by close family and friends.



wedding ceremony of our Badminton Champion Olympian PV Sindhu with Venkata Datta Sai in Udaipur last evening and conveyed my wishes & blessings to the couple for their new life ahead," Shekhawat tweeted. The celebrations commenced with a lively Sangeet ceremony on December 20,

featuring music and dance as the two families came together. This was followed by traditional rituals such as Haldi, Pellikuthuru, Mehendi, and other customs on December 21. Sindhu's wedding news came close on the heels of her victory at the Syed Modi International in Lucknow earlier this month, ending a long title drought. With five medals, including a gold, at the BWF World Championships, and two Olympic medals, Sindhu is widely regarded as one of India's greatest athletes. The couple has invited some of the top celebrities of the country for the wedding reception, including the likes of Sachin Tendulkar and Prime Minister Narendra Modi.



## US Open doubles champion Max Purcell suspended for anti-doping breach

AP ■ MELBOURNE

Two-time Grand Slam winning doubles player Max Purcell has entered a voluntary provisional suspension under tennis' anti-doping rules. The International Tennis Integrity Agency announced the sanction in a statement on Monday after the 26-year-old Australian admitted to violating Article 2.2 of the Tennis Anti-Doping Program "relating to the use of a Prohibited Method." The ITIA said the suspension came into effect on 12 Dec, and time served under provisional suspension will be credited against any future sanction. The length of time of the voluntary suspension was not specified by the ITIA. "During the provisional suspension, Purcell is prohibited from playing in, coaching at, or attending any tennis event authorized or sanctioned by the members of the ITIA (ATP, ITF, WTA, Tennis Australia, Fédération Française de Tennis, Wimbledon and USTA) or any national association," the ITIA statement read. Purcell, with compatriot Jordan Thompson, won the

U.S. Open in September and won Wimbledon with another Australian, Matthew Ebden, in 2022. He is currently ranked No. 12 in doubles. He also finished as a runner-up in the Australian Open doubles final twice, in 2020 and 2022. Purcell, ranked No. 105 in singles, was not listed on the Australian Open entry lists released earlier this month and did not receive a wildcard or feature on the qualifying entries. The ITIA did not say whether Purcell's absence from the draw of the tournament starting Jan. 12. Was due to the sanction. The latest doping violation in tennis comes just weeks after five-time Grand Slam champion Iga Swiatek accepted a one-month suspension after testing positive for the banned substance trimetazidine. Top-ranked men's player Jannik Sinner, winner of two Grand Slams this year, was exonerated by the ITIA after twice testing positive for a trace amount of an anabolic steroid in March with the World Anti-Doping Agency appealing the ruling.

## Kho Kho World Cup to feature 21 men's and 20 women's teams

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

A total of 21 men's teams and 20 women outfits will compete in next month's Kho Kho World Cup with the sport's governing body increasing the number of participating teams due to an overwhelming interest. India will host the inaugural edition of the event at the IGI Stadium from January 13 to 19. Initially, 16 men's and 16 women's teams were scheduled to participate. Teams from six continents -- Asia, Africa, North America, South America, Europe, and Oceania -- will feature in the m u c h - a n t i c i p a t e d tournament. "We are keeping the facilities with the foreign delegates in mind. We have devised meals and diet plan for our guests as per their dietary requirements and we are also providing



entire logistics, stay, and transport facilities for them, so that they do not face any issues during their stay here," KKF President Sudhanshu Mittal said in a release. "We have also made provisions for all countries to stay till the end of the tournament, irrespective of the results." The opening ceremony will take place on January 13, followed by the first match of the tournament between India and Pakistan. The league stage will run from January 14 to 16, with the quarterfinals and semifinals scheduled for January 17 and 18. The final will be held on January 19. Participating nations in Kho Kho World Cup 2025:

- Africa: Men's: Ghana, Kenya, South Africa Women's: Kenya, South Africa, Uganda
- Asia: Men's: Bangladesh, Bhutan, India (host), Iran, Malaysia, Nepal, Pakistan, South Korea, Sri Lanka Women's: Bangladesh, Bhutan, India (host), Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Nepal, Pakistan, South Korea, Sri Lanka
- Europe: Men's: England, Germany, Netherlands, Poland Women's: England, Germany, Netherlands, Poland
- North America: Men's: United States of America South America: Men's: Argentina, Brazil, Peru Women's: Peru
- Oceania: Men's: Australia

