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**INSIDE**

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

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

## AQI under 400, Grap-III invoked in Delhi NCR

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

### WEATHER

AQI	369
MAX	20.8°C
MIN	9.9°C

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

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

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

## Rupee at fresh record low of 85.20 against US dollar

PTI ■ MUMBAI

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

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



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

## Former Home Secy Bhalla is new Manipur Gov

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

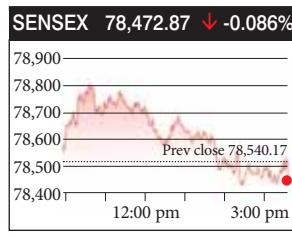
In a major reshuffle, former Union Home Secretary Ajay Kumar Bhalla has been appointed as Manipur Governor amid ongoing trouble in the north eastern State. Some of the other States where change was effected according to a Rashtrapati Bhawan communique includes former Union Minister and army chief Vijay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

## MERRY CHRISTMAS



Park street, Kolkata all decked up for Christmas eve  
PTI

## MARKETS



## LoPs record dissent over NHRC postings

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

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

## Dalit boy dies by suicide after being forced to drink urine

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ LUCKNOW

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

## Delhi Police bust gang settling illegal migrants, 11 arrested

SAUMYA SHUKLA ■ NEW DELHI



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

Rs 7, Aadhaar operators and tech experts. A woman in the intervening night of October 20 and 21 came to Sangam Vihar police station to report that her husband, Santu Sheikh alias Raja, has been murdered which led to the police tracking down four people involved in his murder and subsequently busting the gang. The Bangladeshi nationals, 26 years old Midul Miyan alias Akash Ahmed and 24 years old Fardeen Ahmed alias Abhi Ahmed along with their wives, were arrested and interrogated in connection with the murder of Santu Sheikh alias Raja. Among the motives behind the murder, Raja used to push the wives of the accused into prostitution and also tried to make physical relations with

them while also bullying them for minor issues. They all lived in close proximity. "However, the police learnt during interrogation that these accused had entered India illegally and had been residing in Sangam Vihar for several years," Deputy Commissioner of Police (South) Ankit Chauhan said. They were found in possession of Bangladeshi ID cards (chip-based NID cards) and birth certificates. Around 21 Aadhaar cards, four voter ID cards, and eight PAN cards were also recovered from the victim's residence. Chauhan said, "Under the guidance of Hon'ble Lieutenant Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena, we formed a team to unearth the entire matter and conduct a thorough probe into the illegal immigration issue." These immigrants came to India through the jungle route and then took bikes and taxis to reach the nearest town from where they took AC trains to travel to Delhi, he said. Further questioning of the accused led to the arrest of 26 year old Sahil Sehgal who ran a 'Poonam Online Computer Centre' in Rohini Sector 5.

## Accident in Poonch: Five soldiers killed

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ JAMMU

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

## Jump in Maharashtra voter turnout normal: EC issues FAQs

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

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



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

## Cattle shelters along highways: Unique solution to a perennial problem

DEEPAK KUMAR JHA ■ NEW DELHI

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

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



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

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

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

# 5000 bed Medicity on anvil at 200 acre land in Nava Raipur

**STAFF REPORTER ■ RAIPUR**

The Chhattisgarh government has decided to develop a 5,000-bed Medicity in a 200-acre land at Nava Raipur. A government official said the move aims to develop Medicity for medical tourism and to give it an international identity. Land has been earmarked in Sector 37 of Nava Raipur and the project would be executed with private sector participation. The project is proposed to be linked with the Medicity Scheme of the Union government.



Recently, the Nava Raipur Development Authority held an initial meeting with the Union government's Infratech Services to establish the Medicity in Chhattisgarh. Several multispecialty hospitals, medical college, hotel, diagnostic centres, hotels and boarding facilities would be developed in the project, the official said.

**The move aims to develop Medicity for medical tourism and to give it an international identity.**

# National Vanvasi Sports Competition from Dec 27

**STAFF REPORTER ■ RAIPUR**

The All India Vanvasi (Forest Dweller) Sports Competition will be held at the Science College ground in Raipur district from December 27 to 31. Chief Minister Vishnu Deo Sai released the poster on Tuesday. Forest Minister Kedhar Kashyap and Health Minister Shyam Bihari Jaiswal were present. As many as 800 players from across India and Nepal will participate. Sai said the initiative



was a huge step towards the upliftment of the forest dweller community as it will give them a great opportunity to hone their talents.

