

Disengagement complete at LAC

RAHUL DATTA ■ NEW DELHI

A troop disengagement process at two friction points in Depsang Valley and Demchok at the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in eastern Ladakh is complete. Patrolling by India and China will commence soon as agreed upon between the two countries. The two sides will exchange sweets on Thursday on the occasion of Diwali. Giving this information here on Wednesday, sources said the local commanders of the level of Brigadier from both the sides will continue their talks. The two officials will decide on patrolling modalities in the two areas, they said. India on October 21 announced that the two countries have reached an agreement on patrolling. Sources said that verification post-disengagement is in progress and patrolling modalities are to be decided



REPRESENTATIVE IMAGE

between ground commanders. On October 25, sources here said the disengagement process was likely to get completed by October 28-29. The agreement framework was signed first at the diplomatic level and then military-level talks took

place, they had said, adding the nitty-gritty of the agreement was worked on during the Corps Commander-level talks which was signed last week. Adhering to agreements between the two sides, Indian troops then began to pull back equipment to

rear locations in these areas. The process follows the agreement firmed up between the two countries on patrolling and disengagement of troops along the LAC in eastern Ladakh, a major breakthrough to end the over four-year standoff.

Ties between the two Asian countries had nosedived following a fierce clash in the Galwan Valley in June 2020 that marked the most serious military conflict between the two sides in decades. Sources earlier said the areas and patrolling status were expected to be moved back to pre-April 2020 level. Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri on October 21 had said in New Delhi the agreement was finalised following negotiations over the past several weeks and that it would lead to a resolution of the issues that arose in 2020. On October 23, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping endorsed the agreement on patrolling and disengagement along the LAC in eastern Ladakh during their bilateral meeting on the sidelines of the BRICS Summit in Kazan in Russia.

Continued on page 8



A top view of the banks of the Saryu River during 'Deepotsav 2024' on the eve of the 'Diwali' festival, in Ayodhya. PTI

Kashi, Mathura must also shine like Ayodhya: CM

PTI ■ AYODHYA

Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on Wednesday said the transformation of Ayodhya is proof of "double-engine government delivering on its promise" and asserted that a similar transformation must also happen in Kashi and Mathura. Participating in the eighth edition of Deepotsav here - the first since the consecration of Ram temple on January 22, Adityanath said, "This is a historic first as after 500 years, Lord Ram is now in his abode in Ayodhya for Diwali." "This is just the beginning and this beginning has to reach its logical conclusion. So by 2047, when the country celebrates 100 years of its independence, Kashi and Mathura must also shine like Ayodhya," he said.

"The double engine government has delivered on its promise (construction of Ram temple) and now is the turn of Ayodhya to prove itself. Remember, this 'agnipariksha' of Maa Sita should not happen again and again. "We have to come out of this (bane)... People of Ayodhya must come forward once again (for this). This is why we are here today for this grand celebration," the CM said in his address while hitting out at the opposition for "becoming barriers" in the government's growth agenda. "Just like mafias, these barriers would also be eliminated," he said. His 'agnipariksha' remark, made in a choked voice, was interpreted as an appeal to the people of Ayodhya to ensure that the surprising defeat of BJP

Continued on page 8



Why did Punjab cops give 'studio' to Lawrence?

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ CHANDIGARH

In a scathing remark, the Punjab and Haryana High Court said that police officers in Punjab provided a studio-like facility to gangster Lawrence Bishnoi to facilitate his interview with a news channel. A Bench of Justices Anupinder Singh Grewal and Lapita Banerji made the remark while hearing a suo motu matter related to inmates' use of mobile phones within jail premises. The High Court ordered further probe, rejecting the report of the Special Investigation Team (SIT) and directed the Director General of Police (DGP) to file an affidavit in this regard. "The police officers allowed the criminal to use electronic devices and provided a studio like facility to conduct the interview which tends to glorify crime with the potential to facilitate other crimes including extortion by the criminal and his associates. Involvement of the police officers may suggest receipt of illegal gratification from the criminal or his associates and constitute offences under Prevention of Corruption Act. Therefore, the case requires further investigation," the Court said in an order dated October 28. The Bench made the remarks while questioning the SIT's decision to file a cancellation report in a case related to the interview given by Bishnoi.

Continued on page 8

Rash and drunk drivers may lose their licences soon

SAUMYA SHUKLA ■ NEW DELHI

In a bid to tackle problems regarding road safety and discourage habitual offenders, the Delhi Traffic Police has written to the Secretary of the Delhi Transport Department to cancel the driving licences of owners of vehicles, which have had three violations relating to dangerous driving and drink and driving or more than five relating to normal challans.

This comes in the light of a recently released Delhi road crash report of 2023, which revealed that a pedestrian or



a motorist travelling on the roads of the National Capital are among the most prone to road fatalities as data reveals

that they constitute 43 and 38 per cent of such casualties respectively. "In 2023, 622 pedestrians died in 618 fatal crashes caused by all types of vehicles as compared to 629 pedestrian deaths in 2022. The maximum pedestrian casualties were caused due to car, jeep and taxis which have increased to 76 this year compared to 69 in 2022," the report read. It also revealed that two-wheeler riders have emerged as second most fatal crash-prone victims. "The above figure shows 538 fatal crashes of two-wheelers in 2023 as compared to 539 in

2022. These two-wheelers were the worst hit by Heavy Vehicles (HTVs) (89 followed by Car/JEEP/Taxis (66) in 2023," it stated. According to the report, prepared by the traffic police and released by Delhi Police Commissioner Sanjay Arora, the number of deaths in road crashes has however decreased from 1,264 in 2022 to 1,257 in 2023 despite the increase in the number of vehicle registrations. Moreover, the number of drivers booked under traffic violation has increased from 4,38,052 in 2022 to 6,39,097 in the Year 2023.

Continued on page 8

Delhi's 'Anywhere Registration Policy' will end touts' careers!

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

The Delhi government has approved a policy titled 'Anywhere Registration Policy', with this the sale and purchase of properties in the National Capital can be registered at any sub-registrar's office. The move will help the thousands who have to visit Sub-Registrar Offices, at different locations, and is also aimed at curbing corruption and harassment. Under the policy, buyers can now take an online appointment at any of the 22 Sub-Registrar Offices, across the National Capital for their property registration. They do not have to physically visit any sub registrar office to register the sale/purchase deed of their properties. The policy will save people from long queues for property registration, thus promoting transparency to help



curb corruption. Traditionally, to buy or sell property in Delhi, people need to visit a designated Sub-Registrar Office. Whether it's a property transaction or registering the property through other means, one has to go to the Sub-Registrar Office. However, this process often led to challenges, including

long waiting lines and delays in booking appointments at certain offices, while others remained underutilised. All Sub-Registrars in Delhi will now function as joint sub-registrars and their jurisdiction will cover the entirety of Delhi. The new registration software, National Generic Document Registration System, now allows people to upload the necessary documents required for the registration of sale deeds, power of attorney and wills from the comfort of their homes, make payment and take appointments at the sub-registrar office to complete the remaining formalities. "So, anyone residing in Delhi can make an online appointment for property registration at any of the 22 Sub-Registrar Offices in Delhi," said a sub registrar

Continued on page 8

SIT to probe tusker deaths

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ UMARIA (MADHYA PRADESH)

Three more elephants have died in the Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve (BTR) in Madhya Pradesh's Umaria district, taking the toll to seven, while the condition of three other tuskers was serious, a forest official said on Wednesday. Madhya Pradesh's Forest Minister Ramniwas Rawat has ordered a probe by a Special Investigation Team (SIT) into the death of the tuskers and asked officials to ensure strict action against culprits. According to BTR's deputy director Prakash Kumar Verma, prime facie, the elephants seemed to have died after consuming Kodo millet, but the exact cause

will be known after the autopsy. Four wild elephants were found dead in the BTR on Tuesday while four others, part of the same herd of 13 tuskers, were found ill during routine patrolling, officials earlier said. Verma on Wednesday said so far seven elephants have died. They were part of the herd of 13 pachyderms, he informed. The condition of three other jumbos was serious and they were being treated, while the BTR teams were monitoring the movement of remaining elephants that were part of the herd, he said.

Continued on page 8

Bomb Threat Assessment Committee set up

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

Amid the multiple hoax bomb threat messages to airlines, the Ministry of Civil Aviation, along with security agencies, has come up with new protocols and guidelines to evaluate bomb threats on Indian airlines, especially those emerging via pseudonymous social media accounts. The guidelines are structured to more effectively distinguish between credible threats and hoaxes. As per the new protocols, the Bomb Threat Assessment Committee (BTAC) will establish the identity of the person or organisation making the threat, check their credentials to see if they belong to a terrorist or proscribed outfit, and ascertain the motive and specific socio-economic and political situation within the country or around the globe that could be linked to the threat.

Continued on page 8



When brake lights lit up peak traffic chaos

Serpentine snarls were witnessed across the National Capital on Diwali eve

BY SAUMYA SHUKLA

The festival of lights is here, and for thousands of commuters it also means the brake lights of the scores of vehicles in front of them. It was difficult to enumerate the number and location of these serpentine traffic snarls that were witnessed across the National Capital on the eve of Diwali. The roads were jammed, the pavements had been taken over as shops set up display counters outside, and inside buyers stood six rows deep waiting for their turns. Many others made a beeline for malls, to grab just the perfect gifts to make the festival of lights a memorable affair for their loved ones, creating significant delays and inconvenience to commuters. Even as traffic police made arrangements to minimise inconvenience to commuters, social media was rife with tales of commuting woes. Videos on social media showed long lines of vehicles stuck in traffic in Laxmi Nagar, Chirag Dilli, Kashmiri Gate, Kamla Nagar, Lajpat Nagar, Sarojini Market, Karol Bagh, Sarai Kale Khan and several other parts of Delhi.

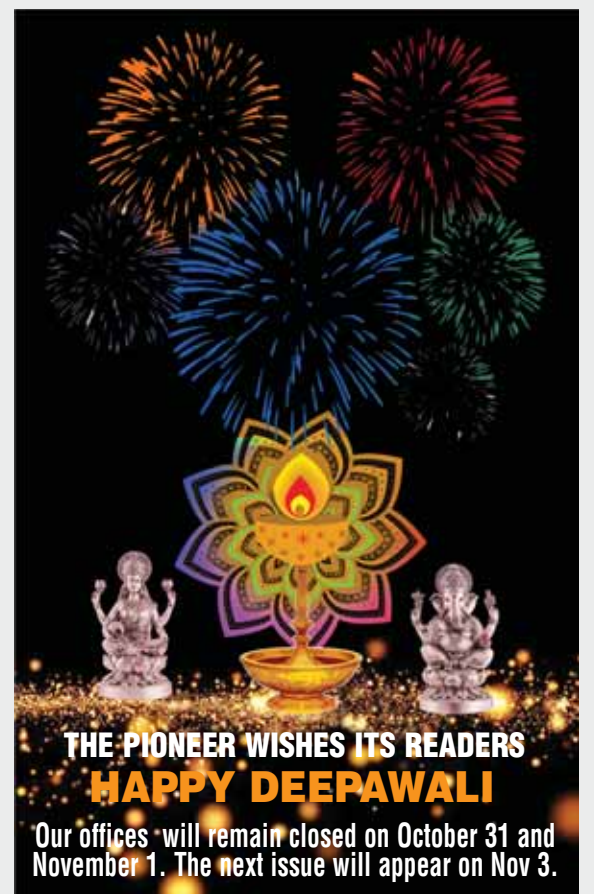


Expressing frustration over the significant jams against the Delhi Traffic Police, a commuter said, "Please deploy your teams on the roads. There is not a single traffic police available on roads in Delhi despite heavy festive rush. From Sheikh Sarai flyover to Moolchand flyover, traffic is choked." Another commuter travelling around the Laxmi Nagar area said, "Delhi is experiencing

significant traffic congestion due to the festive season, causing delays for commuters. A big reason has also been the mismanagement of traffic despite authorities knowing well in advance that such a situation will arise." The other massive congestion reported at Dhaula Kuan, Khajuri Khas, Model Town, Sadar Bazar, Rohtak Road, Kishan Ganj,

Chandni Chowk, Connaught Place, Mangolpuri, Rajouri Garden and Najafgarh. "Nangloi-Najafgarh road is seeing very heavy traffic and no traffic police are available here. I am stuck for the last hour. Should we enjoy Diwali by sitting in our cars?" Commuters took to X saying the traffic was heavy at several places including Badarpur flyover, CV Raman Marg, Punjabi Bagh,

Mehrauli Badarpur Road, Taimur Nagar-Maharani Bagh Road, Ashram and Yamuna Vihar. This situation remains despite the Delhi Police saying that they have made elaborate arrangements for smooth flow of traffic. A senior traffic police officer said they have intensified checking on the road. "We have deployed personnel on bikes to check the encroachment on busy roads which could lead to traffic congestion in the area. People who are coming to the markets are also informed that they should park their vehicles at designated places," it said. "The personnel have loud speakers on their bikes to make the flow of traffic smooth. Non-destined vehicles are not being allowed to enter the national capital. Continuous anti-encroachment drives are also being carried out in the crowded places," the officer said. In view of the festive season, the Delhi Metro also stated that it will introduce additional 60 trips on Tuesday and Wednesday in a bid to enhance commuter convenience and ease congestion. There are around 4,000 daily Metro trips.