## Coaching crisis, heartbreaks and Olympic setbacks mark a disastrous year for Indian boxing

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Indian boxing endured a turbulent year marred by coaching turmoil, crushing defeats, and a medal-less Paris Olympics campaign, all of it made worse by the national federation's negligence that brought u n p r e c e d e n t e d embarrassment to the country. There were very few positives to count in a year when, after a widely successful 2023, expectations were sky high. Yet no boxer was able to add to the three bronze medals -- Vijender Singh (2008), M C Mary Kom (2012) and Lovlina Borgohain (2021) -- that India had secured in the previous editions of the Olympics. The Nishant Dev, unlucky to miss out on an Olympic medal, was India's top performer but the likes of world champions Nikhat Zareen and Lovlina disappointed despite widely

held belief that fortunes of women's boxing were following an upward trajectory. Outside the ring, the Boxing Federation of India's (BFI) negligence cost India an Olympic quota even as administrators globally scrambled to retain the sport on the Olympic roster. Controversy and coaching crisis The dismal performance at the first World Qualifying Tournament, where all nine boxers failed to secure a spot at the Paris Games, prompted High Performance Director Bernard Dunne to resign from his position while still in Italy, less than four months before the Olympics. It wasn't just the defeats that were troubling, but the manner in which the boxers lost that was truly disheartening. Frequent knockouts and RSC out-classed defeats pointed to inherent technical flaws

which had not been addressed. With the exception of Nishant, there was hardly any name in Indian boxing who could be spoken about as a success story. Adding to the woes, the country soon lost the women's 57kg Olympic quota, won by Parveen Hooda at the Asian Games last year, after the boxer was handed a 22-month suspension by the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) for three whereabouts failures within a year. The 2022 World Championship bronze-medallist failed to submit her whereabouts for the period between April 2022 and March 2023, as mandated by WADA regulations. The BFI was also to blame for this unprecedented embarrassment given that federation is duly notified of such a lapse by the



international body. The federation ought to have intervened to ensure that the athlete submitted the required details on time. As a result, India had to fight afresh for qualification in the women's 57kg category, the spot ultimately going to Jaismine Lamboria in the final Olympic Qualifiers. There were wholesale changes for this event with former Asian Games gold-medallist Amit Panghal replacing Deepak Bhoria in the 51kg category. Eventually Panghal and Nishant made the cut for the quadrennial spectacle along with Jaismine, adding to the three quotas won by Nikhat

Zareen (50kg), Preeti Pawar (54kg) and Lovlina (75kg) last year. In all, six boxers qualified for Paris, a decline from the five men and four women who represented India in the 2021 Tokyo Games. Barren Olympics, Nishant's heartbreak Heading into the big event on the back of two consecutive World Championship titles, Zareen was hailed as one of India's strongest medal contenders. However, in the fiercely competitive 50kg category, the Telangana boxer was completely outclassed by China's Wu Yu in a brutally one-sided bout. Zareen, unable to match the relentless pace of her opponent, later said that she had "not eaten for the last two days to maintain weight" and felt weak. A win away from a second consecutive Olympic medal, Lovlina too went down to a

Chinese boxer. The Tokyo Games bronze winner couldn't get past familiar foe Li Qian. For Panghal, who was handed a fairly easy draw, it was deja vu as he made yet another pre-quarterfinal exit from the Olympics. The most heartbreaking loss, however, was endured by Nishant. The 23-year-old was defeated 1-4 by Mexico's Marco Verde Alvarez in the 71kg quarterfinal, despite appearing to dominate the bout. This outcome reignited the fierce debate and outrage over judging. The devastating result denied Nishant, the 2023 world championship bronze-medallist, a podium finish in his debut games as the Indian boxing contingent returned empty-handed from Paris. The sport has been dormant ever since. The boxers haven't competed in any tournament with the BFI deciding against

sending a team for the Asian Championships. India joins World Boxing With the International Olympic Committee (IOC) threatening to leave boxing out of the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics if national federations continued to align themselves with the suspended International Boxing Association (IBA), India joined the breakaway World Boxing (WB). However, the Asian Boxing Confederation (ASBC) voted against leaving the IBA to join the rival association. But BFI reaffirmed its support in WB, which also has the backing of the IOC, by successfully bidding for the hosting rights of the World Boxing Cup Finals next year. The sport's future though remains shrouded in uncertainty and it remains to be seen whether it can manage to hold its place in the Olympics.