**As many as 800 players from across India and Nepal will participate**

## Woman with cancerous tumour stuck to heart gets new life



**STAFF REPORTER ■ RAIPUR**

A 52-year-old woman suffering from a five-kilo cancerous tumour lodged to her heart and lungs has received a fresh lease of life after it was removed through a complex surgery. An official communique said on Tuesday that a team led by Dr. Krishna Kant Sahu and Dr. Ashutosh Gupta performed the procedure at the Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar Memorial Hospital in Raipur. Dr. Sahu said the patient came into the hospital complaining about having difficulty in breathing. Her condition was

so severe that she had to be kept on a high-pressure (bipap) ventilator. Tests revealed a giant tumour inside her chest and stuck to the heart, he said. It posed a significant threat of damaging vital organs as it had pressed the heart and slightly dislodged it. The lungs and the windpipe were also under pressure, he said. They kept the heart-lung machine on standby during the operation. The tumour was successfully removed and the patient is in the care of the cancer department. They discovered that it was a very rare and dangerous type of tumour called sarcoma after conducting a biopsy.

## Employee among three held for theft in Jain temple

**STAFF REPORTER ■ RAIPUR**

Chhattisgarh Police on Tuesday arrested a 27-year-old employee and two of his family members here for stealing gold and silver ornaments and utensils valued at Rs 15 lakh from a Digambar Jain temple. Sudeep Mali, his brother Sagar (25) and mother Sushma (48) were from Madhya Pradesh, Raipur Senior Superintendent of Police Lal Umed Singh said. A temple official, Rasu Jain, on Sunday lodged a theft case. The police detained Sudeep Mali who confessed to committing the crime. He named his brother and mother. The police seized 9 kalash, 8 ashtprathari, five plates, five panchmeru, four platters (thali), a globular water bottle (lota), a chhatra, a pot for water storage, a spoon, all made of silver, as well as a gold kalash valued at Rs 15 lakh from them.

## Patwari among two held for accepting bribe



**STAFF REPORTER ■ RAIPUR**

The Anti-Corruption Bureau on Tuesday arrested two persons including a village revenue officer in Durg district in Chhattisgarh for accepting Rs 20,000 as bribe. Patwari Chinmay Agrawal in Surpa village and kotwar Bhusan Lal were caught red handed while accepting the money, ACB Additional Superintendent of Police Chandresh Thakur said. Agrawal sought the bribe for providing a loan book after the complainant sold a farm land. After a complaint to the ACB, the two were nabbed.

## HNLU to hold international conference on Constitution@75



**STAFF REPORTER ■ RAIPUR**

The Hidayatullah National Law University (HNLU), Raipur, is organizing a two-day conference on "Constitution@75: Evolving Text, Context and Transformations - Rights, Governance and Technology in Focus" to mark 75 years of the Indian constitution. A communiqué said the event, on January 25-26, aims to create a platform for scholars, academics, legal practitioners and policymakers to engage in enriching discussions on the transformative journey of the constitution and its relevance in addressing contemporary challenges. The conference will feature insightful addresses, parallel technical sessions and a special Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Memorial Lecture, focusing on the constitution's text, its dynamic interpretations and its response to issues such as governance, rights and technological advancements.



School children in Chhattisgarh's Korea district presented an impressive street drama on Tuesday to educate people about the dangers of child marriage.

## Covid infection does not worsen multiple sclerosis symptoms: Study

**AGENCIES ■**

A Covid-19 infection does not worsen symptoms or disability in people with multiple sclerosis (MS), according to a study. Multiple sclerosis (MS) is a chronic disease that affects the central nervous system (CNS) and is caused by an autoimmune attack on the body's healthy cells. Researchers from the University of Texas's Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas conducted the study on 2,132 adults with MS with an average age of 65. They were followed over 18 months. While infections are known to cause disability among people with MS, the results published in the online issue of the Neurology journal, showed that "for Covid-19 infections specifically, this was not true." "This is good news for people with MS, that they do not need to worry about long-term worsening of their MS symptoms after a Covid-19 infection," said Amber Salter, from the varsity, and a member of the American Academy of Neurology. In the study, a total of 796 people reported having a Covid infection, and 1,336 people reported never



having Covid. During the study, participants also reported the severity of their MS symptoms and were asked about walking, hand function, bodily pain, fatigue, memory, and thinking. Participants also reported their level of disability based on how their condition affects daily activities like walking or standing. The findings showed that for people with and without Covid, MS symptom severity increased

