

**PAGE 6 NATION**  
CM Mamata slams ECI over gross errors in voter lists



**PAGE 7 LAW & JUSTICE**  
SC slams Uttarakhand Govt over grabbing of forest land



**PAGE 10: MONEY**  
Fixed to six risks, earn returns



**PAGE 12 GLOBAL**  
Jaishankar to visit Sri Lanka as special envoy of PM Modi today



**PAGE 16 SPORTS**  
No disappointment over being wicketless, says Vaishnavi Sharma



## PIONEER IN SHORT

**NITISH KUMAR MEETS PM, SHAH**  
Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar on Monday met Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Union Home Minister Amit Shah during his first visit to the national Capital after retaining charge of the eastern State a month ago following the NDA's landslide victory in the Assembly election. Kumar, accompanied by Bihar Deputy Chief Minister and BJP leader Samrat Choudhary and JD(U) leader and Union Minister Rajiv Ranjan Singh, met Modi and Shah separately and is believed to have discussed various issues — both development and political — related to the State. "Chief Minister of Bihar, Shri @NitishKumar, Deputy CM, Shri @samrat4bjp and Union Minister, Shri @LalanSingh\_1 met Prime Minister @narendramodi today," the Prime Minister's Office said on 'X'. Earlier, the chief minister, along with his deputy Choudhary and Union Minister Singh, met Shah at his residence. During their meetings, the Bihar leaders are believed to have discussed various issues related to the development of the State, sources said.

**FULL REPORT ON P5**

# Disorder, insecurity engulfs Bangladesh: Sheikh Hasina

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
New Delhi

Former Bangladesh prime minister Sheikh Hasina has sharply criticised the Muhammad Yunus-led interim administration following the death of student leader Sharif Usman Hadi, alleging that the country has descended into disorder and insecurity since her removal from office.

In an email interview with news agency ANI, Hasina said Hadi's killing was emblematic of what she described as the collapse of law and order under the interim Government. She argued that violence, political instability, and attacks on minorities have intensified, creating internal turmoil and damaging Bangladesh's relations with neighbouring countries, particularly India.

"The killing highlights the lawlessness that began with the fall of my Government and has since worsened.



Violence is now routine, and the interim administration appears either unwilling or incapable of stopping it," Hasina said. "India and the world can see the chaos unfolding — the persecution of minorities and the dismantling of institutions we worked hard to build."

Her remarks followed the death of Sharif Usman Hadi, a prominent youth leader linked to the 2024 July upris-

## CONSULAR, VISA SERVICES TEMPORARILY SUSPENDED

**ASHOKE RAJ** ■ New Delhi

The Bangladesh High Commission in New Delhi has temporarily suspended all consular and visa services due to unavoidable circumstances, according to an official announcement issued on Tuesday. In a brief notice, the High Commission said the suspension will remain in effect until further notice. The decision applies to services offered by the Bangladesh High Commission in New Delhi as well as consular and visa operations in Agartala.

Due to unavoidable circumstances, all consular and visa services from the Bangladesh High Commission in New Delhi are temporarily suspended until further notice.

**CONTINUED ON >> P4**

# New Zealand to invest \$20 billion in India under FTA

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
New Delhi

India and New Zealand on Monday said they have concluded talks on a Free Trade Deal (FTA) that will give India tariff-free access to the island nation's markets, bring in \$20 billion of investment over the next 15 years and help double bilateral trade in the next five years.

This is the seventh agreement finalised by the Modi-led NDA Government. It includes the UAE, Australia, the UK, EFTA bloc, Oman and Mauritius. Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal said that India has so far finalised FTAs with three members of the Five Eyes (FVEY) alliance — Australia, the UK and New Zealand. The five intelligence-sharing network countries are Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK, and the US. India is in the advanced stage of negotiations for a bilateral trade agreement with the US and in the process of resuming talks for a trade agreement with Canada.

## BAD DEAL FOR NEW ZEALAND: WINSTON PETERS

**New Delhi:** With no duty concessions for New Zealand on dairy, vegetables, sugar, copper, aluminium items, New Zealand Foreign Minister Winston Peters has reacted sharply and said New Zealand regrettably opposed to the India FTA and said it is neither free nor fair. "Regrettably, this is a bad deal for New Zealand. It gives too much away, especially on immigration, and does not get enough in return for New Zealanders, including on dairy. While New Zealand is completely opening its market to Indian products under this deal, India is not reducing the significant tariff barriers currently facing our major dairy products. This is not a good deal for New Zealand farmers and is impossible to defend to our rural communities. The India FTA would be New Zealand's first trade deal to exclude our major dairy products — including milk, cheese and butter," he said adding that resentments will be communicated to India's External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar.

The third free-trade agreement this year, following a similar pact with the UK in July and another with Oman earlier this month, will give India more temporary employment visas, easier access for pharmaceuticals and medical devices.

While the agreement will eliminate or reduce tariffs

## The Bystander



# Indians stranded as US cancel interviews

**AGENCIES** ■ New Delhi

Thousands of Indian H-1B visa holders who travelled to India this December for routine visa renewals have found themselves stranded after US consulates unexpectedly cancelled their interviews.

In some cases, interviews have been rescheduled as far out as October 2026. Immigration lawyers have called it a "huge mess," saying that they have never seen such confusion before, with some unsure whether there was any clear plan behind the changes.

According to media reports from the US media agencies, many of these workers, primarily from the tech industry, had planned their travel around the US holiday season, a typical time for visa renewals. Now, they are stuck in India with expired visas, unable to return to the US for their jobs or reunite with their families. The State Department informed applicants that the delays were a result of expanded social media screening implemented under the Trump administration. The policy is designed to better vet visa applicants to ensure national security and public safety, media reported.

Immigration lawyers handling these cases say that dozens of clients have been affected. Some firms report having over 100 workers stranded. These individuals are mostly experienced professionals in their 30s and 40s, with many of them working in high-demand fields like technology. The disruptions have caused major personal and professional setbacks. Some workers who travelled with their children face difficult choices, including whether to keep them out of school or send them back to the US alone.

**CONTINUED ON >> P4**

# HC seeks Gandhis' reply on ED challenge to trial court order

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
New Delhi

The Delhi High Court on Monday asked Congress leaders Sonia Gandhi, Rahul Gandhi and others to respond to a plea by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) challenging the order of the trial court that refused to take cognisance of its chargesheet against them in the National Herald case. Justice Ravinder Dubeja issued notice to the Gandhis and others on the main petition as well as on the ED's application seeking a stay on the December 16 trial court order, which held that cognisance of the agency's complaint in the case was "impermissible in law" as it was not founded on an FIR. The high court listed the matter for further hearing on March 12, 2026.

Besides Gandhis, the High Court issued notices to Suman Dubey, Sam Pitroda, Young Indian, Dotex Merchandise Pvt Ltd and Sunil Bhandari on the ED's plea. While Solicitor General Tushar Mehta represented the ED in the case, senior advocates Abhishek Singhvi and RS Cheema represented the Gandhis.

In its order, the trial court had said that an investigation and the conse-

## NATIONAL HERALD CASE

# HC seeks Gandhis' reply on ED challenge to trial court order



quent prosecution complaint (equivalent to a chargesheet) pertaining to the offence of money laundering is "not maintainable" in the absence of an FIR for the offence mentioned in the schedule to the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA).

It said the agency's probe stemmed from a private complaint filed by BJP leader Subramanian Swamy and not an FIR. During the hearing on Monday, Mehta contended that the trial court has gone "horribly wrong" with its view and this would affect other cases.

**CONTINUED ON >> P4**

## ASSAM ON HIGH ALERT: HIMANTA

Assam is on "high alert" in the wake of the fresh wave of unrest in neighbouring Bangladesh, Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said on Monday. Sarma, speaking to reporters on the sidelines of a programme, said the State Government was closely monitoring the developments in Bangladesh. "We have seen that in Bangladesh, Hindus are being subjected to atrocities and burnt alive. Those who are currently in power in Bangladesh have been talking about including northeast India in their country," the CM claimed.

**FULL REPORT ON P6**



# AI flight returns to Delhi after engine shutdown

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
New Delhi

An Air India Delhi-Mumbai flight was forced to return to the national Capital in less than one hour after taking off due to right engine shutdown, prompting an immediate safety response mid-air.

Flight AI887, operated by a Boeing 777-337 ER aircraft, had departed from Indira Gandhi International Airport at 3.20 am when pilots observed abnormally low oil pressure on the right-hand engine, identified as Engine No 2. The oil pressure subsequently dropped to zero, triggering standard emergency procedures and a decision to return to base.

The aircraft landed safely at Delhi airport, with all passengers and crew disembarking normally. No injuries were reported.

**CONTINUED ON >> P4**

# Punjab officer falls victim to cyber fraud, shoots himself

**MONIKA MALIK** ■ Chandigarh

A retired Inspector General of Police, once among Punjab's senior-most law enforcement officers, is battling for life after allegedly shooting himself at his Patiala residence, leaving behind a chilling 12-page suicide note that speaks of crushing financial distress, a sophisticated cyber fraud amounting to over ₹8 crore, and an anguished plea for justice and protection for his family.

Former IPS officer Amar Singh Chahal allegedly fired at himself using his personal security officer's revolver, sustaining a gunshot wound to the abdomen. He was rushed to a private hospital in Patiala, where his condition remains critical. Police officials said that timely intervention ensured that he was shifted to medical care while he was still alive.

The incident has sent shockwaves through police circles and the wider public, not only because of Chahal's senior rank and long career but also due to the disturbing details he left behind in his final note — a document that reads like a painstaking account of how an experienced officer fell prey to an organised and highly persuasive online fraud network.

According to police sources, Chahal had written a 12-page suicide note addressed primarily to Punjab Director General of Police (DGP) Gaurav Yadav. Copies of the note were also shared with some of his close friends. In it, he described



Ex-IPS officer Amar Singh Chahal

# Great Nicobar Airport: A boost to India's defence, connectivity

**RAJESH KUMAR** ■ New Delhi

Planned as a dual-use facility, the Modi Government has prepared an ambitious plan for the construction of a dual-use greenfield international airport at Great Nicobar that will play an important role in the country's national security while improving connectivity in the Indian Ocean Region. Great Nicobar is the southernmost and largest of the Nicobar Islands.

According to the Detailed Project Report (DPR) prepared for the strategic airport, it will be developed as a dual-use military airfield



with the control of the airside and Air Traffic Control with the Indian Navy and civil apron control and associated passenger-related facilities with the Airports Authority of India (AAI). The DPR also mentioned the Great Nicobar Development Plan, which is a massive infrastructure plan envisaged by the Government and includes a major trans-shipment port, airport and future strategic defence for the southern tip of Great Nicobar Island.

The population of Great Nicobar Island is projected to reach around 6.5 lakh by 2050. Of this, about 3.25 lakh is expected during Phase 1 between 2025 and 2040, with another 4 lakh added in Phase 2 from 2041 to 2055. By 2075, the population is estimated to rise to 13-15 lakh. The broader development plan includes hotels, resorts, dining and retail facilities concentrated in coastal urban hubs.

The current population of the island is only around 6,500. The island's marine and forest ecosystems are expected to support eco-tourism and scientific

research, alongside economic activity. The documents estimate that investments linked to the airport, a proposed trans-shipment hub, and tourism facilities could create about 1,05,000 direct jobs by 2050. A further 1,57,700 jobs are expected through indirect employment in services and support sectors.

Located near the crucial Six Degree Channel, one of the world's busiest maritime trade routes, the airport is projected to enhance India's surveillance and response capabilities across the eastern Indian Ocean.

**CONTINUED ON >> P4**

## THAILAND, CAMBODIA TO RESUME TALKS

Thailand and Cambodia will resume talks later this week to work toward a more durable ceasefire along their border, Thailand's foreign minister said on Monday, stressing that progress depends on detailed bilateral negotiations rather than public declarations that internationalise the dispute. A ceasefire agreement in October was rushed to ensure it could be witnessed by US President Donald Trump and lacked sufficient details to ensure the deal to end the armed conflict would hold, Thai Foreign Minister Sihasak Phuangketkeow said Monday after an Association of Southeast Asian Nations foreign ministers' meeting in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. While Cambodia has publicly said it is ready for an unconditional ceasefire, Bangkok never received any direct proposal and Thailand believed such statements were aimed at increasing international pressure rather than resolving the issue, Sihasak said following the meeting that was arranged to seek ways to end the crisis.

**FULL REPORT ON P13**

## High-speed car rams four vehicles in Okhla

ABHINAV KUMAR JHA  
New Delhi



A high-speed crash involving a luxury electric SUV on a busy service road in Okhla Industrial Area on Friday afternoon left the driver injured and at least four vehicles damaged. Police said an Audi Q8 e-tron lost control on the service road in front of A-230, Okhla Phase-I, and rams into three parked cars before crashing into the rear of a stationary truck.

The incident was reported at 12:41 pm, when multiple PCR calls alerted the police to a collision involving several vehicles. The driver of the Audi was the only person injured in the accident. No pedestrians or occupants of the parked vehicles were hurt, police said, as all the vehicles struck by the Audi were unoccupied at the time.

The Deputy Commissioner of Police (South-East) said that preliminary findings indicate a loss of control at high speed. "An Audi Q8 e-tron lost control on the service road and hit three parked vehicles before coming to a halt after crashing into a stationary truck. The driver was injured and shifted to the AIIMS Trauma Centre. No other person was injured," the DCP said.

According to police, the Audi, bearing registration number HP-38J-0996, first hit three parked cars: HR-51CF-6467, DL-3CDB-4682 and DL-3CCW-8548.

The impact was strong enough to push the vehicle forward, where it finally slammed into a truck with registration number DL-1MB-3734, which was parked along the roadside.

Local residents and shop owners said they heard a loud crash and rushed out, fearing a major accident. "The sound was very loud. We thought several people

must have been injured. Luckily, no one was standing near the parked cars," said a factory worker from the area. A PCR van arrived at the scene within minutes and transported the injured driver to the AIIMS Trauma Centre. Hospital officials said the driver is stable and undergoing treatment. The extent of his injuries was not immediately disclosed.

Police said a case is being registered against the driver of the Audi under relevant sections of law. The damaged vehicles have been removed from the road to restore traffic flow. Investigators are examining CCTV footage from nearby establishments to reconstruct the sequence of events and determine the exact cause of the crash. "Speeding appears to be a factor, but we are checking all aspects, including road conditions and possible mechanical issues," an officer said.

The accident has again drawn attention to safety issues on service roads in industrial areas, where high-end vehicles often speed through narrow stretches

meant for local traffic. Traffic experts say these roads are particularly dangerous due to parked vehicles, pedestrians and sudden turns. "Service roads are not designed for high-speed driving. When powerful cars are driven rashly on such stretches, even a small error can lead to a major crash," said a senior traffic official.

Residents have demanded stricter enforcement and speed monitoring in Okhla's industrial pockets, especially during peak working hours. "Heavy vehicles, parked cars and workers all share the same road here. Speeding cars are a daily risk," said a local trader.

Delhi Police said action will be taken based on the outcome of the investigation. Officials also appealed to motorists to follow speed limits and drive cautiously, particularly on service roads and industrial stretches. The incident adds to a growing list of crashes in the city linked to overspeeding, prompting renewed calls for tighter checks and better road safety measures.

## CAQM ratifies revised GRAP, flags key pollution drivers

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
New Delhi

The Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM) on Monday ratified a revised Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP). This was done in line with the Supreme Court directions. The commission reviewed winter enforcement in Delhi-NCR and flagged major gains in curbing farm fires. However, it also warned that construction dust and vehicle emissions remain key pollution drivers.

The decisions were taken at the 26th meeting of the full Commission, chaired by CAQM Chairperson Rajesh Verma. The panel also adopted its annual report and audited accounts for 2024-25. These steps set the framework for tighter, stage-wise action through the rest of the winter.

The revised GRAP, approved on November 21 and now formally ratified, ensures that measures under higher stages automatically subsume actions under earlier stages.

The Commission reviewed on-ground implementation this season, including steps taken under different GRAP stages and additional measures under Stages I and II.

These include uninterrupted power supply to curb diesel generator use, traffic decongestion, public advisories, and augmentation of

public transport services during high-pollution days.

CAQM also reviewed compliance with recent court orders on end-of-life vehicles. Following the Supreme Court's December 17 order, protection from coercive action continues for BS-IV and newer vehicles, while enforcement against highly polluting BS-III and older vehicles has resumed. Agencies were directed to ensure strict compliance.

A major highlight was the review of paddy stubble burning in 2025. The Commission noted an overall reduction of about 92 per cent in NCR compared to 2021, attributing the decline to integrated monitoring, enforcement, and interstate coordination.

Punjab, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh were directed to prepare state action plans for monitoring and enforcement during the 2026 wheat residue burning season, based on which statutory directions will be issued.

The Commission also ratified an office order constituting an expert committee to address vehicular emissions, under the chairmanship of Prof. Ashok Jhunjhunwala of IIT Madras.

The committee will assess emissions and health impacts, suggest clean mobility strategies, review EV readiness, and recommend regulatory measures.



Vehicles plying on a road as a layer of smog shrouds the area on a winter day in New Delhi on Monday

On fleet transition, CAQM discussed amendments to Direction number 94 to accelerate the adoption of zero-emission vehicles by aggregators, delivery service providers, and e-commerce firms. After considering stakeholder inputs, the Commission proposed transitional

provisions allowing induction of BS-VI petrol two-wheelers into existing fleets till December 31, 2026, while maintaining restrictions on induction of conventional internal combustion engine vehicles in other specified categories from January 1, 2026.

Construction and demolition (C&D) waste management also drew sharp focus. The Commission said dust from C&D activities remains a major contributor to PM10 and PM2.5 levels in Delhi-NCR. Municipal bodies and development authorities were asked to strengthen supervision, ensure dust abatement, set up collection and processing facilities, verify waste disposal before granting construction permissions, and improve environmental management of demolition waste.

The Enforcement Task Force briefed the Commission on closures and resumptions of industrial units and the status of prosecutions. CAQM stressed sustained vigilance and coordinated enforcement across sectors during the winter, when dispersion conditions worsen.

Officials said the Commission will closely monitor compliance and hold follow-up reviews. Implementing agencies are committed to regular assessment of air quality measures and strict action under GRAP.

With winter pollution risks persisting, CAQM said the emphasis will remain on prevention, rapid response, and accountability, especially on vehicles, construction dust, and waste burning, while scaling up clean mobility and public transport to cut emissions at the source.

## VHP, Bajrang Dal to hold protest over killing of Hindu in Bangladesh

ASHOKE RAJ  
New Delhi

The Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and Bajrang Dal have announced a peaceful protest at Bangladesh High Commission in New Delhi on December 23 to condemn the killing of a Hindu youth in Bangladesh, an incident that has sparked widespread outrage within the Hindu community.

According to a press invitation issued by the VHP,

the demonstration will take place at 11:00 am outside the Bangladesh High Commission in New Delhi. The protest aims to demand justice for the victim and to draw attention to concerns over the safety of religious minorities in Bangladesh.

The VHP stated that the killing was a "brutal and inhuman act" and described it as not merely the murder of an individual but an assault on human rights, religious

freedom, and the basic values of a civilised society.

Organisers noted that this is not the first time the issue has been raised.

Earlier protests had already been registered, and the matter was escalated through diplomatic correspondence, urging authorities to take cognisance of the incident and ensure accountability.

However, the groups said they were compelled to

intensify their outreach due to the absence of satisfactory action.

The upcoming protest will be organised under the joint banner of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Bajrang Dal. Organisers have emphasised that the demonstration will remain peaceful and focused on seeking justice for the victim's family.

Surendra Kumar Gupta, State Minister of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad for the

Indraprastha (Delhi Province), has appealed to media organisations to provide coverage of the protest to amplify the issue at a national and international level.

The organisers said sustained media attention is essential to highlight what they described as an international human rights concern and to press for meaningful action through appropriate diplomatic and legal channels.

## Police constable prevents tragedy in Mohan Garden fire

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
New Delhi

A Delhi Police constable's fearless action averted a major tragedy in West Delhi's Mohan Garden area after a gas cylinder caught fire inside a four-storey residential building. The incident took place on the night of December 20, when a PCR call was received around 9.39 pm reporting a cylinder blast and fire in a building under the jurisdiction of Mohan Garden police station. The building houses 16 families, and residents were at risk as flames spread rapidly inside a kitchen on one of the floors.

Before the fire brigade or senior police officers could reach the spot, Constable Anil Mahla, the beat officer of the area, rushed inside the

building and took control of the situation. Ignoring the danger to his own life, he pulled the burning LPG cylinder out of the kitchen and doused the fire, preventing it from spreading to other floors. Deputy Commissioner of Police (Dwarka) Ankit Singh said the constable's action saved several lives. "Constable Anil showed exceptional courage. Without waiting for the fire brigade, he acted on instinct and removed the burning cylinder. His timely decision prevented a major disaster in a building where many families live," the DCP said.

According to police, the information about the fire reached the police control room first, following which SHO Mohan Garden Inspector Mukesh Antil was alerted



immediately. While rushing to the spot, the SHO contacted the local beat staff to assess the situation on the ground.

Constable Anil reached the building within minutes. By then, flames had engulfed the kitchen area and thick smoke had begun to fill the building. Police said evacuating all residents immediately was

difficult due to the narrow staircases and panic among residents.

Realising the urgency, the constable decided to act alone. He entered the kitchen, grabbed the burning cylinder, and dragged it out of the building. He then managed to control the fire, reducing the risk of an explo-

sion. Residents later told police that panic had spread quickly and many feared a blast. "We thought the cylinder would explode any moment. His action saved all of us," said a resident of the building.

Fire brigade teams reached the spot later and ensured that there was no residual fire or gas leakage. No injuries were reported in the incident, police said. Senior police officers said the constable's action reflected the spirit of frontline policing.

"This was a moment where seconds mattered. His bravery and presence of mind made the difference," a senior officer said. Delhi Police officials said such incidents highlight the risks faced by beat staff, who are often the first responders in emergencies.

## Govt to launch DARPAN 2.0 dashboard to track schemes

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
New Delhi

The Delhi Government is set to roll out DARPAN 2.0, a unified digital dashboard that will track the performance of Government schemes and services in real time, officials said on Sunday. The platform aims to improve transparency, speed up decision-making, and fix gaps in service delivery by bringing data from multiple departments onto a single screen.

Developed by the National Informatics Centre (NIC) under the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, DARPAN 2.0 will give senior officials and

departments a consolidated view of key programmes. It will allow them to monitor progress, spot delays early, and compare performance across departments using common indicators.

Delhi's IT Minister Pankaj Kumar Singh said the new system will help the Government move towards data-driven governance. "DARPAN 2.0 will break data silos and give real-time insights into how departments are performing. This will help officers act faster and ensure schemes reach people in a transparent manner," he said. At present, many departments maintain separate management information systems.

Officials say this leads to fragmented data and delays in action. DARPAN 2.0 seeks to address this by integrating multiple MIS platforms through secure application programming interfaces. The result will be a single, visually simple dashboard that shows the status of schemes at a glance.

The platform will track department-wise Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). These will include progress against targets, timelines, and service delivery benchmarks. Live tracking tools and early-warning indicators will flag delays, bottlenecks, or underperformance before problems grow larger.

**GOVT. OF ASSAM**  
**OFFICE OF THE CHIEF ENGINEER: PW (HEALTH & EDUCATION) DEPARTMENT: CHANDMARI, GUWAHATI-3**  
No Tech-I (H&E)/95/2025/52

**PRESS NOTICE (RETENDER)**

The Chief Engineer (Health & Education), PW(Health & Education) Deptt., Chandmari, Guwahati-3 on behalf of the Governor of Assam, invites fresh Bids online EPC Mode-1 e-tenders in two bid system (Technical and Financial) on **Engineering, Procurement and Construction (EPC) Mode-1** basis from eligible firms contractors of repute having experience in similar nature of work, for the following works.

Details of the bid may be seen at e-procurement website i.e. [www.assamtenders.gov.in](http://www.assamtenders.gov.in)

The bidders must be enrolled with e-tendering web-portal [www.assamtenders.gov.in](http://www.assamtenders.gov.in)

All terms and conditions will be as per the Bidding Documents. The Press Notice will be a part of the Bidding Document

Sl. No.	Package No.	Name of work	Bid Value (Rs. in Lakh)	Completion Period	Bid Security	Cost of Bid
1	Package-26 (Retender-2)	Construction of 100 Secondary Schools in 35 Districts of Assam under RIDF-XXXI (2025-26) for Sukdal High School under Mogiaon DTBD	Rs 411.8125	18 (Eighteen) Months	2% of Bid value for General 1% of Bid Value for Reserve category	Rs 8300.00
2	Package-35 (Retender-1)	Construction of 100 Secondary Schools in 35 Districts of Assam under RIDF-XXXI (2025-26) for Belsor Higher Secondary School under Naibari DTBD	Rs 411.28125	18 (Eighteen) Months	2% of Bid value for General 1% of Bid Value for Reserve category	Rs 8300.00
3	Package-42 (Retender-2)	Construction of 100 Secondary Schools in 35 Districts of Assam under RIDF-XXXI (2025-26) for Kakopthar HS School under Tinsukia DTBD	Rs.408.19476	18 (Eighteen) Months	2% of Bid value for General. 1% of Bid Value for Reserve category	Rs 8200.00
4	Package-43 (Retender-2)	Construction of 100 Secondary Schools in 35 Districts of Assam under RIDF-XXXI (2025*26) for Kajojan High School under Tinsukia DTBD)	Rs. 408.16805	18 (Eighteen) Months	2% of Bid value for General. 1% of Bid Value for Reserve category	Rs 8200.00

The Bid price may vary at the time of detail tendering for which no claim will be admissible  
The Work will be allotted only after receiving Government approval.

Sd/-  
**Chief Engineer (Health & Education), PW(H&E) Deptt., Chandmari, Guwahati-3**

DIPR/C/PIO/703/23-Dec-25

**PUBLIC NOTICE**

It is informed to the public at large that my client Mr. Karan Singh authorized representative of SBI RACPC South Extension New Delhi. That the original Documents of Borrower namely Mr. Mukesh and Mrs. Ritu Dhingra, such as Flat Buyer Agreement dated 30.10.2013 executed between M/s Ramprastha Sare Realty Pvt Ltd and Mukesh Sharma & Mrs. Ritu Dhingra have been lost/misplaced and are untraceable. The FIR/ Lost report to this effect has already been lodged dated 08.12.2025 with LR no.3410074/2025. If any person's has/have any right, title, interest, claim or demand of any nature whatsoever with respect to the above stated property, he/she is hereby required to make the same known in writing along with the documentary proof thereof to the undersigned within 15 days from the date of publication hereof post expiration Any claim(s) or objection(s) if raised or received shall be treated as null & void and such claims.