# Shami not fully fit yet, ruled out of remaining two Tests in Australia

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India pacer Mohammed Shami has been ruled out of the last two Tests against Australia as he is yet to regain full fitness, the BCCI said on Monday. Shami, who last played for India in the ODI World Cup final in November, 2023, made a comeback from his right heel surgery during Bengal's Ranji Trophy match against Madhya Pradesh last month. With calls for his selection growing, Shami played all nine games for Bengal in the subsequent Syed Mushtaq Ali T20 Trophy. He is also part of Bengal's squad for the ongoing Vijay Hazare Trophy but did not play the opening game on Saturday against Delhi. His fitness has been a subject of intense debate and

speculation, so much so that India skipper Rohit Sharma had asked the physios at the National Cricket Academy to provide clarity on the matter following the Brisbane Test. Shami had developed swelling in his knees while playing the SMAT, and the clarification in that regard finally came on Monday. "Based on the current medical assessment, the BCCI Medical Team has determined that his knee requires more time for controlled exposure to bowling loads. Consequently, he has not been deemed fit for consideration for the remaining two Tests of the Border-Gavaskar Trophy," said the BCCI in a release. "Shami will continue to undergo targeted strength and conditioning work under the guidance of the medical staff at BCCI's Centre of Excellence



and build his bowling loads needed to meet the demands of the longest format of the game. His participation in the Vijay Hazare Trophy will depend on the progress of his knee." The medical team said the veteran fast bowler has fully recovered from the heel injury that kept him out of action after the ODI World Cup. "The BCCI Medical Team at the Centre of Excellence has been working closely with Indian fast bowler Mohammed Shami on his recovery and rehabilitation after his right heel surgery. Shami has completely recovered from this heel problem. "However, his left knee has exhibited minor swelling due to increased joint loading from his bowling workload.

The swelling is on the expected lines, owing to the increased bowling after a prolonged period," the BCCI said. Shami bowled 43 overs in his comeback game in the Ranji Trophy. Following that, he played in all nine games of the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy (SMAT), where he also "engaged in additional bowling sessions on the sidelines to build his bowling volume in order to get ready for the Test matches." The 34-year-old has taken 229 wickets in 64 Tests, 195 scalps in 101 ODIs and 24 wickets in 23 T20 Internationals. With India relying heavily on Jasprit Bumrah in Australia, Shami's presence in the bowling attack would have provided a much needed boost.



## Momentum on their side, India eye series win against West Indies

PTI ■ VADODARA

Coming off one of their biggest wins in terms of runs, fancied India will look to guard against complacency when they take on a beleaguered West Indies side with an aim to bag the three-match series in the second Women's ODI here on Tuesday. India will be entering the game on the back of a massive 211-run victory over the visitors in the series opener in which the Harmanpreet Kaur-led team ticked almost all the boxes. Every match the teams play in the coming months will be significant as the ICC World Cup is scheduled to be held in the country next year. India, who have never won a women's World Cup, are desperate to end their ICC title drought at home and they are aware that a strong build-up is extremely important for them to head into the mega event as one of the contenders alongside the 'usual suspects', Australia and England. Though India have not begun their preparations for the big tournament in earnest, having suffered a 0-3 whitewash in Australia, they bounced back in style, albeit against a much weaker opposition in the West Indies.



In between the ongoing ODI series and the one against Australia, India registered a 2-1 victory in a T20I rubber against the team from the Caribbean islands, which was their first home series win in the shortest format in over five years, but with her clean hitting and running between the wickets, the skipper has laid all concerns to rest. Mandhana, who led India in Kaur's absence and struck three fifties in a row in the T20Is, was again in her element in the first ODI and made a classy 91 off 102 balls while laying the foundation for an imposing total. The left-handed opener will be keen to continue in the same vein in the remaining one-dayers as well.

Play of the Match in the first ODI, Renuka Singh will be high on confidence having returned a five-for and she will once again look to inflict maximum damage on the Windies with the new ball. As far as the West Indies are concerned, they will have to lift their game several notches and the likes of Hayley Matthews, Deandra Dottin, Shemaine Campbelle and Afy Fletcher, the squad's senior players with years of experience, will need to lead from the front. Teams (from): India: Harmanpreet Kaur (captain), Smriti Mandhana (vice captain), Pratika Rawal, Jemimah Rodrigues, Harleen Deol, Richa Ghosh (WK), Uma Chetry (WK), Tejal Hasabnis, Deepti Sharma, Minnu Mani, Priya Mishra, Tanuja Kanwer, Titas Sadhu, Saima Thakor, Renuka Singh Thakur. West Indies: Hayley Matthews (captain), Shemaine Campbelle (vice captain), Aaliyah Alleyne, Shamila Connell, Nerissa Crafton, Deandra Dottin, Afy Fletcher, Shabika Gajinabi, Chinelle Henry, Zaida James, Qiana Joseph, Mandy Mangru, Ashmini Munisar, Karishma Ramharack, Rashada Williams.