THE PIONEER WISHES ITS READERS HAPPY DEEPAWALI

Our offices will remain closed on October 31 and November 1. The next issue will appear on Nov 3.

Ayodhya celebrates 'return' of Treta Yuga with Deepotsav

PNS ■ AYODHYA

This year's Deepotsav transformed into a historic celebration, filling Ayodhya with an unparalleled spirit. Following the enthronement of Ram Lalla in the grand temple, the festival sparked a profound enthusiasm among saints and devotees. Ayodhya's saint community expressed profound joy, describing this Deepotsav as a unique and momentous occasion, realised after a long 500-year wait. Mahant Bindu Gadyacharya Swami Devendra Prasadacharya of Ayodhya's Dashrath Mahal described Deepotsav as a heritage of Sanatan dharma. He said, "Deepawali and Deepotsav form the foundation of Sanatan dharma, and this year's Deepotsav is particularly special as Lord Shri Ram has returned to his abode in Ayodhya. This celebration offers a unique opportunity to express our faith and devotion to Lord Shri Ram. The saints feel that Ayodhya once again mirrors the scene from Treta Yuga, when Shri Ram first arrived in the city." The saint community voiced their appreciation for the Yogi Adityanath government,

attributing the divine occasion of Ram Lalla's consecration to the government's dedicated efforts. According to them, the government has successfully revived Ayodhya's religious and cultural heritage, filling the entire saint community with joy. Mahant Brijmohan Das Maharaj of Chaubhuj temple conveyed his emotions through self-composed verses, expressing that the pride in Ram Lalla's presence is shared not only by the saints, but by all of Ayodhya. The people are celebrating this Deepotsav with immense enthusiasm, united in their reverence, he added. Mahant Rajiv Lochan Sharan Maharaj of Badhaai Bhawan temple said, "The divine scene witnessed on Lord Ram's arrival in Ayodhya during Treta Yuga has reappeared before us today. We saints are overjoyed to witness this historic moment and are participating in Deepotsav with profound enthusiasm." Through the combined efforts of the Sant Samaj, devotees, and the government, Deepotsav is not only a religious festival but a message of Ayodhya's divinity and faith to the world. The devotion and

spirit of the saints infuse this historic Deepotsav, giving Ayodhya a heightened spiritual presence.

TABLEAUX MESMERISE DEVOTEES

The Yogi Adityanath government's eighth Deepotsav celebration in Ayodhya brought the city alive with vibrant tableaux and a grand procession. Eighteen special tableaux, depicting episodes from 'Ramcharitmanas', were showcased along the route from Saket Mahavidyalaya to Ram Katha Park, drawing large crowds on Wednesday. Culture and Tourism Minister Jaiveer Singh, MLA Ved Prakash Gupta, Mayor Girish Pati Tripathi, and others inaugurated the tableaux. As they moved through the streets, devotees captured these powerful scenes on their mobile phones, while fireworks and coloured gulal filled the air. Saket College students beautifully illustrated iconic moments from 'Ramcharitmanas', from the Putreshti yajna to Shri Ram's coronation, bringing

each scene to life through skillful portrayals. Folk artistes enhanced the spectacle, engaging the audience with live narrations between tableaux. For this year's Ayodhya Deepotsav, Saket Mahavidyalaya crafted 18 stunning tableaux, 11 were prepared by the Information department and seven by the Tourism department. The Tourism department's tableaux beautifully depict scenes from the seven chapters of Tulsidas' 'Ramcharitmanas' - Bal Kand, Ayodhya Kand, Aranya Kand, Kishkindha Kand, Sundar Kand, Lanka Kand and Uttar Kand - bringing the essence of the Ramayana to life for devotees. The eighth Deepotsav included special displays illustrating key episodes in Shri Ram's life: from his education and marriage to Sita, the forest exile, Bharat Milap, Shabri's devotion, Ashok Vatika, Hanuman's journey to Lanka, Laxman's injury from Shakti arrow, Ravana's defeat, and the grand return to Ayodhya for Deepotsav.



Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath applies 'tilak' to the artistes dressed as Lord Rama, Lord Lakshmana and Goddess Sita and others during 'Deepotsav 2024' on the eve of the 'Diwali' festival, in Ayodhya and various events being held on the occasion (below) PTI



Ayodhya sets two records on Deepotsav 2024

25,12,585 diyas illuminated, Sarayu aarti by 1,121 Vedacharyas



PNS ■ AYODHYA

Ayodhya marked two historic achievements as Lord Ram was enshrined in his palace after 500 years. During Deepotsav 2024, a record-breaking 25,12,585 diyas lit up the city - surpassing last year's count of 22.23 lakh - and 1,121 Vedacharyas jointly performed the Sarayu aarti, setting another milestone. Verified by Guinness World Records, the event showcased Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath's commitment to Ayodhya, bringing global recognition to Ramnagar. Under the leadership of the Yogi government, teachers of Ram Manohar Lohia Avadh University and its affiliated colleges, teachers and students of intermediate colleges, voluntary organisations, saints,

local public representatives, local administration, Tourism, Culture department and others also played a big role in creating the record. As soon as the scheduled time of lighting the diyas began, 25,12,585 diyas were lit one by one amid the chanting of 'Shri Ram Jai Ram Jai Ram'. With the announcement of the record by the representatives of Guinness Book of World Records, the whole Ayodhya resounded with the slogan of 'Jai Shri Ram'. This milestone was confirmed by a Guinness World Records representative after drone calculations. Last year, a record was also set for Deep Prajavani, and upon receiving the certificate, Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath extended heartfelt congratulations to Ayodhya, the state, and the

nation on this unforgettable achievement. Since initiating Deepotsav in 2017, Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath has strengthened Ayodhya's connection with his Gorakshapeeth lineage, enriching the festival year after year. In his two terms, Deepotsav has flourished, illuminating Ayodhya with both lights and devotion, endearing the chief minister further to the people. The progression of Deepotsav records speaks for itself: 1.71 lakh diyas in 2017, 3.01 lakh in 2018, 4.04 lakh in 2019, 6.06 lakh in 2020, 9.41 lakh in 2021, 15.76 lakh in 2022, and 22.23 lakh in 2023. This year, over 25.12 lakh diyas were lit, symbolising the prosperity and growing pride of the state under the Yogi government.

BJP scared of growing strength of PDA: AKY

Lucknow (PNS): Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav on Wednesday said that the Bharatiya Janata Party was afraid of the growing strength of PDA and the pichhda, Dalit, alpsankhyak people would defeat the saffron party in Uttar Pradesh by-elections. Akhilesh Yadav, who was in Hardoi on Wednesday, said: "They (BJP) have coined a new slogan as they are afraid of the PDA's growing power. People are joining the PDA. We all know the origin of this slogan." Talking about the coming bypolls in Uttar Pradesh, the SP chief said, "The BJP will lose all nine seats in the state bypolls. Their (BJP) strategy is clear, first falsely implicate someone and then tarnish their image through media." Slamming the BJP over the 'batenge toh katenge' statement of Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, Akhilesh Yadav said the ruling party was frightened by the unity of PDA (pichhda, Dalit, alpsankhyak) people. In an apparent dig at Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, who had on September 23 reiterated his 'batenge toh katenge' remark, Akhilesh Yadav said, "We (SP leaders) are doing the politics of social justice. PDA's slogan is a progressive slogan. The BJP's 'batenge toh katenge' slogan is a negative slogan. The BJP does politics of hatred and dividing the society." "The slogan has been prepared in a lab and the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh has been chosen to promote it.

Yogi govt revamps Maha Kumbh with grand vision, extensive infra upgrades

PNS ■ PRAYAGRAJ

The Uttar Pradesh government led by Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath is setting the stage for Maha Kumbh 2025 with a vision of unparalleled grandeur, divinity, and modernity for devotees from India and abroad. In preparation for the world's largest cultural and spiritual event, development projects worth thousands of crores of rupees are underway, transforming Prayagraj with new infrastructure and amenities to elevate the experience for millions of pilgrims. Devotees arriving in Prayagraj and local priests who have witnessed previous Kumbhs are calling the scale of development "nothing short of a marvel". They attribute the sweeping changes to Chief Minister Yogi's administration. According to them, such extensive efforts were unheard of in

previous governments, who, they say, neglected the event's infrastructure and planning. The ambitious upgrades are reshaping the Maha Kumbh, turning it into an event that is both modern and deeply connected to its spiritual roots. Anupam Parihar, author of 'Religious and Spiritual Heritage of Prayagraj', highlights the Yogi government's key historical decisions in his book. He explains how, due to a lack of interest from previous governments, the traditional Dwadash Madhav circumambulation ritual in Prayagraj had stopped since 1991. However, Chief Minister Yogi revived this significant pilgrimage ritual on February 6, 2019, during Kumbh, following the initiative of Akhil Bharatiya Akhara Parishad president, the late Mahant Narendra Giri, and general secretary Mahant Hari Giri. This revival has

since benefited both local priests and saints as well as pilgrims from across India and abroad. To further prepare for Maha Kumbh 2025, the state government has allocated a special budget to improve religious sites throughout Prayagraj. Major temples and historical sites, including Akshayvat, Saraswati Koop, Patalpuri, Bada Hanuman Mandir, Dwadash Madhav Mandir, Bhardwaj Ashram, Nagvasuki Mandir and Shringverpur Dham are being renovated with extensive funding. This restoration effort is part of the Yogi government's broader vision to restore Prayagraj's ancient glory and enhance the religious and cultural appeal of these sacred sites for devotees during the upcoming Maha Kumbh.

HELPLINE LAUNCHED Anticipating a massive influx of devotees for Maha Kumbh 2025, a toll-free helpline has been launched for train passengers. The Prayagraj Division Railway has introduced the helpline, to ensure smooth and hassle-free travel experiences for the millions of pilgrims. It is the first time that such a service is being made available specifically for this event. The helpline, which will go live on November 1, is designed to help devotees easily access information about train schedules, arrivals, and other rail-related services. In addition to this, the Prayagraj Railway Division is enhancing accessibility through a dedicated mobile app specifically for Maha Kumbh. Along with the railway website, this app will serve as a one-stop resource, offering devotees convenient access to information and assistance to make their pilgrimage as smooth as possible.

Over 29 lakh destitute women receive pension ahead of Diwali in UP

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

Over 29 lakh destitute women have received the third instalment of pension ahead of Diwali in Uttar Pradesh following Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath's directive in this regard. The chief minister had directed that the third pension instalment be transferred to the accounts of destitute women under the Nirashrit Mahila Pension Yojana before Diwali and Chhath festivals. The move is intended to provide much-needed support to the

widows facing financial hardship and help them celebrate the festivals with joy. The Yogi government has ensured they receive this assistance without inconvenience. Chief Minister Yogi has also instructed officials to ensure timely aid to every eligible woman, reinforcing his commitment to bring festive joy to even the most vulnerable households in the state. The Nirashrit Mahila Pension Yojana supports widows aged 18 and above with an annual family income of up to Rs 2 lakh. To qualify, beneficiaries must not be receiving aid from any other

state or Central government pension scheme. This initiative serves as a lifeline for impoverished women who lack other forms of financial assistance. In the 2024-25 financial year, pension distribution under this scheme has been managed in three quarterly instalments. During the first quarter, Rs 78,838.54 lakh was provided to 26.12 lakh beneficiaries. The second quarter saw Rs 91,517.75 lakh being transferred to 28.47 lakh beneficiaries, while in the third quarter, ahead of Diwali, Rs 90,176.91 lakh was distributed to 29.03 lakh beneficiaries.