**Brijesh Tiwari (Advocate) Ch No. K-678, Near Tehsil Building, Delhi High Court, Tis Hazari Courts, Delhi-110054, (M): 7011083614**

**GOVT. OF ASSAM**  
**OFFICE OF THE SUPERINTENDING ENGINEER, PWRD, MORIGAON ROAD CIRCLE, MORIGAON**  
No.SE/MRC/TB/NIT/01/2023-24/75

**PRESS NOTICE INVITING TENDER**

The Superintending Engineer, PWRD, Morigaon Road Circle, Morigaon on behalf of the Governor of Assam invites bid from APWD appropriate registered contractors for 1(One) no. of Balance Work under the PMGSY, **Package No. AS- 17-231** for the year 2019-20 amounting to Rs.2,27,73,704.00. Details may be seen at website <https://pmsytendersasm.gov.in/> and also at the office of the under signed during office hours.

Sd/-  
Superintending Engineer, PWRD, Morigaon Road Circle, Morigaon.

DIPR/CF/PIO/3205/23-Dec-25

**PUBLIC NOTICE**

Ms. Priyanka Sablok has approached ICICI Bank Ltd., Laxmi Nagar, Delhi (Bank) to avail a loan for purchase of Entire Third Floor with roof rights of Property No. F-26-B, (100 sq. yards), Moti Nagar, New Delhi from Mr. Ishaan Srivastava, who has represented that he is the absolute & sole owner of the said property, having inherited from his mother Mrs. Bharti Srivastava (being her only Class-I (legal heir), who was owner by virtue of Sale Deed dated 30.11.2016 (Doc. No. 11142). If anybody, person, body corporate has any right, lien or claim whatsoever on the said Property by way of inheritance or otherwise, then he/she/it may contact the undersigned with documentary proof of claim within 10 days of publication of this notice, otherwise it shall be deemed that either there are no claims of the same have been waived off. No claim or objection shall be entertained hereafter and Bank shall proceed to advance the loan on mortgaging of the said property.

**Amit Kumar (Advocate) GNA & Associates D-28, Jangpura Extension, New Delhi-110014.**

**GOVERNMENT OF ASSAM**  
**OFFICE OF THE CHIEF ENGINEER, P.W.D.(BUILDING), ASSAM, CHANDMARI, GUWAHATI - 781003**  
No. 1/1363695/2025

**Press Notice**

The Chief Engineer, P.W.D (Building), Assam, on behalf of the Governor of Assam invites Bids for Technical & Financial offer as per Request for Proposal from qualified and experienced firms (criteria as per RFP document) for providing Project Management Consultancy Services for the following work:

Sl. No.	Name of Work	Approx. Value of the project	Approx. PMC Value
1	PMC services for redevelopment of RG Baruah Sports Complex, Guwahati, Kamrup, Assam	Rs 725 Cr	Rs 13.17 Cr including GST

- The details/RFP document may be seen in e-procurement portal website i.e. [www.assamtenders.gov.in](http://www.assamtenders.gov.in)
- The validity period of the Bid shall be 180 days from the date of submission.
- The Bidders must be registered with the E-tendering system (ETS) of the Govt. of Assam. (website: <http://assamtenders.gov.in>)
- The Chief Engineer P.W.D (Building), Assam reserves the right to accept or reject any or all proposals without showing any reasons what so ever.

**Chief Engineer (Building), PW(B&NH) Deptt., Chandmari, Guwahati-3, Assam**

DIPR/C/PIO/702/23-Dec-25

## Government to seal polluting units, warns offices on WFH rules

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
New Delhi

Stepping up its efforts to combat air pollution in the national Capital, the Delhi Government on Monday said it will seal polluting industries without further notice and warned of stringent action against private offices flouting work-from-home (WFH) directives.

Announcing this, Environment Minister Manjinder Singh Sirsa said the enforcement drive was further intensified across Delhi from Monday to identify and act against polluting industries. Units found violating air-pollution norms will be sealed immediately without further notice. Industries failing to apply for OEMC certification by the December 31 deadline will also face strict action.

The Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) and Delhi Pollution Control Committee (DPCC) are jointly identifying illegal and unauthorised industrial units operating within the city. All such units are liable for closure.

"The Delhi Government is ensuring 100 per cent compliance to protect the city's air," the Minister added.

According to officials, the DPCC has ordered the closure of 411 industrial units found operating without mandatory consent and causing visible air and water pollution across the national Capital.

A joint inspection of 28 notified industrial areas and 27 redevelopment areas is



being carried out the DPCC, along with the Revenue Department and the Delhi State Industrial and Infrastructure Development Corporation (DSIIDC).

During the survey, a total of 1,586 units in notified industrial areas were inspected till December 20, of which 232 were found operating without the consent of DPCC and causing visible pollution. In redevelopment areas, 1,102 units were inspected and 179 were found violating pollution norms, according to officials.

Based on the findings, DPCC issued closure orders on December 21 to all 411 non-compliant units, an official said. He said the three agencies launched the inspection following the directions of Delhi Environment and Forest Minister Manjinder Singh Sirsa. The survey, which began on December 9, is still underway.

Meanwhile, Sirsa addressing a press conference stated that more than 2.12 lakh new PUC certificates were issued following the strict implementation of GRAP-IV measures over the past four days. Making these assertions in a news conference, he also noted that weather conditions are expected to improve by Tuesday as the impact of a western disturbance recedes.

He said 2,12,332 new Pollution Under Control (PUC) certificates were issued by late night on December 16. During the same period, approximately 10,000 vehicles failed the mandatory emission tests.

Sirsa announced an intensified enforcement drive across the Capital, saying polluting factories and industries will now be sealed without further notice. "Action will also be taken

against industries that have not applied for the mandatory Online Consent Management (OCM)," he added. The minister warned private companies to comply with the 50 per cent staff capacity and work-from-home norms. He said such offices would face strict penalties, while polluting industrial units would be shut down.

Currently, Deputy Commissioners and officials from the Delhi Pollution Control Committee (DPCC) are conducting drives to close illegal industries immediately, he said, adding that other mitigation measures include city-wide road-washing operations and the clearing of garbage through biominning.

Sirsa said the chief minister has directed authorities to ensure Delhi becomes dust-free the coordination of multiple local bodies and agen-

cies. Stating that strict restrictions enforced under GRAP-4 over the past four days have started delivering visible results, with measurable improvement in air quality, the minister informed that the Government is also upgrading all PUC centres with modern, high-capacity equipment to reduce delays and ensure accurate emission testing.

Additionally, a third-party inspection mechanism is being introduced to strengthen credibility and transparency in certification. Technical teams from the Transport Department are conducting continuous on-ground monitoring to prevent malpractice, Sirsa added.

Sirsa also informed that round-the-clock cleaning and washing of roads is being undertaken to suppress dust. Simultaneously, large-scale bio-mining operations continue at landfill sites, with nearly 35,000 metric tonnes of waste being scientifically processed and removed every day. These efforts are aimed at dismantling the legacy waste mountains and reducing dust-related pollution.

The Minister announced significant progress in the plan to rejuvenate the city's water bodies, many of which have disappeared or become encroached over the years. The government's target is to revive at least 50 per cent of the long-vanished water bodies, restoring them to their original ecological form in coming days.

## Zero tolerance on pollution sources: CM

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
New Delhi

Delhi Chief Minister Rekha Gupta on Monday reiterated that the Government will follow a zero-tolerance policy against all sources contributing to pollution and announced key decisions, including no waiver of challans, exploring pooled and shared electric bus services and rationalising Delhi Transport Corporation (DTC) bus routes.

She said her Government has taken a series of decisive steps to curb rising pollution levels in the national Capital and ensure a cleaner environment. A high-level review meeting was held on Monday to assess pollution control measures and take effective decisions like issuing new guidelines for e-rickshaws, strict enforcement of Pollution Under Control (PUC) norms without any waiver of challans, exploring pooled and shared electric bus services in Delhi-NCR, issuing new guidelines for e-rickshaws and rationalising Delhi Transport Corporation (DTC) bus routes.

Senior officials from the Environment and Transport Departments, the Delhi Pollution Control Committee (DPCC), Public Works Department (PWD) and Delhi Traffic Police, along with Environment Minister Manjinder Singh Sirsa, were present at the meeting.

The Chief Minister took a strict view of vehicles operating without valid PUC certificates. Under existing provisions, polluting vehicles attract a penalty of Rs 10,000. It was observed that in several cases, vehicle



owners approach Lok Adalats to get these fines reduced, which weakens the deterrent effect.

Rekha Gupta made it clear that henceforth, no pollution challan will be waived under any circumstances. She directed officials to pursue all necessary legal options, including approaching courts if required. She emphasised that the government's objective is not revenue generation but ensuring clean and healthy air for citizens.

To promote pollution-free mobility through private sector participation, the Delhi Government will soon initiate discussions with companies such as Ola and Uber. The proposal aims to explore the operation of pooled and shared electric or non-polluting buses in the Delhi-NCR region. Such initiatives are expected to reduce dependence on private vehicles and strengthen environmentally friendly public transport. The Chief Minister stated that achieving zero emissions in the Capital remains a key priority of the government.

Unregulated movement of e-rickshaws has emerged as a major cause of traffic

congestion, leading to higher fuel consumption and increased pollution.

To address this issue, the Delhi Government will soon issue comprehensive new guidelines for e-rickshaws. These guidelines will regulate their operational areas and routes to ensure smoother traffic flow and better road management.

To further strengthen public transport, the Government has decided to rationalise DTC bus routes. The Chief Minister said that DTC services must reach every area and neighbourhood of Delhi. Scientific and rational route planning will improve last-mile connectivity and encourage citizens to opt for public transport instead of private vehicles.

She directed all concerned departments to work in close coordination and implement these decisions with immediate effect. She stated that the Delhi Government is fighting a comprehensive and multi-dimensional battle against pollution and will not hesitate to take stringent measures to protect the environment. The Government remains fully committed to making Delhi clean, green, and pollution-free.

## Air quality remains very poor with AQI at 373

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
New Delhi

A thick grey haze hung over the Capital on Monday while the air quality settled in the 'very poor' category, with the 24-hour average AQI recorded at 373.

Out of the 39 functional monitoring stations, 12 logged readings in the 'severe' category, while 27 recorded 'very poor' air quality.

Among the stations in the severe zone, Anand Vihar emerged as the most polluted, logging an Air Quality Index (AQI) of 425, according to the CPCB's SAMEER app.

Delhi also recorded the worst air quality in the National Capital Region, followed by Noida at 366, according to Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB).

Data from the Decision Support System for Air Quality Management showed that vehicular emission was the largest contributor to pollution, accounting for 15.7 per cent of the total share.

This was followed by industries in Delhi and peripheral areas, contributing 7.1 per cent, residential sources 3.8 per cent, construction activities 2.0 per cent, and waste burning 1.3 per cent.

Among NCR districts, Gurugram contributed 8.6 per cent, Jhajjar 8.5 per cent,



A man walks wearing a mask on a smoggy and winter day at Kartavya Path in New Delhi on Monday

pollution levels dipped to the 'poor' category, before returning to the red zone on December 11 and remaining there since, according to CPCB data.

Apart from those two days, Delhi air has largely remained 'very poor', with AQI levels hovering above 300 for most of the month. Earlier in the day, thick haze shrouded the city, with morning AQI readings remaining in the very poor category at 366.

The AQI at seven air quality monitoring stations was 'severe', with Narela logging the highest reading at 418.

Meanwhile, the India Meteorological Department said Delhi recorded a maximum temperature of 21.8 degrees Celsius, 1.1 notches above normal, and a minimum temperature of 11.0 degrees Celsius, 3.5 degrees above normal. Relative humidity stood at 100 per cent at 8.30 am and 79 per cent at 5.30 pm, it said.

The IMD had forecast a minimum temperature of 10 degrees Celsius, and a maximum of 22 degrees Celsius, accompanied by moderate fog.

It also predicted a prevailing average wind speed of less than 10 km per hour, unfavourable for the dispersion of pollutants, likely prolonging the spell of poor air quality in the Capital.

Bharatpur 5.1 per cent, Faridabad 4.8 per cent, Sonapat 4.6 per cent, Ghaziabad 2.7 per cent, and Rohtak 2.0 per cent, the data showed.

According to the Air Quality Early Warning System, Delhi's air quality is likely to remain in the very poor category from Tuesday

to Thursday, and is expected to oscillate between very poor and severe levels over the next six days. This December, the air quality has persistently remained in the red zone with AQI readings above 300 from December 1 to 8.

The city saw brief relief for two consecutive days when



A layer of smog engulfing Delhi-NCR, during a cold winter evening on Monday

## No respite from hazardous air in December

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
New Delhi

There was little respite for residents from the Capital's hazardous air this December, as the city has not recorded even a single day of 'moderate' air quality, while nearly 20 days so far have seen pollution levels hover in the red zone.

The 'moderate' category—marked by Air Quality Index (AQI) readings below 200—has not been recorded at all

this December. In contrast, during the same period last year, the national Capital had recorded six days of moderate air quality.

Overall, December last year saw eight days with AQI levels below 200, data from the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) showed. Last December also recorded eight 'poor' air quality days, with AQI readings above 200, and six days of 'severe' readings, when levels crossed the 400-mark.

Between December 1 and 7 last year, Delhi's air quality largely remained in the 'moderate' to 'poor' range, except for one day when it deteriorated to the 'very poor' zone above 300, before improving again the next day to the 'moderate' category.

This December, however, the air quality has persistently remained in the red zone with AQI readings above 300 from December 1 to 8. The city saw brief relief for two consecutive days when pol-

lution levels dipped to the 'poor' category, before returning to the red zone on December 11 and remaining there since, the data showed.

On Monday, the city recorded a 24-hour average AQI of 373 at 4 pm, once again in the 'very poor' category, according to CPCB data.

The Capital's air quality is likely to remain in the 'very poor' category over the next six days, according to the Air Quality Early Warning System.

## Vehicle curbs hit market sales, footfall drops

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
New Delhi

Markets across the national Capital have reported a decline in sales and footfall following the ban on non-BS VI vehicles and the enforcement of the 'No PUC, No Fuel' rule, with traders saying fewer buyers from the National Capital Region (NCR) are visiting Delhi's key shopping hubs.

Sadar Bazaar, one of Delhi's largest wholesale markets that largely depends on retailers from neighbouring NCR towns, has seen sales fall by around 30 to 35 per cent due to reduced movement, Paramjit Singh Pamma, chairman of the Sadar Bazaar Association, said.

Pamma said that buyers from outside Delhi have limited their visits since the restrictions came into force.

"Around 30 to 35 per cent of our sales have been affected as retailers from NCR are coming less frequently," he said.

With the festive season underway, traders said the impact is being felt more sharply. "We have Christmas and New Year stock piled up, but the number of buyers is much lower compared to last year and overall footfall has dropped by nearly 35 per cent," Pamma added.

Similar concerns were raised by traders at Sarojini Nagar market, a popular destination for winter shopping.

Ashok Randhawa, president of the Sarojini Market Association, said the crowd has thinned over the past week.

"There has been about a 40 per cent reduction in footfall. Winter clothes that used to sell out in a few days



Shoppers browsing through a stall selling Christmas trees, decorations and festive figurines ahead of Christmas at INA market in New Delhi

are now lying unsold as customers from NCR are not coming," he said.

Traders in south Delhi markets have also reported a slowdown.

Kuldeep Kumar president of the Lajpat Nagar Market Association said the curbs have affected both shoppers and small traders. "Footfall has gone down

noticeably in the last few days and this has had a direct impact on daily sales especially the clothing market," Kumar said.

The curbs come as authorities stepped up pollution control measures amid worsening air quality.

Since Thursday, private vehicles from outside Delhi that do not meet BS-VI emission standards have been barred from entering the city.

In addition, the "No PUC, No Fuel" rule has come into force, under which fuel stations are prohibited from dispensing fuel to vehicles without a valid Pollution Under Control (PUC) certificate.

The enforcement is being carried out using automatic number plate recognition cameras, voice alerts at petrol pumps and police support.

## NDMC slaps ₹11 lakh fine on 22 construction sites

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
New Delhi

The New Delhi Municipal Council (NDMC) has imposed fines worth ₹11 lakh on at least 22 construction sites in Lutyens Delhi this year for violating dust-mitigation norms and directions of the National Green Tribunal (NGT), according to official challan records.

Among the penalised premises were prominent locations such as the Tamil Nadu Bhawan on Kautilya Marg, Assam Bhawan on SP Marg, multiple plots in Golf Links, JorBagh, Malcha Marg, Netaji Nagar and Sardar Patel Marg, the data stated.

Each site was fined ₹50,000, indicating a uniform penalty structure for construction-related violations, the NDMC said. The civic body said challans

were issued for non-compliance with mandatory dust-control measures at construction sites, as well as for violations of NGT directions. All violators were served notices under relevant sections of the New Delhi Municipal Council Act, 1994, primarily sections 249 and 250.

Additionally, NDMC data on civic enforcement between January and November 2025 shows that the council issued a total of 1,491 challans across various categories, including littering, solid waste management (SWM) violations, plastic use, biomass burning, and pet-related offences.

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## IN FOCUS



An artist performing Bhagavathy Theyyam as part of the Indian Cultural Congress event in Kochi on Monday PFI

## Rahul to take call on CM post, says Siddaramaiah

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
■ Mysuru

Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah on Monday said that ultimately, Congress top leader Rahul Gandhi and the party high command have to take a decision on the CM change issue, and everyone will abide by their decision. He said that he has spoken to the high command, and the leadership have told him that they will decide. The CM's statement came a day after Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge said that the confusion over the leadership issue in the party's Karnataka unit exists only at the local level and not within the party high command. He had also said that the local leaders should take ownership of the internal disputes rather than blaming the high command. "I don't know about it. Rahul Gandhi and the high command have to decide. Whatever they decide, I'm committed to it," Siddaramaiah told reporters here in response to a ques-

tion on Kharge's statement. "I have spoken to the high command. They have said that they will decide. I will abide by whatever the high command decides," he said. The power tussle within the ruling party has intensified amid speculations about a change in chief minister in the state, after the Congress Government reached the halfway mark of its five-year term on November 20. To a question as to when clarity on the leadership issue is expected, the CM said, whenever the high command decides. Asked whether he is the CM for the full five years, he said, "It's a different matter. Whatever the high command decides." Allying that the media is discussing the leadership issue, despite clarifications that the high command will decide on the matter and everyone will abide by it, he said, "What is there to ask so many questions on the issue? After I have said whatever I have to in the Assembly, why still discuss this?"

## Disorder, insecurity engulfs Bangladesh...

As his condition deteriorated, Hadi was flown to Singapore for specialised care and admitted to the neurosurgical intensive care unit at Singapore General Hospital. Despite medical intervention, he succumbed to his injuries after six days, according to an announcement by Inqilab Mancho cited by Bangladeshi media outlets. Hadi had emerged as a significant political figure after last year's uprising and was seen as a potential independent candidate from the Dhaka-8 constituency. Hasina also raised alarm over what she described as the interim Government's failure to safeguard minority communities. Referring to the lynching of 27-year-old Hindu youth Dipu Chandra Das in Mymensingh district, she accused the administration of neglecting its responsibility to protect vulnerable groups. Das was allegedly beaten to death by a mob over blasphemy accusations, an incident that sparked widespread outrage. "These events are not isolated," Hasina said, linking the violence to growing diplomatic friction. She accused the interim leadership of fostering hostility toward India while allowing extremist groups to influence both domestic governance and foreign policy. "A responsible Government would protect diplomatic institutions and uphold the rule of law," she said. "Instead, the interim administration tolerates violence and shields those who threaten social harmony." Separately, the former prime minister questioned the legitimacy of recent shifts in Bangladesh's foreign policy, particularly outreach toward Pakistan. She argued that such strategic decisions should not be undertaken by an unelected Government.

## Consular, visa services temporarily suspended

"Any inconvenience caused is sincerely regretted," the statement said. The announcement did not specify the reasons for the suspension nor provide a timeline for the resumption of services. Applicants who were planning to submit visa or consular applications have been advised to await further updates from official channels. The temporary halt is expected to impact travellers, students, businesspersons, and others requiring consular assistance. Authorities indicated that further information would be shared once services are ready to resume. The development comes days after India temporarily shut its visa application centre in Chittagong until further notice, following protests by demonstrators outside the Assistant High

## BJP-MGP alliance wins Goa ZP polls

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
■ Panaji

The BJP-MGP alliance managed to win a majority of seats in the Goa ZillaPanchayat polls, results of which were declared on Monday. The two parties won more than 30 of the 50 ZP seats in the State, while the Congress emerged victorious on 10 seats and the AAP and Revolutionary Goans Party on one each. Four independent candidates also won in

TWO PARTIES WON MORE THAN 30 OF THE 50 ZP SEATS IN THE STATE, WHILE CONGRESS EMERGED VICTORIOUS ON 10 SEATS

the polls, voting for which were held on December 20. Hailing the victory, Prime Minister NarendraModi, in a post on X, said, "Goa stands with good governance. Goa stands with progressive pol-

itics. I thank my sisters and brothers of Goa for blessing the BJP-MGP (NDA) family with strong support in the ZillaPanchayat elections." "This will add more vigour to our efforts for Goa's growth. We are committed to boosting the dreams and aspirations of the people of this wonderful State. Our hardworking NDA Karyakartas have done commendable work on the ground, which has led to this result," the PM further said. Earlier, Chief Minister PramodSawant took to X to thank people in the state for placing their trust in the BJP and blessing the party with a thumping victory. "Heartiest congratulations to all the newly elected ZillaPanchayat members of the BJP-MGP (NDA) Alliance. This strong mandate reflects the people's faith in the Double Engine Sarkar, under the dynamic leadership of Hon'ble Prime Minister Shri @narendramodiji, and the guidance of @BJP4India National President Shri

@JPNaddaji and BJP National Working President Shri @NitinNabinji," he said. "I also commend our dedicated karyakartas, led by @BJP4Goa President Shri @DamuNaik, for their tireless efforts to take our vision to the very last mile. I am confident the BJP-led Alliance will accelerate all-round development, strengthen transparent and accountable governance, and work towards a Viksit Goa and Viksit Bharat," the CM said.

## BJP councillor threatening African national for not learning Hindi

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
■ New Delhi

A video of BJP councillor Renu Chaudhary allegedly threatening an African national for not learning Hindi has gone viral on social media. In the purported video, Chaudhary, who represents Ward Number 196 of east Delhi's Patparganj, is heard asking the man, a football coach who teaches children at an MCD park, why he has not learned Hindi yet and giving him an ultimatum that if he does not learn the language within a month, action would be taken against him. She is also heard telling him that since he earns money in India, he should

learn the language. "Hindi nahi seekhi. Kyun nahi seekhi? Agar ek mahine mein Hindi nahi seekhi, toh park cheen lo insee? (You haven't learnt Hindi. Why? If you don't learn Hindi in a month, then take him off the park)," she is heard saying in the video. Defending her remarks, Chaudhary said eight months ago she had asked the coach to learn basic Hindi, but he had not complied. She alleged that the man conducted commercial activities inside the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) park without paying the required revenue and had not addressed cleanliness issues that were pointed out. The MCD staff faced difficulties communicating with him due to the

language barrier, she said. "He engages in commercial activities inside the MCD park and is supposed to pay revenue. He is teaching students, but when asked about it, he said he does not know Hindi. It was eight months ago that I requested him to learn the language," Chaudhary said in a separate video statement. She claimed that she had earlier offered to pay for his Hindi tuition. "He did not pay heed to my request. Neither did he reduce commercial activities nor did he take steps to maintain cleanliness. He has been here for 14 years, he should have learnt basic Hindi by now," said the councillor, who said she did not believe she had done something wrong.

## Girls' interest in agriculture education brings hope: Bagde

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
■ Jaipur

Rajasthan Governor Haribhau Bagde on Monday expressed satisfaction over the growing participation of girls in agricultural education, saying the path to the country's prosperity passes through agriculture. Addressing the convocation ceremony of Maharana Pratap University of Agriculture and Technology, Bagde said a convocation marks a new beginning in a student's life and noted that a majority of degrees and gold medals awarded this year had gone to women students. The increasing interest of girls in agricultural education is a matter of happiness. If given opportunities, they prove their excellence.

Agriculture remains the foundation of India's progress," he said. The governor said agriculture is central to Indian life, with over two-thirds of the population directly or indirectly dependent on it. He expressed concern over the rising use of chemicals in foodgrains, linking it to increasing health problems. Bagde said several farmers in Rajasthan were successfully practising natural farming without fertilisers, even as demand for foodgrains continued to rise and cultivable land had reduced. Recalling that India had to import foodgrains until the 1980s, he said the country's current surplus reserves reflected a historic achievement in the agriculture sector.

## Codeine Syrup case accused have clear links with SP: Yogi

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
■ Lucknow

UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath strongly rebutted allegations by Leader of Opposition Mata Prasad Pandey over "deaths" allegedly due to the consumption of fake medicines and codeine syrup, asserting in the Assembly that no such case has come to the notice of the State Government so far. Adityanath said that evidence had emerged linking the accused in the codeine cough syrup case to the

Samajwadi Party (SP). He said that cases related to illegal diversion of the syrup were being pursued under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act, and the State Government successfully defended its stand in court. Launching a sharp attack on the Akhilesh Yadav-led party, Adityanath alleged that the largest wholesaler involved in the codeine syrup case, first arrested by the special task force (STF) in 2016, was issued a licence when the SP Government was in power.

Referring to photographs circulating in the public domain, he said, "Whenever such issues come up nationally, some people immediately flee the country. I think the same may be happening with your people as well." Replying to the issue raised by the opposition as soon as the House proceedings began, the chief minister said the matter appeared to be politically motivated. "When an issue is raised unnecessarily, one is reminded of the saying 'Chor ki dadhi me tinka' (guilty con-

science pricks the mind)," he remarked. He said, "There is not a single case of death due to fake drugs reported in Uttar Pradesh till date," and added that the enforcement agencies remain vigilant. "From time to time, the Food Safety and Drug Administration (FSDA) conducts raids and takes strict action against erring firms," Adityanath added. He also categorically said, "There has been no death in Uttar Pradesh due to codeine syrup. Cases related to illegal diversion of the syrup were

being pursued under the NDPS Act, and the state Government had successfully defended its stand in the court." Adityanath clarified that codeine syrup is not manufactured in Uttar Pradesh and the state only has stockists and wholesalers. Its production takes place in states like Himachal Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. The death cases that came to light were reported from other states and were linked to a syrup manufactured in Tamil Nadu, he said.

## FROM PAGE - 1

Indian chefs, and music teachers, as well as high-demand sectors including IT, engineering, healthcare, education, and construction, strengthening workforce mobility and services trade.