**MOTILAL OSWAL HOME LOANS**

**POSSESSION NOTICE (FOR IMMOVABLE PROPERTY/IES)**  
(UNDER RULE 8 (1) OF THE SECURITY INTEREST (ENFORCEMENT) RULES, 2002)

Whereas the undersigned being the authorized officer of Motilal Oswal Home Finance Limited, (Formerly known as Aspire Home Finance Corporation Ltd, under Securitization and Reconstruction of Financial Assets and Enforcement of Security Interest Act, 2002 (S4 of 2002), and in exercise of powers conferred under Section 13 (12) read with Rule 3 of the Security Interest (Enforcement) Rules, 2002 issued Demand Notice dated mentioned hereunder calling upon the following borrowers to repay the amount mentioned in the notice being also mentioned hereunder within 60 days from the date of receipt of the said notice.

Sr No.	Loan Agreement No. / Name Of The Borrower / Co Borrower/Guarantor	Date of Demand Notice & Outstanding	Date Of Possession Taken	Description Of The Immovable Property
1	LXDUR00417-180065960 / Jeetu Ram Vishwakarma / Ganeshyabai Jeetu Ram Vishwakarma	20-12-2021 For Rs.807772/-	20-12-2024	Kh No. - 764 / 08, Ph. No. - 38, Sukul Dehan Road, Rajnandgaon, Chhattisgarh- 491441

The borrower in particular and the public in general are hereby cautioned not to deal with the property and any dealings with the property will be subject to the charge of Motilal Oswal Home Finance Limited for an amount mentioned herein above and interest thereon. The borrower's attention is invited to provisions of sub-section (8) of section 13 of the Act, in respect of time available, to redeem the secured assets.

**Authorized Officer (Motilal Oswal Home Finance Limited)**

**IDFC FIRST Bank Limited**  
(erstwhile Capital First Limited, amalgamated with IDFC Bank Limited and presently known as IDFC First Bank Limited) | CIN : L65110TN2014PLC097792  
Registered Office: - KRM Towers, 8th Floor, Harrington Road, Chetpet, Chennai- 600031.  
Tel : +91 44 4564 4000 | Fax: +91 44 4564 4022

**NOTICE UNDER SECTION 13 (2) OF THE SECURITIZATION AND RECONSTRUCTION OF FINANCIAL ASSETS AND ENFORCEMENT OF SECURITY INTEREST ACT, 2002**

The following borrowers and co-borrowers availed the below mentioned secured loans from IDFC FIRST Bank Limited (erstwhile Capital First Limited, amalgamated with IDFC Bank Limited and presently known as IDFC First Bank Limited) The loans of the below-mentioned borrowers and co-borrowers have been secured by the mortgage of their respective properties. As they have failed to adhere to the terms and conditions of the respective loan agreements and had become irregular, their loan were classified as NPA as per the RBI guidelines. Amounts due by them to IDFC FIRST Bank Limited (erstwhile Capital First Limited, amalgamated with IDFC Bank Limited and presently known as IDFC First Bank Limited) are mentioned as per respective notices issued more particularly described in the following table and further interest on the said amounts shall also be applicable and the same will be charged as per contractual rate with effect from their respective dates.

Sr No.	Loan Account No.	Type of Loan	Name of borrowers and co-borrowers	Section 13 (2) Notice Date	Outstanding amount as per Section 13 (2) Notice
1	58114993 & 32829835	Loan Against Property	1. Anand Kumar Gadheval 2. Dashvanti Goyl	11.12.2024	INR 9,73,182.37/-

**Property Address :** All That Piece And Parcel Of Land Area 1088 Sq. Ft. Part Of Khasra No 6/3, Situated At Gram: Birejhar, P.H.No. 33, New P.H.No. 61, R.I.C.-Rajnandgaon-2, Tahsil & District: Rajnandgaon, Chhattisgarh- 491441, And Bounded As: East : Land Of Other, West : Land Of Kalu, North : Land Of Lалу, South : Road