By ensuring the funds reach the accounts of beneficiaries before Diwali, the government has helped support their financial stability, allowing them to enjoy the festival without worry. From 2024-25, the pension distribution process has been integrated with the Aadhaar-based Payment System and the Public Financial Management System. This technological linkage enables direct transfers to beneficiaries' bank accounts, making the process more efficient and transparent and ensuring beneficiaries receive their payments promptly.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Traffic mayhem

On the eve of Diwali, Delhiites found themselves stranded for hours as traffic jams clogged major roads

Diwali is the biggest festival in Delhi. It is awaited eagerly by one and all. While the festivities galore it is also during this time, the Delhiites suffer the most; high pollution levels and traffic jams dampen the festive spirit. On the eve of Diwali, thousands of commuters in Delhi found themselves trapped in an unending traffic nightmare. With the festive season in full swing, the city's roads, particularly around popular market areas, became scenes of frustration as vehicles moved at a snail's pace, leaving commuters stranded for hours. Despite pre-announced traffic measures by Delhi Police, congestion overwhelmed key roads, with frustrated citizens questioning the effectiveness of traffic management efforts. Heavy traffic jams were reported across several areas, including the DND flyway, Ashram Marg, and Sarai Kale Khan, stretching into congested points such as Karol Bagh, Taimur Nagar-Maharani Bagh Road, Punjabi Bagh, and Badarpur Mehrauli Road. As the festive rush built up on Dhanteras, shoppers headed to market areas in droves. Many took to social media to share images and videos of the gridlocked streets, sparking discussions about the city's recurring traffic woes. In a bid to curb the chaos, Delhi Police had announced intensified road checks, anti-encroachment drives and measures aimed at keeping traffic flowing smoothly. Additionally, non-essential vehicles were restricted from entering the capital, and shoppers were instructed to park only in designated areas. Despite these efforts, the measures seemed insufficient against the overwhelming crowd of festival shoppers. Sarojini Nagar, Sadar Bazar, and Khan



Market saw an enormous influx, leaving shop owners struggling to manage both security and traffic. In some areas, the traffic snarls dampened the Diwali spirit. Ironically, the unexpected security measures, intended to reduce congestion, left sections of the market unusually empty on Dhanteras. As commuters endured bumper-to-bumper delays, voices of discontent grew louder and many people vent their spleen on social media. With Diwali celebrations continuing, these issues are likely to persist. Despite attempts to bolster security and traffic regulation, the administration's efforts seem to have fallen way short, leaving commuters to bear the brunt of another chaotic festive season on Delhi's streets. The traffic jams reflect poorly on the administration's capability to handle it. No denying that more cars are on the roads and given the limited capacity of roads, traffic jams cannot be completely eliminated. But having said that it is also true that the preparedness to deal with such a scenario were inadequate. At places there was no traffic police personnel to control the traffic and many signal lights reportedly did not work. We actively campaigned to bring this issue to the attention of relevant departments through a series of reports well in advance, right before the festive season began. Yet, as always, complacency prevailed.

PICTALK



Artists dance on the Rampath ahead of Deepotsav celebrations, in Ayodhya

'Trophyisation' of weapon platforms

In the propaganda war, the symbolic power of "trophy" weapons extends far beyond the battlefield, reshaping the narratives of geopolitical rivalries



BHOPINDER SINGH

If Ukrainians made a public spectacle of captured Russian weaponry, the Russians did likewise in flaunting captured Western military hardware, from the Ukrainians. It is surreal to see captured battle trophies like the American M1 Abrams tank, German Leopard tank or the British Husky tactical support vehicle etc., in a public park. The symbolism supports the Russian narrative that the 'West/NATO' is attacking Russia, and yet the Russians are triumphing. However, the ground truth is more complex as the Russians had invaded Ukraine and the war status is a stalemate at best, as the envisaged '10-day operation' has gone on for over a year and a half. Such displays are common across militaries, and they understandably do not sit well with the other side.

Now, the Chinese have got riled over similar symbolism as the US Navy plans to exhibit a warplane, albeit of its own, that harks back to the 2001 Hainan Island incident that involved a mid-air collision of a Signal Intelligence aircraft i.e., EP-3E Aries II of the UN Navy, and a Chinese Air Force F-8 fighter plane. Flying over the tense and disputed South China Seas, the US plane had taken off from its Kadena Air Base in Japan and was intercepted by two F-8 fighters midway between the Hainan Islands and Paracel Islands. Whilst making aggressive passes, one of the Chinese fighter planes collided with the American plane and the Chinese fighter plane broke. The Chinese fighter pilot's body was never recovered. The damaged American plane along with its 24 crew members made an emergency landing at China's Hainan airbase without authorization and its crew were detained. There was a counterclaim by the Chinese that the American plane had deliberately hit the Chinese fighter plane, but it was never substantiated, even though the Chinese had the data from the flight recorders of both planes. 10 days of hectic diplomatic parleys ensued with each side blaming the other for provocation and unreasonable conduct.



China insisted on the illegality of the American plane's presence claiming the region to be part of its exclusive economic zone as per the United Nations Convention on the Law of Sea (UNCLOS)—whereas the Americans claimed patrolling rights under its right of Freedom of Navigation. But embarrassing delays in securing the release of American crew were publicly distracting from the more pressing foreign policy issue of launching the 'War on Terror' for the then US President, George Bush, in Afghanistan, following 9/11.

A due 'letter of the two sorrys' (for the death of the Chinese fighter pilot and unauthorized landing) from the American side led the same to be conveniently interpreted as a 'letter of apology' by the Chinese media, and the same led to the release of American crew and the return of the disassembled aircraft. 23 years later, the Americans are bringing back the same plane i.e., EP-3E Aries II, at its Pima Air & Space Museum in Tucson, Arizona, for public display. The 'trophyisation' will be accompanied by a backstory explaining its significance in a historic incident that was fraught with risks of further escalation, for public consumption. The Chinese fear an American



THERE WAS A COUNTERCLAIM BY THE CHINESE THAT THE AMERICAN PLANE HAD DELIBERATELY HIT THE CHINESE FIGHTER PLANE, BUT IT WAS NEVER SUBSTANTIATED, EVEN THOUGH THE CHINESE HAD THE DATA FROM THE FLIGHT RECORDERS OF BOTH PLANES

narrative of 'capitulation' that paints the Chinese reaction in a dim light, even though it had the American plane and its 24 crew members, on its soil. As a riled Chinese social media commentator reacted, "It is not 2001. Wake up! It's 2024" — as if to suggest that the Chinese PLA was no minnow any longer, and it would give a befitting reply.

The unofficial mouthpiece of the Chinese regime i.e., Global Times, captured the reactionary mood in China, "Chinese people saw the incident as a painful memory for the nation and the reported plan to display the US warplane at a sensitive moment when China-US relations are delicate and face uncertainties, is like 'rubbing salt into the wound' and reflects an unfriendly stance by the US toward China."

However, the situation in the choppy South China Seas has not changed much with the Chinese belligerence continuing and growing by the day, and with the Americans still conducting reconnaissance air sorties and naval exercises to counter the same.

Countries like Taiwan, Japan and most recently Philippines, are in the direct line of competing territorial claims, against China. Symbolism with the conceptualisation of con-

cepts like QUAD (Quadrilateral of Sino-wary, Japan, US, Australia and India) or Naval Exercises are part of vital international optics and narrative building. In a dictatorial country like China where propaganda has been elevated to a fine art, Beijing understands the power of public perception, hence its discomfort with the re-posting of the Hainan incident, entailing the return of EP-3E Aries II in public imagination.

The Chinese pipedream would like the new US exhibit to include, "calls from China and other countries worldwide to end US reconnaissance operations near their borders", but as the most encroaching, expansionist, and coercive neighbour — it would know better than to expect the American exhibit to be kind towards China's propaganda position. With many famous defections of fighter pilots towards 'enemy' countries (especially from China to Taiwan), the 'trophyisation' of weapon platforms is an old hat, and in that context, the thin-skinned and hyper-reaction by the Chinese recently is churlish.

(The writer, a military veteran, is a former Lt Governor of Andaman & Nicobar Islands and Puducherry. The views expressed are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

POPULATION CENSUS 2025

Madam — Regarding 'Population Census Takes Off in 2025' (Oct 29), the census is far more than a political activity; it's a strategic framework for development as India progresses toward becoming a superpower. The proposed 31 questions for the census should encompass aspects such as the agricultural workforce, tribal and coastal populations, elderly and infirm populations, women's education and economic standing, the skilled youth workforce, informal sector engagement, child mortality rates, school and college enrollment, residents abroad, border-area inhabitants, those who have traveled or hold properties abroad, and OCI and NRI populations in India. The upcoming election delimitation should ensure fair population representation per constituency for MPs and MLAs.

Although caste census isn't constitutionally mandated, it is often used as a political tool that risks dividing society along caste lines. The lack of exact figures on castes and the absence of official caste records make the legitimacy of caste data contentious, often resulting in disputes and litigation. Furthermore, with the prevalence of inter-caste marriages, the caste census appears increasingly outdated.

Vinod Johri | Delhi

DIGITAL FRAUD

Madam — When a Prime Minister warns citizens about digital fraud, it underscores the gravity of this issue and its deep infiltration at the grassroots level. According to available data, Indian citizens lost around ₹120 crores to digital fraud in the first quarter of 2024 alone—a conservative estimate, as many cases go unreported due to fear of police harassment or lack of awareness. The methods used by fraudsters vary widely and evolve constantly. A common tactic involves scammers posing as relatives to extract bank details, often from numbers originating abroad. This is particularly prevalent in Punjab, where many have relatives overseas, making

Revisit West Asia policy



The editorial on the looming war clouds in West Asia (Oct 28) should resonate more deeply with India than with other nations, given India's critical stakes in the region. For decades, attacks and counterattacks in West Asia have been common, but the current wave of violence escalations and genocides on both sides has far-reaching implications globally. India, in par-

ticular, faces a dilemma. The current administration leans ideologically toward supporting Israel, despite India's historical support for the Palestinian cause. Additionally, India benefits from affordable crude oil sourced from Russia, although these savings are primarily enjoyed by select private players in the oil sector rather than reaching the public. However, as tensions intensify, potentially drawing in the US and Russia, nations worldwide may find themselves compelled to align with one side. This situation could pressure the government to prioritize ideological support for Israel or risk trade disruptions that could affect India's economic stability—already challenged by an unfavorable trade balance. India, surrounded by a region of strained relations, cannot afford isolation in such turbulent times. It is essential for prudence to prevail.

AG Rajmohan | Anantpur

them easy targets.

These foreign-based numbers make tracing the criminals more challenging. While the Digital India initiative launched in 2015 has successfully propelled the nation toward digital empowerment, it has also exposed more citizens to cybercrime. This calls for increased caution, particularly among the elderly and those less familiar with digital technology. Only by staying vigilant can we protect ourselves from these evolving digital threats.

Yash Pal Raihan | Jalandhar

RIISING CASES OF STROKES AMONG YOUNG

Madam — Countries worldwide are making significant investments to position themselves at the forefront of the semiconductor industry, with India setting aside \$11 billion and considering an additional \$5–10 billion. These are sizable figures, particularly when compared to the relatively lower investment in labor-intensive industries like leather and handicrafts. But what is the government's ultimate goal with such a massive investment? Is it to establish a base

for a larger electronics sector, or to support the expanding automobile supply chain? Unfortunately, the government's response has been unclear and less than satisfactory, with an emphasis on promoting 'aatmanirbharta' or self-reliance.