## HC seeks Gandhis' reply on ED challenge to trial...

He said that after investigation, the ED officials gather evidence and other material, and, like the police files a report, the ED files a prosecution complaint. Singhvi disputed the submissions made on behalf of ED but said he will accept notice and file a reply in the matter. "I want to say something. I am only saying that there is a perspective which is contrary to what my friend is saying," he said. The ED, in its plea, said the trial court order has in effect given a hall pass to a category of money launderers only on the ground that the scheduled offence is reported by a private individual by way of a complaint to a magistrate. "The sole ground given for declining cognisance is that a prosecution complaint filed by an authorised officer under the PMLA cannot be based on a scheduled offence emanating from a private complaint filed by a private individual and such scheduled offence must be registered only by a law enforcement agency, that is, either by way of an FIR by the police or a complaint by a person authorised to investigate the scheduled offence," the plea said.

## Indians stranded as US cancel interviews

The US State Department responded, saying that visa interviews are now being prioritised to ensure thorough vetting of applicants. This shift in priorities has led to a significant increase in processing times for H-1B visas. India is the largest source of H-1B workers, with the country accounting for 71 per cent of visa holders, according to a 2025 USCIS report. Companies like Amazon, Microsoft, and Meta are among the biggest sponsors of these workers. The visa delays are part of broader changes to the H-1B program implemented during Trump's second term. In July, the US Government ended remote visa renewals for H-1B and H4 visa holders, requiring applicants to return to their home countries.

## AI flight returns to Delhi after engine shutdown

The plane, carrying around 335 people, was airborne for nearly an hour before returning to

Delhi. The aircraft made an emergency landing, the sources said. In aviation terms, a drop in engine oil pressure to zero is treated as a serious safety concern, as oil is essential to keep engine components cool and moving smoothly. Inadequate oil pressure can lead to rapid overheating and, in extreme cases, engine failure or fire. The incident would be investigated by the Permanent Investigation Board of the Airline under the supervision of Director Air Safety (NR), Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA). The Ministry of Civil Aviation (MoCA) has sought details from Air India about the incident.

According to the Ministry of Civil Aviation, the Boeing 777-300ER aircraft, registered as VT-ALS and operating flight AI-887, experienced a problem during flap retraction after take-off. "The flight crew observed low engine oil pressure on Engine No 2 (right-hand engine). Shortly thereafter, the engine oil pressure dropped to zero," the ministry said. "The airline has been directed to extend all assistance to passengers and accommodate them on subsequent flights," the Ministry said in a post on X. On its part, Air India said in a statement, that the crew operating flight AI887 from Delhi to Mumbai on 22 December decided to return to Delhi shortly after take-off due to a technical issue as per standard operating procedure. The flight AI887 was being operated with a Boeing 777-300 ER aircraft and was airborne for about an hour after taking off at around 6.30 am, as per information available on flight tracking website Flightradar24.Com.

## Great Nicobar Airport: A boost to India's...

It will enable operations by larger military aircraft and sharply reduce response times, particularly as the nearest civilian airport in Port Blair is over 500 km away. The site is surrounded by hills, and necessary site grading has been planned to facilitate safe aircraft operations. The flight path of the aircraft will run over the sea, and there will be minimal disturbance due to the overflying of aircraft at low altitude. The runway at this site is oriented in an approximate north/south direction, which is suitable for the prevailing wind direction, according to the DPR. Apart from strategic needs, the airport will ensure ease of connectivity and hence present a great opportunity for tourism-oriented development that would put Andaman and Nicobar Islands on the map of global tourist destinations as well, according to the DPR. The Indian mainland is at least 1,500 km from this island, with cities like Delhi ranging at a distance of approximately 3,000 km, while Calcutta and Mumbai are located at a distance of 1,850

## FIR filed in Air India passenger assault case

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
■ New Delhi

An FIR has been registered in connection with the alleged assault of a passenger by an off-duty Air India (AI) Express pilot at Delhi's Indira Gandhi International Airport after the police received a formal complaint from the victim via email.

Delhi Police said the complaint was sent by AnkitDewan on Monday morning, three days after the alleged incident at Terminal 1. Following the receipt of the complaint, police registered a case under appropriate sections of law and initiated an investigation.

The FIR has been registered at the IGI Airport police station under Sections 115 (voluntarily causing hurt), 126 (wrongful restraint) and 351 (criminal intimidation) of the BharatiyaNyayaSanhita (BNS). Airport DCP Vichitra Veer said the complaint was received through email and is now being examined. "After receiving the complaint, the matter is under investigation and further action will be taken based on the findings of the inquiry," the DCP said.

Earlier, Delhi Police had stated that no formal complaint had been received in the matter and that they came to know about the alleged incident only after a social media post surfaced on platform X. Dewan had shared photographs of his bloodied face online, alleging he was assaulted at Terminal 1 of the Delhi airport. According to Dewan, the incident took place on Friday afternoon near the security checkpoint at Terminal 1. He alleged that while standing in the queue with his family, he objected when Air India Express captain VirenderSejwal and some others allegedly tried to cut the line. Dewan claimed that the pilot first abused him verbally and then assaulted him physically in front of his family. Dewan further alleged that the assault left him bleeding and traumatised his seven-year-old daughter, who witnessed the altercation.

## Punjab officer falls victim to cyber fraud...

The profile photograph and the group's interactive nature, where queries were promptly answered, deepened trust among members. The suicide note explained how investors were shown an online dashboard showcasing multiple schemes — daily stock trading, over-the-counter trades, IPO investments and quantitative funds — each promising progressively higher returns. These dashboards, Chahal later realised, were entirely fake. He wrote that the group lured members by promising discounted IPO allotments and unusually high returns of 30-40 per cent in OTC trades and over 50 per cent in quantitative funds. When doubts were raised, other group members — now suspected to be part of the scam — stepped in to defend the system, presenting it as foolproof. The situation worsened when Chahal attempted to withdraw ₹5 crore. He alleged that he was first charged 1.5 percent as service fees and three percent as tax, amounting to ₹2.25 crore. Even after paying this amount, the funds were not released. Further demands followed — ₹2 crore more, and later ₹20 lakh under the guise of "premium membership" — but the money never came back. Chahal stated that more than ₹8 crore had been transferred from his Axis Bank, HDFC Bank, and ICICI Bank accounts, nearly ₹7 crore of which was borrowed from friends and acquaintances. He claimed to have attached bank details, transactions records, IFSC codes, chats, and screenshots as evidence. In the note, Chahal spoke candidly about his deteriorating mental health, revealing that he was undergoing treatment for depression. He requested security for his family, relief for those from whom he had borrowed money, and appealed that any recovered amount be returned to his family. He specifically demanded a Special Investigation Team or a CBI probe into the fraud. Police confirmed recovery of the suicide note and the weapon used. Patiala Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP) Varun Sharma said that teams reached the spot within minutes of receiving information. "Our immediate priority is saving his life. All angles will be investigated," he said.

## Golden era of industrialisation begun in Odisha: CM Majhi



Odisha Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi on Monday claimed that the State has entered a "golden era" of industrialisation, citing strong response from investors at the recently concluded investor summit in Hyderabad.

## Govt committed to protecting Aravalli range: Rajasthan CM

Amid the controversy over the proposed mining norms in the Aravalli range, Rajasthan CM Bhajanlal Sharma on Monday said no tampering with the mountain range would be allowed, asserting that his Government is firmly committed to its conservation. Addressing a programme in Jhalawar district, Sharma said, "Our government is committed to protecting the Aravalli range. No kind of interference will be allowed there."



## Maoist arms-manufacturing facility busted in Chhattisgarh



Security forces have destroyed a weapons manufacturing facility operated by Maoists in Chhattisgarh's Sukma district and seized eight rifles and a large cache of materials used in making firearms and explosives, police said on Monday.

## Adhikari protests over killing of Hindu man in Bangladesh

Senior BJP leader Suvendu Adhikari along with other party leaders and supporters on Monday staged a demonstration near the Bangladesh Deputy High Commission here to protest the killing of a Bengali Hindu in the neighbouring country. Adhikari led the rally from Nizam Palace to Beckbagan where around 2,000 people squatted on the road condemning the lynching of Dipu Das at Mymensingh on December 18 night and then setting the body on fire.



# Udhampur operation expands after multiple terrorist sightings

MOHIT KANDHARI  
■ Jammu

A relentless chase to hunt down a group of Pakistani terrorists, spotted thrice in the general area of Majalta tehsil of Udhampur district in recent days, was expanded on Monday to prevent any other terror strike on a vital security installation in the region.

The ongoing search operations, launched in the Chore Motu and its adjoining villages of Majalta tehsil, in which a jawan of the special operations group was killed in action on December 15, were expanded to nearby forest areas to hunt them down. Between Saturday and Sunday, the same group of foreign terrorists have been spotted twice in the area.

On Saturday, hungry terrorists barged into the residence of a villager and ran away after taking food. The same group was spotted once again on Sunday, prompting the security forces to launch a fresh chase to neutralise them.

The ongoing anti-terrorist



Village Defence Guards (VDGs) keep vigil during a joint security drill in a hilly area as police and other forces continue search operations and anti-militancy measures across the State in Doda, Jammu and Kashmir

operations have been supervised at the highest level by the senior army and police officials of the Jammu and Kashmir police.

The security forces have mobilised additional troops on the ground to plug the gaps and also pressed the services of the dog unit to track down their whereabouts inside the thickly forested

area. The security forces are also relying on aerial surveillance to trace the whereabouts of these battle-hardened Pakistani terrorists. The villagers have been directed to keep a hawk's eye on the suspicious movement of these foreign terrorists.

The Director General of Jammu and Kashmir Police, Nalin Prabhat, on Monday

said the coordinated operations are aimed at dismantling the complete ecosystem of terror by eliminating its support system. DGP said that the security forces have been carrying out aggressive operations against terrorists, their overground workers (OGWs), sympathisers, drug smugglers and those involved in hawala money rackets.

# Nitish Kumar meets PM, Amit Shah

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
■ New Delhi

Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar on Monday met Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Union Home Minister Amit Shah during his first visit to the national capital after retaining charge of the eastern state a month ago following the NDA's landslide victory in the assembly election.

Kumar, accompanied by Bihar Deputy Chief Minister and BJP leader Samrat Choudhary and JD(U) leader and Union Minister Rajiv Ranjan Singh, met Modi and Shah separately and is believed to have discussed various issues — both development and political — related to the state.

"Chief Minister of Bihar, Shri @NitishKumar, Deputy CM, Shri @samrat4bjp and Union Minister, Shri @LalanSingh\_1 met Prime Minister @narendramodi today," the Prime Minister's Office said on 'X'.

Earlier, the chief minister, along with his deputy Choudhary and Union Minister Singh, met Shah at his residence. "Met Chief Minister of Bihar Shri



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar during a meeting in New Delhi

@NitishKumar ji, Union Minister Shri @LalanSingh\_1 ji, and the Deputy Chief Minister of Bihar Shri @samrat4bjp ji. Under the leadership of Modi ji and Nitish ji, the NDA government is committed to taking public welfare and good governance in the state to even

greater heights," Shah said in a message on 'X' in Hindi.

After their meeting with the prime minister, Choudhary said that following the resounding mandate received by the NDA in Bihar, the chief minister, he and Singh had a courtesy meeting with PM Modi, the "world's

most popular leader". "Under the guidance and leadership of esteemed Modi ji, the country and Bihar are continuously progressing. During this time, valuable guidance was also received on the goals of a developed Bihar," Choudhary wrote on 'X' in Hindi.

During their meetings, the Bihar leaders are believed to have discussed various issues related to the development of the state, sources said. The expansion of the state cabinet and the forthcoming elections to five Rajya Sabha seats are learnt to have figured in the meetings, sources said. Kumar had arrived here on Sunday for a two-day visit and returned to Patna this evening.

Election to the 243-member Bihar assembly was held in November, in which the NDA secured 202 seats and Kumar returned as chief minister for the 10th term in office.

Among the NDA partners, the BJP won 89 seats, the JD(U) bagged 85, the Lok Janshakti Party (Ram Vilas) 19, Hindustani Awam Morcha (Secular) five and Rashtriya Lok Morcha won four seats.

# BJP slams Sonia Gandhi's claims on VB-G RAM G Act

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
■ New Delhi

The BJP on Monday termed Congress leader Sonia Gandhi's claims about the VB-G RAM G Act a "flight of political fancy" and alleged that her arguments against the law rest on "mischaracterisations, selective memory and outright falsehoods".

The Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) (VB-G RAM G) Bill, which replaces the MGNREGA, became an Act with President Droupadi Murmu's assent on Sunday.

Parliament passed the bill during its just-concluded Winter Session last week, amid vociferous protests by the opposition in both Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha.

Criticising the law, Gandhi said the "demolition" of the historic Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) will have catastrophic consequences for crores of people across rural India and called upon all to unite and safeguard the rights that protect everyone.

In an editorial in The Hindu titled "The bulldozed demolition of MGNREGA", the Congress parliamentary party chairperson also said the "death" of MGNREGA is a collective failure.

Hitting back, BJP IT depart-

ment head Amit Malviya said on social media, "Sonia Gandhi's recent article on MGNREGA reads less like a serious engagement with law or data and more like a flight of political fancy."

"It is evident that she has not read the VB-G RAM G Act, because her arguments rest on mischaracterisations, selective memory, and outright falsehoods," he charged. In a point-by-point rebuttal, the BJP leader alleged that Gandhi in her article "romanticised" the origins of MGNREGA, claiming that it emerged from widespread consultation, but it's "far from the truth".

"MGNREGA was conceived and driven by the National Advisory Council — an unelected executive body that functioned, in effect, as a super-cabinet. So dominant was its role that (then) Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was frequently derided as a 'super cabinet secretary' under Sonia Gandhi's NAC," he alleged.

It's "historical revisionism" with Gandhi presenting this process now as participatory democracy, he charged.

Dismissing her claims that demand-based employment is being dismantled, thereby destroying the employment guarantee itself, Malviya asserted that the legal right to employment remains



It is evident that she has not read the VB-G RAM G Act, because her arguments rest on mischaracterisations, selective memory, and outright falsehoods

AMIT MALVIYA, BJP IT DEPARTMENT HEAD

untouched under the VB G RAM G Act.

"What has changed is the budgeting framework — from an open-ended, reactive model to a norm-based system, which is how virtually all government schemes function," he said.

"Far from weakening the guarantee, employment has been strengthened from 100 days to 125 days. In FY 2024-25, planned allocations closely tracked actual demand, demonstrating that disciplined planning works," he said.

The BJP leader said Sonia Gandhi's argument that MGNREGA remains the central pillar of rural survival

and that the new law will suppress rural wage growth ignores how rural India has changed. While MGNREGA did play a role in alleviating distress, it has not kept pace with today's rural realities, he claimed.

"NABARD and MPCE data show that 80 per cent of rural households report higher consumption, 42.2 per cent report higher incomes and 58.3 per cent now rely exclusively on formal credit," Malviya said.

"MGNREGA today functions as a fallback safety net, not as the defining feature of rural livelihoods," he said, and termed as "equally misleading" Gandhi's claim that

the poorest will be abandoned if the old framework changes. "Rural poverty has fallen sharply from 25.7 per cent to 4.86 per cent. MSME credit has tripled since 2014, enabling self-employment and non-farm livelihoods.

"Public policy cannot be frozen in the conditions of 2005 when India has demonstrably moved forward," he added.

The BJP leader also dismissed as "false" the allegation that the Centre is shifting the financial burden to states, moving from a supposed 90:10 model to 60:40 under the VB-G RAM G Act.

"MGNREGA was never funded at 90 per cent by the Centre in practice. States already bore 25 per cent of material costs, major administrative expenses, and 100 per cent of unemployment allowance, often without predictability or transparency," he said.

The new model simply formalises and rationalises funding, making states "equal partners" rather than "passive implementers of top-down mandates", the BJP leader said. Noting that Gandhi objected to the 60-day work restriction portraying it as an assault on year-round employment, Malviya said that, in reality, this period is "aggregated, flexible, and state-notified - not a blanket ban".

# Priyanka to visit US on mission mode to meet India haters: BJP

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
■ New Delhi

The BJP on Monday alleged that Congress leader Priyanka Gandhi Vadra is set to embark on a visit to the US on a "mission mode" to meet "India haters" and "defame" the country following the footsteps of her brother and Leader of the Opposition in Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi.

In a social media post, BJP national spokesperson Syed Zafar Islam said, "Heard that Priyanka Gandhi is travelling to the USA on a mission mode to defame India like her brother Rahul Gandhi. She is being welcomed there by India haters like George Soros." They must know that such a "stunt" will backfire on them "terribly", the former BJP Rajya Sabha MP added.

Islam, however, did not share any further details about Priyanka Gandhi's US visit. Another BJP national spokesperson Shazia Ilmi demanded "transparency", alleging that Congress leader Rahul Gandhi has undertaken 247 foreign trips since 2015 and many of these travels have been declared "private with no disclosure of meetings, agendas or funding."

"Repeated appearances at Soros-linked ecosystems, FES

forums, OSF-funded institutions, while attacking India's democracy abroad. Now Rahul in Germany, Priyanka in the US — same pattern, same script," she charged in a post on X.

Ilmi alleged that after such foreign visits by Rahul Gandhi, India "witnesses protests like street mobilisations, global reports and narratives questioning its institutions, and attacks on CAA, farm laws, Adani".

"Whenever India debates reforms or faces protests, the Gandhi siblings surface abroad at Soros-linked platforms, questioning India's democracy. Coincidence or coordination?" she asked, adding, "Who funds these trips? Who briefs them?"

"Time for transparency... India is not a laboratory for foreign agendas," she added.

BJP national spokesperson Pradeep Bhandari alleged that the country has seen in the past how US-based billionaire investor George Soros and his close aide, "who do not believe in Indian democracy", have been seen in meetings along with Rahul Gandhi.

"After Rahul Gandhi spending a week in Germany, now Priyanka Vadra to head to the United States of America. Who are Gandhi-Vadra family

siblings meeting on these trips abroad, and what is the purpose of these 'non-official' trips?" Bhandari asked on social media. "The nation demands transparency and answers," he added.

Another BJP spokesperson C R Kesavan alleged that the main agenda of Rahul Gandhi's "current Bharat badnaam yatra" is to insult India and undermine its democracy.

"Why else would Rahul Gandhi be seen gallivanting with the likes of Cornelia Woll, who has close associations to institutions and entities funded by George Soros?" Kesavan asked in an apparent reference to the Congress leader's recent visit to Germany.

The BJP spokesperson alleged that Soros' "nefarious agenda" is to destabilise India and the Congress has always "ducked and dodged" explaining its association with entities "like FDL-AP Foundation and Hindenburg which have close links to the organisations connected to George Soros."

Kesavan said Rahul Gandhi had earlier met with US lawmaker Ilhan Omar, who, he alleged, is a "prominent anti-India voice and virulent advocate for Independent Kashmir."

# Knowledge most powerful tool for India to become \$5 trillion economy: Gadkari

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
■ Mumbai

Knowledge is the most powerful tool for India to become a \$5 trillion economy and the third largest economy in the world, Union Minister Nitin Gadkari said on Monday.

Addressing an event in the Indian Institute of Technology Bombay, he said the future of any country is based on the type of futuristic technology it possesses.

Taking technology to the grassroots, particularly in agriculture and rural India, is critical for making India self-reliant and a global power, he said.

"IITs and their students have made a great contribution towards the country's development and progress.

While working in the government, if we face any challenge, we refer it to the IITs first. The credibility of IITs is so good that the solution we get is widely accepted. In a nutshell, you are the capital of knowledge," the Union Minister said.

"The progress of the country, resources, and technologies are important, but what is more important is the futuristic technology and knowledge. The future of any country is based on what type of futuristic technology it possesses," he added.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has put forth a target in the form of a mission and that is making India a \$5 trillion economy and the third largest economy in the world, Gadkari said.

"If we want to become a

USD 5 trillion economy and the third largest economy, knowledge will be the most powerful tool," the Union Minister for Road Transport and Highways said.

Gadkari said entrepreneurship, science, technology, research, skill and best practices are cumulatively referred to as knowledge, and the conversion of this knowledge into wealth is the future.

He pointed out that about 60 per cent of India's population depends on agriculture, but its contribution to the GDP is only around 12 per cent.

"The manufacturing sector contributes around 22 to 24 per cent to the GDP, while agriculture and allied activities together account for only about 12 per cent. Unless



The progress of the country, resources, and technologies are important, but what is more important is the futuristic technology and knowledge. The future of any country is based on what type of futuristic technology it possesses

—NITIN GADKARI, UNION MINISTER

we improve the economic condition of farmers, the poor and the marginalised, the country cannot truly progress," the Union minister added.

Emphasising the need to promote industries in rural areas to curb migration to cities, Gadkari said if industries are set up in rural India, migration to urban centres will automatically come down.

"Increasing exports and reducing imports must be a national priority," he said.

Calling technology the key driver of growth, he said India must leverage innovations that can boost exports. "We are working to diversify agriculture towards the energy and power sectors," he added.

Gadkari pointed out that

India produces surplus rice, wheat and corn, which keeps domestic prices low and adversely impacts farmers. "Because of surplus production, farmers are not getting remunerative prices for wheat, rice and corn."

He said the government's decision to allow ethanol production from corn has benefited farmers in improving their income.

"India currently spends around ₹22 lakh crore annually on fossil fuel imports. The bio-fuel sector has immense potential to reduce this burden and transform India from an energy importer into an energy exporter," he added.

Referring to crop residue management, Gadkari said farmers in Punjab and Haryana earlier burned rice

straw which caused severe pollution.

"Now the same rice straw is being used to produce bio-bitumen, ethanol and bio-aviation fuel," he said, adding that sustainable aviation fuel is also being produced from agricultural waste.

Gadkari called the automobile sector a major growth engine for India.

"India's automobile industry is currently worth about ₹22 lakh crore, compared to around ₹79 lakh crore in China and ₹49 lakh crore in the US. My aim is to make India number one in the automobile sector in the next five years," he said.

The target is difficult, but this industry has the potential to drive India's economic growth, Gadkari added.

## States Focus

# Congress rejects claims of being finished



### MIZORAM GOVERNOR URGES FOR AGRICULTURAL BOOSTING

Mizoram Governor Vijay Kumar Singh on Monday called for focused efforts to boost agricultural production in the state, Lok Bhavan sources said. Speaking to students from IIT Madras and NIT Mizoram, Singh emphasised the need to strengthen supply chains, advance processing techniques, and conduct in-depth studies to support rural communities and formulate effective development plans, the sources added. He urged the students, who were part of the New India Mission internship programme, to fully grasp the programme's objectives and contribute their best.



### RAILWAY FARE HIKE WILL BURDEN PEOPLE: SIVANKUTTY

Kerala General Education and Labour Minister V Sivankutty on Monday criticised the Union Government's decision to increase the railway fares, saying it would severely affect the common people, workers and students. Reacting to the Railway Ministry's announcement that the revised fares would come into force from December 26, the minister termed the move "condemnable". In a statement, he pointed out that the increase of a paise per kilometre in ordinary, AC and non-AC classes would have a significant impact on long-distance travellers.

**TN RAGHUNATHA**  
■ Mumbai

As it prepared to go it alone in the crucial Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) polls and contest the local body polls elsewhere in alliance with the Shiv Sena (UBT) and NCP (SP) "wherever possible and necessary", the Opposition Congress on Monday claimed that in the recent local body polls that it had won 41 municipal presidents and 1,006 councillors in the recent Municipal Council-Nagar Panchayat elections.

Rubbishing the claims made by his party's critics that "the Congress is finished", Maharashtra Pradesh Congress Committee (MPCC) president Harshwardhan Sapkal said, "The latest poll results once again show that trust is greater than money and ideas are more important than power. The victory in the municipal elections will provide fresh energy for the forthcoming municipal corporation and Zilla

Parishad elections".

"The Congress's fight to save Maharashtra from the massively corrupt BJP-led Mahayuti will continue unabated," Sapkal said.

"The latest poll results have given a fitting reply to those who claim that the Congress is finished. The people have rejected the notion that social harmony can be disrupted in the name of caste and religion for political gain, or that all elections can be won purely through money power. Our electoral success reaffirms that the Congress ideology alone can safeguard the nation," the MPCC chief said.

Alleging that the ruling BJP and the Eknath Shinde-led Shiv Sena had secured their victories "through excessive use of money" and "with the support of the administration and the Election Commission", the Congress still lives in the hearts of the people and will continue to do so. This is a battle of ideas, and the Congress has not strayed even an inch from its ideology," the State



**The latest poll results have given a fitting reply to those who claim that the Congress is finished. The people have rejected the notion that social harmony can be disrupted in the name of caste and religion for political gain, or that all elections can be won purely through money power**  
— HARSHWARDHAN SAKPAL, MPCC PRESIDENT

Congress chief said.

"The voters have shown that public trust matters more than money, and ideology matters more than power," Sapkal said, as he congratulated the victorious

candidates and party workers who stood by the party in the polls and thanked the people of Maharashtra "who have shown faith in the Congress". Sapkal's statement came two days after the Congress

in-charge Ramesh Chennithala, said that his party would go the BMC polls on its strength and elsewhere contest the local body polls in alliance with the Shiv Sena (UBT) and NCP (SP) "wherever possible and necessary".

"In Mumbai, we will go it alone as this is a local poll and workers have their aspirations," Chennithala had said.

Seeking to enthuse the party cadres across the state in the face of the party's not-so-impressive performance in the recent Municipal Council-Nagar Panchayat polls, Sapkal said, "In the elections to 288 Municipal Councils and Nagar Panchayats across the state, the Congress party fought on the strength of its ideology despite extremely adverse circumstances. With no financial backing and relying solely on a firm belief in democratic values, the party took on the ruling dispensation's money power".

"On the strength of the hard work put in by Congress workers, voters elected 41

Congress municipal presidents and 1,006 councillors across the state. These results once again show that trust is greater than money and ideas are more important than power," the MPCC chief claimed.

Elaborating on the outcome in the recent Municipal Council-Nagar Panchayat elections, Sapkal said, "In the Nagpur division, Congress won 14 municipal presidents and 340 councillors; in the Amravati division, 9 municipal presidents and 236 councillors; in Marathwada, 5 municipal presidents and 156 councillors; and in western Maharashtra, 3 municipal presidents and 47 councillors.

"In northern Maharashtra, the Congress won 2 municipal presidents and 47 councillors and in the Konkan division, 1 municipal president and 26 councillors. In addition, 7 municipal presidents and 154 councillors from Congress-supported local alliances were also elected," Sapkal said.