## Indians unhappy with 'used' practice pitches

PTI ■ MELBOURNE

The Indian team has expressed dissatisfaction with the practice pitches ahead of the fourth Test against Australia here, blaming their variable bounce for the hit that Rohit Sharma took on his knee but MCG curator Matt Page has defended the tracks by saying that "standard protocol" has been followed. Rohit developed swelling on his left knee as he tried to play a throe down from support staff member Dayanand Garani and didn't take further part in the nets on Sunday. The side opted not to practice on Monday. It was learnt the skipper needed icing at night and the team think-tank held the used pitch's uneven bounce responsible for the injury scare. The Indian team had sent its training schedule two months ago but the MCG curator stuck to the standard operating procedure of giving a new practice track only three days prior to the Test match, which begins on December 26 in this case. "So for us, three days out, we prepare pitches for here. If teams come and play before that, they get what pitches we've had," Page told reporters about why India didn't get a pitch that would resemble the centre strip. "So today, we're on fresh pitches. If we needed to play this morning, they would have been on those fresh pitches. Stock standard procedure for us, three days out. We do our pitches that we're going to have for our Test match," Page defended the move. When asked if he has had the Indian schedule and BCCI had correspondence with Cricket Australia, he responded in affirmative. "Yes, they gave us schedule. There has been correspondence between CA and Indian board and the extent of those conversations, I don't know," Page informed. Pitch will help fast bowlers "The iconic MCG won't have the bounce of Perth or the seam movement of Gabba but it will still be pace-friendly with 6mm of grass covering,

## Strike rotation and solid defence key to face Bumrah, says Simon Katich

PTI ■ MELBOURNE

Former cricketer Simon Katich has advised Australian batters to concentrate on rotating the strike and maintaining a solid defence to succeed against the peerless Indian pacer Jasprit Bumrah. Katich noted that since Bumrah rarely bowls loose deliveries, the Australians must be strategically good in their approach. "I know all the talk is around having more positive intent, and I think that's all well and good and it is certainly something they have to be mindful of. But against someone like Bumrah intent is not about just blazing him for fours, because he doesn't bowl many bad balls," Katich told SEN 1116. "So a lot of that intent has to be about rotating strike and being able to defend really well, because you're not gonna be able to play with any intent if you aren't there after the tenth over. That's the challenge for all of these guys," Katich added. To illustrate his point, Katich made a reference to Australia's second innings in the third Test at Brisbane, where the hosts attempted an aggressive approach but ultimately lost their wickets. "We saw it in the second innings in Brisbane. Australians came out with

really positive intent, trying to score more quickly and look what happened, 7/80 in no time. "It's not easy to do against the red ball that moves around off the seam in a wearing wicket which the Gabba was starting to become with cracks. "The top order has to be very careful and mindful of how they go about it. You're not going to score many runs if you're trying to take him on off the length, because he is so good," he added. For the remaining two Tests, Australia has opted to place their trust in teenage sensation Sam Konstas, replacing opener Nathan McSweeney, who was given a maiden call-up ahead of the series. "I know the young kid's (Konstas) got a lot of potential, and a lot of ability, but it'll be a challenge because not many guys around the world have been able to do that to that quality of bowling," Katich said. Marsh should make way for Webster. Katich also felt Mitchell Marsh's inability to bowl the expected volume of overs suggests he isn't "100%" fit and should be replaced by uncapped rookie Beau Webster for the Boxing Day Test against India. Marsh has been dealing with recurring back stiffness

since the white-ball tour of the UK in September. During the Perth Test, he bowled 17 overs in total, taking two wickets on the opening day but later pulled up sore. In Adelaide, he bowled four overs while in Brisbane he rolled his arm for two overs. "I've been saying for a couple Tests, Mitch Marsh has not been able to bowl the volume of overs that everyone expected of him. Given the conditions and given he is a wicket taker," Katich said on 'SEN Breakfast'. "We saw that in Perth, he bowled well on day one. Took some key wickets and then struggled to back up. I mean obviously the Aussie hierarchy know better than we do around where his fitness is at. "But for him to bowl two overs the other day after Josh Hazlewood went down, that to me indicates something's not 100% right with him." After Marsh had pulled up sore, 30-year-old Tasmania all-rounder Webster was added to Australia's squad. "At the end of the day, Beau Webster deserves to be in that squad," Katich said. "He's done very well for Tassie in the last few years, he's a genuine all-rounder given what his role is for Tassie and he plays that dual role with bat and ball," Katich added.