However, self-reliance may not be entirely practical given the complex nature of global supply chains. Reducing dependence on allied nations like South Korea and Taiwan may not be necessary; rather, the focus could be on lessening reliance on China. A key challenge for the government in implementing this plan will be securing a skilled workforce. A more strategic approach would be to target specific, scalable segments of the supply chain, such as fabrication, design, assembly, and packaging. Instead of focusing solely on self-reliance, India should aim to establish itself as a key player in the global semiconductor supply chain, maximizing the impact of this significant investment.

Pratyush Tiwari | Ujjain

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

The benefits and reality of organic food choices

From freshly harvested crops to packaged foods, the organic label now commands a premium price; is it for real or just a sales gimmick

In recent years, a remarkable trend has emerged, with organic products now prominently displayed on supermarket shelves and featured on packaging across the board. It encompasses everything from freshly harvested crops to essential packaged goods. And, given that the organic brand will cost significantly more, people are questioning if it is worth it. Organic foods offer health, aetiology, and environmental benefits. This type of food is promoted as a more wholesome and righteous option. The concept is straightforward: reduce pesticide use, eliminate synthetic fertilisers, and avoid genetically modified organisms. For numerous individuals, opting for cleaner and more organically cultivated produce justifies the expense. And yet, aren't we, in our way, being chipped away at our true worth as customers?



Our vegetables, once vibrant and full of flavour, are now coated in pesticides that strip them of their natural essence. We've all noticed it: the tomatoes don't taste like they used to, and a bell pepper is just... bland. With the essence of fresh vegetables fading from our experience, many sought refuge in the convenience of pre-packaged meals.

The appeal and taste of fast food or packaged snacks overshadow the presence of vegetables offered alongside them. It's hardly unexpected that many individuals find themselves torn between the less appealing, time-consuming superfoods and the quicker, more delicious meal alternatives. Yet, what is the price to pay? Here's the point: it's not about flavour or ease—it's about well-being. Even minimal exposure to pesticides has been linked to a variety of health issues, including hormone disruption and neurological complications. As time passes, these substances may build up within the human body, and despite increasingly stringent regulations, the long-term consequences remain largely unclear. This justifies the higher price tag, reinforcing the value of organic foods. Is "organic" always synonymous with better quality? Not exactly. Organic does not guarantee perfection. Certification processes have gaps, meaning that pesticide-free does not necessar-

ily equate to "organic." It promises a reduction in synthetic chemicals and the adoption of more sustainable farming practices. Additionally, organic farming enhances biodiversity and soil health—both essential for the future of our planet. Is this a worthwhile investment? It hinges on what you value most. Choosing organic is a positive move towards minimising chemical exposure and fostering sustainable practices. However, to truly enhance the flavour of your meals, seeking out local farmers and fresh produce that hasn't undergone excessive processing or long-distance transport could be a more effective solution to that issue. Embracing organic choices transcends mere financial considerations; it represents a commitment to your well-being, an enhancement of your culinary experience, and a forward-thinking approach to the future of our food systems. (The writer is a motivator and a freelance journalist; views expressed are personal)



RACHNA LAKHPATRI



FIRST COLUMN

WHERE DO WE GO WRONG?

It is essential to recognise the diverse spiritual paths that humanity traverses



AJIT KUMAR BISHNOI

I am referring to our relationship with God. To understand this properly, clarity must be there about different classes of men. There are two main ones. The first one is of majority. In this, there are five types. Many do not know God, those who are living in the wilderness, and do have not much connection with civilization. The next are those, who are aware but have no opinion about God. They take a neutral stance in this matter. They are called agnostics. The next level is of those, who are aware of God, but are too lazy to have anything to do with Him, i.e., they don't do any spiritual practices to develop a link with God. The fourth category is of those, who are envious of God. Why is God superior to us, why should we take His shelter, why does He control everything, etc.? And the last category is atheists, who forcefully deny God's existence. Now I come to those, who have faith in God and His instructions, but are of different levels.

The first level is of those who do some spiritual practices as rituals. For example, someone has a murti of Lord Krishna in his home, which he has placed on a shelf. He lights an 'agarbatti' every morning after bath and places it near the murti. Someone else may be chanting Gayatri Mantra three times a day. Or someone maybe worshipping Suryadeva every morning with water. These are very nice activities and bring benefits, which are limited in extent. The worshiper has certain material desires, which he is keen on. He is superior to an ordinary man carrying out his material activities in pur-



suit of material goals like wealth, power, fame, etc. The next level is those who do some rituals and also have some faith in the Lord's instructions, as given in bonafide spiritual texts like the Bhagavad-Geeta. But they restrict themselves for two reasons what they can get from God. They don't do more to please God and become deserving, but displease God by their lusty, greedy, angry, hateful, etc. activities. Is this intelligent?

They end up gaining some material benefits for the spiritual acts done, and also punishments for bad acts done. They don't cancel out, i.e., both come to fruition. The next level of faith is better. They do rituals and try to gain purity in action through their minds, senses, and words. This helps them enhance their mode of goodness. They reap many benefits as a consequence. (The Bhagavad-Geeta 14.6) Then, comes the next level, who can be called devotees. They desire to please God in addition to their senses, minds and bodies. They have faith in God's instructions, i.e., try to act accordingly. But they also don't go far enough. This happens due to many reasons like fault in nature (svabhava) and not great 'sanskars' (cultural training).

They only come to a stage described by Lord Krishna. (6.41) Now we come to the highest level of devotees; he is helplessly attracted towards God due to practice done in the previous life. He transcends the ritualistic part of the Vedas. (6.44) Let us, therefore, not go wrong. We should stop ourselves from denying the existence of God staying neutral or being feeble about connecting with God. We have so much to gain even if we are not thinking of gaining liberation. God has so much to offer like opulence of all six kinds including success.

(The writer is a spiritual teacher; views are personal)

India's shift toward competency-based hiring



DINESH SOOD

The focus on competency over credentials promises not only to improve employability but also to foster a more inclusive workforce



India is moving towards skills-based hiring over degrees, marking a significant shift in the job market. Companies increasingly adopt competency-based hiring practices, focusing on practical skills and inclusivity rather than traditional degrees. This change is influenced by the growing importance of industry-relevant competencies in today's digitised business landscape. IBM India is a notable example of this trend, as it has implemented a 'skills-first' policy, where a college degree is no longer a prerequisite for recruitment. Similarly, companies like TCS, Infosys, and Wipro are also shifting towards skills-based hiring, investing heavily in training programs in the digital economy. This shift has broad implications for India's education sector, prompting universities and educational institutions to incorporate more industry-relevant training and competency-based curricula. Many Indian universities are partnering with businesses to offer specialized training in artificial intelligence, data analytics, cyber security, and beauty and wellness. Recently, Medhavi University collaborated with Orane International, a pioneer global institute in beauty-wellness. Such collaborations aim to bridge the gap between academic knowledge and industry requirements, ensuring graduates are job-ready from day one. Reports have shown that such partnerships have significantly increased employability in specialized fields, highlighting the importance of aligning education with industry needs. Competency-based hiring is revolutionising university education and professional development in India. In today's technology-driven economy, continuous learning and upskilling are crucial for career advancement. Companies like IBM, TCS, and Infosys



THE INDIAN GOVERNMENT RECOGNISES THAT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT IS CRITICAL TO NATIONAL PERFORMANCE AND ECONOMIC GROWTH. AS REFLECTED IN THE 2024 EDUCATION BUDGET, SIGNIFICANT FUNDING HAS BEEN DIRECTED TOWARDS DIGITAL PROJECTS TO PREPARE YOUNG INDIANS FOR A DIGITAL FUTURE

heavily invest in training programs on the digital economy. These programs often include online courses, certifications, and micro-credentials, enabling employees to acquire new skills efficiently.

The Indian government recognizes that skills development is critical to national performance and economic growth. As reflected in the 2024 education budget, significant funding has been directed towards digital projects to prepare young Indians for a digital future.

Over the next five years, approximately 2 million young people will receive skills training. Additionally, 1,000 Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) will be modernized, with updated course content tailored to industry needs.

This government support is crucial for India's ambition to remain a talent hub. India stands at a critical juncture in its economic journey, with immense potential for growth but facing a significant challenge in bridging the unemployment-employability gap. As the world's fifth-largest economy, India's vision for "Viksit Bharat" by 2047 hinges on effectively skilling its youth to meet the demands of a rapidly evolving job market.

The Union Budget 2024-25 has highlighted this priority, allocating substantial funds for education, employment, and skilling initiatives. However, the task ahead is daunting, with nearly 73% of workers aged 15-59 years lacking formal or informal vocational training. A multi-pronged

approach is essential to harnessing India's demographic dividend and fueling economic growth. This includes bolstering institutional support, strengthening industry-academia connections, and leveraging innovative financing solutions like impact bonds. As India navigates this crucial phase, the success of its skill development efforts will play a pivotal role in shaping the nation's future and realizing its economic potential. Competency-based hiring transforms the job market and creates opportunities for diverse groups often excluded.

In India, many individuals seeking to re-enter the workforce—often in remote or part-time roles—benefit from this approach. During the pandemic, many women took online courses in digital marketing, content creation, and I.T. services while balancing home responsibilities. This shift towards skills-based hiring opens doors for a more inclusive and diverse workforce and paints an optimistic picture of the future of employment in India, full of opportunities and potential for growth.

India's thriving start-up culture is a testament to the adaptability and practical experience valued in skills-based hiring. Startups, often operating with limited resources, place less emphasis on educational background and more on the skills and potential of their employees.

As a result, startups are setting the pace in adopting skills-based hiring practices, inspiring more giant corporations to follow suit

and revolutionise the job market. Their innovative approach to hiring is not only inspiring but also a sign of the changing times in the Indian job market. Transitioning to skills-based hiring comes with challenges, including the need for accurate and unbiased skills assessments.

Traditional hiring, reliant on academic qualifications, is relatively straightforward. In contrast, evaluating practical skills requires sophisticated testing and assessment techniques. Additionally, companies must train their H.R. teams to recognize and nurture talent based on skills rather than credentials.

Acknowledging these challenges is the first step towards overcoming them, and it prepares us for the future of hiring. By acknowledging these challenges, we can better prepare for the future of hiring and ensure a more effective and inclusive job market.

Despite these challenges, the benefits of competency-based hiring are evident. Companies can access a broader and more diverse talent pool by focusing on skills, including individuals overlooked by traditional hiring processes. This approach helps fill critical skills gaps and fosters a more inclusive and innovative workforce.

(The writer is co-founder and MD of Orane International, a training partner of the National Skill Development Corporation and a network Member of India International Skills Centres, an initiative of GoI. The views expressed are personal)

Reviving Bihar's libraries: Bridging the gap between tradition and technology

A well-conceived hybrid model could revitalise Bihar's libraries, providing a space where traditional and digital learning coexist

In today's era of rapid digital transformation, libraries in Bihar and across India are facing a critical challenge: how to remain relevant in a world increasingly dominated by digital content and online resources. Historically, libraries have been pillars of knowledge and learning, preserving history, culture, science, and philosophy for generations. However, with the rise of the internet, mobile technology, and social media, the traditional role of libraries is being questioned, especially in rural areas and smaller towns. The digital revolution has reshaped the way people, especially the youth, consume information. Where libraries were once the sole custodians of knowledge, the



RINKU KUMARI

Internet now offers instant access to vast amounts of data. E-books, online courses, and educational videos are available at the click of a button, challenging the need for physical spaces to access information. While this shift has opened new avenues for learning, it has also contributed to the neglect and decline of public libraries, particularly in states like Bihar. Bihar's once-thriving

library culture has dramatically deteriorated. Where there were once 540 public libraries in the state during the 1950s, only 51 remain today, according to a 2022 report from the Bihar Assembly Library Committee. Entire districts, including Arwal, Kaimur, Banka, Sheohar, Kishanganj, and Sheikhpura, now have no public libraries at all—neither in rural areas nor in urban centres. The closure of these institutions reflects a deeper cultural shift, where reading and communal learning spaces are no longer central to the lives of many. Muzaffarpur, highlights the concerning reality of the fading library tradition. Its few remaining libraries, such as

the Gandhi Smriti Library and Nav Yuvak Samiti Trust Library, are either poorly resourced or neglected. In a city of this size, there isn't a single well-functioning library that caters to literature lovers or cultural enthusiasts, leaving little hope for their counterparts in rural areas. Yet, as the world embraces digital transformation, the role of libraries must evolve rather than disappear. The challenge lies not in replacing libraries but in reimagining them as hybrid spaces—integrating digital resources with the physical charm and purpose of traditional libraries. Libraries, with their rich legacy of providing knowledge, can be transformed into community hubs that offer more than just



books. They can become centres for digital literacy, e-learning, and skill development, especially in areas where access to the internet and technology is still a challenge. In this context, Vinay, a social worker from Muzaffarpur, suggests a forward-thinking solution: modernizing libraries to meet the needs of the current generation. Libraries should be equipped with computers, internet access, and resources

for career counselling and education. "We need to reconnect young people, who are lost in the virtual world, with the world of books," he explains.