## CM Mamata slams ECI over gross errors in voter lists

**SAUGAR SENGUPTA**  
■ Kolkata

Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on Monday hit out at the Election Commission of India (ECI) for allowing "gross errors" in the voters' lists during the special intensive revision of electoral rolls and directed the booth-level agents (BLAs) of the Trinamool Congress to identify and trail the micro-observers being appointed by the ECI for hearing during the SIR scrutiny.

Alleging once again that the poll panel was acting at the instance of the BJP and serving its purposes, Banerjee said during a meeting of the TMC BLAs.

"The ECI is working to serve the purpose of the BJP. It has become evident by their acts. They have left gross errors in the electoral rolls in mapping the voters at the time of the SIR. This is not to be accepted and you will have to keep a strong vigil on each of their steps when the hearing process starts," she told the BLAs asking them to collect all the details of the micro observers and trail them when the hearing would start.

The ECI has appointed central government employees as micro-observers during the hearing process when the ECI officials would hear out the voters whose



West Bengal Chief Minister and TMC supremo Mamata Banerjee addressing the party's booth level agents (BLAs) during a meeting in Kolkata

names have been deleted from the voters' lists. The meeting was held at the Netaji Indoor Stadium, Kolkata.

"They are appointing the observers without informing the State Government. This is because they must have some trick up their sleeves. It is clear that they are working at the instance of the BJP to serve their interests. But it is not going to be that easy, because this is Bengal," Banerjee said, asking the BLAs to "watch out for every move of the observers."

"The micro observers who have been appointed have little knowledge of the local language or the people. So

how can they perform their work properly?" she asked. Banerjee's attack on the ECI coincided with a group of TMC backed booth level officers on Monday gheraoing the State Chief Electoral Officers office. They raised slogans against the ECI and tried to break the barricade, questioning the reason behind making them go beyond schedule.

"Every day the ECI is increasing our responsibilities and making us do all those things for which we are neither equipped nor trained. In this process, several of the BLOs have either died or fallen sick. We want us to be relieved of the work," BLOs shouted.

## Assam on high alert in view of fresh unrest in Bangladesh: Himanta

**TONY DAS**  
■ Guwahati

Assam is on "high alert" in the wake of the fresh wave of unrest in neighbouring Bangladesh, Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said on Monday. Sarma, speaking to reporters on the sidelines of a programme, said the state government was closely monitoring the developments in Bangladesh.

"We have seen that in Bangladesh, Hindus are being subjected to atrocities and burnt alive... Those who are currently in power in Bangladesh have been talking about including northeast India in their country," the CM claimed.

It is also well known that people from Bangladesh entered Assam at different times and the state is "full of these people", he asserted.

"We have to be vigilant and must keep a sharp eye on the



Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma

developments in that country," Sarma said.

Sarma had claimed last week that "Bangladeshi elements" have been repeatedly saying that northeast India should be merged with the neighbouring country, which is "irresponsible and dangerous", and India will not remain silent on this.

"India is a very big country, a nuclear nation and the

fourth largest economy of the world. How can Bangladesh even think about it?" the Chief Minister had said.

Bangladesh has witnessed a fresh wave of unrest following the death of student leader Sharif Osman Hadi. He was a prominent face in the anti-government protests that forced the collapse of the Sheikh Hasina Government.

## Nadda slams Congress over 2013 Jhiram Ghati Naxal attack

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
■ Janjgir

In a sharp attack on Congress, BJP president JP Nadda on Monday alleged that some insiders in the party were involved in facilitating the 2013 Jhiram Ghati Naxal attack, which led to the killing of state Congress leaders.

Addressing the "Janadesh Parab" (people's mandate festival) event held to mark the completion of two years of the Vishnu Deo Sai-led BJP government, Nadda said previous Congress Governments had colluded with Naxalites, while the "double-engine" Government under PM Narendra Modi confronted Left-wing extremism head-on.

The event was held at the Khokhra Police Ground in Janjgir-Champa district.

Nadda said he was in charge of the BJP for Chhattisgarh during the 2013 Jhiram Valley naxal attack and closely witnessed developments related to it.

"Today, I say this with great

responsibility that no one else was providing information and inside details about the Jhiram Valley incident. People from within were involved in getting their own people killed, and they were in contact with Naxalites," he alleged.

"When protectors turn predators, the common people suffer the most," he added.

On May 25, 2013, Maoists attacked a convoy of Congress leaders during the party's 'Pariwartin Rally' ahead of the assembly elections in the Jhiram valley in Bastar district, killing 32 people, including then State Congress chief Nand Kumar Patel, former leader of opposition Mahendra Karma, and former union minister Vidyacharan Shukla. Nadda said a decisive action was taken against Maoism under the double-engine Government in the Centre and the state, under CM Sai. He claimed that Naxalism has now been confined to a



BJP National President and Union Minister JP Nadda being welcomed by BJP leaders at Swami Vivekananda Airport in Raipur, Chhattisgarh

**Today, I say this with great responsibility that no one else was providing information and inside details about the Jhiram Valley incident. People from within were involved in getting their own people killed, and they were in contact with Naxalites**

—JP NADDA, UNION MINISTER

limited number of villages and districts in the State.

"Nearly 2,500 Naxalites have surrendered in the last

two years, 1,853 have been arrested, and top leaders such as Hidma and Basavaraju have been neu-

tralised," he said. Nadda alleged that Congress Governments had maintained friendship and understanding with Naxalites, whereas the BJP government under the leadership of PM Modi launched a decisive strike to end the menace.

"Under Modi's leadership, the double-engine government acted decisively, and under Sai's leadership, it was firmly implemented on the ground. In the coming time, Naxalism will be uprooted and eliminated," he said.

Targeting the previous Bhupesh Baghel-led Congress government, he said, people still remember the corruption in administration, failure to deliver on its promises, and the appeasement policy.

The biggest problem was an understanding with Naxalism, the BJP leader said.

He added that the public had uprooted such an ineffective and deceitful government in the 2023 Assembly elections and voted the BJP to power.

## Tharoor flags India's slipping university rankings

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
■ Nalanda (Bihar)

Senior Congress leader Shashi Tharoor on Monday flagged India's slipping global standing in university rankings and cautioned that "unrealistic global aspirations" cannot substitute for basic investments in schools and higher learning institutes.

Tharoor, also a renowned author, was speaking during an interactive session on literature with Prof Sachin Chaturvedi at the ongoing Nalanda Literature Festival in Bihar. "India no longer hosts any of the world's leading universities... While a few universities have now entered the top 200, none figure among the top 10 or even the top 50 worldwide," the Thiruvananthapuram MP said.

He welcomed the revival of Nalanda University as a symbol of India's civilisational legacy.



Congress Shashi Tharoor

dating from the third century BCE to the 13th century CE. The ruins of the centre of learning is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, a coveted tag it earned in 2016.

Tharoor said the ancient university was a leading institution of the world, "not just because there was no competition, but also because it was an extraordinary institution."

He called it a matter of "great, great satisfaction" that Nalanda University has been re-established after nearly 800 years of its "third

and lasting" destruction by Bakhtyar Khilji in around 1200 AD. Tharoor pointed out that Nalanda once attracted students from as far as Turkey and Persia in the west to Thailand in the east and Japan in the north. In contrast, the Congress leader said, the proportion of foreign students in Indian universities is actually declining.

"I think we have a long way to go in terms of whether the NEP can help Indian universities become a major force in the world," he said, adding

that "aspirations are important, but we need to walk before we run. There is a need to get the basics right."

On the role of National Education Policy (NEP), Tharoor said its formation involved extensive consultation, though "not in the form of a structured process."

He recalled that when the draft was finalised, it was shared with select members of parliament, and several of his recommendations and objections were incorporated. However, he cautioned against overestimating the NEP's immediate impact on India's global academic standing.

Tharoor was more critical of the policy's outcomes at the school level.

He highlighted that it has been less successful primarily due to lack of resources.

The author pointed out that India has long spoken of spending 3.6 per cent of the GDP on education, an ambition dating back to the 1960s, but it currently spends only a little over 2 per cent.

## People put faith in PM Modi's development vision: Fadnavis

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
■ Nagpur

The results of local body polls have clearly shown that the BJP is the largest party in Maharashtra, with the people of the State putting complete trust in the development vision of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis said on Monday.

In results declared on Sunday, the Mahayuti alliance of the BJP, Shiv Sena, and NCP swept the elections to 288 municipal councils and nagar panchayats, winning 207 posts of presidents in the local bodies. The Opposition Maha Vikas Aghadi could come up with a collective tally of 44.

According to the State Election Commission (SEC), the BJP won 117 posts of municipal presidents, Shiv Sena won 53, and the NCP won 37 posts. The Congress bagged 28, the NCP (SP) seven,

and Shiv Sena (UBT) nine. Addressing a press conference in Ramgiri where he congratulated newly-elected members and presidents of municipal councils, the CM said the Bharatiya Janata Party has razed the Opposition's fortress in Nagpur district.

"Sunday's results have clearly shown that the BJP is the biggest party in Maharashtra. More than 3000 BJP councillors got elected. The people of the state have shown trust in PM Modi's development vision," Fadnavis said.

"In Nagpur district, the BJP has made several coun-

cils Congress-free. The state government will bring huge developmental changes in the district," he said while urging party workers to not get arrogant due to the emphatic win. The huge mandate for the Mahayuti must motivate every functionary to work more for the people of Maharashtra, he emphasised. State revenue minister and senior BJP leader Chandrashekhar Bawankule thanked the people of Nagpur district for trusting the "double engine" government of PM Modi and CM Fadnavis.

"CM Fadnavis gave ₹6,500 crore for various development projects in Nagpur district. A total of 317 councillors and 22 council presidents of the BJP got elected in Nagpur district. Party workers must prepare for the upcoming Nagpur municipal corporation elections and ensure huge victory," Bawankule said.

## Jharkhand CM inaugurates free coaching institute for ST students

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
■ Ranchi

Jharkhand Chief Minister Hemant Soren on Monday inaugurated a free coaching institute for Scheduled Tribe (ST) students preparing for medical and engineering examinations in the state.

The Dishom Guru Shibu Soren Engineering (JEE) and Medical (NEET) Coaching Institute has been set up in a welfare department building at Hindpiri here, where 300 selected students will be provided specialised coaching for competitive examinations, an official said.

"A new chapter has been added to uplift our upcoming generation. This institute will help tribal students crack competitive examinations in medical and engineering fields," Soren said while inaugurating the facility.

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**Order Order**

**SC stays conviction of  
ex-Maharashtra Minister  
Manikrao Kokate**



Manikrao Kokate

The Supreme Court on Monday stayed the conviction of former Maharashtra Minister Manikrao Kokate in a cheating and forgery case and clarified that he shall not face any disqualification as an MLA. The case, concerning a housing scheme for EWS with an annual income limit of ₹30,000 dates back to 1989-1992.

A vacation bench of Chief Justice Surya Kant and Justice Joymalya Bagchi issued notice to the Maharashtra Government on Kokate's plea. "Issue notice. In the meanwhile, conviction of petitioner shall remain stayed to the extent that there shall be no disqualification as a member of legislative assembly. However, he shall not hold any office of profit," the bench said.

Kokate is an MLA of NCP (Ajit Pawar) from the Sinnar constituency in Nashik district. His conviction and a two-year sentence by a Magistrate in February this year were upheld by the Nashik sessions court on December 16, holding that he and his brother dishonestly induced the State Government to allot them flats. The Bombay High Court on December 19 suspended Kokate's two-year jail term in the cheating and forgery case. It granted him bail but refused to stay his conviction.

**AgustaWestland: Delhi  
court reserves order on  
Christian Michel's plea**



Christian Michel

A Delhi court reserved its order for Tuesday on a plea filed by Christian James Michel seeking release from custody in a CBI case related to the alleged AgustaWestland VVIP chopper scam. Michel has sought release on the grounds that he had already undergone the maximum period of sentence of seven years for the charges against him. Special CBI judge Sanjay Jindal, who was hearing the plea, reserved the order for December 23.

On December 20, the court ordered the release of Michel from custody in a money laundering case filed by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) related to the alleged scam. Michel, accused of being a 'middleman' in the defence deal, was extradited from Dubai in December 2018, following which the CBI arrested him and filed a chargesheet.

The CBI, in its chargesheet, claimed an estimated loss of 398.21 million euros (about ₹2,666 crore) to the exchequer due to the deal that was signed on February 8, 2010, for the supply of VVIP choppers worth 556.262 million euros.



**SC slams Uttarakhand Govt  
over grabbing of forest land**

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
■ New Delhi

The Supreme Court on Monday slammed the Uttarakhand Government over the grabbing of forest land, observing that the State Government and its authorities were sitting like "mute spectators", and initiated a suo motu case. A vacation bench of Chief Justice Surya Kant and Justice Joymalya Bagchi directed the chief secretary of Uttarakhand to form an inquiry committee and submit a report.

"What is shocking to us is that the State of Uttarakhand and authorities are sitting like mute spectators when forest land is being grabbed in front of their eyes. Thus we initiate a suo motu case. "Chief secretary of Uttarakhand and Principal conservation secretary is instructed to form a fact finding committee and submit a report. Private parties are stopped from creating any third party rights and no construction shall take place," the bench said.

The Supreme Court said vacant land, other than residential houses, shall be taken



CJI Surya Kant

Justice Joymalya Bagchi

in possession by the forest department. The bench posted the matter for hearing on Monday after reopening of the court following vacations. The Supreme Court was hearing a plea filed by Anita Kandwal pertaining to illegal possession of a large chunk of forest land in Uttarakhand.

Besides ordering inquiry, the Court also imposed immediate restrictions to prevent the situation from worsening. It barred private

parties from creating any third-party rights over forest land and made it clear that no construction is to take place. "Private parties are stopped from creating any third party rights and no construction shall take place," said CJI Kant. The Bench effectively put a stop to all ongoing or planned activities until further orders are issued. Additionally, the Court ordered that all vacant land, except areas where residential houses already stand,

must be taken into possession by the Forest Department.

"Vacant land other than residential houses shall be taken in possession by the forest department," said CJI Kant. This step is intended to prevent any further changes from occurring on the ground while the matter remains under the Court's consideration. The Bench ordered that the case be posted for further hearing on January 5, upon the reopening of the Court.

**Visva Bharati, Birbhum administration under NGT  
scanner over waste management in varsity town area**

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
■ Kolkata

The National Green Tribunal (NGT) on Monday imposed fines on Visva-Bharati University and the Birbhum district administration over alleged lapses in solid and liquid waste management in the central university town, a day before the commencement of the heritage Poush Mela. The tribunal's directive, however, is related to overall waste management on the Visva-Bharati campus area and adjoining localities with no bearing on the 'Poush Mela' to be held from December 23-28, fair organisers said.

The court had earlier sought a report detailing arrangements for the control



Visva Bharati University

and disposal of solid and liquid wastes on the campus town, but imposed fines on the central varsity and Birbhum district administration and ordered them to appear in person. Environmentalist Subhas Dutta had filed a case in the

NGT in 2016 over pollution issues linked to handling of solid and liquid waste by the Visva Bharati.

In 2017 and again in 2020, the NGT had directed Visva Bharati to ensure adequate arrangements for the management and disposal of

waste, but those directions were not complied with, the court felt. In past, the NGT directed Visva Bharati authorities and the West Bengal Government to submit an action taken report about solid-liquid waste management on the campus area.

Visva-Bharati's spokesperson Atig Ghosh said, "We will fully comply with the NGT's directives about waste management." On the eve of the fair, West Bengal Pollution Control Board officials visited the venue to monitor waste disposal arrangements and sprayed water using sprinklers.

The Poush Mela — held jointly by Visva Bharati and Santiniketan Trust — will have over 1,400 stalls, organisers said.

**Lavasa project: HC dismisses PIL seeking probe against Pawars, Sule**

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
■ Mumbai

The Bombay High Court on Monday dismissed a PIL seeking a CBI probe against NCP (SP) leader Sharad Pawar, his daughter and Baramati MP Supriya Sule as well as his nephew and Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar for alleged illegal permissions given to the Lavasa hill station project in Pune.

A bench of Chief Justice Shree Chandrashekhkar and Justice Gautam Ankhad noted that petitioner Nanasahab Jadhav, a lawyer, failed to



show any legal provision whereby a court, while exercising its civil jurisdiction, can pass a direction to the police to register a First Information Report. Jadhav's public interest litigation sought a direction to the Central Bureau of Investigation to register a case against Sharad Pawar, Sule and Ajit Pawar for alleged illegal permissions given to construct a hill station at Lavasa in Pune district.

In February 2022, the HC had refused to interfere when Jadhav had filed a petition seeking to declare the special permissions granted to Lavasa

as illegal. The HC had, however, noted there seemed to be some exertion of influence and clout by Sharad Pawar and his daughter. In the fresh PIL filed in 2023 seeking a CBI probe, Jadhav said he had filed a complaint with the Pune police commissioner in December 2018 seeking a probe against Pawar and others, but the police took no action.

In March this year, Sharad Pawar filed an intervention application opposing the PIL, claiming Jadhav had made similar or same allegations again and again.

**Ex-CM Baghel's son got ₹250 crore as share from Chhattisgarh liquor scam**

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
■ Raipur

Chaitanya, son of former Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Bhupesh Baghel, received ₹200 crore to ₹250 crore as his share from an alleged liquor scam in the State, the Anti-Corruption Bureau/Economic Offence Wing (ACB/EOW) has claimed in its chargesheet. The state police's ACB/EOW, in its seventh supplementary chargesheet in the multi-crore liquor scam filed before a special court here on Monday, claimed Chaitanya Baghel played a key role in establishing, coordinating, and protecting extortion racket (syndicate) within the excise department (during the previous Congress Government which was in office from 2018-23).

The voluminous document, which runs into around 3,800 pages, has named Chaitanya Baghel as an accused in the alleged scam pegged at more than ₹3,000 crore, an ACB/EOW statement said. With this, a total of eight chargesheets have been filed in the case so far. The latest chargesheet details the current status of investigation against the accused already arrested, along with digital evidence reports pertaining to all those in



Chaitanya Baghel

custody. The document also outlines the progress of the ongoing probe against accused persons.

The statement quoting the chargesheet said Chaitanya Baghel acted as coordinator among officials such as Anil Tuteja, Soumya Chaurasia, Arunpati Tripathi, and Niranjan Das who worked in line with the syndicate's interests at administrative level and as ground-level operatives of the network such as Anwar Dhebar, Arvind Singh, and Vikas Agarwal (all co-accused), and issued instructions to them.

Chaitanya Baghel worked through his trusted associates to transfer and manage proceeds of the scam collected by businessman

Anwar Dhebar's team, moving the funds to higher levels, it claimed. He allegedly received his share of the proceeds through various firms belonging to liquor businessman Trilok Singh Dhillon, transferring it through banking channels to his family firms and using it in real estate projects.

Furthermore, he was found to have received and invested large sums of the money generated out of the scam through banking channels via his family members, friends, and associates, the chargesheet claimed.

The probe agency said, "Evidence indicates that Chaitanya, along with managing the proceeds of

crime at a higher level, received around ₹200 crore - ₹250 crore as his share." The investigation has also revealed that high-level protection, policy/administrative intervention, and influence provided to the syndicate by Chaitanya Baghel enabled this crime to be perpetrated for a long period, it claimed.

"The ongoing investigation suggests the amount involved in the liquor scam is estimated to be approximately ₹3,074 crore. However, further investigation suggests the total amount of the proceeds of crime generated out of the alleged scam could exceed ₹3,500 crore", it added. The Enforcement Directorate (ED), probing money laundering angle in the alleged scam, arrested Chaitanya Baghel on July 18 following a search at his house which he shares with his father, a Congress politician, in Bhlai town of Durg district.

As per the ED's prosecution complaint (chargesheet) filed earlier, Chaitanya Baghel "handled" more than ₹1,000 crore worth of "proceeds of crime" generated from a liquor "scam" in the state. The central agency has said the alleged scam resulted in a "massive loss" to the state exchequer and filled the pockets of beneficiaries of a liquor syndicate.

The scam was orchestrated between 2019 and 2022 when the CM Bhupesh Baghel headed the Congress Government in Chhattisgarh. Money was "illegally" collected from "every" bottle of liquor sold in Chhattisgarh (between 2019-2022), said the anti-money laundering agency. Chaitanya Baghel was arrested by the ACB/EOW in September while he was in jail under judicial custody. The ED in January arrested former excise minister and Congress leader Kawasi Lakhma besides businessman Anwar Dhebar (brother of Congress leader and former Raipur Mayor Aijaz Dhebar), former IAS officer Anil Tuteja, Indian Telecom Service (ITS) officer Arunpati Tripathi and some others as part of their investigations in the case.

The EOW/ACB registered an FIR on January 17, 2024, in the alleged scam, naming 70 individuals and companies, including Lakhma and former chief secretary Vivek Dhand. After his son was arrested, former CM Baghel claimed the action was taken because the Congress during its rule tried to stop cutting of forests and mining activities in the state. The Congress leader also alleged probe agencies were being misused to target Opposition leaders.

**Surat court stays 7-year old Jain girl's diksha after father moves plea**

**PRESS TRUST OF INDIA**  
■ Surat

A family court in Gujarat's Surat city on Monday stayed 'diksha' (religious initiation) of a seven-year-old Jain girl after her father filed a plea claiming his estranged wife had gone against his wishes and decided that the child should embrace monkhood.

Family court judge SV Mansuri granted a stay on her 'diksha', which was scheduled on February 8, 2026, in Mumbai.

"The court granted our plea for an interim stay on the girl's 'diksha' and kept further hearing on January 2. It has asked the mother to file an affidavit stating that the child will not take part in the ceremony," petitioner's lawyer Sampti Mehta said. The court was informed that the woman had left her husband's house nearly a year ago following a dispute on this

issue, and took her daughter and son to live with her parents. On December 10, the girl's father had approached the family court seeking her custody, claiming his estranged wife had decided against his wishes that the child should take 'diksha' to become a monk.

In the plea, filed under the Guardians and Wards Act, 1890, the petitioner sought to be appointed as the girl's legal guardian to protect her interests. Judge Mansuri had issued a notice to the petitioner's wife, seeking a reply by December 22.

The petitioner stated that he married the respondent in 2012, and they have two children. The couple have been living separately since 2024. He had discussed the issue of their daughter embracing monkhood with his wife and agreed that the girl should become a monk after attaining maturity, the petition said.

**Trial of all 7 accused in Zubeen Garg death case gets underway**

**TONY DAS**  
■ Guwahati

All the seven accused in the death of singer Zubeen Garg appeared virtually before a sessions court here, as the trial in the case got underway on Monday.

The Kamrup (Metro) District and Sessions Court, after examining the accused via video-conferencing, fixed the next date of hearing on January 3, 2026. It will consider framing of charges on the date of the next hearing, a senior lawyer said.

The court will call for their production, either in person or virtually, to ask them whether they plead guilty or will stand for trial in the case, he said.

Garg had gone to attend the North East India Festival (NEIF) in Singapore, where he died under mysterious circumstances while swimming in the sea on September 19.

The accused — NEIF chief organiser Shyamkanu Mahanta, the singer's secretary Siddhartha Sharma, his cousin Sandipan Garg, and two personal security officers (PSOs) Nandeswar Bora and Paresw Baishya appeared from the Baksa Jail, while musician Shekharjyoti Goswami and singer Amritprava Mahanta were present online from Haffong Jail.

The celebrated singer's sister Palme Borthakur was present in court during the hearing, and later told reporters that the family has full faith in the judiciary. The Special Investigation Team (SIT)



Zubeen Garg

probing the case had charged Mahanta, Sharma, Goswami and Amritprava with murder in the chargesheet filed before the Chief Judicial Magistrate (CJM) on December 12.

The singer's cousin and suspended Assam Police officer Sandipan Garg has been charged with culpable homicide not amounting to murder, while the two PSOs were charged with criminal conspiracy and criminal breach of trust by misappropriating funds or property entrusted to them.

The first hearing in the case, after the SIT submitted the chargesheet, took place on December 16 at the CJM court here.

The CJM, thereafter, committed the case to the sessions court for the trial to begin. The accused were present virtually during the December 16 hearing, too, as the police had cited law and order issues if they were produced physically.

The hard copies of the chargesheet were handed over to the accused by the jail authorities before the first hearing, and their family members were provided a pen drive each with copies of the document.

Asked about the charges against the accused, Borthakur said that they have not received the certified copy of the chargesheet yet.

Advocate Dhruvajyoti Das was appointed by the District Legal Services Authority to represent the accused, though an independent lawyer appeared on behalf of Amritprava during Monday's hearing.



## Editor's TAKE

### The Epstein files: Anatomy of a cover-up

The partial release of the Epstein files has unleashed outrage in the US and beyond, posing uncomfortable questions about power, privilege and justice

As the Pandora's box called the Epstein files tumbles out of the closet, many high and mighty in the US and, for that matter, across the world are getting goosebumps. The serial offender Jeffrey Epstein may have long gone, but he still haunts the people he courted and the ones who used him for their shameless acts. The partial release of the Jeffrey Epstein files has triggered a political and moral storm in the United States, and beyond. Long after Epstein's death in a New York jail cell in 2019, the disgraced financier and serial abuser remains at the centre of a massive cover-up underway in the US to protect the rich and famous who courted him, used him and eventually dumped him – a stark reminder of how wealth, influence and institutions can combine to bury uncomfortable truths. Jeffrey Epstein was friends with presidents, prime ministers, royalty, billionaires, academics and celebrities. His Manhattan mansion and private island were hubs of elite socialising, even as young girls – many of them minors – were being trafficked, exploited and eventually silenced. When he was first prosecuted in 2008, Epstein served a brief sentence that allowed him daily freedom. That deal alone raised eyebrows about who intervened, who looked away, and why.

The newly released documents, mandated by Congress under the Epstein Files Transparency Act, were expected to shed light on those questions. Instead, what emerged was a heavily redacted, partial disclosure – photographs, call logs and court records – but conspicuously missing some of the most consequential material, including FBI interviews with survivors and internal Justice Department memos explaining charging decisions. The result has been widespread outrage.

The Trump administration has defended the limited release on the flimsy grounds of protecting victims. Protecting survivors is indeed a moral and legal imperative. But that argument begins to ring hollow when entire categories of documents are withheld, and files are briefly posted and then removed from the public domain. Democrats have accused the administration of orchestrating a cover-up – not necessarily to protect Epstein's victims, but to protect the people who wield power and money.

Whether or not those accusations are fully borne out, the optics are deeply damaging. When transparency laws are met with selective disclosure, excessive redaction and shifting explanations, public trust erodes. The controversy over photographs involving Donald Trump – removed and then promised to be reposted after redactions – has only reinforced suspicions that political considerations are paramount.