You are hereby called upon to pay the amounts to IDFC FIRST Bank Limited (erstwhile Capital First Limited, amalgamated with IDFC Bank Limited and presently known as IDFC First Bank Limited) as per the details shown in the above table with contracted rate of interest thereupon from their respective dates and other costs, charges etc., within 60 days from the date of this publication, failing which the undersigned shall be constrained to initiate proceedings, under Section 13 (4) and section 14 of the SARFAESI Act, against the mortgaged properties mentioned hereinabove to realize the amount due to IDFC FIRST Bank Limited (erstwhile Capital First Limited, amalgamated with IDFC Bank Limited and presently known as IDFC First Bank Limited). Further you are prohibited under Section 13 (13) of the said Act from transferring the said secured assets either by way of sale/lease or otherwise.

**Authorized Officer IDFC First Bank Limited (erstwhile Capital First Limited, amalgamated with IDFC Bank Limited and presently known as IDFC First Bank Limited)**

Date : 25.12.2024  
Place : Chhattisgarh

**छत्तीसगढ़ शासन जल संसाधन विभाग**  
कार्यालय कार्यालयन अभियंता, वि. / यां. ला. न. नलकूप एवं गेट संभाग सकरी, बिलासपुर (छ.ग.)

**eProcurement Portal: <https://eproc.cgstate.gov.in>**  
(प्रथम-आनत्रण)  
सिस्टम निविदा क्र. 163215/निविदा सूचना क्र. 05/व.ले.लि./2024-25  
दिनांक. 23.12.2024

निम्नलिखित कार्यों के लिए दिनांक 14.01.2025 17:30 तक ऑन लाईन निविदाएं आमंत्रित की जाती हैं। कार्य का नाम- जानगी-चापा जिले के विकासखण्ड बलौदा अंतर्गत कुदरी बैराज योजना के वि/या उपकरणों का पेंटिंग कार्य। अनुमानित लागत - रु. 197.51 लाख (निविदा की अनुमानित लागत एस.ओ.आर. दिनांक 22.08.2022 के आधार पर) अन्य विवरण एवं विस्तृत निविदा छत्तीसगढ़ शासन की ई-प्रोक्वोरमेंट वेबसाइट <https://eproc.cgstate.gov.in> पर दिनांक 30.12.2024 समय 17.31 बजे से देखे तथा डाउनलोड किये जा सकते हैं। नोट: 1. निविदा में माग लेने हेतु ठेकेदारों को ई-प्रोक्वोरमेंट वेबसाइट <https://eproc.cgstate.gov.in> पर नामांकित / पंजीयन तथा लोक निर्माण विभाग की एकीकृत पंजीयन प्रणाली के अंतर्गत ठेकेदार को उपयुक्त श्रेणी में पंजीयन कराना अनिवार्य है। 2. निविदाकार को इस निविदा में वर्ष 2024 में जारी किए गये Pre Bid Qualification certificate (Valid up to 30.09.2025) का उपयोग अनिवार्य है। 3. निविदा पूर्व अर्हता के संबंध में निविदा प्रपत्र के पृष्ठ क्र. 13 एवं 26 में वर्णित अनुसार प्रमाण पत्र संलग्न करें।

कार्यालयन अभियंता  
वि. / यां. ला. न. नलकूप एवं गेट संभाग सकरी, बिलासपुर (छ.ग.)

G-242504804/4

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

**Tender Notice (1 Call)**

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

NIT No. System Tender No.	Name of Work	Probable amount of contract
1	2	3
194/163015	Hygiene Maintenance And House Keeping Work at Transit Hostel Sector-30, Atal Nagar, Nawa Raipur (C.G.)	Rs. 34.71 Lakh

Last date of tender Download Date up to 09.01.2025 Time 17:30 PM  
Note: All eligible interested contracTors are mandated to get enrolled on the e Procurement portal (<https://eproc.cgstate.gov.in>) in order to download the tender documents and participate in the subsequent bidding process.

**Superintending Engineer P.W.D. Raipur Circle Raipur (CG)**

G-242504827/3

**कार्यालय कार्यालयन अभियंता, खारंग जल संसाधन संभाग, बिलासपुर (छ.ग.)**  
कार्यालयीन आदेश

आदेश क्रमांक/व.ले.लि./2024-25 बिलासपुर, दिनांक....