Libraries can offer both—the serenity and richness of traditional books and the practicality and excitement of digital resources. This transformation would not only make libraries more accessible but also relevant to today's youth, who are accustomed to consuming knowledge digi-

digitally. The success of such an initiative would depend on concerted efforts by local leaders, communities, and governments. For instance, establishing a digital library in every Panchayat would bridge the urban-rural divide, bringing digital literacy to the forefront while preserving the cultural and intellectual heritage libraries represent. Panchayat representatives and village intellectuals can play a critical role in promoting the use of these modernized libraries, ensuring that the younger generation has access to both digital and physical forms of knowledge. The ongoing digital revolution has created an urgent need to rethink the purpose and structure of

libraries. The Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Public Library in Patna, one of the few libraries still thriving in Bihar, is a testament to the potential of such institutions. However, unless libraries across the state are modernized to embrace digital tools and resources, their future seems uncertain. The decline of libraries in Bihar isn't just about the closure of physical spaces—it reflects the broader societal changes driven by technology. But rather than view this as the end of the library's role, it should be seen as an opportunity to redefine its importance in a digital-first world. (The writer is an educator in Muzaffarpur Bihar; views are personal. Charkha Features)

Israel must step in if it bans UNRWA, says UN

AP ■ UNITED NATIONS

The United Nations stressed Tuesday that if Israel puts in place new laws cutting ties with the UN agency for Palestinian refugees, the Israeli government will have to meet their needs under international law.

Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said in a letter obtained by The Associated Press that there is no other alternative to the agency, known as UNRWA. It has been a lifeline during the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza, and the Israeli legislation "will have devastating consequences for Palestinian refugees" in Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem, he said.

The UN agencies for children, health and migration also stressed that UNRWA is the "backbone" of the world body's operations in Gaza, where people have relied on its emergency food aid and health centers during the more than year-long war, which has killed tens of thousands and left much of the enclave in ruins.

The United Nations is heartened by statements of support for UNRWA from all quarters and countries, U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric said, and "we would very much appreciate efforts by any member state to help us get over this hurdle."

Israel has alleged that some of UNRWA's 13,000 staffers in Gaza participated in the Oct. 7, 2023, attacks by Hamas that sparked the war. It's also accused hundreds of UNRWA staff of having militant ties and

said it has found Hamas military assets in or under the agency's facilities.

Israel's new laws: Two laws passed Monday could prevent UNRWA from continuing its work. Even the US, Israel's closest ally, joined many governments and humanitarian organizations in opposing the legislation, which doesn't take effect for three months. Guterres sent the letter Tuesday to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu outlining his concerns.

As an occupying power, under international humanitarian law, Israel is required to ensure the needs of the Palestinians are met, including for food, health care and education, Guterres said. And if Israel isn't in a position to meet those needs, it has an obligation to allow and facilitate the activities of the UN, and "UNRWA is the principal means by which assistance is supplied to Palestinian refugees," he said.

If UNRWA's activities are restricted or halted, the secretary-general said, Israel would have to fill the vacuum "to ensure the needs of the population are met."

"Otherwise, it would be in violation of international law," said Dujarric, the UN spokesman.

Israel's UN Ambassador Danny Danon responded to the letter by saying, "Rather than condemning UNRWA for turning a blind eye to terrorism and in some cases participating in terrorism, the UN instead condemns Israel."

He claimed in a statement that

UNRWA isn't interested in providing humanitarian aid to Gaza, calling it "nothing but an arm of Hamas operating under the guise of the United Nations."

"Israel will continue to facilitate humanitarian aid in Gaza according to international law," Danon said, "but UNRWA has failed in its mandate and is no longer the right agency for this job."

Dismay from UN agencies: World Health Organization spokesman Tarik Jasarevic said UNRWA health workers have provided over 6 million medical consultations over the past year. They also offered immunizations, disease surveillance and screening for malnutrition, and UNRWA's work "couldn't be matched by any agency - including WHO," he said.

Jeremy Laurence, spokesman for the UN human rights office, said that "without UNRWA, the delivery of food, shelter, health care, education, amongst other things, to most of Gaza's population would grind to a halt."

UNRWA was established by the UN General Assembly in 1949 to provide relief for Palestinians who fled or were expelled from their homes before and during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war that followed Israel's establishment, as well as their descendants.

Israel faces criticism: Timed to the Israeli laws, Norway announced Tuesday that it will ask the 193-nation General Assembly to request a ruling from the top United Nations court about whether Israel is obligated to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid to

Palestinians by international organizations, including the UN.

The International Court of Justice in July condemned Israel's rule over the Palestinian territories, declaring its occupation unlawful. The nonbinding opinion called on Israel to end its occupation and immediately halt settlement construction.

Norway's foreign minister, Espen Barth Eide, told the AP that Israel's policy is making it increasingly difficult for Palestinians to access life-saving assistance. He said Norway will argue that even if Israel's occupation is illegal, it has obligations, "and we believe that these are not met."

Guterres told Netanyahu that while the Israeli laws prohibit any activity by UNRWA "within the sovereign territory of the State of Israel," the UN considers Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem part of the occupied Palestinian territory and Israel has no sovereignty because of its occupation.

Meanwhile, at the UN's regular Security Council meeting on the Middle East - this month open to all UN members - speakers supported UNRWA and virtually all called for immediate cease-fires in Gaza and Lebanon.

UN Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield expressed deep concern at the Israeli legislation, saying, "right now there is no alternative to UNRWA when it comes to delivering food and other life-saving aid in Gaza."

Spanish authorities say 63 dead from devastating flash floods



AP ■ BARCELONA

At least 63 people have died in Spain's eastern region of Valencia after flash floods swept away cars, turned village streets into rivers and disrupted rail lines and highways in the worst natural disaster to hit the European nation in recent memory.

Emergency services in the eastern region of Valencia confirmed the death toll on Wednesday.

Rainstorms on Tuesday caused flooding in a wide swath of southern and eastern Spain. Floods of mud-colored water tumbled vehicles down streets at frightening speeds. Pieces of wood swirled with household articles. Police and rescue services used helicopters to lift people from their homes and cars.

Authorities reported several missing people late Tuesday, but the following morning brought the shocking announcement of dozens found dead.

Over 1,000 soldiers from Spain's emergency response units were deployed to the devastated areas.

"Yesterday was the worst day of my life," Ricardo Gabaldón, the mayor of Utiel, a town in Valencia, told national broadcaster RTVE. He said several people were still missing in his town.

"We were trapped like rats. Cars and trash containers were flowing down the streets. The water was rising to three meters," he said.

Spain has experienced similar autumn storms in recent years, but nothing compared to the devastation over the last two

days.

The death toll could easily rise with other regions yet to report victims and search efforts continuing in areas with difficult access. In the village of Letur in the neighboring Castilla La Mancha region, Mayor Sergio Marín Sánchez said six people were missing. A high-speed train with nearly 300 people on board derailed near Malaga, although rail authorities said no one was hurt. High-speed train service between Valencia city and Madrid was interrupted, as were several commuter lines.

Valencian regional President Carlos Mazón urged people to stay at home so as not to complicate rescue efforts, with travel by road already difficult due to fallen trees and wrecked vehicles.

"The neighborhood is destroyed, all the cars are on top of each other, it's literally smashed up," Christian Viena, a bar owner in the Valencian village of Barrio de la Torre, said by phone. "Everything is a total wreck, everything is ready to be thrown away. The mud is almost 30 centimeters deep."

Spain's central government set up a crisis committee to help coordinate rescue efforts.

The rain had subsided in Valencia by late Wednesday morning. But more storms were forecast through Thursday, according to Spain's national weather service.

Spain is still recovering from a severe drought earlier this year. Scientists say increased episodes of extreme weather are likely linked to climate change.

Biden calls Trump supporters garbage, sparks backlash

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

US President Joe Biden sparked a controversy when he compared supporters of Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump to garbage. Biden was commenting on a racist joke a comedian made at a Trump rally days earlier likening Puerto Rico to an "island of garbage."

"The only garbage I see floating out there is his supporters, his demonisation of Latinos is unconscionable, and it's un-American. It's totally contrary to everything we've done, everything we've been," Biden said in his remarks on a campaign call for Latino voters on Tuesday.

"Just the other day, a speaker at his rally called Puerto Rico a 'floating island of garbage.' Well, let me tell you something. I don't know the Puerto Rican that — that I know — or a Puerto Rico, where I'm from — in my home state of Delaware,

they're good, decent, honourable people," he said.

Republican Senator Marco Rubio raised this issue in front of thousands of Trump supporters in Allentown, Pennsylvania. Trump, the former president, was also quick to condemn it.

Trump, who was holding a rally in Allentown, described Biden's remarks as "terrible," and likened them to Hillary Clinton's comments calling some of Trump's supporters "deplorable" in 2016.

"So, you have to remember Hillary [Clinton]—she said 'deplorable' and then she said 'irredeemable,'" Trump said. "Garbage? I think is worse."

In a damage control exercise, Biden later tried to explain his remarks on X.

"Earlier today I referred to the hateful rhetoric about Puerto Rico spewed by Trump's supporter at his Madison Square Garden rally as garbage—which is the only word I can think of

to describe it," Biden wrote. "His demonisation of Latinos is unconscionable. That's all I meant to say. The comments at that rally don't reflect who we are as a nation," Biden said.

Trump's running mate Ohio Governor JD Vance described it as disgusting.

"This is disgusting. Kamala Harris and her boss Joe Biden are attacking half of the country," he wrote on X.

"There's no excuse for this. I hope Americans reject it," he added.

Karoline Leavitt, the Trump Campaign's National Press Secretary, said in a statement that Trump is backed by Latinos, Black voters, union workers, law enforcement officers, border patrol agents and Americans of all faiths.

"(Kamala) Harris, (Tim) Walz and Biden have labelled these great Americans as fascists, Nazis, and now, garbage," Leavitt said.

China successfully launches new crew to space station

PTI ■ BEIJING/JINQUAN

China on Wednesday successfully launched its spaceship sending three astronauts, including the country's first female space engineer on a six months' mission to fine tune its low orbiting space station.

The Shenzhou-19 crewed spaceship was launched by a Long March-2F carrier rocket, early Wednesday from the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Centre in northwest China.

About 10 minutes after the launch, the Shenzhou-19 spacecraft separated from the rocket and entered its designated orbit.

The crew members are in good shape and the launch is a complete success, the CMSA announced.

The spaceship will perform a fast, automated rendezvous and docking with the front port of the space station core module Tianhe in about 6.5 hours, forming a combination of three modules and three spacecraft. China built its space station

after it was reportedly excluded from the International Space Station (ISS) over concerns that China's space programme is manned by its military, the People's Liberation Army, (PLA).

It is currently the only country to have a space station. The ISS is a collaborative project of several countries. Observers say China's space station may become the only one of its kind in orbit once the ISS retires in the coming years.

The two robotic arms of the station, especially the long one which has the ability to grab objects including satellites from space, drew international concerns.

Early this month China announced its plans for the further development of space programmes which included launching a manned lunar mission, construction of a lunar space station, exploration of habitable planets and extra-terrestrial life to expand its space programme in the next few decades.

Besides building its space sta-



tion, China has launched a number of space missions including a lunar probe that collected samples for the first time from the far side of the moon and brought them back to earth for scientific studies.