And this is happening in a country which claims to be the custodian of freedom and liberty – a democracy that thrives on transparency and public trust. Besides, this is not merely an American issue. Epstein's web was global, and the principle at stake transcends national boundaries, and a few Indian names are also floating. In democracies, citizens have a right to know how justice operates, even more so when the accused are rich and powerful.

## Bondi massacre: Transnational terrorism

Bondi emerges not as an isolated tragedy, but as part of a larger, interconnected pattern of Islamist violence that stretches across continents and repeatedly leads back to the same unresolved fault lines in the global fight against terrorism



KRIPA NAUTIYAL

On a sunny Sunday afternoon at one of Australia's most iconic beaches, evil descended upon families celebrating Hanukkah. The Bondi Beach massacre of December 14, 2025, where a father-son duo armed with rifles systematically hunted down and killed 15 innocent people, represents the latest horrific chapter in the ongoing global war against Islamic terrorism. The attackers, motivated by Islamic State ideology, specifically targeted Australia's Jewish community in what has become the country's worst mass shooting in almost 30 years. The chilling details emerging from the investigation paint a picture of calculated savagery. Sajid Akram and his Australian-born son, Naveed, 24, arrived at Bondi Beach with long-range rifles, homemade ISIS flags displayed on their vehicle, and a determination to maximise casualties. There are reports indicating that Naveed Akram, the 24-year-old son and one of the two attackers, studied at Hamdard University in Islamabad, Pakistan. Dashcam footage captured the first moments of heroism and horror-Boris and Sofia Gurman, a 69-year-old and 61-year-old Russian-Jewish couple, attempted to disarm one of the attackers before being fatally shot. Another man, 43, wrestled a gun from an attacker despite being shot multiple times. Yet, despite such extraordinary courage, fifteen families now mourn loved ones murdered simply for being Jewish.

What makes this attack particularly alarming is its transnational dimension. The Akrams travelled to Mindanao in the Philippines in November 2025 – a region known as a hotbed of Islamic insurgency-before returning to execute their massacre. This pattern of international travel to extremist strongholds for training or inspiration echoes a disturbing global trend in Islamic terrorism.

### The Thread That Connects Continents

The Bondi Beach massacre cannot be viewed in isolation. It is part of a relentless pattern of Islamic terrorism that has claimed thousands of lives across continents, with one nation's shadow looming particularly large-Pakistan.

The September 11, 2001 attacks remain history's deadliest terrorist assault, killing nearly 3,000 innocents. The mastermind, Osama bin Laden, was eventually discovered living comfortably in Abbottabad, Pakistan – not in a remote cave, but in a garrison town home to Pakistan's premier military academy. This revelation exposed what many had long suspected: Pakistan's role as a sanctuary for the world's most dangerous terrorists.

India has borne the brunt of Pakistan-sponsored terrorism for decades. The November 26, 2008 Mumbai attacks-India's 9/11-saw ten gunmen from the Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba conduct coordinated assaults across Mumbai over four days, killing 166 people and wounding over 300.



The sophistication was undeniable: handlers in Pakistan directed operatives in real time via satellite phones, demonstrating state-level support and infrastructure behind the massacre.

### Kashmir's Continuing Agony

The recent Pahalgam attack in Kashmir added another blood-stained page to this chronicle. Hindu tourists were deliberately identified, separated, and executed in an act of sectarian terrorism timed to coincide with high-profile diplomatic engagements. The calculated nature of the attack-designed to maximise international attention and create communal discord-reveals the strategic thinking behind such violence.

What haunts investigators is the apparent local support network that enabled terrorists to operate in what should have been a secure tourist area. The questions are uncomfortable but necessary: were local businesses intimidated into silence? Does a network of sympathisers provide passive support to terrorist activities? The answers point to a deep-rooted challenge that extends beyond immediate security responses.

### The Evolution of Terror

The November 2025 explosion near Delhi's Red Fort introduced a terrifying new dimension-"white-collar terrorism." The alleged involvement of medical professionals, including doctors, in planning and executing attacks represents a disturbing evolution. These educated operatives used sophisticated encrypted communication platforms such as Threema, employed spycraft techniques such as "dead-drop emails", and even attempted to procure biological toxins like ricin. Investigations revealed connections to Jaish-e-Mohammed and the emergence of "women's jihad" – systematic recruitment of educated women into terrorist networks. Dr Shaheen Saeed's arrest and the discovery of the women's wing, "Jamaat-ul-Mominat", operating in India demonstrate how terrorist organisations are exploiting societal assumptions about gender to circumvent security measures.

THE BONDI BEACH MASSACRE CANNOT BE VIEWED IN ISOLATION. IT IS PART OF A RELENTLESS PATTERN OF ISLAMIC TERRORISM THAT HAS CLAIMED THOUSANDS OF LIVES ACROSS CONTINENTS, WITH ONE NATION'S SHADOW LOOMING PARTICULARLY LARGE-PAKISTAN

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The Pioneer SINCE 1865

### Pakistan: The Persistent Problem

Threading through every major attack-from 9/11 to Mumbai to Pahalgam to the recruitment networks behind the Red Fort plot – is Pakistan's role as sponsor and sanctuary of Islamic terrorism. Despite receiving billions in international counter-terrorism aid, Pakistan has operated a cynical double game: publicly condemning terrorism while privately nurturing terrorist groups as instruments of foreign policy.

The handlers directing the Mumbai attackers operated from Pakistani soil with impunity. The infrastructure supporting the Pahalgam attack traces back across the border. Masterminds of countless attacks live openly in Pakistan, often with state protection. Osama bin Laden's discovery in Abbottabad was not an aberration – it was confirmation of a decades-long pattern.

### The Global Response

The international community's response has been woefully inadequate. Individual attacks provoke temporary outrage and social media condemnations, but systemic pressure on state sponsors of terrorism remains absent. China's strategic interests in Pakistan, particularly the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, shield Islamabad from meaningful consequences. Western nations, preoccupied with their own geopolitical calculations, fail to maintain consistent pressure.

Even as Australians now grapple with their worst mass shooting in decades, the world must recognise that these attacks are not isolated incidents. The Bondi Beach massacre, like Mumbai, Pahalgam, and Delhi before it, represents symptoms of a systemic problem: state-sponsored radicalisation and the weaponisation of religious ideology.

### The Path Forward

Combating this persistent threat requires more than grief and vigils. Intelligence capabilities must evolve to track encrypted communications and white-collar terrorism. Security protocols must account for sophisticated operatives exploiting professional credibility. Most critically, the international community must overcome geopolitical considerations to hold state sponsors accountable. Until Pakistan faces meaningful consequences for nurturing terrorist networks, until democracies develop effective counter-strategies for evolving threats, innocent people will continue dying at beaches, in hotels, at heritage sites, and on city streets. The time for half-measures has passed. Islamic terrorism-particularly that sponsored or sheltered by Pakistan-must be recognised as a global threat requiring coordinated, sustained, and decisive action.

The flowers laid at Bondi Beach, the vigils held worldwide, and the tears of grieving families all serve as painful reminders that, in the face of such evil, the world's response must match the magnitude of the threat. Anything less dishonours those who have already paid the price.



Folk artists perform with traditional musical instruments at the Poush Mela fair in Santiniketan, Birbhum district of West Bengal. PHOTO: PTI

## Reforming education without reforming teachers



SAKSHI SETHI

### 2ND OPINION THE PIONEER

When Finland revises its curriculum, it begins by retraining teachers. When Singapore introduces new competencies, educators are upskilled well before students encounter the change. Across high-performing OECD nations, education reform starts with strengthening teaching capacity, not demanding student adjustment. India, however, follows a different sequence. Reforms are announced with fanfare, policy documents multiply, acronyms proliferate, and students are expected to adapt immediately. Teachers, meanwhile, are left to translate ambitious vision into classroom reality-often with little preparation, minimal consultation and growing administrative pressure.

If education reform is genuinely the objective, one

uncomfortable truth must be acknowledged: real change lies not in constantly fixing students, but in re-teaching teachers.

When learning outcomes disappoint, the diagnosis is predictable. Students are distracted. They do not read. Smartphones have ruined attention spans. Every explanation is accepted except the possibility that pedagogy itself has failed to evolve. This narrative is administratively convenient. It shifts accountability away from institutions, boards and training bodies and places it squarely on children. Questioning students is easy; questioning systems is not.

Teacher professional development has increasingly become an exercise in compliance rather than competence. Orientation programmes, NCERT-led sessions and mandatory Continuous Professional Development hours look impressive on paper. In practice, they are often overcrowded, rushed and overwhelmingly PowerPoint-driven. Teachers log in, listen passively, mark attendance and log out-officially "trained", yet pedagogically unchanged.

The irony is stark. Teachers are urged to foster experiential learning through training that offers no experience. They are told to encourage inquiry while being placed in environments that discourage questioning. Reflection is sacrificed to coverage, dialogue to dead-

lines. Completing hours matters more than deepening understanding. Concepts such as classroom psychology, differentiated instruction, assessment literacy and socio-emotional learning are frequently invoked but rarely internalised. Creativity is praised in policy language but quietly discouraged in practice, especially when it challenges hierarchy or routine.

A teacher unfamiliar with inquiry-based learning may view questions as disruption and disagreement as disrespect. This is not individual failure; it is systemic contradiction. Re-teaching teachers is not an indictment of the profession. It is recognition of its growing complexity. Teaching today is not mere content delivery; it is cognitive mentoring, emotional scaffolding and ethical guidance.

India's education policies are often visionary, yet classroom experiences remain average. The gap between intent and implementation is bridged not by students, but by teachers – who are rarely treated as intellectual partners in reform. Until teachers are prepared for the classrooms we imagine, reform will remain cosmetic. Real change does not begin in the child's notebook. It begins in the teacher's mind.

The writer is an educator and counsellor

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### BLURRED LINES BETWEEN INFLUENCE AND AUTHORITY

I was not surprised when Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) chief Mohan Bhagwat remarked that viewing the Sangh through the lens of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) would be a "big mistake". However, his assertion appears difficult to accept in practice. Several prominent leaders of the ruling BJP, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Home Minister Amit Shah and Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, have long histories as RSS pracharakas or active members. This close personal overlap inevitably blurs the line between the organisation and the party.

Numerous reports have also pointed out that several ministerial and personal staff appointments in the central government involve individuals with RSS backgrounds or links to

its affiliates, such as the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad, particularly in ministries dealing with education and culture. This pattern reinforces perceptions of institutional influence.

Bhagwat has repeatedly stated that the RSS has no political agenda and works solely for the "betterment of Hindu society" and nation-building through character development and social reform. While the RSS may claim to act only as an ideological or moral guide without interfering in day-to-day governance, concerns remain. Opposition leaders, including Rahul Gandhi, allege that the RSS is steadily extending its influence over autonomous educational and research institutions, raising fears of ideological intrusion.

BIDYUT K CHATTERJEE | FARIDABAD

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GANAPATHI BHAT | AKOLA

N SADHASIVA REDDY | BENGALURU

SM JEEVA | CHENNAI

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Cruelty cannot justify tradition

Cockfighting may be banned in India, but in parts of southern India it continues openly under the misleading label of "sport". Coastal Andhra Pradesh, coastal Karnataka and parts of Tamil Nadu still witness this brutal activity, despite it being outlawed as early as 1960 under the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act. Its survival points not to cultural strength, but to the failure of enforcement, aided by political patronage and police apathy.

Court directives, including repeated orders from the Supreme Court and High Courts, have failed to curb the practice. During Pongal, illegal cockfights flourish across Tamil Nadu, justified in the name of tradition and history. In reality, roosters are fitted with sharp blades and knives and forced to fight until one bleeds to death, while spectators cheer and gamble without remorse.

Although a 2018 Supreme Court order permitted cockfighting without blades, this condition is routinely violated. Disturbingly, even owners and spectators have been injured or killed by the same weapons they endorse.

Cockfighting combines cruelty with gambling and lawlessness. It demands firm action, not symbolic bans. Compassion, not custom, must guide our laws.

### Bangladesh's dangerous drift

The decision to bury Islamist leader Sharif Osman Hadi beside Bangladesh's revered revolutionary poet Kazi Nazrul Islam represents a grave symbolic error. Nazrul stood for pluralism, human dignity and resistance to oppression.

Hadi, by contrast, was associated with Islamist extremism, identity-based hatred and the pursuit of a theocratic state. Placing them together distorts history and weakens Bangladesh's secular foundations. As several observers have noted, this act was not accidental but politically motivated. Hadi played a key role in mobilising Islamist groups during the anti-Sheikh Hasina movement and supported the growing influence of Jamaat-e-Islami.

The unrest following his assassination exposed these dangers starkly. Cultural institutions were vandalised, media houses attacked, diplomatic missions targeted, and a young Hindu man, Dipu Chandra Das, was lynched on a false charge of blasphemy. The Muhammad Yunus administration's glowing tribute to Hadi deepens fears of ideological capture. India cannot remain silent. Bangladesh's secular character and minority safety are vital to regional stability and demand principled engagement.

### Rethinking India's welfare framework

The 2025 Winter Session of Parliament marked a major shift in India's welfare framework with the passage of the Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (VB-G RAM G) Bill. Replacing the two-decade-old MGNREGA, the new law raises guaranteed employment from 100 to 125 days per household, offering enhanced income security for rural families.

The mission also broadens the scope of work by focusing on durable asset creation through water security, core infrastructure, livelihood assets and climate resilience. In principle, this reflects an attempt to move beyond short-term relief towards long-term rural stability. However, the Bill's passage exposed sharp ideological divides. The government described the repeal of MGNREGA as necessary modernisation aligned with the vision of "Viksit Bharat 2047". The Opposition strongly objected to removing Mahatma Gandhi's name and raised concerns about the revised 60:40 Centre-State funding ratio.

Despite protests, walkouts and a premature adjournment of the session, the Bill was passed alongside other major reforms. While structural change is necessary, its success will ultimately depend on transparent implementation and respect for cooperative federalism.



## Assam's Elephant deaths expose a systemic failure

As the Forest and Railway departments trade blame, the tragedy lays bare a deeper, long-standing failure: India's development model continues to carve through fragmented forests and animal habitats with inadequate safeguards, making such disasters not accidents, but outcomes of sustained policy and planning neglect

**FIRST Column**



**BK SINGH**

In the wee hours of Saturday, eight elephants were knocked down by the Mizoram-Delhi Rajdhani Express in Sangjurai village, Hojai district of central Assam, killing seven of them on the spot and injuring one. The injured elephant also died the next day while undergoing treatment. Five of the killed elephants were calves. Visibility was very poor due to heavy fog when the train struck the elephant herd. The loco pilot did apply the emergency brake to avert the accident; testimony to this is the derailment of the locomotive and the first five bogies of the train. The train could only be started four hours later, when the derailed bogies were replaced.

The Forest and Railways departments blamed each other for this. Though Sangjurai village is not in the recognised elephant crossing corridor, movement of elephant herds in the paddy fields as well as through the cluster of houses in the village is quite common. The Forest Department has already recognised several corridors for the movement of elephants crossing the rail tracks in the state. I spoke to Assam's Chief Wildlife Warden, Dr Vinay Gupta, who says that the recognised corridors are many, where trains move with an upper speed limit of 20 km per hour and are monitored with an array of gadgets, but it may not be practical to recognise all rail tracks in the state as corridors. He further added that the track running through the paddy fields of Sangjurai village is elevated and the elephants on the track would not have sufficient time to move out, even after the locomotive whistle or sound was heard. He is hopeful of finding a solution to the problem in a forthcoming brainstorming session with Rail officials.

The Range Forest Officer, Kampur, has informed the press that the place of collision is three-fourths of a kilometre from the potential crossing spot at pillar number 125. Further, AI-enabled intrusion detection systems (IDS) are installed at several places. The nearest system to the accident site is 32 km away, located between Hawaipur and Limdung towns linking central Assam to the Barak Valley and Mizoram. Locals at the acci-



**FIFTEEN YEARS LATER, WHEN FORESTS REVIVE AND PRODUCE ENOUGH HUMUS ON THE FOREST FLOOR, VILLAGERS RETURN TO THE ORIGINAL AREA AND AGAIN CLEAR TREE GROWTH AND BURN IT**

The writer is Retired Head of Karnataka Forest Force and presently teaches Economics in Karnataka Forest Academy

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dent site feel that a similar system at Sangjurai could have avoided the accident. They also said that elephants regularly move out of forests from November to February and come to the village for food (paddy and sugarcane), and the authorities have been pleaded with to recognise it as an elephant route.

Ninety-four elephants are said to have been killed in Assam since 2019-20 in train collisions. Elephants in the Jalpaiguri belt of West Bengal are even more vulnerable to train accidents. The last two train collision cases were recorded there. A report, "Suggested Measures to Mitigate Elephant and Other Wildlife Train Collisions on Vulnerable Railway Stretches in India", has identified 127 stretches spanning over 3,452 km. Seventy-seven railway stretches over 1,965 km in 14 states have been prioritised for mitigation measures. Clearly, there has been laxity on the part of the Railway and Forest departments, as despite such measures being in place, accidents continue

to happen. Linear infrastructure such as roads, railways and canals fragment forests and wildlife reserves as well as corridors for their movement. Although widening of roads and converting single rail tracks into double lines are necessities of growth and development of the country, at the same time proper mitigation measures must be in place. Development projects such as mining, industries and expanding agriculture also lead to deforestation and degradation of natural forests, and in the process forests get fragmented. As forests shrink, wild animals have no option but to stray out of reserves. If the size of forests or reserves is large enough to hold a viable population of wild animals and also provide enough food and water, animals can probably be contained within the reserves. Assam's forests have been sufficiently fragmented owing to development projects and expanding agriculture. The Bodo agitation also took its toll on forests, and there was massive

deforestation during that period. North-eastern states, in general, practise shifting cultivation. Forests are cleared and burned for growing agricultural crops, and after a few years, when productivity falls, villagers clear fresh areas and burn tree growth for cultivation again. Fifteen years later, when forests revive and produce enough humus on the forest floor, villagers return to the original area and again clear tree growth and burn it. These areas are perpetually cleared for cultivation. What remains as natural forest is on hillocks, which are spared as agriculture is not viable there. The practice of shifting cultivation is quite harmful to forests and wildlife conservation.

Forest-dwelling communities and tribals claim rights over forest land under the Forest Rights Act, 2006. The Act has been grossly misused in the North-east and several other states in central India and along the coast. This has provided a tool for local communities to occupy forests after clearing tree growth and burning. The Act has created a tendency among com-

munities to grab land. It has been the biggest driver of deforestation in post-Independence India. Officially, communities are to claim rights over forest land only if they were in occupation of the land as on December 13, 2005. More than 20 years have passed since the cut-off date; it is high time the Act is repealed.

Central Coalfields Limited, Ranchi, once came up with a proposal to lay a railway line through forests in Jharkhand. During scrutiny of the proposal in the Ministry of Environment and Forests, I found that the line had been deliberately aligned through forests to save costs, as the user agency would have had to pay heavily for acquisition of private land. I turned it down, but after my transfer, the proposal was accepted. Similarly, the Daitari-Banspani single railway line project through the forests of Keonjhar district of Odisha was turned down by me but approved later. This has led to an increase in wildlife conflict, and collisions of elephants with trains have gone up manifold. Now the doubling of this rail line has been proposed.

The Hubballi-Ankola rail line through the best forests and wildlife-rich areas of Uttara Kannada district of Karnataka has been turned down by several officers during the last two decades, but the user agency, with the support of some politicians, continues reopening the file every time a new person takes charge. Despite being rejected many times in the past, the file of the Sharavathi pump storage project, requiring the sacrifice of 200 ha of pristine forest in the same district in the Western Ghats, is being reopened repeatedly. These projects will have disastrous consequences for the lives and livelihoods of people in Karnataka and will further aggravate human-wildlife conflict.

Land is a scarce commodity and is required for development projects. If any project is to be permitted, land has to be acquired or forests diverted. The need of the hour is to minimise diversion of forest land, and wherever it is necessary, proper mitigation measures must be built in. Highways and railway lines must have sufficient underpasses for the movement of wild animals. New rail and road projects in elephant areas must be made elevated.

Wildlife and forests protect each other. Since we are not able to transition away from fossil fuel consumption at scale, we must keep our forests intact, which have the potential to absorb one-third of the greenhouse gases we emit.

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## Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhikshan Bill, 2025: A backbone for higher educational institutions



**T SENTHIL SIVA SUBRAMANIAN**

India is marching and making bold moves towards *Amrit Kaal*, especially by discovering innovative, objective, flexible, simplified and light educational reforms through the introduction of Bharat's educational revolutionary Bill called Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhikshan. The Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhikshan Bill, 2025, in short called VBSA, is a 21st-century educational reformist system that enforces positive and more competent unified standards, regulations and accreditation through an autonomous entity and thereby makes Bharat's educational system unique and sets transformational benchmarks, leading to meeting global educational standards.

VBSA meets the vision of the Hon'ble Prime Minister of India, Shri Narendra Modi: "Minimum Government, Maximum Governance".

### A Gateway to Academic Excellence

The Hon'ble Union Minister of Education, Shri Dharmendra Pradhan, stated that VBSA will act as a coordinating, advisory and philanthropic body, and it would create a flexible platform for different stakeholders of educational institutions that is expected to enhance research, innovation and entrepreneurship, which will lead to the introduction of higher quality education and will set universal benchmarks among higher educational institutions. Most importantly, VBSA will open critical and innovative thinking qualities among students and Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs). VBSA is expected to reskill and upskill students' knowledge, thereby making education more outcome-based. The primary focus of VBSA is innovation-based education that paves the way for youth empowerment. VBSA makes a paradigm shift from conventional subjective education to emerging objective-based education. VBSA will enhance research and innovation in educational institutions and adds paramount importance to the ease of access to mega research funding schemes like the Anusandhan National Research Foundation (ANRF).

### A Flexible and Simplified, Objective Approach

VBSA foresees a 'light but tight' based approach. VBSA will enhance Indian educational systems to meet global and universal educational standards, thereby making education more multi-



disciplinary and interdisciplinary in Higher Educational Institutions. VBSA will constitute members from expert committees and representatives from industry, thereby bringing educational quality among institutions. It also includes and makes a uniform way for public access to educational data.

VBSA will bring Indian educational systems to global standards and thereby will create a unique and frugal platform for outreach enhancement, gross enrolment ratio improvement, and a robust holistic approach, thereby meeting the objectives of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and the National Credit Framework (NCF).

VBSA will form a fulcrum and has the following educational architecture under one umbrella of autonomy:

- Viksit Bharat Shiksha Manak Parishad (Standards Council)
- Viksit Bharat Shiksha Vinayaman Parishad (Regulatory Council)
- Viksit Bharat Shiksha Gunvatta Parishad (Accreditation Council)

### Case Study in Educational Systems

VBSA has successful case studies and best practices in MedTech education in India, which are successfully implemented at the Indian Institute of Technology, Jammu; All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), Jammu; and the Indian Institute of Management (IIM), Jammu. These make students capable of learning technology, medical and management disciplines, leading to nurturing innovation and start-ups, thereby contributing to the growth of the medical start-up ecosystem in India.

Additionally, the "AMZ Science and Technology Cluster", known as the Vizag Science and Technology (S&T) Cluster, and AMTZ-India's premier medical technology park based at the Andhra Pradesh MedTech Zone (AMTZ) in Visakhapatnam-showcase the growth

of Indian MSMEs and medical start-ups in the medical sector. Another successful case study is the undergraduate medical technology course offered by the Indian Institute of Technology, Madras, which introduces medical technology to undergraduate engineering students.

Emerging technologies such as Artificial Intelligence, semiconductors, space and critical minerals have emerged as the fastest-growing disruptive technologies in India in the current decade of the 21st century. Today, there is a need for science, technology and economic collaboration within educational systems, which will be met through the best practices of VBSA.

In today's era of digitalisation, the launch of Digital India has created a revolution in the educational system, facilitating teachers across every corner of the nation to reach students in remote locations. MOOC platforms such as NPTEL and SWAYAM create unique opportunities for students and faculty members to reskill and upskill knowledge in science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics-management (STEAMM). Another successful case of digitalisation is the best practices of Jigyasa by CSIR and Virtual Labs under the Ministry of Education, which enable students to perform remote-based experiments and

provide ease of access to software tools and techniques. Additionally, the I-STEM-Indian Science, Technology and Engineering Facilities Map-an initiative of the Office of the Principal Scientific Adviser to the Government of India, brings enormous value for students and researchers to access equipment and hardware, tools such as MATLAB, available at nearby educational institutions, thereby enabling research and development activities.

### A Vision for Viksit Bharat@2047

VBSA will set benchmarks among institutions, leading to enhancement of the quality of education among different stakeholders-students, faculty, staff and overall Higher Educational Institutions. VBSA will have a vital component of discrete student feedback that forms the primary constituent to meet standards, regulations and accreditation in Indian educational systems. VBSA will bring a paradigm shift in educational systems, thereby making them more flexible, simplified and objective.

VBSA will make Indian educational systems self-reliant, thereby enabling them to achieve Aatmanirbhar Bharat, leading to the vision of Viksit Bharat@2047.

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## A powerful way to bring peace and harmony to one's life



**AMIT DESHMUKH**

As the United Nations observes World Meditation Day on December 21, the global community is being invited to pause - not in inertia, but in awareness. In an era marked by conflict, anxiety, digital overload, and declining mental health indicators, the UN's recognition of meditation is both timely and transformative. It acknowledges that sustainable peace is not only negotiated in diplomatic chambers but cultivated within the human mind.

Meditation, long rooted in ancient wisdom traditions, has today emerged as a subject of rigorous academic inquiry. Peer-reviewed research published in leading neuroscience and psychology journals demonstrates that regular meditation practice can reduce stress, anxiety, and depression while improving emotional regulation and cognitive clarity. A landmark study from Harvard Medical School observed structural changes in brain regions associated with learning, memory, empathy, and self-awareness after just eight weeks of mindfulness meditation practice. Such findings validate what yogic traditions have asserted for millennia: inner discipline shapes outer behaviour.

India's contribution to this global understanding is profound, particularly through institutions such as the Bihar School of Yoga, founded by Swami Satyananda Saraswati in Munger, Bihar. The Bihar School of Yoga emphasises meditation not merely as a relaxation technique, but as a systematic training of consciousness. Its research-based yogic practices - such as Yoga Nidra, Antar Mouna, and Ajapa Japa - are widely studied for their impact on mental health, trauma recovery, and psychosomatic balance. Scholars associated with Bihar Yoga Bharati (Yoga University) have consistently highlighted that meditation enhances self-regulation, resilience, and emotional intelligence - qualities increasingly essential in today's volatile world.