निविदा सूचना क्र. 10/व.ले. लि./2024-25 दिनांक 16.10.2024 निविदा सिस्टम क्र. 159986 (प्रथम आनत्रण) राशि रूपये 73.38 लाख को ठेकेदार द्वारा अनुबंध नवी करने के कारण निविदा निरस्त किया जाता है।

विज्ञापन क्र.जी 242503280 दिनांक 19.10.2024 कार्यालयन अभियंता खारंग जल संसाधन संभाग, बिलासपुर (छ.ग.)

G-242504814/2





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

PTI ■ BHOPAL

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ LUCKNOW

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



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

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

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

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ LUCKNOW

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



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

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

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

MOHIT KANDHARI ■ JAMMU

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



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

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

## Christmas Carols go silent in Kerala

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■ KOCHI

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



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

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

in the State? The BJP has included many influential Christians in the party and talks are underway with the spiritual leaders of the church. Last day we saw Prime Minister Modi visiting a Church in the national capital and holding discussions with the cardinals," said Prof Sebastian.

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

## Rajnath attends inaugural ceremony of 'Atal Yuva Mahakumbh'

PTI ■ LUCKNOW

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



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

ED attaches Dawood's brother related property in Mumbai

## ED attaches Dawood's brother related property in Mumbai

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ MUMBAI

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

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



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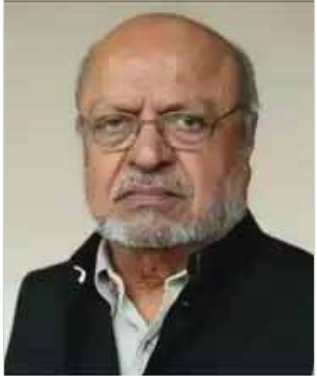
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PAPER WITH PASSION

## Adieu Shyam Benegal

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

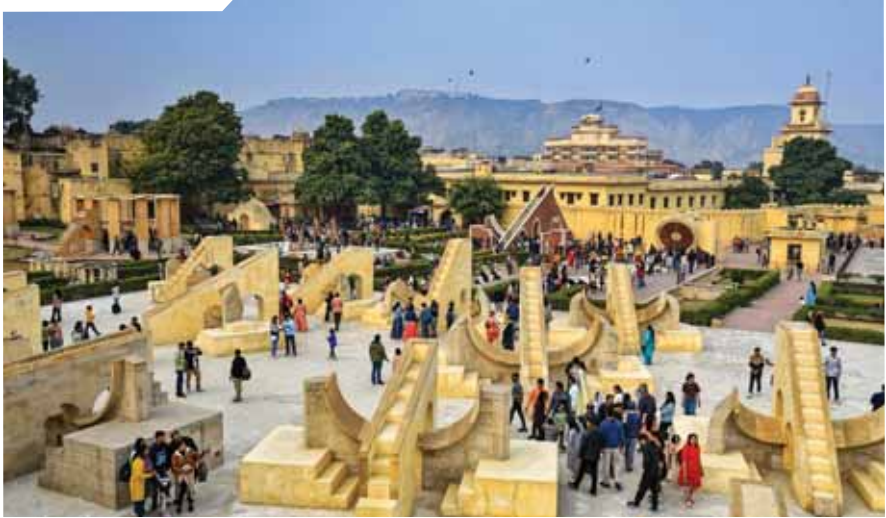
The curtains have fallen on one of the most illustrious chapters in Indian cinema. Shyam Benegal, the pioneering filmmaker who redefined storytelling in Indian cinema, passed away at the age of 90 on December 23, 2024. He succumbed to chronic kidney disease at Wockhardt Hospital in Bombay Central. Known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