The Shenzhou-19 crew consists of mission commander Cai Xuzhe, and astronauts Song Lingdong and Wang Haoze. Wang is currently China's only female space engineer and the third Chinese woman participating in a crewed spaceflight mission, the CMSA said.

The tasks for new crew included conducting space science and application tests, performing extravehicular activities, installing protective devices against space debris, and managing the installation and recycling of extravehicular payloads and equipment.

Lin Xiqiang, CMSA spokesperson told a press conference on Tuesday that the crew will carry out 86 space science research and technology experiments, covering various fields including space life science, microgravity fundamental physics, space material science, space medicine and new space technologies.

The Shenzhou-19 astronauts will complete in-orbit rotation with the trio currently manning and stay at the space station for approximately six months.

Wang Haoze explained that she will be mainly responsible for space experimental projects, cargo management, and space station operation management. China is also engaging in discussions to select and train astronauts from partner nations, inviting international counterparts to join its space station flight missions, Lin said.

Considering the close ties, an astronaut from Pakistan was expected to join in future space station missions.

"No matter which country participates, it is humanity's collective quest to unravel the mysteries of the cosmos," Lin said.

NY rally was an absolute lovefest: Trump

AP ■ ALLENTOWN

Urged by some allies to apologise for racist comments made by speakers at his weekend rally, Donald Trump took the opposite approach on Tuesday, saying it was an "honour to be involved" in such an event and calling the scene a "lovefest" — the same term he has used to describe the Jan. 6 insurrection at the US Capitol.

Trump gathered supporters and reporters to his Mar-a-Lago resort two days after a massive rally at Madison Square Garden featured a number of crude remarks by various speakers, including a set by comedian Tony Hinchcliff in which he joked that Puerto Rico was a "floating island of garbage."

Some of Trump's top Republican allies have condemned the remarks, and his campaign took the rare step of publicly distancing itself from Hinchcliff's joke, though not the other comments.

But given the opportunity to apologize at multiple events and in interviews Tuesday, Trump instead leaned in. Speaking at his Florida resort, he said that "there's never been an event so beautiful" as his Sunday rally in his hometown of New York.

"The love in that room. It was breath-taking," he said. "It was like a lovefest, an absolute lovefest. And it was my honor to be involved."

On Tuesday night, he told Fox News' Sean Hannity that he knows nothing about Hinchcliff but said, "I can't imagine it's a big deal."

With just a week before Election Day, some Trump allies have voiced alarm that the rally, which was supposed to highlight the Republican presidential nominee's closing message in grand New York fashion, has instead served as a distraction and even a liability, given the electoral importance of Puerto Ricans who live in Pennsylvania and other key swing states.

"This is not a time to have anyone criti-



cize Puerto Rico or Latinos," former U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley, who challenged Trump for the GOP presidential nomination and later endorsed him, said in an interview with Fox News Channel.

Trump later held a rally in Allentown, Pennsylvania, a city with a large Hispanic population, where Puerto Rico's shadow U.S. senator, Zoraída Buxo, joined him and defended the former president's record.

"We need this man to be our commander in chief," said Buxo, who cannot vote in the Senate because Puerto Rico is not a state. "He will make us feel safe and he will protect us."

Still, there was anger in Allentown. Ivet Figueroa, 61, stood outside the rally venue holding a trash can with the words "Trash Trump" on it.

She said of the insult and Trump: "The person who said it was vetted by him. So that's what he allowed, so he has to take responsibility for what he said. Now it's too

late for saying sorry. I don't want an apology, I want justice, and justice is on Nov. 5."

The fallout from the Madison Square Garden event risked highlighting voters' concerns about Trump's rhetoric and penchant for controversy in the closing stretch as both campaigns are scrambling for votes.

Speakers at the rally also made racist comments targeting Latinos, Black people, Jews and Palestinians, along with sexist insults directed at Trump's Democratic rival, Vice President Kamala Harris, and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

In an interview with ABC News earlier Tuesday, Trump claimed to not know Hinchcliff but did not denounce what he said.

"I don't know him. Someone put him up there. I don't know who he is," Trump said, according to the network, insisting that he hadn't heard Hinchcliff's comments.

When asked what he made of them, Trump "did not take the opportunity to denounce them, repeating that he didn't hear the comments," ABC reported.

In the Hannity interview, Trump said people were trying to make the comedian's appearance into a "big deal" when it "has nothing to do with the party, has nothing to do with us."

The comments have drawn outrage from Puerto Rican leaders.

The archbishop of Puerto Rico called on Trump to disavow them, saying it wasn't enough for the campaign to say the joke didn't reflect Trump's views. The president of Puerto Rico's Republican Party called the "poor attempt at comedy" by Hinchcliff "disgraceful, ignorant and totally reprehensible."

In Pennsylvania, where Trump campaigned Tuesday night, the Latino eligible voter population has nearly tripled since 2000. More than half of those are Puerto Rican voters.

Trump is unstable, obsessed with revenge: Harris

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

US Democratic presidential candidate Kamala Harris launched a fierce attack on her Republican rival Donald Trump, describing him as "unstable" and "obsessed with revenge" while urging Americans to reject his chaos and division.

Making a passionate appeal to her countrymen, Vice President Harris used the last major speech of her campaign to present herself as a fighter who would usher in a new generation of leadership.

"Donald Trump intends to use the United States military against American citizens who simply disagree with him. People he calls — 'the enemy from within'. This is not a candidate for President who is thinking about how to make your life better," she said.

"This is someone who is unstable, obsessed with revenge, consumed with grievance, and out for unchecked power," Harris said.

Harris, 60, will take on Trump, 78, in the November 5 election.

Addressing thousands of people at the Ellipse in Washington, DC, where Trump told his supporters on January 6, 2021, to "fight like hell," shortly before they ransacked the US Capitol, Harris described the election as an existential choice between the liberties and the "chaos and division."

"He has an Enemies List of people he intends to persecute. He says one of his highest priorities is to set free the violent extremists who assaulted those law enforcement officers on January 6," she said.

Harris said it was time to stop pointing fingers and start locking arms.

"It is time to turn the page on the drama



and conflict, the fear and division. It is time for a new generation of leadership in America," she said.

"And I am ready to offer that leadership as the next President of the United States," she said.

In discussing her policy plans, she cast herself as a president who would expand Medicare to cover home health care, who would back women's reproductive rights and a president who would prize compromise.

"I am someone who has spent most of my career outside of Washington. So I know that not all good ideas come from here. I am not afraid of tough fights against bad actors and powerful interests," she said.

Harris said her mother instilled in her a drive to hold accountable those who use their wealth or power to take advantage of other people.

"The drive to protect hard-working Americans who aren't always seen or heard, and deserve a voice. That is the kind of president I will be," Harris said.

When elected, Harris said she would walk into the Oval Office, with a To-Do list.

"Full of priorities on what I will get done for the American people. And I will work with everyone — Democrats, Republicans, and Independents—to help Americans who are working hard and still struggling to get ahead," she said.

Petrol, diesel commission hiked; no change in prices

PTI ■ NEW DELHI



Commission paid to petrol pump dealers on sale of petrol and diesel has been hiked without change in retail price but rates will go down in several places in states such as Odisha, Chhattisgarh, and Himachal Pradesh on account of intrastate freight rationalisation.

Commission on sale of petrol has been hiked by 65 paise a litre and that on diesel by 44 paise per litre. Alongside, the state-owned firms also rationalised intrastate tariffs which could lead to a reduction in rates of up to Rs 4.5 a litre in some parts.

Indian Oil Corporation (IOC) -- the state-owned market leader -- on October 29 wrote to dealers informing of an increase in dealer margin for all categories.

"Considering the hardship of retail outlets selling less than Rs 170 per kilolitre per month, special care has been taken to alleviate the same," it said. "You will be entitled to an upward revision of dealer margin of approximately Rs 0.65 per litre for petrol and Rs 0.44 a litre of diesel."

This is the first revision in commission paid to dealers in nearly eight years.

All the three state fuel retailers -- IOC, Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd (BPCL) and Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Ltd (HPCL) -- took to X to announce the revision in dealers' commission.

"IndianOil is pleased to announce a revision in the dealer margins (effective from

30th October 2024), following the resolution of a pending litigation. This will have no additional impact on the Retail Selling Price of products," IOC said in a post on X.

BPCL in a post said the revised commission will be effective October 30. This would be "at no additional cost to consumers".

"On the auspicious occasion of Deepawali, HPCL is happy to announce revision in dealer commission effective 30th October 2024. This will have no additional impact on the Retail Selling Price of Petrol & Diesel," HPCL said.

"Thru this revision, HPCL aims to strengthen the ability of our dealer network in delivering superior customer experience and enhanced service standards for millions

of customers who visit our Retail Outlets on a daily basis."

The revision, it said, also aims at delivering happiness to all the committed staff employed at retail outlets and their families.

Dealers commission was last revised on October 5, 2016 when it was raised to Rs 1,868.14 per kilolitre, plus 0.875 per cent of produce billable price on petrol and Rs 1,389.35 per kl plus 0.28 per cent of produce billable price on diesel. This has now gone up to Rs 0.65 per litre on petrol and Rs 0.44 a litre on diesel.

The three firms also rationalised intrastate freight that will result in a cut in petrol and diesel prices in several places in states such as Odisha, Chhattisgarh, and

Himachal Pradesh.

"Further, demonstrating the core value of Nation First, our endeavour to provide affordable petrol and diesel across the length and breadth of the country on a sustained basis has come to fruition. #IndianOil has undertaken intrastate rationalisation of freight which will reduce variation of retail selling price of product across various markets within a state, except in geographies where Model Code of Conduct is in place," IOC said.

BPCL said intra-state freight rationalisation will reduce price disparities in petrol/diesel, benefiting consumers, especially in remote areas.

"Simultaneously, we have also undertaken intrastate rationalisation of freight thus benefiting customers at remote places, far from our supply locations, except in areas under model code of conduct," HPCL said.

Oil Minister Hardeep Singh Puri welcomed the intra-state freight rationalisation which he said will "benefit consumers located at remote locations (far from petrol and diesel depots of oil marketing companies) which will result in a decrease in petrol and diesel prices in several parts of the country. (Decision in poll-bound states and constituencies will be implemented later)".

In a post on X, he cited the example of Kuanpally and Kalimela in Odisha's Malkangiri where petrol price will reduce by Rs 4.69 and Rs 4.55, respectively; and diesel

rates will be cut Rs 4.45 and Rs 4.32, respectively.

Similarly, prices will reduce by Rs 2.09 in petrol price and Rs 2.02 in diesel price in Chhattisgarh's Sukma.

Rates will also be cut in Bijapur, Bailadila, Katelykalyan, Bachel, and Dantewada of the state.

Similarly, prices will also be cut in several places in Arunachal Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Mizoram.

"The dealer commission increase will provide better services to approximately 7 crore citizens who visit our fuel retail outlets in the country everyday, without increasing fuel prices," he said.

"The fulfilment of this demand pending for the last 7 years will bring joy and happiness in the lives of petrol pump dealers and nearly 10 lakh staff working at more than 83,000 petrol pumps across the country."

Ajay Bansal, President of All India Petroleum Dealers' Association, welcomed the decision saying it will help meet a part of the increase in cost of running petrol pumps over the past eight years.

"This revision comes after seven years and eight months. We welcome it," he said, adding that the dealers have withdrawn a legal case they had filed against the oil companies over oil companies enforcing marketing discipline guidelines.

The dealer commission revision has happened following the withdrawal of the court cases.

BRICS+ group's share in global goods exports can overtake G7 by 2026

PTI ■ NEW DELHI



The share of BRICS+ grouping in global merchandise exports can overtake the G7 bloc by 2026, EY India said on Wednesday.

The October edition of EY Economy Watch reveals a significant shift in global trade dynamics, with the BRICS+ group rapidly increasing its share in merchandise exports and imports.

From 2000 to 2023, the BRICS+ group's share of global merchandise exports has risen from 10.7 per cent to 23.3 per cent, marking an impressive increase of 12.6 percentage points.