Academic papers emerging from yoga universities and interdisciplinary research centres underline that meditation bridges science and spirituality. It is neither religious nor ideological; rather, it is a universal human capacity. As one research conclusion from yogic studies notes, meditation enables "a conscious restructuring of mental patterns, leading to improved adaptability and inner stability". This insight aligns seamlessly with contemporary psychological models of mindfulness-based interventions now adopted in healthcare systems worldwide.

At the policy level, India has played a pivotal



role in bringing contemplative practices to the global stage. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, a consistent advocate of yoga and meditation, has repeatedly emphasised their relevance beyond personal wellness. In his public addresses, he has described meditation as "a powerful way to bring peace and harmony to one's life, society, and the planet". His message reinforces the idea that global harmony begins with individual balance - a philosophy that resonates deeply with the UN's vision for World Meditation Day.

The United Nations' endorsement of meditation is also a subtle yet significant shift in global governance thinking. It recognises mental well-being as foundational to peace, development, and human dignity. In a world grappling with war, displacement, climate anxiety, and technological disruption, meditation offers a low-cost, high-impact tool for restoring inner equilibrium and social cohesion.

World Meditation Day, therefore, is not symbolic alone - it is instructional. It urges governments, educational institutions, and civil society to integrate contemplative practices into daily life, classrooms, workplaces, and public health systems. The convergence of scientific evidence, yogic scholarship, and political leadership sends a clear message: the future of peace depends as much on inner awareness as on external agreements.

As humanity navigates uncertain times, meditation stands as a quiet yet powerful act of resistance against chaos - reminding us that lasting change begins within.

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In the first nine months of this year, the country witnessed more than 100 merger and acquisition (M&A) deals which, according to a media report, is the highest in the past four years. What is surprising, however, is that the largest share was accounted for by the food and beverage (F&B) sector, where the sizes of the deals are generally much lower than, say, energy, tech, and asset-heavy ones. This was followed by apparels, another lightweight category. In terms of value, the consumer sector deals were more than Rs 20,000 crore, with almost 75 per cent in F&B. One of the reasons may be that the India growth story has shifted from demand to consumption, largely due to personal tax and GST changes. Hence, consumption-led sectors like F&B have emerged in the limelight. In the recent past, thanks to GST 2.0, private consumption has zoomed.

Apart from the macro scenario, where consumption may lead the growth story for a few years, the F&B sector is undergoing radical changes. From an annual base of \$120 billion in revenues, it may add another \$100 billion over the next few years, and grow at a compounded growth of 6.5 per cent. Several factors like rapid urbanisation, and higher demand for convenience food can explain the growth pattern. The rise of online and speedy food delivery, especially of those that deliver within minutes, is influencing how Indians eat, and discover food and flavours. Hence, both Indian and global investors have set their eyes on growing and profitable firms that may be up for grabs, or need money to expand and grow. Experts expect the M&A activity in F&B to go up, or remain at current heightened levels over the next few years, even as delivery start-ups deliver financial performances. These are exciting gobbling times.

Media reports highlight several big-ticket deals in progress, and which were done this year. Last month, the Reliance Group acquired a stake in a Chennai-based firm. The Indian arm of a Norwegian parent is eyeing M&As, according to an agency report. "Its chief executive told Reuters that the company is banking on the growth of quick-delivery platforms, and rising demand for ready-to-eat meals to drive double-digit revenue growth." An Indian firm spent nearly \$500 million to acquire a whisky brand from a renowned foreign liquor company. Thus, the action is not restricted to the foreigners, who eye the growth of an Indian middle-class that mirrors the west, and apes the latter's lifestyles. Indians are interested in foreign brands. It may be a survival tactic too; faced with the certainty of foreigners' entry and/or expansion, Indians feel the need to secure their perimeters.

Investment firms, private equity players, and others have joined the action. Vixar, along with a prominent investor, and HDFC Asset Management, purchased a stake in The Belgian Waffle Co. for almost ₹800 crore. "The investment consortium will become the controlling shareholder, (together) owning the single-largest block," states a media report. Several funds have indicated preferences for scaled-up and brands-led firms in the F&B sector. One of the major activities among these firms related to the iconic Haldiram. According to a media report, "Temasek, IHC, and Alpha Wave Global acquired minority stakes... valuing the company at \$10 billion while Chryscapital took a controlling stake in Theobroma Foods. Devyani International, which operates KFC in India, acquired a majority stake in Sky Gate Hospitality, the parent of Biryani by Kilo." Thus, it is not about established players and start-ups. Established brands are taking over other renowned ones to up their offerings.

Globally, the opposite trend has set in. "Early 2025 saw caution due to macro factors, but confidence grew by quarters 2 and 3, with deal flow picking up, especially in beverages and wellness. Buyers are taking a disciplined approach, focusing on strategic fit, and long-term growth rather than just volume. But expect continued interest in wellness, plant-based, and functional foods/drinks, with major players using M&As to adapt to changing consumer tastes, and strengthen market positions," states an assessment. According to Kroll, "In Q3-2025, 72 transactions were announced... representing a 20 per cent quarter-on-quarter increase, and second straight quarter of rising deal volume. This recent ramp-up in activity is encouraging, as it indicates a revived confidence... following a 10-year low in H1-2025. For the trailing 12-month period ending September 30, 2025, 258 transactions were announced... which marks a 10.4 per cent decline." Almost four-fifths of them were strategic.

Such patterns were quite distinct from the Indian scenario, where the focus is on expansion, with a risk-taking taste. Brands wish to grow through the inorganic route, and cover competitive bases through brand guardrails. The market is in the growth phase due to several factors, and hence the criticality is of acquiring market shares across segments, and even diversifying in related areas. Brand acquisition, platform purchases, revenue growths, and tactical buying is more important than thinking only in terms of strategy. Only after this frenetic M&A activity is over in the next 3-4 years will firms take stock of what is in their baskets, and put on the strategic hats. At that stage, they will decide what to sell, and what to retain, which may fuel another round of strategic deals.

# Shanti with US, ashanti in India

Bill on nuclear sector pleases the US, aligns with global norms

OUR TAKE

There was both surprise and shock when India pushed through the new, almost unexpected SHANTI law in Parliament. The Opposition cried wolf, and repeatedly urged for the bill to be referred to a parliamentary panel for "greater scrutiny," and better structure. Two of the most important clauses of the Act were the entry of the private sector in the nuclear sector, and a tiered cap on civil liability on the operators in case of nuclear accidents. The Government justified that private firms were crucial to enhance the generation of safer nuclear power to add to power from other 'green' and renewable sources. No private player is likely to enter the sector in an atmosphere of 'uncapped' liability. Firms need to have clarity on what is likely to be their maximum exposures in case of nuclear accidents to plan their business models, and assess future revenues, and profits. Thus, the law, and its critical clauses were logical and obvious.

According to the Opposition, there is fresh evidence that the urgency was due to American pressure. Congress' Rajya Sabha MP, Jairam Ramesh, tweeted on X, "Now we know for sure why the Prime Minister bulldozed the SHANTI Bill through Parliament.... It was to restore SHANTI with his once good friend. The SHANTI Act may well be called the TRUMP Act, (or) The Reactor Use and Management Promise Act." In essence, what he implied was that the Indian law was dictated by the desires and wishes of the US President Donald Trump. Since the benefits shifted towards the vendors, i.e., private players, especially Americans, it was to please the White House, which wants other nations to open their markets for the easy and cheap entry of American goods, services, and investments. In effect, the SHANTI Act declares civil peace between India and the US, especially in return for lower tariffs on Indian exports under the forthcoming bilateral deal.

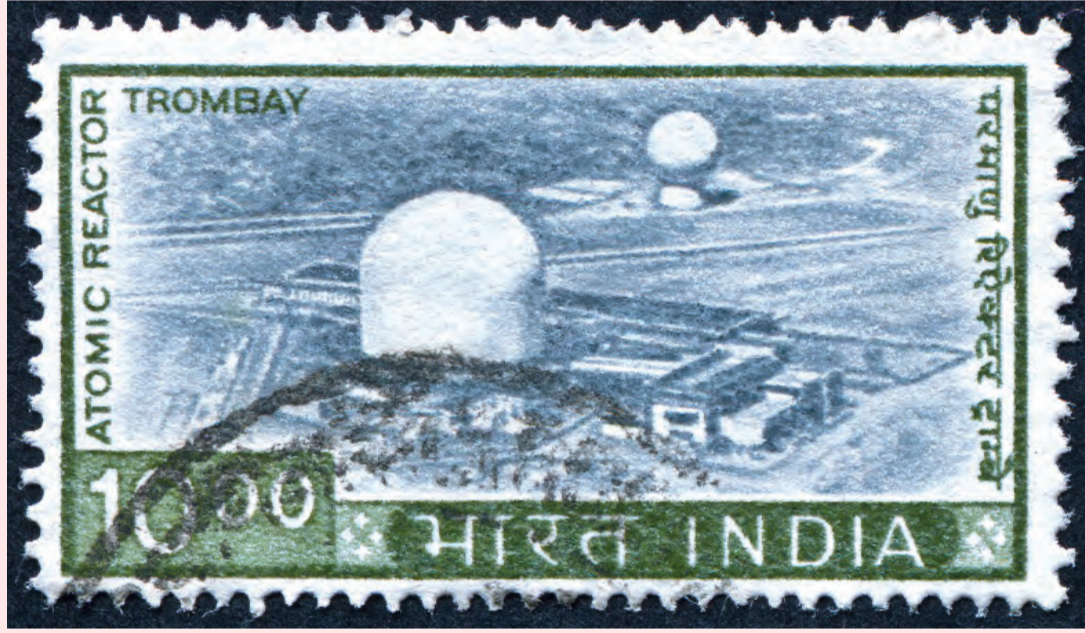
Evidence for such logic, coupled with rhetoric, comes in the form of the latest American law,

National Defence Authorisation Act (NDAA), which was signed by Trump on December 19, 2025, days after the Indian law. Although the NDAA is signed annually, media reports indicate that this is the first time in nearly a decade that India finds a reference in the context of the India-US nuclear deal (2008), and the civil liability norms. The specific clause states that the US "shall establish and maintain within the US-India Strategic Security Dialogue, a joint consultative mechanism within the Indian Government to assess the implementation of the 2008 Indo-US nuclear deal," and "align (India's) domestic nuclear liability norms with international norms." In terms of both, contend critics, New Delhi has delivered on Washington's wishes. In fact, the entry of foreign players and liability norms are inextricably linked.

Under India's 2010 Act, explains a note by PRS India, "the operator of a nuclear installation is liable for any damage by a nuclear incident as per a no-fault principle. This means that the operator is liable to compensate victims regardless of any negligence or wrongdoing.... The 2010 Act specifies a maximum liability of `1,500 crore.... The (new) Bill specifies a tiered structure, with liability limit ranging from `100 crore to `3,000 crore...." Any liability over the upper limit may be borne by the Indian Government. This, states New Delhi, is a win-win for both the people, and private operators. The former benefit from the doubling of the potential compensation. The latter gain from lower graded compensations, which is linked to lower or higher generation capacity of the nuclear power plant. According to a media report, SHANTI "removes the links to 'supplier liability,' or the circumstances under which an operator... can statutorily claim recourse from a supplier of components if it resulted in a nuclear accident." Supplier liability was a contentious clause that paralysed the entry of Americans, and others, who are major

suppliers of nuclear technology. According to an official statement, "At the core of the bill lies a strong emphasis on maintaining India's strategic control over its nuclear ecosystem. Even as the sector opens to private participation, the Bill ensures that critical functions remain firmly under sovereign oversight. The Government retains exclusive authority over the nuclear fuel cycle, waste management, and all security-related operations. The reforms reinforce safety standards, and enhance India's nuclear governance framework for future expansion. The nuclear energy sector in the bill is structured in a way that does not compromise national security or India's independent decision-making. Enhanced safeguards and monitoring systems ensure consistent compliance across all nuclear activities." It adds, "The... Bill stands as a pivotal step in shaping the next phase of India's nuclear journey. By modernising the legal framework, and strengthening institutional oversight, it creates the foundation for a more efficient, innovative, and secure nuclear ecosystem. The Bill supports India's long-term vision of expanding clean, reliable energy while ensuring that strategic interests remain fully protected. As the country moves towards greater energy dependence, and technological advancement, this legislation can play a defining role in driving the growth of India's nuclear power, and broader energy landscape."

However, a website claims that there are several challenges. For example, the lower liabilities, a minimum of `100 crore, goes against the principle of 'polluter pays.' Lessons from previous non-nuclear tragedies like Bhopal are undermined as the new law weakens accountability of the private players. The regulatory regime is controlled by the Executive, and the law lacks a "clear funding and regulatory framework for long-term waste management, and decommissioning." Higher private investments, especially by foreigners, may lead to a system of contractual workforce, which may enhance occupational and safety risks. The indigenous trajectory may be derailed because of higher dependence on foreign technology, even as the country encourages self-reliance. Thus, there is a need to have a comprehensive energy policy, which brings together the various sources such as renewables and nuclear energy. In addition, there is a need for better public consultation and trust through mechanisms to institutionalise community participation, and involve the people in issues like environmental safeguards, and transparency. As the website concludes, "The SHANTI Bill represents a transformative shift in India's nuclear energy governance, driven by de-carbonisation and development goals. While it can unlock investment, and accelerate capacity expansion, weakened liability, regulatory risks, and safety concerns remain significant. A balanced approach, (via) combining nuclear growth with strong accountability, public trust, and renewable integration, is essential for sustainable energy security. India has a long way to go to attain Shanti."



## A Contrarian Investor

# Fixed to nix risks, earn returns

Debt instruments can offer stable, risk-adjusted earnings



Most analysts seem to converge on the fact that the lower interest rate regime is winding down. Central banks, including the Reserve Bank of India, may go slow on further reductions, although there may be -12 cuts in the future. With much of the so-called duration rally already priced in, Axis Mutual Fund expects the investor preferences to shift decisively toward accrual-focused strategies. Short-tenor corporate bonds with better interest rates, and selective exposure to high-quality credit, which are safer and secure, are likely to remain in focus as the yields stabilise due to dovish mindset.

The fund house expects the 10-year G-sec yield to trade in a 6.4-6.6 per cent band, supported by benign, even zero or negative, inflation, continued market operations by Indian central bank, and the possibility of the country inclusion in global bond indices. There are media reports that key indices wish to include Indian bonds, which may nudge the foreign and Indian investors to shift buying and purchases. During a period, when equities remain volatile, as they were in the past several weeks, or plateau, as they did for the first 10 months of the calendar year (2025), fixed debt instruments and paper may find their sheen, and shine in the process.

"Investors should prioritise short- to medium-term debt funds, while maintaining tactical exposure to gilts for stability and diversification," states the Axis Mutual Fund outlook for 2026. It underscores that fixed income remains well-positioned to deliver stable, risk-adjusted returns in a maturing rate cycle, with disciplined accrual strategies at the core of portfolio construction. More investors may shift towards stability and safety over the next few months, even as brokerage houses predict the Sensex to gain by 15-20 per cent in the next calendar year (2026). Retail investors generally enter the bull phase in the middle, rather than the beginning, and resort to safer havens before making aggressive and higher risk-prone moves. Thus, debt may be the in thing.

This may seem contradictory to the trends in 2025. As per the latest data from the Association of Mutual Funds in India (AMFI), debt mutual fund categories witnessed outflows, barring the ultra-short duration fund, low duration fund, money market fund, short duration fund, corporate bond fund, and floater fund. There was a marginal net outflow in the debt mutual fund category overall, but AUM of the category remained steady at ₹19.36 lakh crore for the month of November 2025, owing to month-to-month gains.

Since April this year, the monthly flows in

debt funds have varied widely. In three months, April, July, and October, there were positive inflows that ranged from ₹1,00,000 crore to more than ₹2,00,000 crore. In the months of May, June, August, and September, there were net outflows that ranged from less than ₹ 2,000 crore to more than ₹1,00,000 crore. But the fluctuations were tricky. For example, liquid funds witnessed the highest inflows in October, followed by outflows of more than ₹14,000 crore in the next month.

In this setting, fixed income is poised to play a more meaningful role in investors' portfolios. Stable interest rates, tightening systemic liquidity, and sustained demand for bonds are expected to shift investor preference toward accrual-based strategies. Additionally, India's rising probability of inclusion in the Bloomberg Bond Index, potential index-related inflows, and balanced supply-demand dynamics strengthen the outlook for domestic bond markets. "Fixed income is well-positioned to enhance portfolio stability and risk mitigation in 2026," says Amit Modani, senior fund manager (fixed income), Shriram AMC. He adds that

strong macro fundamentals provide a constructive backdrop for bond investors in the year ahead. The year 2025 began amid a sharp shift in the global political and economic landscape, with Donald Trump assuming the US Presidency, and trade tensions resurfacing across key economies. Global growth moderated during the year, while emerging markets faced renewed pressure from tariff-related disruptions and persistent geopolitical uncertainty. India stood out for its macroeconomic resilience. The economy recorded robust growth alongside easing inflation, creating room for supportive monetary policy. The RBI responded with calibrated rate cuts and liquidity measures aimed at ensuring stability across the banking system and money markets. "The year is ending on a far more sanguine note than what the early part of 2025 had suggested, despite material disruptions from trade disputes and geopolitical tensions," says Modani.

Looking ahead, 2026 is expected to be characterised by stability rather than aggressive policy shifts. A relatively stable global envi-

ronment, with the US Federal Reserve rates likely to remain unchanged for most of the year, combined with accommodative domestic monetary policy, provides a supportive backdrop for India. Policy rates are projected to enter an extended pause phase. Growth is expected to moderate into a 6.3-6.5 per cent range, while headline inflation is projected to gradually stabilise around 4-4.5 per cent. This trajectory suggests an extended pause in policy rates.

"With growth moderating and inflation settling near the RBI's comfort zone, policy rates are likely to remain on hold through most of 2026, resulting in a 'lower-for-longer' rate environment," Modani says. The benchmark 10-year government bond closed at 6.49 per cent, reflecting a cautious but steady rate environment. The RBI reduced the repo rate by 25 basis points to 5.25 per cent, while injecting liquidity through open market operations (OMOs) and a dollar-rupee swap, aimed at easing tightening pressures in the system. "Bond markets are drawing comfort from a combination of lower inflation, proactive liquidity management by the RBI and improving growth visibility," Axis Mutual Fund said in its review.

Inflation fell to a record low of 0.25 per cent, aided by moderation in food prices and favourable base effects. The sharp disinflation has strengthened the case for the central bank to maintain an accommodative stance over the near term. At the same time, growth momentum surprised positively. GDP growth came in at 8.2 per cent, supported by strong services sector activity and favourable statistical effects. "The sharp fall in inflation alongside resilient growth has created room for policy support, but the window for aggressive duration plays is now behind us," the Axis MF report notes.

Thus, on an overall basis, the investors' initial reaction may be to veer towards debt funds, and fixed income instruments. Unless, of course, the IPO (Initial Public Offering) market gathers more steam, and gets heated, which will attract retail investors. By the middle of 2026, if equities emerge as bullish, the attraction will immediately shift from debt, as investors will be willing to chase returns, and give up on risks, even if the strategy is fraught with issues.

# Merger of public sector banks – need for caution



GOVIND BHATTACHARJEE

At the 12th SBI Banking and Economics Conclave in November 2025, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said that the country needed big and world-class banks, and that discussions were on with the RBI in this regard.

That was the first official indication of the possible merger of public sector banks (PSBs), on which the official stance remains a “no immediate mergers”. Consolidation of PSBs has been going on for some time. India has already seen two major waves of mergers of PSBs: first, the SBI absorbed its associate banks in 2017, and then in 2019, 10 smaller lenders were merged into 4 larger entities, reducing their total number to only 12 from 27 in 2017.

The proposed plan, still speculative, by all indications, would reduce the number of PSBs further to perhaps 4-6 larger entities, with smaller lenders like Indian Overseas Bank, Central Bank of India, Bank of India, Bank of Maharashtra, UCO Bank and Punjab and Sind Bank likely to be absorbed into larger banks such as State Bank of India, Punjab National Bank and Bank of Baroda.

The idea is to create significantly larger PSBs capable of enhancing India's banking stability and global competitiveness by combining resources, expertise, and infrastructure. But the Government needs to carefully examine the quantitative and qualitative impacts of these mergers, and tread the path rather cautiously.

Merging weaker banks with stronger ones is desirable only if the merged entities with larger balance sheets, deeper capital buffers and a wider network of branches can become better equipped to absorb shocks, support diversified lending portfolios, meet stricter regulatory standards, and improve efficiency to support long-term growth. Consolidation can also pool resources for digital banking, cybersecurity enhancements, and fintech integrations, which are critical needs in a rapidly digitising and evolving financial system.

The health of India's PSBs is vastly improved now from what it was a decade back, when most



PSBs were placed under the RBI's Prompt Corrective Action (PCA) supervisory framework, triggered by poor capital base, asset quality, or soaring NPAs. In 2017-2018, there were 11 PSBs under PCA; all have now come out of it. Their performance has significantly improved, marked by record profitability (₹1.78 lakh crore net profit in FY25), reduced NPAs (Gross NPA down to 2.31 per cent), robust credit and deposit growth, driven by reforms, digitisation, and better governance. They are the key drivers of India's economic growth, and, undisputedly, there is a case for their further consolidation to make them globally competitive and financially robust institutions capable of supporting the Viksit Bharat 2047 vision. No Indian bank, let alone PSBs, operates at a scale comparable to its global peers. While the top Indian Bank, SBI, manages assets worth only about \$700 billion, the top US and European banks like JP Morgan Chase, Bank of America or HSBC manage assets worth above \$3 trillion each. If this scale gap is to be bridged, consolidation is an imperative.

Our experiences in past mergers have been rather mixed. SBI's merger with its five associate banks in 2017 was followed by integration

turbulence, especially in aligning disparate IT systems and front-end processes. Likewise, the 2019-20 PSB consolidation slowed credit growth due to transitional adjustments. In both cases, post-merger efficiency gains were limited, and cost-to-income ratios did not fall as expected. Credit growth also remained slow, as banks were cautious immediately after the NPA crisis when the mergers took place. While an increase in scale improved resilience, it did not lead to immediate performance improvement.

In contrast, private sector mergers (for example, ICICI-Bank of Rajasthan, HDFC-HDFC Bank) show that mergers executed with robust organisational alignment, clear IT roadmaps, and strong governance tend to outperform those where change management is under-invested.

The private sector banks cleaned up their balance sheet before the merger, unlike most PSBs, and governance reform was a central driver of the merger, which was minimal in the case of PSBs.

The efficiency gains for private merged banks were very positive, and this teaches us a lesson that mergers are no substitutes for reform, that without changing the governance structure,

mergers only compound the existing problems. Economists often apply econometric models to study the impact of transitions. Several such models have been applied to study bank mergers and acquisitions (M&As) in the US, Europe, and also in India. There are efficiency and cost function models that test the efficiency gains, market competition models to test market concentration, event study models to test stock market reaction, risk and stability models to check the impact of mergers on systemic risk and financial stability, dynamic panel models to study post-merger performance, etc.

These models, when applied to Indian PSB mergers post-2017, tell us that while mergers improved balance-sheet stability, capital adequacy and provisioning buffers, they did not generate statistically significant gains in profitability or efficiency in the short to medium run. Mergers did not produce enough synergies to accelerate credit growth.

Data Envelopment Analysis (DEA) and Stochastic Frontier Analysis (SFA) models show limited or no improvement in cost efficiency, and some merged entities even experienced temporary efficiency declines. Event-study models

showed muted or negative market reactions, indicating investor scepticism in the absence of governance reform. All these tell us that unless mergers are accompanied by governance reforms covering board autonomy, managerial incentives and operational flexibility, productivity cannot be improved, even though mergers may improve resilience and stability. International experience also shows that bank mergers are primarily stability-enhancing tools, not automatic drivers of efficiency or growth.

Bank mergers in the USA have been driven by deregulation and crisis interventions, especially after the global meltdown of 2008. Consolidation in the USA had created “too big to fail” banks and financial institutions — they were the central transmission channels that pushed the global economy and financial system into an unprecedented crisis, which shook the entire world. The emergence of these megabanks increased systemic risk manifold; to manage this, much tighter regulations had to be brought in. This is another lesson — mergers must be accompanied by appropriate reforms in regulation. In the late 1980s, Japan experienced a huge asset price bubble that led to abnormal increases in prices of equities, land and real estate, to control which the Bank of Japan had to tighten the monetary policy. As the prices collapsed, banks were saddled with enormous volumes of NPAs, and they started collapsing.

Government responded with the usual tools — public-funded capital injections, creation of asset-management companies to absorb bad loans and forced mergers leading to many of today's megabanks (Mitsubishi UFJ, Sumitomo Mitsui and Mizuho). The mergers restored stability, but could not revive profitability and dynamism in the absence of governance reforms and a deflationary macroeconomic environment. As a consequence, Japan suffered a lost decade of low growth and deflation.

The lesson is clear and should guide our future mergers too — that reliance on mergers without governance reform may not improve performance; on the other hand, it may lead to stagnation. The lesson is all the more important for us as PSBs control over 60 per cent of our banking system in terms of both deposits and credits.

The author is a former Director General of the CAG of India, is a Professor at the Arun Jaitley National Institute of Financial Management. Opinions expressed are personal

## Trade pact negotiations with US in advanced stage: Goyal

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
■ New Delhi

India is at an advanced stage of negotiations for a bilateral trade agreement with the US, Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal said on Monday. US Deputy Trade Representative Rick Switzer was recently here with his team to take stock of these talks. The two-day talks concluded on December 11.

“We are already at an advanced stage in our discussions with the US,” Goyal said here while talking to the media about the conclusion of negotiations for the India-New Zealand free trade agreement.

He also said that India has so far finalised FTAs with three members of the Five Eyes (FVEY) alliance — Australia, UK and New Zealand. The five countries of the intelligence sharing network are Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK, and the US. India is also in the process of resuming talks for a trade agreement with Canada. “We are soon going to launch discussions for the ToR (terms of reference) with Canada also,” Goyal said adding “this reflects the growing strategic importance of India in world geopolitics”. The India-US trade pact talks are crucial as both the countries are working to finalise the first tranche of the Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA).

The talks are also important as the Trump administration has imposed steep 50 per cent tariffs on Indian goods entering American markets. The Indian industry and exporters are eagerly waiting for the conclusion of the negotiations and announcement of the deal, as the high import duties are hurting their shipments to America.



Though they are exploring other markets to maintain their export profits, the US is a key destination for them as it accounts for about 18 per cent of the country's exports. As per experts, resolution of these tariffs would be key to firming up the first phase of the trade deal.

As part of the pact, the US is seeking duty concessions on agri products like almonds, corn and apples, and industrial goods. India has strongly opposed any concessions on the agri and dairy sectors. India has stated that it will not compromise the interests of farmers and MSMEs.