His films gave voice to the marginalised and explored themes of gender, class struggles, and rural India, bringing to light the unseen facets of Indian society. 'Nishant', a harrowing tale of oppression and resistance, and 'Manthan', inspired by Dr. Verghese Kurien's milk cooperative movement, became cult classics. The latter, crowdfunded by 500,000 farmers, stands as a testament to Benegal's ability to connect with grassroots realities. The film, India's official entry for the 1976 Academy Awards, exemplified his commitment to blending art with advocacy. Benegal's films also

became a platform for some of India's finest acting talents. Actors like Shabana Azmi, Naseeruddin Shah, Smita Patil, and Om Puri found their early footing in his films. Azmi, who debuted in Benegal's 'Ankur', recently shared a poignant moment from his 90th birthday celebrations, underscoring the indelible bond they shared. His collaboration with screenwriter Vijay Tendulkar produced narratives that were both poignant and thought-provoking, winning multiple National Awards. From 'Junoon' to 'Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose: The Forgotten Hero', Benegal's oeuvre showcased an unmatched versatility, spanning historical dramas, rural sagas, and contemporary commentaries. Earlier this year, 'Manthan' was restored and screened at the Cannes Film Festival under the Cannes Classics segment, reiterating the timeless relevance of Benegal's vision. Despite his declining health, the event underscored his enduring influence on global cinema. Benegal's storytelling was never confined to entertainment. His films were instruments of change, questioning societal norms and sparking dialogues. His pioneering approach laid the foundation for generations of filmmakers who sought to marry art with social responsibility. Rest in peace, Shyam Benegal, the maestro who showed us the soul of India through his lens.

### PICTALK



Tourists visit the historical Jantar Mantar, in Jaipur

# India recalibrates Myanmar strategy

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



ASHOK K MEHTA

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

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

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

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



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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

#### STRENGTHENING INDIA-KUWAIT TIES

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

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

Ramesh G Jethwani | Bengaluru

#### PV Sindhu marries Venkata Datta Sai



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

in the lake city of Rajasthan at the exclusive and majestic Raffles Udaipur Resort. Pre-wedding festivities included sangeet, haldi, and mehendi ceremonies. The families, long-time acquaintances, planned the wedding swiftly to accommodate Sindhu's training schedule. Union Minister Gajendra Singh Shekhawat (shockingly, he was wearing a black kurta in an auspicious ceremony, even as a Hindu party leader) shared a captivating photo of the couple, offering his blessings. Now the reception is scheduled in Sindhu's native city, Hyderabad, on December 24. Congratulations to the darling daughter of Mother India, P. V. Sindhu, and her husband, Venkata Datta Sai. Best wishes to the newlyweds for a wonderful & eternal married life. Whatsoever, the first image of the wedding has already captivated hearts, setting the tone for the couple's happily ever after.

Bidyut Kumar Chatterjee | Faridabad

#### POPCORN PRICING DEBATE

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

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

RK Jain | Barwani

#### TRIBES PROTECT NATURE

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

Anthony Henriques | Mumbai

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

## Across cultures and ages: The beauty of unexpected friendships

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

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



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

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

Friendships formed in middle age are special not despite our life experiences, but because of them. We bring to these connections a deeper sense of self-awareness, empathy, and appreciation. There's no rush to impress or to conform. The pressures of youthful identity-building are gone. In their place, we find sincerity, authenticity, and the willingness to value people for who they truly are. They remind us of the universality of human warmth and curiosity. Meeting someone from another country - someone whose life, traditions, and language are different - can feel like discovering an entirely new world. And when such encounters lead to genuine friendship, they break down the invisible walls that geography and culture often build around us. There is also a profound joy

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

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

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



ASHA KUMAR IYER

## FIRST COLUMN

## THE ETERNAL WISDOM OF SUNDAR KAND

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



RAVI VALLURI

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

## Atal ji: The statesman with vision and resolve



NARENDRA MODI

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



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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Dreaming of a White Christmas in New York City

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

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

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



SHREYA DAYAL

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

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

**The Magic of NYC's Holiday Icons**

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

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

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

**The Broadway Moment That Changed Everything**

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



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

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

**Coming Full Circle**

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

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

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

**The Spirit of a NYC Christmas**

There's something timeless

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

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

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

# No justification in US curbs on Pak firms, says Shehbaz

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

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

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

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

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

PTI ■ LAHORE

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

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

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

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

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

AP ■ UNITED NATIONS

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

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

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

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

# Hong Kong police issue arrest warrants, bounties for six activists

AP ■ HONG KONG

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

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

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

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

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

PTI ■ LONDON

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



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

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

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



People celebrate with Christmas decorations in Haifa, Israel.

AP/PTI

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

THE CONVERSATION ■ QUEENSLAND

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

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



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

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

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

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

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











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