In contrast, the G7's share has seen a notable decline, dropping from 45.1 per cent to 28.9 per cent. Meanwhile, the rest of the world has maintained a relatively stable share, increasing slightly from 44.2 per cent to 47.9 per cent.

G7 is a grouping of advanced economies -- the United States, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, and the United Kingdom.

This trend highlights the growing prominence of the BRICS+ group in the global trade arena, suggesting a potential shift towards a multipolar global economic landscape, EY India said.

"Given the present trends and the likelihood of several new members joining the BRICS+ group being strong, the share of BRICS+ in global merchandise exports can overtake that of the G7 group by 2026," EY India Chief Policy Advisor DK Srivastava said.

high-tech market, it added.

In addition to trade dynamics, the currencies of BRICS+ nations are gaining traction in the global economy. The Yuan has remained stable, with slight appreciation, while the Indian rupee has faced depreciation, particularly since 2018.

Notably, the share of the US dollar as a global reserve currency has declined from 71.5 per cent in 2000 to 58.2 per cent in 2024, signalling a potential shift toward a more multipolar currency framework.

"As geopolitical tensions continue, the coordinated policies among BRICS+ members may challenge the established dominance of the G7 and the US dollar, paving the way for a new multipolar global economic landscape," Srivastava said.

The BRICS+ group is establishing a platform for conducting international trade and investment transactions, which could become a low-cost alternative to the existing SWIFT platform.

The group is also developing a trade and reserve currency, backed by gold and other select commodities, Srivastava added.

BRICS, consisting of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, has now expanded with five additional members - Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Central to this transformation are India and China, two key members of the BRICS+ alliance. In 2023, they ranked third and first, respectively, globally in terms of purchasing power parity (PPP), both countries are projected to retain these positions by 2030.

China's contribution to BRICS+ exports has surged dramatically, increasing from 36.1 per cent in 2000 to 62.5 per cent in 2023. India has also made significant strides, contributing 7.9 per cent to BRICS+ exports in 2023.

EY's analysis further underscores the increasing importance of high-tech exports from BRICS+ countries.

The group's share of global high-tech exports has risen significantly, from just 5 per cent in 2000 to 32.8 per cent in 2022.

This shift reflects a strategic move toward technology-intensive products, positioning BRICS+ nations as vital players in the global

Businesses expect resounding sales this Diwali

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The roads are jammed and shops chock-a-block as people make beelines for malls and markets to grab just the perfect gift to make the festival of lights a memorable affair for their loved ones.

Dinner sets, beauty hampers, gourmet food baskets, electronic gadgets, and the ever reliable chocolates and mithai, the options are endless for the fervent Diwali shoppers but the task is to balance budgets with big expectations.

Khanna, a homemaker in her 30s, knows it too well as she treads the fine line between temptation and staying within budget.

"The temptation to give innovative and expensive gifts to your near and dear ones is always there but one can't go out of budget too. The key is in finding the right balance," Khanna told PTI.

On her shopping list is an eclectic mix of home decor for friends, smartwatch for her husband, board games for children and home appliances

for house helps.

"Gifting during the Diwali festival comes with a huge responsibility. I guess zeroing in on budget and what to give to whom is never easy, and I doubt if anyone has mastered it," she added.

The festive season has always been the favourite time of the year for businesses and this year is no different as leading players in the online and offline retail sector are expecting "resounding sales".

While Bikano, a leading name in the traditional snack market, has set a mammoth "Rs 300 crores plus" year-end target in the festive season, Surya Roshni, a lighting and consumer durable company, explained how a large proportion of their sales, accounting to about "30 per cent", happens during this period.

"When it comes to the festivities, most people tend to spend more than usual, which is somewhat of a distinct period when the purchasing tendencies flout all the rules," Jitendra Agrawal, ceo of Surya Roshni,



said.

He added that it's not just the urban centres but the semi-urban centres have also been "recording steady growth" in the festive period.

Chirag Gupta, founder and ceo of premium snacking company 4700BC, is upbeat about this year's demand, witnessing a "20-25 per cent" increase for its festive gourmet hampers.

The festive season has set the cash registers ringing for brands selling their wares online. And like previous years, the online sector continues to garner strong demand.

For instance, online marketplace Snapdeal

witnessed a "1.8X growth" in order volumes during the festive sale.

"Women's fashion (2.5 X growth), children's fashion (2X growth) and home decor (1.6X increase) are among the categories that saw significant increase compared to the previous year," a Snapdeal spokesperson said.

In addition to buying physical gifts, shoppers have come to rely on digital gift cards that offer minimum inconvenience and enticing discounts.

Gift cards are not just hassle free for the ones gifting but also allow the recipients the freedom of choice.

Tata Neu's gift card

marketplace, which offers a diverse range of gifting options from high-value electronics to everyday essentials like food and travel, said the category has become very popular on their platform with "over 50 per cent" of existing customers returning frequently to make purchases.

Revering in the festive spirit are also the alcohol brands, with many ditching conventional gift choices such as bed linen or crockery sets for spirits.

Major players in the breweries and distilleries industry, such as DeVANS Modern Breweries Ltd and Radico Khaitan, are witnessing growing demand and bumper sales. They have launched new variants and festive packs for their premium products.

Mocktail brand Swizzle has also recorded a noticeable uptick of 25 per cent in the sales last month.

Last year, according to figures by the excise department, 64 lakh liquor bottles worth about Rs 121 crore were bought by people in Delhi in

just three days running up to Diwali.

"One of the reasons liquor has emerged as a preferred gifting choice during festivals is its strong association with celebration and social gatherings."

"This year, we hope for this trend to continue and will show sustained growth in alcohol sales, fuelled by an expanding customer base and a heightened interest in distinctive beverage experiences," said Amar Sinha, Chief Operating Officer at Radico Khaitan Limited.

Gifting an "experience" in Diwali also has its own loyal takers.

Instead of delivering a package to the loved ones, many are opting to give them a break from the daily hustle by booking an exclusive staycation at five-star hotels and resorts. The Claridges, for instance, has an array of staycation offers at its different properties in picturesque Uttarakhand, with packages starting at Rs 20,000 inclusive of breakfast.

3F Oil Palm inks pact with Karnataka Government to empower farmers

PTI ■ MUMBAI



The 3F Oil Palm on Wednesday said it has signed a pact with the Karnataka government to advance sustainable agriculture in rural communities.

This partnership will provide farmers access to advanced agricultural technologies, training programmes and essential resources to enhance productivity and support Karnataka's growing horticultural sector, according to a statement.

A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed with the Department of Horticulture of Karnataka with an aim to increase palm

oil productivity, create economic growth and empower farmers with sustainable knowledge, offering a model for long-term agricultural success for oil palm cultivators in Udupi, Dakshina Kannada and Sedam taluk of Gulbarga district, the company said in a statement. The company plans to introduce cultivation practices, focusing on sustainable growth and community empowerment.

INBRIEF

VIT AP UNIVERSITY HONOURED WITH BHARAT BLOCKCHAIN AWARD

AMARAVATI: VIT AP University is proud to announce that it has been awarded with Bharat Blockchain Academic Excellence Award 2024, representing the state of Andhra Pradesh.



PRACTICAL EXAMINATION FROM NOVEMBER 04

AMRITSAR: The practical examination for all subjects of Guru Nanak Dev University affiliated colleges for BA/BSc Semester - First, Third and Fifth classes under Guru Nanak Dev University are commencing from November 04, 2024.

GNDU EXTENDS LAST DATE FOR ODL AND ONLINE COURSES

AMRITSAR: Guru Nanak Dev University has extended the last date for admission to courses offered under Open and Distance Learning (ODL) and Online mode until 15th November 2024 as per the guidelines issued by the University Grants Commission- Distance Education Bureau (UGC-DEB) Notification.

BLOOD DONATION CAMP AT GURU NANAK DEV UNIVERSITY

AMRITSAR: Guru Nanak Dev University has extended the last date for admission to courses offered under Open and Distance Learning and Online mode until 15th November 2024 as per the guidelines issued by the University Grants Commission- Distance Education Bureau Notification.

GNDU CELEBRATED THE "DIWALI FESTIVAL - GREEN GLOW FEST"

AMRITSAR: The Department of Education of Guru Nanak Dev University celebrated the "DIWALI FESTIVAL" under the title "GREEN GLOW FEST" with great enthusiasm under the guidance of, Head, Department of Education.



Piyush Goyal meets Schneider Electric CEO; discusses investment plans

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal on Wednesday held a meeting with Peter Herweck, CEO of energy management and automation major Schneider Electric, in Riyadh and discussed the company's investment plans for India.

The minister is in Saudi Arabia to discuss ways to further deepen the strategic partnership between the two countries and explore new avenues of trade, investment and economic cooperation.

"Held a meeting with Mr Peter Herweck, CEO of @SchneiderElec, a global company specialising in energy management and digital automation with a strong presence in our country. Discussed the company's investment plans for India and how it can leverage the nation's talent pool and government support to provide high-tech, sustainable, and energy-



efficient solutions to the world," Goyal said in a post on social media platform X.

In March this year, Schneider Electric said that it will invest Rs 3,200 crore by 2026 to make India its manufacturing hub for domestic sales as well as exports.

As part of this, the company will set up manufacturing facilities for its various products and solutions across India.

Presently, the company has 30 factories across India. The minister also held a

bilateral meeting with William E Ford, Chairman and CEO of the global growth investment firm, General Atlantic.

"Discussed the company's potential to collaborate with India's healthcare sector, especially in consumer-focused health enterprises. Additionally, explored potential for expansion of their investment in Global Capability Centres (GCCs), as well as various other sectors, in the country," Goyal said in another post.

Suzuki to supply electric SUV to Toyota as collaboration expands

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Suzuki Motor Corporation will supply the all-new battery electric vehicle SUV model to Toyota Motor Corporation as the companies further expand their collaboration.

The new model is scheduled to be manufactured at Suzuki Motor Gujarat from the early months of 2025, Suzuki Motor Corporation said in a statement.

Maruti Suzuki India plans to launch the same model next year.

Suzuki has around 58 per cent stake in Maruti Suzuki.

"Suzuki will supply our first BEV (Battery Electric Vehicle) to Toyota globally. I am grateful that the collaboration between the two companies has further deepened in this way," Suzuki President Toshihiro Suzuki said.

While continuing to be competitors, the companies will deepen collaborations toward solving social issues, including the realisation of a



carbon-neutral society through a multi-pathway approach, he added.

Toyota President Koji Sato said by leveraging the BEV unit and platform that the companies have jointly developed, they will take a new step in the collaboration in the field of electrified vehicles.

"This will allow us to deliver various choices that contribute to a carbon-neutral society to customers worldwide. We would like to learn from each other's strengths, compete, and further joint efforts based on a multi-pathway approach," he added.

The BEV unit and platform

adopted for this model were jointly developed by Suzuki, Toyota, and Daihatsu Motor Corporation, utilising each company's strength.

Both Suzuki and Toyota's businesses have their roots in Enshu - the western part of Shizuoka Prefecture - and both companies took on the challenge of switching their businesses from looms to the automobiles industry, the statement said.

Suzuki and Toyota started exploring business partnerships in 2016. The fields of collaboration are diverse and include production and mutual supply of vehicles, and the spread of electrified vehicles.

As a result, the market launch of collaboration vehicles has expanded to Japan, India, Europe, Africa, and the Middle East.

The new development marks the first BEV in the OEM relationship between the two companies. It will be launched worldwide, providing a BEV choice even in the SUV market, which is showing remarkable growth.



India to play international FIFA friendly against Malaysia on Nov 18 in Hyderabad

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Winless in three matches after chief coach Manolo Marquez took charge as head coach, the Indian men's football team will play Malaysia in an international friendly in Hyderabad on November 18, national federation (AIFF) said on Wednesday.

The All India Football Federation (AIFF) had last month announced that the match will be played on November 19 but did specify the venue.

On Wednesday, it advanced the match by a day and also announced the venue. "The FIFA Friendly match between India and Malaysia will be played on November 18, 2024, at Gachibowli Stadium in Hyderabad, Telangana," the AIFF said.

November 11-19 is the last FIFA international match window of this year. In international matches scheduled during a FIFA window, clubs are mandated to release players for national duty.