## Tanush Kotian replaces recently retired Ashwin in India's squad

PTI ■ MELBOURNE

Mumbai off-spinner Tanush Kotian is set to join the India squad in Australia as a replacement for the recently retired Ravichandran Ashwin. It is understood that the 26 year old Kotian, who was part of India A's tour of Australia, has also been added as a cover for Washington Sundar. "Kotian has been added as a safety net and also to keep the squad number intact for the last two games. He only comes into the picture if either among Washy or Jaddu (Ravindra Jadeja) gets injured," a senior BCCI source told PTI on conditions of anonymity. Kotian, who is currently in Ahmedabad for Vijay Hazare Trophy, is expected to leave Mumbai on Tuesday and will reach



Melbourne before the start of Boxing Day Test. The bowling all-rounder picked two wickets and scored an unbeaten 39 for Mumbai in their Vijay Hazare Trophy match against Hyderabad on Monday.

Kotian has fond memories of the Melbourne Cricket Ground where he scored 44 batting at No. 8 for India A and looked the part. He already has 101 wickets to his name and 1525 runs with two centuries in 33 first-class games. Originally, Axar Patel was supposed to be summoned to Australia but as per sources, the left arm spinner had sought a break after first two matches of Vijay Hazare Trophy due to a family commitment. Kotian has been added to the squad following Ashwin's surprise retirement from international cricket following the draw Test in Brisbane. The 38-year-old ended his glorious career as the second highest wicket taker for India behind Anil Kumble.

# The ability to take 20 wickets is not that good in Indian team: Cheteshwar Pujara

PTI ■ MELBOURNE

The Indian team in Australia lacks a bowling attack that is good enough to take 20 wickets in a Test, Cheteshwar Pujara said on Monday and called it the side's biggest concern heading into the last two matches of the Border-Gavaskar Trophy. The five-match series is currently levelled at 1-1 with everything to play for in the Tests in Melbourne and Sydney. The visitors have been relying heavily on pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah to get them wickets and while he has been a great success with both the red and pink ball, the peerless fast bowler has not received enough support from the other end, something that has plagued India besides their top-order batting woes. "My biggest question and the reason for a little bit of concern is that the Indian bowling is looking a little weak," Pujara told Star Sports. "Batting is a little better, like the top five didn't do well, but the

middle order and lower middle order, Ravindra Jadeja, Nitish (Reddy), and even tailenders, Bumrah and Akash Deep contributed with the bat. "Now, there is a weakness in the bowling, so what will you feed the team? That is the biggest question, because you can't drop Nitish, you can't drop Jadeja, so what will be the team combination?" Pujara felt that Nitish Reddy and Ravindra Jadeja are not able to do the job of being the side's fourth and fifth bowler. "Ashwin has taken retirement, so two spinners, I don't think they will play in Melbourne. So, how will you strengthen the bowling? Because the three seamers are very good, but their supporting role, fourth and fifth seamer, Nitesh Kumar is the fourth seamer and Ravindra Jadeja is the fifth bowler. If you add both of them together, the bowling is not that good. "We will have to think about that, because if you want to win a Test match, then you have to take 20 wickets, and the ability to take 20



wickets is not that good, the supporting role of the other bowlers is not good, so we will have to improve that as soon as possible, and how that will be, I don't know, but that is a big question." With the exception of opener KL Rahul, the top-order batting has also been a big letdown so far in the series, and Pujara said it has got to do a lot with their inability to see off Mitchell Starc's initial spells with the new ball. "He has been the best bowler for them in this series. And the way Mitchell Starc has played in the last 1-1.5 years, he has brought a lot of improvement. And he has a lot of ability. "If I talk about my personal experience, when he used to play in the last series in 2018 or 2021, I used to feel that if he plays against me, I will get runs. "And now, it feels like he will take wickets. So what is the difference? The difference is that his line length, his accuracy has increased a lot. He is bowling very less loose deliveries. He is playing on the

stump. Every ball is hitting on the good length spot. He is getting swing." Starc has so far taken 14 wickets in the series, the most by an Australian bowler and only behind Bumrah across two teams. Pujara observed, "The change he has brought in his game has made him a different player. And he is looking more dangerous than Cummins and Hazlewood. So we will have to take care of his game, especially from the new games. "In the first five overs, his first spell, he has taken the most wickets there. So if there is a good batting in the first five overs, bring him for the second or third spell. Because he gets tired. So the batting of the top order so far, our top order has never played in the third or fourth spell. "The ones who have played are the lower middle order and the tail enders. And there we saw that when Bumrah and Akash were batting, when Mitchell Starc was bowling, he was not that effective. So they will have to play their new game well."