In February, leaders of the two countries directed officials to negotiate an agreement. It was planned to conclude the first tranche of the pact by the fall of 2025. So far, six rounds of negotiations have been held. The agreement aims to more than double bilateral trade to \$500 billion by 2030, from the current \$191 billion.

The US remained India's largest trading partner for the fourth consecutive year in 2024-25, with bilateral trade valued at USD 131.84 billion, including \$86.5 billion in exports.

## India sees 16% growth in IT hiring in 2025: Report

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
■ Mumbai

India's IT sector showed signs of recovery in 2025, with total job demand touching 1.8 million roles, marking a 16 per cent increase over the previous year and highlighting renewed momentum in hiring across the industry, a report said on Monday.

India's IT hiring environment showed improvement with total IT job demand reaching 1.8 million roles in 2025, a 16 per cent rise over the previous year, according to the IT Workforce Trends in India 2025 report by workforce and talent solutions provider Quesq Corp.

According to the report, Global Capability Centres increased their contribution to India's IT hiring market, accounting for about 27 per cent of total demand in 2025, up from around 15 per cent in 2024.

Product and SaaS firms also expanded hiring selectively, while IT services and consulting recorded modest growth, it said. Startup hiring declined to low single-digit levels amid funding moderation, it stated.

## FMCG industry looks for better margins in 2026

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
■ New Delhi

Expecting 2026 to be a “favourable year”, with policy tailwinds as tax reliefs and GST reforms, along with benign commodities, the Indian FMCG industry looks for a high single-digit volume growth, improvement in margins and comeback of the urban demand, which is a vector of growth. Benign inflation will help expand gross margins, enabling companies to invest more in advertising, the lifeblood of FMCG (Fast-Moving Consumer Goods).

However, the companies also need to rethink their media strategies, as traditional media is losing relevance amid evolving consumer habits and preferences, driven by where, how, and how much time different age groups spend on media. FMCG companies are also expected to invest in new technologies — from automation and analytics to AI-driven demand forecasting, supply chain optimisation, and personalised consumer engagement and same-day and 10-30 minute Quick-Commerce deliveries are expected to be the critical pillar for omnichannel growth strategies.

“Digital-first, personalised, and performance-led platforms have gained prominence, while traditional mass media has gradually lost relevance and efficiency.

This has required FMCG companies to rethink media mix, content formats, and engagement strategies to stay relevant and effective,” Emami Vice Chairman and MD Harsha Vardhan Agarwal told PTI. The trend of premiumisation is expected to continue, but more selectively, with consumers continuing to prioritise quality, indulgence and wellness, and categories offering differentiated benefits expected to outperform.

“For the broader FMCG industry, 2026 is shaping up to be a more favourable year, supported by easing inflation, benign commodity trends, tax relief measures, higher Government capex, and a more accommodative monetary stance. These factors collectively strengthen the outlook for consumption,” he said. He expects a “gradual recovery” in both rural and urban markets, continued premiumisation, and further share gains for organised retail, e-commerce, D2C, and quick-commerce channels.

“For our company, we enter 2026 with optimism and a clear growth agenda. We anticipate recovery in the second half of FY26 (October 2025 to March 2026), setting the stage for double-digit growth in FY27,” said Agarwal. Dabur India CEO Mohit Malhotra said the Indian FMCG landscape is transforming. The growing affluence in India, rural demand, the rich demographic dividend, and technological advancements will be the four major drivers reshaping consumption in the FMCG space in the years to come.

India's young demographic, characterised by Millennials and Gen Z, has a significant impact on consumption patterns, favouring experiential purchases and lifestyle-oriented spending, he said. “With rising incomes and a growing middle class, there is an increasing demand for premium and high-quality products, particularly in urban India. Consumers are willing to pay a premium for products that offer better quality, unique features, or enhanced experiences. This trend is more visible in the online space,” he said. Godrej Consumer Products MD and CEO Sudhir Sitapati is concerned about the slow volume growth of the FMCG sector, which has been “puzzling” him for the last 4-5 years.

“It's been lower than what it should be. FMCG volume growth has been 4-5 per cent, while GDP has been 7-8 per cent. So that's been a puzzle,” he said. One puzzle is that consumption growth in India has been lagging GDP growth. Rural has been leading urban for a few quarters now.

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## Canada, US, UK top destinations for higher education for Indian students: NITI Aayog report

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
■ New Delhi

Canada, the USA, the United Kingdom, Australia and Germany have emerged as the top five international higher education destinations for Indian students, according to a report released by NITI Aayog on Monday.

In 2024, Canada was the top international higher education destination with a total of 4,27,000 Indian students visiting the country. This was followed by the USA with 3,37,630 Indian students, the United Kingdom with 1,85,000, Australia (1,22,202), and Germany (42,997), the report said.

It further said that India is the world's largest source country of international students with over 13.35 lakh students studying overseas in 2024. Also, the country has the largest higher education age cohort (18-23 years) in the world, 15.5 crore.

“In 2024, for every 1 international student coming to India, 28 Indian students went abroad, underscoring a significant brain drain for the country,” it said. About the inflow of foreign students in India, the report titled ‘Internationalisation of Higher Education



in India’ presented the data of 2021-22. Nepal, Afghanistan, the USA, Bangladesh and the UAE were the top source countries of international students in India in 2021-22, it said.

As per the report, Canada, the US, UK and Australia host 8.5 lakh Indian students who spent ₹2.9 lakh crore on higher education in 2023-2024. At the same time, Latvia has the highest 17.4 per cent of Indian students, followed by Ireland hosting 15.3 per cent, and

Germany, 10.1 per cent. The report, citing numbers recorded in 2020, said that among States, Andhra Pradesh was the top source with 35,614 students going overseas, followed by Punjab, which sent 33,412, and Maharashtra 29,079 students for higher education.

It noted a surge in outward remittances from ₹975 crore to ₹29,000 crore during 2014-24 under the RBI's Liberalised Remittance Scheme for Indian students studying abroad.

## Sensex rallies on foreign fund inflows, firm global trends

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
■ Mumbai

Benchmark Sensex jumped by 638 points while the broader Nifty closed above 26,100 on Monday following heavy buying in IT, auto and metal shares amid foreign fund inflows and a rally in global markets on hopes of further rate cuts by the US Federal Reserve. Building on the previous session's rally, the 30-share BSE Sensex jumped 638.12 points or 0.75 per cent to settle at 85,567.48. During the day, it surged 671.97 points or 0.79 per cent to 85,601.33.

The 50-share NSE Nifty climbed 206 points or 0.79 per cent to close above the 26,100 mark at 26,172.40. Among Sensex firms, Trent rose the most by 3.56 per cent. IT shares Infosys jumped 3.06 per cent, Tech Mahindra by 2.09 per cent, HCL Tech by 1.67 per cent and TCS by 1.28 per cent. Bharti Airtel, Bharat Electronics, Tata Motors, Reliance and Maruti were among the major movers.

However, State Bank of India fell the most by 0.6 per cent, followed by Kotak Mahindra Bank, Larsen and

Toubro and Titan. “Indian markets extended their year-end rally, supported by strong liquidity and global cues, as expectations of further Fed easing in 2026 continue to underpin growth. FIIs turned net buyers, reinforcing the positive tone, with IT and metals leading gains,” Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Investments Limited, said.

The BSE smallcap gauge jumped 1.12 per cent, while midcap index climbed 0.86 per cent. All sectoral indices ended higher. IT surged 1.99 per cent, BSE Focused IT by 1.72 per cent, capital goods by 1.65 per cent, industrials by 1.33 per cent, metal by 1.32 per cent and commodities by 1.05 per cent.

A total of 2,796 stocks advanced while 1,514 declined and 191 remained unchanged on the BSE “A stabilising USD-INR exchange rate, coupled with data showing foreign portfolio investors turning net buyers of domestic equities over the past few sessions, triggered broad-based buying and short covering across derivative segments.”

“Global risk appetite also remained

firm, supported by expectations of further monetary policy easing by the US Federal Reserve, which helped sustain the risk-on momentum across global markets,” Ponmudi R, CEO of Enrich Money, an online trading and wealth tech firm, said.

In Asian markets, South Korea's Kospi jumped over 2 per cent, while Japan's Nikkei 225 index climbed nearly 2 per cent.

Shanghai's SSE Composite index and Hong Kong's Hang Seng index also settled in positive territory. European markets were trading on a mixed note. US markets ended higher on Friday.

Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) bought equities worth ₹1,830.89 crore on Friday, according to exchange data. Domestic Institutional Investors (DIIs) also bought equities worth ₹5,722.89 crore in the previous trade.

Brent crude, the global oil benchmark, climbed 0.86 per cent to \$60.99 per barrel.

On Friday, the Sensex jumped 447.55 points or 0.53 per cent to settle at 84,929.36. The Nifty climbed 150.85 points or 0.58 per cent to 25,966.40.

FROM THE WORLD

JAPAN H3 navigation satellite failed

Japan's space agency said its H3 rocket carrying a navigation satellite failed to put the payload into a planned orbit...

PAKISTAN

Nine terrorists killed in KP

Security forces have killed nine terrorists in two separate operations conducted in Pakistan's northwestern province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP)...

Minority groups in Bangladesh protest over Govt's failure

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA Dhaka



Women protest against attacks on the Hindu minority

Minority groups in Bangladesh held a protest in the national Capital over the interim Government's failure to prevent the persecution of minorities...

(Muhammad Yunus) claims he will build a humane Bangladesh, but in reality, he is an inhumane chief adviser...

Meanwhile, the anti-terror Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) arrested 10 suspects over the lynching of Das. Later, police arrested two more suspects...

said nine people were arrested over the violent attack on the mass circulation Prothom Alo and Daily Star newspapers...

Jaishankar to visit Sri Lanka as special envoy of PM Modi today

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA Colombo/New Delhi



External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar being welcomed by Sri Lankan Minister Ruwan Ranasinghe in Colombo, Sri Lanka

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar will arrive in Sri Lanka on Tuesday as Prime Minister Narendra Modi's special envoy and meet with the island nation's leadership...

immense proportions. Since the launch of Operation Sagar Bandhu on November 28, India has provided over 1,134 tonnes of humanitarian assistance to Sri Lanka...

from Indian Coast Guard Ship Shaurya. Two teams of the National Disaster Response Force conducted immediate search and rescue operations...

Chinese Embassy in India to accept visa applications online: Report

ASSOCIATED PRESS Beijing



The Chinese Embassy in Delhi has launched the 'China Online Visa Application System' for Indian passport holders to apply for visas online...

said. Applicants could enjoy the convenience of filling out the form and uploading application materials online by visiting https://www.visaforchina.cn/DEL3\_EN/jqianzhengywu...

forms, upload documents and schedule biometrics electronically for tourist (L), business (M), student (X) and work (Z) visas.

Ukraine strikes oil terminal, planes inside Russia

ASSOCIATED PRESS Kyiv

Ukrainian forces hit an oil terminal, a pipeline, two parked jet fighters and two ships in a series of strikes on Russian soil, officials said on Monday.

PUBLIC NOTICE

I am Pankaj Sethi, S/o S.K. Sethi, R/o H. No. - D 310, Street No-09, Sadh Nagar, Palam Colony, New Delhi-110045, hereby inform that I HAVE LOST MY PROPERTY DOCUMENTS...

Indian Bank

Notice is hereby given to Ms SHIVANI YADAV, EMP ID: 783218, Resident of F3 901, TDI City Kingspark Apartment, Sonapat, Haryana-131023 presently under Unauthorised Absence...

THE PIONEER CLASSIFIEDS

CHANGE OF NAME I, Chhotaki, Mother of- No. 4585913X L/Hav(GD) Ashok Kumar R/O- Rawar, Teh- Bilara, Dist- Jodhpur, Rajasthan- 342605, have changed my name from Chhoti Devi to Chhotaki for all future purposes...

Indian Naval ships INS Vikrant, INS Udaygiri, INS Sukanya, LCU-54, LCU-57, LCU-51, and INS Gharial delivered large volumes of relief material to Colombo and Trincomalee, apart from Indian Coast Guard Ship Shaurya.

NORTHERN RAILWAY NOTICE FOR E-AUCTION

Table with columns: S. No., Date & time of e-Auction, Assets to be auctioned. Includes details for Senior Divisional Commercial Manager/Fs, Delhi Division, Northern Railway.

Important notes: 1. For more information, requirement and various aspects regarding these e-Auctions, interested bidders are advised to visit https://www.ireps.gov.in/html/helpdesk/learning\_centre.html...

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PIONEER NEWS SERVICE

New Delhi

Minister of Tourism Edmund Bartlett has attributed the island's 3,00,000 visitor mark post Hurricane Melissa, to the sector's remarkable recovery strategy.



stopover and cruise visitors, in the island's recovery, with major resort areas fully operational and welcoming visitors for the crucial winter season.

Rios, Negril, and Kingston are now open for business and ready to provide world-class experiences to visitors from around the globe.

said Minister Bartlett. "Jamaica is not just back—we are stronger, more resilient, and more committed than ever to delivering the authentic Jamaican experience our visitors know and love."

NORTHERN RAILWAY (E-Auction Notice)

Table with columns: E-Catalogue No, Date & Time of bidding, Railway Stations/Locations/Lots. Includes details for Sr. Divisional Commercial Manager/PS, Northern Railway Delhi Division.

## Car bomb kills Russian general in Moscow

ASSOCIATED PRESS  
■ Moscow

A Russian general was killed on Monday morning after an explosive device detonated underneath his car in Moscow, and investigators said Ukraine could be behind the attack, the third such killing of a senior military officer in a year.

Lieutenant General Fani Sarvarov, head of the Operational Training Directorate of the Russian Armed Forces' General Staff, died from his injuries, said Svetlana Petrenko, the spokesperson for Russia's Investigative Committee, the nation's top criminal investigation agency.

"Investigators are pursuing numerous lines of enquiry regarding the murder. One of these is that the crime was orchestrated by Ukrainian intelligence services," Petrenko said.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that President Vladimir Putin had been immediately informed about Sarvarov's killing. The Defense Ministry said that



Sarvarov had previously fought in Chechnya and taken part in Moscow's military campaign in Syria.

Just over a year ago, on December 17, 2024, Lieutenant General Igor Kirillov, the chief of the military's nuclear, biological and chemical protection forces, was killed by a bomb

hidden on an electric scooter outside his apartment building. Kirillov's assistant also died. Ukraine's security service claimed responsibility for the attack.

An Uzbek man was quickly arrested and charged with killing Kirillov on behalf of the Ukrainian security service. Russian President

Vladimir Putin described Kirillov's killing as a "major blunder" by Russia's security agencies, noting they should learn from it and improve their efficiency.

But in April, another senior Russian military officer, Lt. Gen. Yaroslav Moskalik, a deputy head of the main operational department in

the General Staff, was killed by an explosive device placed in his car parked near to his apartment building just outside Moscow.

A suspected perpetrator was quickly arrested. Moscow also has blamed Ukraine for several bombings and other attacks in Russia.

## Asim Munir conferred with Saudi Arabia's highest civilian honour

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
■ Islamabad

Pakistan's Chief of Defence Forces, Field Marshal Syed Asim Munir, has been awarded Saudi Arabia's highest civilian honour, the King Abdulaziz Medal of Excellence. Munir is currently on an official visit to the Kingdom.

"Under a Royal Decree issued by the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, the King Abdulaziz Medal of Excellence, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's highest national honour was also conferred upon the Field Marshal," the army said on Monday.

The Saudi leadership conveyed its appreciation for Field Marshal Asim Munir's professionalism and strategic outlook, noting his commitment to strengthening the longstanding, brotherly ties between the two countries.

## ICE agent fires shots at man after being hit by SUV

ASSOCIATED PRESS  
■ St Paul



An Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agent fired shots on Sunday at a Cuban immigrant living in the US illegally after the man struck the agent and another one with an SUV in Minnesota's state capital, the Department of Homeland Security said.

The man also bit an ICE agent as officers subdued him outside his apartment in St Paul after he tried to flee on foot, Assistant Homeland Security Secretary Tricia McLaughlin said in an email. The man wasn't hurt, and the injuries received by the agents struck by the SUV were not life-threatening, though he and the agents were taken to the hospital for evaluation, McLaughlin said. Tensions have been rising in the Minneapolis-St Paul area as federal authorities continue an immigration crackdown. Last week, ICE agents and protesters clashed in neighbouring Minneapolis. McLaughlin said the man detained Sunday entered the US. In 2024 through a now-discontinued program implemented by ex-President Biden's administration, allowing migrants without proper entry papers into the country while their claims for asylum were reviewed. The incident occurred Sunday morning. Police said in a statement that they were called to the area by reports of shots being fired, only to learn that the ICE agent had fired the shots. ICE saw the man getting into his SUV and approached the vehicle, McLaughlin said, identifying themselves as ICE agents.

## IIT Delhi-Abu Dhabi expands student capacity



PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
■ Abu Dhabi

The Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Delhi - Abu Dhabi campus will have around 400 students next year, nearly double the present strength, a top official has said.

Shantanu Roy, Executive Director, Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Delhi-Abu Dhabi presently has around 12,000 students, the Abu Dhabi campus has 182 students. That number is likely to become 400 next year, Roy told visiting Indian media during an interaction at the IIT Delhi-Abu Dhabi campus recently.

Asked about what differentiates IIT Delhi Abu Dhabi campus with other IIT campuses in India, Roy said, "This is in a different geography and is being aligned with the priorities of the United Arab Emirates. India is a much bigger country, with a much larger population, the economic expanse is large." "This is of course the Middle-East, which has had a history of largely being a fossil fuel-based economy, but UAE is expanding and diversifying a lot. So, the whole education innovation ecosystem that is being set up here is in alignment with that diversification," Roy said.

"But of course it's a smaller country, with a very small population and geography,

and has a large international student strength.

"That's because UAE being at the crossroads of the world, is connected with Europe and Asia. So, we have diversity in the student population," he said. Roy said the campus is aligned with the priorities of the UAE in terms of energy, sustainability, Artificial Intelligence (AI) and smart materials, which are specifically focused.

"It is not to say that this is not being done in the Delhi campus, because all these areas are of great importance to India as well. It is not like this campus is not aligned with the Delhi campus. "We are actually one institution, and not two different institutions. I think that's very important to understand at the outset," Roy said.

"We are actually one global institution with three campuses. This (Abu Dhabi) is our first international campus," he added.

"In the beginning, in the first semester, we started with 17 students. We had only one master's programme. Within six months, we started two undergraduate programmes with around 50 students enrolled then. "We are starting a new undergraduate programme every year, maybe a new master's programme every year, and possibly some growth on the PhD front every year," he said.

## Thailand, Cambodia to resume ceasefire talks

ASSOCIATED PRESS  
■ Kuala Lumpur

Thailand and Cambodia will resume talks later this week to work toward a more durable ceasefire along their border, Thailand's foreign minister said on Monday, stressing that progress depends on detailed bilateral negotiations rather than public declarations that internationalise the dispute.

A ceasefire agreement in October was rushed to ensure it could be witnessed by US President Donald Trump and lacked sufficient details to ensure the deal to end the armed conflict would hold, Thai Foreign Minister Sihasak Phuangketkeow said Monday after an Association of Southeast Asian Nations foreign ministers' meeting in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

While Cambodia has publicly said it is ready for an unconditional ceasefire, Bangkok never received any direct proposal and Thailand believed such statements were aimed at increasing international pressure rather than resolving the issue, Sihasak said following the meeting that was arranged



Thailand's Foreign Minister Sihasak Phuangketkeow

to seek ways to end the crisis. The general border committee involving both nations will meet Wednesday to iron out detailed measures toward a lasting ceasefire, he said.

"This time, let's thrash out the details and make sure the ceasefire reflect the situation on the ground and the ceasefire is one that really holds, and both sides are going to fully respect the ceasefire," Sihasak told a news conference. The border conflict escalated into deadly combat two weeks ago and derailed the agreement promoted by Trump, which

ended five days of fighting in July. The agreement was brokered by Malaysia and pushed through under pressure from Trump, who threatened to withhold trade privileges unless Thailand and Cambodia agreed. The ceasefire was formalized with more detail at an October regional summit in Malaysia attended by Trump.

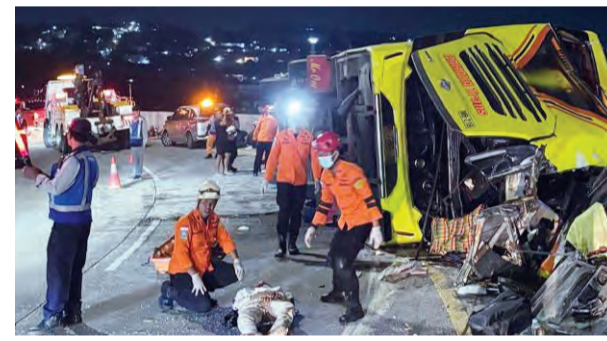
The fighting has drawn international concern. The US Department of State on Sunday released a statement calling for Thailand and Cambodia to "end hostilities, withdraw heavy weapons, cease employ-

ment of landmines, and fully implement the Kuala Lumpur Peace Accords, which include mechanisms to accelerate humanitarian demining and address border issues." The fighting is a result of a dispute over patches of territory claimed by both nations along their shared border.

The latest round of fighting began Dec. 8, a day after a border skirmish wounded two Thai soldiers. Since then combat has broken out on several fronts, with Thailand carrying out airstrikes in Cambodia with F-16 fighter jets and Cambodia firing thousands of medium-range BM-21 rockets from truck-mounted launchers that can launch up to 40 rockets simultaneously. More than three dozen people on both sides of the border have officially been reported killed in the past week of fighting, while more than half a million have been displaced, according to officials.

Under the October truce Thailand was to release 18 Cambodian soldiers held prisoner and both sides were to begin removing heavy weapons and land mines along the border.

## Passenger bus crash in Indonesia kills 16: Official



ASSOCIATED PRESS ■ Jakarta

A passenger bus crash killed at least 16 people on Indonesia's main island of Java just after midnight on Monday, officials said. The bus carrying 34 people lost control on a toll road and struck a concrete barrier before rolling onto its side, said Budiono, a search and rescue agency chief who goes by single name like many Indonesians. The inter-province bus was traveling from the capital Jakarta to the country's ancient royal city of Yogyakarta when it overturned while entering a curved exit

ramp at the Krapyak toll way in Central Java's Semarang city, he said. "The forceful impact threw several passengers and left them trapped against the bus body," Budiono said.

Police and rescue teams arrived about 40 minutes after the accident and recovered the bodies of six passengers who died at the scene. Another 10 people died on the way to a hospital or while being treated, Budiono said. The 18 victims being treated at two nearby hospitals included five people in critical condition and 13 in serious condition, he said.

## Flash flooding in northern California leads to soaked roads, one dead

ASSOCIATED PRESS  
■ Redding

Heavy rain and flash flooding soaked roads in northern California, leading to water rescues from vehicles and homes and at least one confirmed death, authorities said. In Redding, police said they received numerous calls for stranded motorists on Sunday who tried to drive through flooded areas. One person in Redding died, Mayor Mike Littau posted online. He did not provide further



information. Redding has about 93,000 people and is about 160 miles (257 kilometres) north of Sacramento. Between 3 and 6 inches (7.6

centimetres) and 15.2 centimetres) had fallen by Sunday night in parts of two counties, the National Weather Service said.

## Committed to Constitution and democratic system: Nepal Army

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
■ Kathmandu

The Nepal Army (NA) on Monday expressed its firm commitment to the country's Constitution and the democratic system, asserting that it never floated a political agenda.

The army also said that it fully respected the decisions of the President and the executive in the course of normalising the situation following the Gen Z protests that

toppled the KP Sharma Oli-led Government in September.

The army's statement comes in response to questions raised by a section of the media and the political circle regarding its role in protecting national properties during the Gen Z movement of September 8 and 9. Following the collapse of the Oli Government on the

second day of the Gen Z protests, when there was a political vacuum, with the facilitation of the Nepal Army, the security situation in the country returned to normal and the Gen Z Government was formed with the collaboration between President Ramchandra Paudel and Nepal Army leadership.