The Gachibowli Stadium in Hyderabad had also hosted the three-team Intercontinental Cup tournament last month. India had played out a goal-less draw with Mauritius on September 3 before losing 0-3 to Syria, the eventual champions, on September 9 in that tournament.

India then travelled to Vietnam to play an international friendly against the hosts on October 12. The match ended 1-1.

The November 18 match will be Marquez's fourth match in charge of the national team and he would be looking for a win against a lower-ranked team, though it will not be an easy one. Malaysia are ranked 133rd in the FIFA chart while India are at 125th.

The last time the two teams met was in October 2023 in the Merdeka Cup semifinal. India had lost 2-4.

Ronaldo misses late penalty as Al-Nassr ousted from Saudi cup

AP ■ RIYADH (SAUDI ARABIA)

Cristiano Ronaldo missed a stoppage-time penalty and Al-Nassr was eliminated from the King's Cup in a 1-0 loss to Al-Taawoun. The five-time Ballon D'Or winner has yet to win a major trophy since signing for the club almost two years ago.

Playing at the round-of-16 stage of Saudi Arabia's premier knockout competition, Al-Taawoun took the lead on Waleed Al-Ahmad's header with 20 minutes remaining. Al-Ahmad was then whistled for a foul in the area in the 95th minute.

Ronaldo had converted all 18 of his previous penalties for Al-Nassr but this time shot over the bar to the shock of the home crowd of 14,519.

The defeat is the first for Stefano Pioli since the Italian succeeded Luis Castro as head coach in September.

Ronaldo and Al-Nassr still have two chances at silverware this season but are already six points



behind leader Al-Hilal after eight games of the Saudi Pro League and have seven points from three games in the group stage of the Asian Champions League.

"Technically we performed well but we couldn't win the game," Pioli said. "We feel disappointed to be out of the cup. But we still have two trophies to go for and we will give our best in them."



Bopanna-Ebden advance to quarterfinals of Paris masters

PTI ■ PARIS

Veteran Indian tennis player Rohan Bopanna and his Australian partner Matthew Ebden advanced to the quarterfinals of the men's doubles event of the Paris Masters here.

The Indo Australian pair eked out a 6-4 7-6 win over the Brazilian-German combine of Marcelo Melo and Alexander Zverev in one hour 16 minutes at the ATP 1000 event on Tuesday.

Bopanna and Ebden won 91 percent of their first serve and hit four aces in the course of the match.

The third seed Ind-Australian duo made a crucial break in the first game to take the opening set.

The reigning Australian Open champions then had the opportunity to break their opponents in the fifth game of the second set but Melo and Zverev managed to hold with the match heading to a tie-breaker.

Earlier this week, Bopanna and Ebden had clinched a spot in the prestigious season-ending ATP Finals.

Brazil's Atletico Mineiro draws at Argentina's River Plate and reaches Copa Libertadores final



AP ■ BUENOS AIRES

Brazil's Atletico Mineiro drew 0-0 at Argentina's River Plate and reached the final of the Copa Libertadores for the second time.

The team of veteran striker Hulk had beaten its rivals 3-0 in the first leg of the semifinal. The festive atmosphere at the

full Monumental de Nunez Stadium with more than 80,000 fans did not affect the Brazilian side, which had some of the clearest chances to score.

Atletico's rival in the decider will be decided on Wednesday, and it is very likely to be fellow Brazilian side Botafogo. The Rio de Janeiro-based team will play at Uruguay's Penarol after winning the first leg 5-0.

Brazilian teams have won the tournament for the past five years.

The final will be played on Nov. 30 at the same Monumental de Nunez Stadium in Buenos Aires.

Atletico's win also affected the race to be the last South American qualifier for the 2025 Club World Cup, as it eliminated Olimpia of Paraguay from contention.

Olimpia would have advanced to the 32-team tournament in the United States had River Plate won this Copa Libertadores edition. River Plate already qualified based on its consistent results in the continental competition across four seasons.

FIFA will make the draw for the June 15-July 13 tournament on a date in early December it has not yet confirmed.

Alcaraz and Tsitsipas reach 3rd round at Paris Masters but Rublev loses temper and match

AP ■ PARIS

Carlos Alcaraz overcame some crusty moments on his serve to beat Nicolas Jarry 7-5, 6-1 and reach the third round of the Paris Masters. The second-seeded Spaniard was troubled by Jarry's strong forehand at times. The Chilean broke his serve in the ninth game and held for 5-5. But Jarry double-faulted in his next service game to lose the first set.

"It was a little bit complicated, really happy to get through the first set," Alcaraz said. "I have to get used to the speed of the court. It's really fast for me."

Alcaraz saved a break point in the third game of the second set with an ace and broke for a 4-1 lead with a crisp forehand winner.



season-ending ATP Finals for the Turin, Italy, next month. Seventh-seeded Casper Ruud of Norway, a three-time Grand Slam runner-up, started well before losing 7-6 (3), 3-6, 6-4 to unseeded Australian Jordan Thompson.

In an earlier second-round match, sixth-seeded Andrey Rublev lost two tiebreakers and his temper as his hopes of qualifying for the Finals took a hit.

Rublev lost 7-6 (6), 7-6 (5) to Francisco Cerundolo and was so frustrated at one point in the second set that he smashed his racket against his left knee at least seven times in succession and made it bleed.

The Russian player held the eighth and final qualifying place in the race for the Finals and could be overtaken by rivals.

U.S. Open runner-up Taylor Fritz became the fifth player to qualify

for the Finals. The big-serving American reached the season-ending tournament for the second time in three years. The indoor event takes place from Nov. 10-17.

Fritz joined U.S. Open champion Jannik Sinner, Alcaraz, Alexander Zverev and Daniil Medvedev in the field.

Sinner pulled out of the Paris Masters on Monday, citing a virus.

The Italian player is guaranteed to finish the year as No. 1. He was the second high-profile player to pull out following seven-time champion Novak Djokovic.

In remaining first-round play, Holger Rune - who beat Djokovic in the 2022 final - advanced with a 6-4, 6-4 victory over Matteo Arnaldi.

No. 9 seed Alex de Minaur beat Mariano Navone 7-5, 6-1 to stay in

Punjab FC, Chennaiyin FC clash following a string of good run

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

In-form sides Punjab FC and Chennaiyin FC will square off in the Indian Super League here on Thursday as the battle for playoffs spots heats up.

Punjab FC are placed fourth in the table after as many matches while Chennaiyin FC are positioned sixth with two victories and draws each in their five games thus far.

They are arguably two definite contenders for the top-six and hence this fixture carries significance for both teams, giving them an opportunity to move up the standings and develop pressure on the higher-ranked opponents.

So far, across both seasons, Punjab FC have scored 34 goals in the ISL - boiling down to 1.30 strikes per game. Impressively though, only once have they gone back-to-back



matches without finding the back of the net in the competition, which was a sequence of two clashes in December last year.

Given that they didn't score in the previous game, Punjab FC run the risk of equalling that record, something that they would want to avoid especially with the coming game taking place at their home turf.

In their last home match, Punjab FC held their own

to achieve positive outcomes. For instance, they have won seven points from losing situations this season - the joint-most with Kerala Blasters FC.

Contrastingly, Punjab FC have claimed no such points so far, highlighting the need of an early lead for the Marina Machans.

The Owen Coyle-coached side have also emerged as a force to reckon with on the road. They are unbeaten in their last three ISL away games - winning twice and drawing once.

The last time Chennaiyin FC registered a longer such streak was for five games from January-February 2020. Interestingly, they had made it all the way to the final that year, under the tutelage of Coyle.

"We want to follow our style," Punjab FC head coach Panagiotis Dilmeris expressed confidence by saying that he wants his team to take the lead in setting the tempo of the game regardless of the ideas and plans that Chennaiyin FC come up with.

"The main topic before us this season is that we want to make the opponents follow our style of play. That's our biggest concern. Chennaiyin FC have good players and a good style of play but we want to follow our style," Dilmeris added.

Chennaiyin FC and Punjab FC have faced each other twice in the ISL, winning once each.

"I want us to believe we can win every game," Chennaiyin coach Coyle said.

"I want my players to believe that they can win every game. That won't be possible. But the intent should be there always and that's the kind of players I like working with," Coyle added.



Jürgen Klopp defends his decision to join Red Bull after fan backlash

AP ■ BERLIN

Jürgen Klopp has defended his decision to head up Red Bull's group of soccer clubs, saying he "didn't want to step on anybody's toes" after his decision prompted a backlash from fans of his former teams in Germany.

Klopp is taking over as the drinks company's head of global soccer from January in what was widely seen as a surprise move. It will be his first job after leaving Liverpool at the end of last season.

"I didn't want to step on anybody's toes, definitely not, and personally I love all of my ex-clubs," Klopp said in an interview released Wednesday on a podcast hosted by former Real Madrid and Germany midfielder Toni Kroos.

Klopp suggested any decision he made to coach another club would also have disappointed

some fans.

"I really don't know what exactly I could have done for everyone to be happy," he said. Red Bull, and especially its Leipzig team, are widely resented by many German soccer fans, who see the drinks company as an unwelcome corporate presence trying to buy success.

Fans at Klopp's former clubs like Borussia Dortmund have criticized the move, and Mainz fans held up banners this month expressing their disappointment and questioning whether he was "crazy."

Klopp spent 18 years at Mainz as a player and coach before joining Dortmund in 2008, where he went on to lead the club to two Bundesliga titles and the Champions League final.

Klopp said he had never viewed Red Bull's involvement in soccer "so critically," and

suggested it played an important role in bringing high-level club soccer back to the former East Germany with the Leipzig project.

Klopp previously said he planned to take a "long break" from soccer after leaving Liverpool, where he coached his last game in May after nine years with the club.

"I'm 57 so I can still work for a couple more years but I don't really see myself on the sideline (as a coach) for the time being," he said. "But it was always clear that I wasn't going to do nothing at all. And then this story with Red Bull came into the picture, and for me it's outstanding."

Klopp said he saw his Red Bull role primarily as an "advisor" working together with coaches at the clubs backed by the drinks giant. "I always had the feeling that the coach is very, very often the loneliest person at the club," he said.

FIFA announces first Club World Cup sponsor with Chinese electronics firm branding VAR checks

AP ■ SHANGHAI

FIFA finally announced a first sponsor for its revamped Club World Cup on Wednesday in a deal that will brand video review checks at the tournament in the United States next year.

Chinese consumer electronics firm Hisense will have "branding appearing in the video operation room and on pitchside screens," FIFA said in a statement, when match officials study key incidents in the 32-team tournament being played in 11 American cities from June 15 to July 13.

Though no previous FIFA

tournament has had a sponsor for video reviews since the technology was approved before the men's 2018 World Cup in Russia, Hisense was the official "VAR Screen Provider" for this year's European Championship organized by UEFA in Germany.

Less than eight months before the Club World Cup opens - with Lionel Messi's Inter Miami hosting the first game of a tournament that sees Real Madrid, Manchester City and Bayern Munich play their first competitive games in the U.S. - it now has one sponsor but still lacks any broadcast deals.

FIFA's talks for a global streaming deal with Apple+ stalled several months ago and U.S. Sponsors have been more focused on deals for the men's 2026 World Cup that will be co-hosted with Canada and Mexico.

Saudi Arabian sponsors are expected to sign soon and help FIFA President Gianni Infantino fulfil promises to clubs that the tournament's total prize money will run to hundreds of millions of dollars every four years.

FIFA is set to confirm Saudi Arabia as the 2034 World Cup host on Dec. 11.

The new Hisense deal "paves the way for further sponsorship deals for FIFA's new flagship club competition to be announced in the coming weeks," soccer's world body said.

FIFA did not specify the value of the

deal sealed with Infantino at a signing ceremony in Shanghai.

Reviews of referee decisions in key incidents - for goals, penalty awards and red cards - can extend to at least two minutes, despite FIFA's aim during trials in 2016 of completing checks in about 10 seconds.

Hisense first signed up as a FIFA sponsor for the 2018 World Cup and it renewed for the 2022 edition in Qatar.

The television and laptops manufacturer also signed its first sponsor deal with UEFA, when Infantino was still the European soccer body's general secretary, ahead of Euro 2016.