GOVERNMENT OF HARYANA TENDER NOTICE						
SR. NO.	NAME OF Department	NAME OF WORK NOTICE TENDER	OPENING DATE CLOSING DATE	AMOUNT / EMD (APPROX.) IN RUPEES	WEBSITE OF THE Department	NODAL OFFICER/CONTACT DETAILS/EMAIL
1	PWD B&R, KARNAL	CONSTRUCTION OF NEW RCC SLAB TYPE CULVERT ON INDIRI GARHI BIRBAL ROAD (ROAD ID -7197) (ODR) IN INDIRI CONSTITUENCY, IN KARNAL DISTRICT	19.12.2025 25.12.2025	7.69 LACS	<a href="https://etenders.hry.nic.in">https://etenders.hry.nic.in</a>	9876009311 pwd-eeepd-karnal@hry.nic.in
2	PWD B&R, KARNAL	SPECIAL REPAIR OF ASSANDH RAJOUND KAITHAL PATIALA ROAD (SH-11) IN KAITHAL DISTRICT FROM RD 163.25 TO 189.30 KM (ID-6917) (PDG. STREET LIGHT ON CENTRAL VERGE OF 4 LANE PORTION IN TOWN RAJOUND)	20.12.2025 27.12.2025	34.97 LACS	<a href="https://etenders.hry.nic.in">https://etenders.hry.nic.in</a>	01842265696 pwd-eeed-karnal@hry.nic.in
3	PWD B&R, ROHTAK	CREATION OF TWO NOS. COURT ROOMS IN THE JUDICIAL COURT AT ROHTAK (PROVIDING E1 ONLY)	19.12.2025 24.12.2025	4.80 LACS	<a href="https://etenders.hry.nic.in">https://etenders.hry.nic.in</a>	9034929655 pwd-eeed-rohtak@hry.nic.in
4	PWD B&R, SONIPAT	SUPPLYING AND FIXING OF FURNITURE IN EXHIB AND TAXATION DISTRICT HEAD QUARTER OFFICE FLOOR-12 SONIPAT (THROUGH NEW PORTAL) EXCLUDING GST	18.12.2025 29.12.2025	312.50 LACS	<a href="https://etenders.hry.nic.in">https://etenders.hry.nic.in</a>	01302200575 pwd-eeepd2-sonapat@hry.nic.in
5	IRRIGATION & WATER RESOURCES DEPARTMENT HARYANA, CHARKHI DADRI	INTERNAL CLEARANCE OF SIYANA MINOR FROM K.M. 0.000 TO 1.700 + 4 WORKS	19.12.2025 26.12.2025	3.63 LACS	<a href="https://etenders.hry.nic.in">https://etenders.hry.nic.in</a>	8059375563 xenmgcckd11@gmail.com
6	IRRIGATION & WATER RESOURCES DEPARTMENT HARYANA, ROHTAK	INTERNAL CLEARANCE OF KHACHROULI MINOR FROM RD 0 TO 45000 + 2 WORKS	19.12.2025 26.12.2025	11.18 LACS	<a href="https://etenders.hry.nic.in">https://etenders.hry.nic.in</a>	9896410404 xenfdtrtk@gmail.com
7	PUBLIC HEALTH ENGINEERING, SIRSA	SIRSA TOWN (P-1): AUGMENTATION OF W/S SCHEME SIRSA TOWN CONSTRUCTING R/S/STNS, ADDITIONAL STRUCTURES AND LAYING THE INTERNAL DISTRIBUTION PIPE LINES AT SIRSA TOWN DISTRICT SIRSA. (UNDER AMRUT-2) RECONSTRUCTION OF 4.50 MLD WTP AT EXIST. 1ST W/W, RAW WATER PUMPING STATION AND BOOSTING STATIONS INCLUDING BRICK LINED S/S TANK, BALANCING CAPACITY RESERVOIR, INLET PIPE, CLEAR WATER TANKS, PUMP CHAMBER, BOUNDARY WALL, PUMPING MACHINERY, D.G SET, ELECTRIC TRANSFORMER, GAS CHLORINATOR, RISING MAIN LINES, FHTC AND LAYING THE DISTRIBUTION PIPE LINES ETC. O AND M DURING DEFECT LIABILITY PERIOD OF 12 MONTHS AFTER SUCCESSFUL COMPLETION OF 3 MONTHS TRIAL RUN AND THEREAFTER FOR 5 YEARS COMPLETE IN ALL RESPECT. A&C + 3 WORKS	19.12.2025 15.01.2026	6350.41 LACS	<a href="https://etenders.hry.nic.in">https://etenders.hry.nic.in</a>	01666221925 ee25srs@pshedharyana.gov.in
8	PANCHAYATI RAJ, FARIDABAD	CONSTRUCTION OF DRAIN AND TREATMENT PROCEDURE OF WASTE WATER (GWM) AT VILLAGE ATAUJ BLOCK BALLABGARH DISTRICT FARIDABAD + 8 WORKS	18.12.2025 26.12.2025	311.93 LACS	<a href="https://etenders.hry.nic.in">https://etenders.hry.nic.in</a>	0-9467905067 prexeeng.fbdi@gmail.com
9	PANCHAYATI RAJ, FARIDABAD	KHABRA CONST OF RCC PIPE LINE FROM KHEDI MINOR MOGA NO 54100 R TO G555 ( BHATTU KALAN) VANGY + 7 WORKS	19.12.2025 25.12.2025	257.73 LACS	<a href="https://etenders.hry.nic.in">https://etenders.hry.nic.in</a>	01667230855 prexeeng.fbdi@hry.nic.in

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION KINDLY VISIT [www.etenders.hry.nic.in](http://www.etenders.hry.nic.in)

RO 41363-1-27-7

**PUBLIC NOTICE**  
Notice is hereby given on behalf of Old Name Reena Dahiya W/o Shri Pawan Kumar residing at Plot No. 11-12, Pocket-6, Sector-21, Rohini, Delhi-110086, have changed my name and shall hereafter be known as [Reena W/o Shri Pawan Kumar residing at Plot No. 11-12, Pocket-6, Sector-21, Rohini, Delhi-110086] for all purposes. May inform in writing, at the address mentioned below, about his objections, within 7 days from today.

**NOTICE**  
I, Devendra Kumar Sharma Advocate on behalf of my client Mr. Anil Ernest S/o Late Sh. E.F. Masih R/o Building No. 10-A, 4th Floor, Palm Residency, Chhattarpur South Delhi-110074 caused this notice to the general public that my above said client has bebarred and disowned his daughter named Ms. Joyous Ernest, aged above 40 from all his immovable and Movable Assets/Property throughout India because of her bad behavior and wrong acts and conducts, as her behavior towards my client is not well and proper, now my client would have no concern with her above said person in any manner, if any person(s) deals with said person in any ways, in that case my client will not be responsible for the same. He/ She would be doing so at their own risk and my above said client will not be responsible.

S/d, Devendra Kumar Sharma (Advocate), Ch. No. 89, Patiala House Courts, New Delhi - 110001

**PUBLIC NOTICE**  
I, Neeru Chhabra, S/D/W/O Brij Mohan Lal Gulati, 15 Poorvi Marg 2nd Floor, Vasant Vihar, New Delhi, 110057, I have lost my property document original documents of following sale deed has been lost. 1. sale deed dated 24.12.2001 executed by Sh. Atul Bansal through attorney Sh. Pran Nath Bhatia in favour of Smt. Naiyer Jain vide document no 4176 in addl. book no 1, volume no 553 at pages 116 to 136 on 13.12.2001 in the office of sub-registrar, New Delhi.

**PUBLIC NOTICE**  
I, Neeru Chhabra, S/D/W/O Brij Mohan Lal Gulati, 15 Poorvi Marg 2nd Floor, Vasant Vihar, New Delhi, 110057, I have lost my property document original documents of following sale deed has been lost. 1. sale deed dated 24.12.2001 executed by Sh. Atul Bansal through attorney Sh. Pran Nath Bhatia in favour of Sh. Shree Pal Jain vide document no 11, in addl. book no 1, volume no 564 at pages 73 to 94 on 01.01.2002 in the office of sub-registrar, New Delhi.

**GOVERNMENT OF NATIONAL CAPITAL TERRITORY OF DELHI OFFICE OF THE DISTRICT MAGISTRATE (NORTH) D.M. NORTH OFFICE COMPLEX, G.T. KARNAL ROAD, ALIPUR, DELHI-36 F. No. MISC/SDM/Alipur/2023/8107 Dated 18/12/2025**

**PUBLIC NOTICE**  
General Public is hereby informed that North District has started operation of One Stop Center with objective to support Women affected by violence Irrespective of caste, class, religion, sexual orientation or marital status in private and public space under one roof. The current location for the OSC is Babu Jag Jeevan Ram Memorial Hospital, Jahangir Puri Delhi-110033. The OSC facilitates access to various services viz. Emergency response and Rescue service, Medical assistance, assistance to women in lodging FIR/NCR/DiP, Psychological counseling and legal aid etc. For the administration and management of the One Stop Center, applications for the following category of posts on contract basis are invited from the interested candidates (Females only) by the District Magistrate (North).

S No	Name of the Post	NO of Post	Qualification	Experience	Salary /Magisteration per month
1	Centre administrator	01	M.A Sociology/ Psychology/Social Work /LLB/Social Science	5 Years experience of working with women in an administrative set up in Govt. or Non Govt. Project/Programmes and experience of running and managing an institution.	Rs.40,000/- P.M.

• Preferably with 01 (One) year Experience of Counselling Skills.  
• The above post is reserved for females only.  
Interested Candidates may submit the duly filled application form with self attested copies of all relevant documents in the office of below mentioned authority:-

R 1 Branch, O/o the District Magistrate North, Revenue Department, Alipur Delhi 110036

Application form may be downloaded from "dnorth.dh.govt.nic.in" or can be obtained from the office DM North

All the duly filled applications can be submitted up to 05 January 2026 at the above mentioned office address from 10.00 AM to 05.00 PM. After that, no application will be accepted. Candidates will bring the original documents for verification along with a self attested copy of all the documents at the time of interview. Shortlisted candidates will be called for interview which will be scheduled later.

Sd/- (KANIKA, IAS) SUB DIVISIONAL, MAGISTRATE ALIPUR, DELHI

## PROSPECT

### FSIB names Brajesh Kumar Singh for post of Canara Bank MD and CEO



The Financial Services Institutions Bureau (FSIB) on Monday recommended Brajesh Kumar Singh for the post of Managing Director of Bengaluru-based Canara Bank. Singh, who is serving as Executive Director of Indian Bank, will replace K Satyanarayana Raju on his superannuation this month. Declaring the result of the selection process, the FSIB – the headhunter for directors of State-owned banks and financial institutions – in a statement said the bureau interviewed 17 candidates on Monday. "Keeping in view their performance in the interface, overall experience and the extant parameters, the Bureau recommends Brajesh Kumar Singh for the position of MD and CEO in Canara Bank," it said. The final decision on the FSIB recommendation would be taken by the appointments committee of the Cabinet headed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Other members of the headhunter are Animesh Chauhan, former chairman and MD of erstwhile Oriental Bank of Commerce, the RBI's former executive director Deepak Singhal and Shailendra Bhandari, ex-MD of erstwhile ING Vysya Bank.

### Minister Hazarika lays foundation stones in Cachar

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
■ Guwahati

Minister of Water Resources and other departments, Government of Assam, Pijush Hazarika, on Monday attended a series of foundation stone-laying ceremonies in Cachar district, marking significant progress in flood and erosion control, water security and policing infrastructure in the region. At Lakhipur, the Minister laid the foundation stone of the scheme titled "Anti-erosion measures to protect Lakhipur (Binnakandi Pt-II) area from the erosion of River Barak on its left bank", in the presence of Minister Kaushik Rai. The project will be implemented at an estimated cost of ₹400 lakh and will involve the use of A-type geo bags, porcupines and geosynthetic fabric sheets to protect a large stretch of the

Lakhipur Legislative Assembly Constituency from recurring river erosion. During the day, Hazarika also laid the foundation stones of Kachudaram Police Station and Sonai Police Station under Cachar district, in the presence of Minister Kaushik Rai, MP Parimal Suklabaidya and MLAs Nihar Ranjan Das and Karim Uddin Borbhuyan. The police stations are being newly constructed under the MOITRI (Mission for Overall Improvement of Thana for Responsive Image) scheme, aimed at strengthening policing infrastructure and improving public service delivery. Hazarika stated that under the dynamic leadership of Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, Assam continues to move decisively towards resilient infrastructure, public safety and sustainable development.



### ICAI launches 'Project Vanija'

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
■ New Delhi

The Institute of Chartered Accountants of India (ICAI), through its Committee on Career Counselling (CCC), launched "Project Vanija – Shaping the Future of Students for Bharat as a Developed Country", a vision-

ary national initiative aimed at strengthening commerce education from the early stages of schooling, in alignment with the Prime Minister's vision of Viksit Bharat @2047. The project was launched on 19 December 2025 in New Delhi during a national-level deliberation, with active participation from



As Indigo is likely to submit its reply to the DGCA showcause notice for India's aviation meltdown of last fortnight, the Nation is still bewildered as to why it happened?

The Aviation ministry cut Indigo flights by 10 per cent and setup a "high level enquiry committee" within DGCA, that included persons who were involved in the decision making, that caused this crisis, rather than have impartial external committee, the Ministry fell back on the tried and tested "Babu investigation scheme". The Delhi High Court ordered Phase-1 implementation in July Phase-2 in November and the Interglobe CFO had stated on Nov 4th Investor call - "There's a new FDTL that has kicked in from November. "While it's a scaled down version what was initially proposed by the regulators, nonetheless there will be some incremental cost."

Curiously, Indigo removed 80 pilots in early 2025 and 40 more SFOs on 19/9/25 and paused Pilot recruitment in June. So then what caused almost 4900 flights to be cancelled? The hushed allegations of a "pact" between some DGCA officers and some airline officers have lingered for ages. The social media images showing Indigo staff using senior DGCA officers computers, have caused speculation those fears may not be totally unfounded. In fact both sons & husband of a recently retired JGD-DGCA and a serving JGD-DGCA are Indigo Pilots.

An older complaint against the current CFO, about Indigo's staff allegedly having pervasive access to her office, was silently shelved. A DGCA source speaking on condition of anonymity said "Indigo staffers had greater pull across DGCA's different divisions, than we had" they often used to say - "Sirji, aapka agar kuchkaamhoga AED ya DAT mein, tohhamaye bata dena, aapkaamkarvalengey hum". On the 3rd of September the

## SOME INDI-DGCA HOME TRUTHS

Chief Pilot of Indigo emailed the DGCA to "relook at implementation of the FDTL" as they "needed a one year extension of the FDTL CAR".

The DGCA refused any extension of the FDTL CAR date, as it was a High Court order.

The Indigo Senior Vice President (Ops) then wrote seeking DGCA exemption on 7 points of Phase-2 FDTL CAR. The DGCA wrote back approving 5 points and rejected point 6 & 7 which was "number of night landings" and "definition of night time".

On the 31 October, the Senior Vice President (Ops) is reported to have emailed the DGCA, that "Indigo will be in full compliance with FDTL CAR".

The DGCA itself has an Octopus structure, with 19 divisions, the DG, an Economic Advisor and many JDGs who are the regional satraps of Indian Aviation.

Indigo sought 900 additional flights in winter, which was approved by the DDG Amit Gupta, and his direct superior EA (DGCA) Lalit Chandel. The JDG (DAT) SanjayBrahmaneealong with Director DAT AtulMaindolaas heads of Directorate of Air Transport, are meant to issue NOC's for aircraft acquisition and to monitor the Pilot strength as per the CAR S-3-c Part II.

The Flight standards directorate comes under JGD Mr. Bharat Bhushan and Director Mr. Ravindra Jamwal and the CFO Capt. Shweta Singh who were responsible for supervision of pilot standards. In most cases, like this one, AED and DAT does as it desires and there hardly appeared to be any coordination amongst divisions, which gives rise to the internal discords that operators exploit.

(Ironically two of these persons responsible for these very approvals and who were responsible for monitoring Indigo's FDTL issues/requests, are now on the investigation team). It's like putting an arsonist in charge of the Fire department.

So where did it all go wrong? was this just a contrived disaster?

During the month of November 1-30, over 1200 flights got cancelled. On 26th November, almost 350 flights got cancelled and the DG and the FOIs noticed the spike in cancellations and questioned Indigo. Following this, the SVP (Ops) Indigo again sought clarifications on

two points of the FDTL CAR.

At a meeting on 1/12/25 Indigo apologised, admitting their fault and sought 4-8 days for a transition, blaming the software Jeppesen optimiser (used by 50 other airlines) and other things. Indigo once again asked for the two exemptions (Point 6 & 7) of FDTL CAR to help stabilise its operations. This was two days before the Indigo Meltdown.

That meeting had the DG, JDG, CFOI, SFOI, Dy SFOI, 2 FOIs and 2 Asst. Directors and Interglobe was represented by Special Advisor to MD RK Singh, Sr VP (Ops) Capt Mitra, Head of IOCC Jason, Capt Mohan and Capt Palia. The same was minuted with certain clarifications sought by the Indigo team on (a) landing with night window; (b) delayed flights completed beyond 0200 hrs (c) application of max FDTL extension and standbys.

Importantly, despite the DG; EA; JDG; DDG and CFOI all being aware of the cancellation spikes and failure to comply, for which Indigo admitted their fault too, no corrective action was ever ordered by the DG; EA; JDG or other DGCA officials to forestall this mayhem. They allowed Indigo to continue unchecked, in spite of all of them being in the knowledge of the chaos at Indigo (even before the 3rd Dec disruptions).

The next night hell broke loose, as Indigo's flights got affected and one by one began getting cancelled and disrupted. By 3rd December it hit 350 flights and by 4th November it crossed 1252 flights.

As the entire Indian aviation ecosystem collapsed, the DGCA called Indigo for an emergency meeting on 4th evening, where Indigo once again apologised and promised to make amends.

Indigo was called for an emergency meeting, where asked for the two exemptions that had been refused by DGCA in September (Item 6&7) November and December, of the demand originally made by the Sr VP (Ops) Indigo - that of Night landings and of definition of night for duties be 0001 to 0500 hours.

The DGCA finally allowed Indigo those two exemptions, until February 10th 2026.!

Some Pilots allege they were not rostered and sat at home; some

who were rostered, but transports did not come to pick them up. All these seemed very unusual occurrences at India's largest airline.

Captain Sam Thomas, ALPA president said "It appears to be an artificially created crisis to arm twist the DGCA into rolling back the rules, which appear to have been successful" As the PMO and MoCA got involved deeper, the Ministry appointed DGCA's worthies as enquiry committee members. Little realising that the same people had fiddled whilst Rome burnt.

The next evening, the DGCA repatriated 4 FOI Pilot inspectors who were on contract to the DGCA, as sacrificial lambs, even though one was in a hospital with Cancer and resigned; one was a national hero having saved 65 passengers from a burning aircraft, one was assistant chief pilot Vistara, It appeared the DGCA wanted long hanging fruit as scapegoats to quell the burning fires in Indian aviation. The DGCA's public view was that they were responsible for supervision and they failed, despite the DG, EA, JDGs & Directors being present at every meeting and taking (evading) the decisions themselves.

The smoke blown into public eyes was quite simply, to conceal the fact that the regulator had lost control of the situation at Indigo. They had their teeth so deep into the system that they allegedly gamed it at every bend.

A senior pilot who was previously with DGCA asked "Why were no international flights affected in this manner? Was it planned or managed? How could there have been no verification of the number of aircraft vis-à-vis the number of crew? If there was, then how did the Pilots mysteriously disappear between the 3rd and 6th of December? Where were the Pilots leave & roster records? What is the pilot utilisation of the last 12 months? Did Indigo not meet the standard force of Pilots?" If this was so, then how did the EA-DGCA, JDG-AED & JDG-DAT allow them to increase their domestic and international fleet to add more flights? Why was there no scrutiny of the DGCA on fleet and route increase?

The question is where did Indigo's pilots disappear? If they had enough pilots for the summer and the DGCA press release claims they were only short of 65 Captains & 65

FOs, then why did almost 4900 cancellations occur?

Captain CS Randhawa, FIP President said "This was a complete violation of the court orders and it has been deliberate by Indigo".

What is supremely strange, that Indigo did not ask the DGCA for a single FDTL dispensation until the 7th, to position, return, or ensure operation of some flights when all hell was breaking loose across India. A seasoned pilot has questioned "how did Indigo restore their network with no pilot increase and just the two relaxations or did someone plan this?"

The trail of emails and requests going back to September and their actions since May 2025, would give rise to very dubious conclusions. We reached out to CEO-Indigo and VP-Corp Command the DGCA (all officers mentioned herein) for their detailed comments on this matter via email, but we have got no response until going to press, we shall add their comments as and when received.

Are we as a nation going to run around blindfolded and pretend that this didn't happen? or will we accept the broken fix by a broken regulator to repair our aviation sector, rather than cleansing and rebuilding our systems?

An issue like this needs a deeper investigation from an external agency, like the CVC if the government wants to clean up aviation and prepare it for the future. Indian Aviation is still reeling from the tragedy of AI-171 and this Indigo chaos has made headlines all over the world. As an unnamed Pilot said "We are just one take off away from another 171, if the DGCA continues to close their eyes to this nautanki". The Prime Ministers dream is the growth of Indian aviation and "make in India", yet we have such broken systems riddled with dubious actions.

As India rockets towards being the world's third largest Aviation market and have 2000+ aircraft, one wonders if it's time to clean up Indian Aviation and restructure the regulator?

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## Divya Kala Mela concludes with powerful message of inclusion, self-reliance

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
■ New Delhi

Reinforcing the idea that persons with disabilities seek opportunity, not sympathy, the nine-day Divya Kala Mela organised by the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (DEPWd), Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India, concluded successfully today at Kartavya Path, India Gate. Held from 13 to 21 December 2025, the mela emerged as a compelling national platform showcasing the entrepreneurial strength, creative excellence and economic contribution of Divyang artisans and entrepreneurs from

across the country. The return of Divya Kala Mela to Kartavya Path marked its 28th edition since the initiative began at the same venue in December 2022, underscoring the evolution of the mela into a sustained movement for economic empowerment. Across 28 editions held nationwide, more than 2,362 Divyang participants have taken part, collectively generating business exceeding ₹23 crore.

In the Delhi edition alone, around 100 Divyang artisans and entrepreneurs from 20 States displayed a diverse range of products, with home décor, organic food items and handicrafts witnessing strong consumer demand



and sales crossing ₹2 crore—reflecting growing public confidence in Divyang-led enterprises. The mela also strengthened pathways to employment and financial inclusion. A special job fair organised on 16 December witnessed participation from

157 Divyang youth, of whom 99 were shortlisted and several received on-the-spot job offers from reputed companies. Further supporting entrepreneurship, the National Divyang Finance and Development Corporation (NDFDC) sanc-

tioned loans exceeding ₹1.05 crore to Divyang entrepreneurs, while ALIMCO facilitated the distribution and registration of assistive devices, enhancing functional independence and productivity.

A major highlight of the closing day was the "Divya Kala Shakti" cultural programme, where Divyang artists from the Delhi-NCR region captivated audiences with inspiring performances of dance and music, powerfully conveying that artistic expression transcends physical limitations. The Experience Zone, along with adaptive sports such as Blind Cricket and Boccia, offered visitors an immersive understanding of both the chal-

lenges and capabilities of persons with disabilities, fostering greater social sensitivity and inclusion.

The Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities and NDFDC expressed gratitude to the citizens of Delhi, the local administration and the authorities at Kartavya Path for their support in making the event a success. The Department reaffirmed its commitment to organising similar initiatives across the country, with the objective of building a truly inclusive, dignified and opportunity-driven society where Divyangjan are recognised as equal partners in India's journey towards self-reliance.

### MP Khandelwal wants adbhavna Park renamed after Atal Bihari Vajpayee

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
■ New Delhi

Member of Parliament Praveen Khandelwal has written to the Lieutenant Governor of Delhi proposing that Sadbhavna Park, located on Ring Road, be renamed as "Atal Sadbhavna Park" to commemorate the 100th birth anniversary of former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee ji. He has also suggested to install a statue of Vajpayee in the said park.

Khandelwal said that Atal Bihari Vajpayee ji was one of India's greatest statesmen, a visionary leader, an outstanding parliamentarian and a symbol of democratic values and national unity. His life and work were deeply rooted in the ideals of Sadbhavna (harmony), dialogue, inclusive development and good governance, making the proposed renaming both symbolic and meaningful.

## SaveLIFE, Tata AIG equip Prayagraj health centres with advanced emergency gear

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
■ Prayagraj

SaveLIFE Foundation, in collaboration with Tata AIG General Insurance Co Ltd, has provided upgraded emergency care equipment to the Community Health Centres (CHCs) at Jasra and Chaka.

The initiative, part of the Zero Fatality District (ZFD) Programme, aims to enable the two CHCs to function as Trauma Stabilisation Facilities for road crash victims and other emergency cases, especially during the crucial "golden hour" after a crash.

An event to mark the handover was held at CHC Jasra on December 17 and was attended by Dr Ankita Pandey, Medical Superintendent, CHC Jasra; Devang Pandya, Vice-President and Lead-CSR and Sustainability, Tata AIG General Insurance Co. Ltd; and representatives from SaveLIFE Foundation.

Dr RC Pandey, Additional Chief Medical Officer, Prayagraj, said appropriate trauma care during the initial hours after a crash can signif-



icantly improve patient outcomes. "We are thankful to SaveLIFE Foundation for upgrading the equipment at CHCs Jasra and Chaka. This initiative will strengthen our teams to stabilise patients and manage trauma cases more effectively," he said. Officials said the new equipment will help ensure faster treatment closer to crash sites, improving survival chances for victims in Jasra, Chaka and nearby

areas. Between 2022 and 2025, CHC Jasra handled 188 crash-related cases, including 96 fatal crashes and 104 deaths. CHC Chaka recorded 776 crash cases, 184 of which were fatal, resulting in 205 deaths.

Tata AIG's Devang Pandya said, "Road safety requires a coordinated approach that goes beyond prevention to include strong post-crash response systems. Through this CSR

initiative with SaveLIFE Foundation, we aim to strengthen on-ground emergency response and support safer roads for all."

SaveLIFE Foundation founder and CEO Piyush Tewari said, "To save lives in road crashes, it is critical to strengthen emergency care at the district level. Upgrading CHC-level trauma care will ensure victims receive timely care closer to where crashes occur."

**Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar**  
Short Term e-Tender for Providing Un-Skilled, Semi-Skilled, Skilled and Highly-Skilled Manpower through Outsourcing

E-tender No. GNDU/REG/2025/03 Date: 22.12.2025  
Online bids are invited for providing Un-Skilled, Semi-Skilled, Skilled and Highly-Skilled workers at Guru Nanak Dev University Main Campus, its Regional Campuses and Associated/Constituent Colleges on monthly wages on contract basis for a period of two years. Tender Documents can be purchased through online mode only from website www.eproc.punjab.gov.in. Last date for closing the online tender is 01.01.2026 upto 5:00 PM. For more details visit the above mentioned portal.

Amritsar Registrar  
22.12.2025  
RO 2426/12/2025-26/6193 Dated CHD :- 22/12/2025

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CGM/BR /Works/ TS-13/9081	Installation of new 33/11 KV S/S Malakhedi with 33 KV & 11 KV Lines under (O&M) Division Narmadapuram of (O&M) Circle Narmadapuram	106.53 Lakh	5900/-	12.01.2026 at 15:30 Hrs.

Other details, terms and conditions are available on company website : <https://portal.mpcz.in> & <https://mptenders.gov.in> or the under signed office.  
M.P. Madhyam/123612/2025  
CHIEF GENERAL MANAGER

## BRIEFLY

### Nice ended nine-game losing streak with French Cup win



Nice finally ended a nine-game losing streak when it beat Saint-Etienne 2-1 at home to reach the last 32 of the French Cup on Sunday. Striker Zoumana Diallo netted his first goal for Nice and midfielder Morgan Sanson scored the other goal to give Nice much-needed respite in what has been a tough season.

Some fans even confronted the players after one defeat. Nice is 13th in Ligue 1 and last in the Europa League group stage after six straight defeats.

Elsewhere, Marseille showed its attacking prowess again in a 6-0 win at third-tier Bourg-en-Bresse, with club top scorer Mason Greenwood among six players to score. Coach Roberto De Zerbi's side has netted 56 league goals in 2025 - its third-highest home tally ever in a year.

In Sunday's other matches, top-tier sides Monaco, Nantes, Rennes, Lyon and Strasbourg all advanced, but Le Havre lost 2-0 at home to second-tier Amiens.

Five-time champion Lyon won 3-0 against Saint-Cyr-Collonges, an amateur side from the Lyon suburbs.

Record 16-time champion Paris Saint-Germain started its French Cup defense with a 4-0 win at fifth-tier Vendée Fontenay on Saturday.

### Pinkathon Mumbai sees 5,300 women participants



The 10th edition of the Pinkathon Mumbai brought together over 5,300 women participants and set a world record for the maximum number of visually impaired women running together, with 115 of them competing across categories.

The two-day meet that concluded on Sunday, featured 3 km, 5 km, and 10 km races, drawing runners across age groups.

Pinkathon founder Milind Soman said, "What stands out every year is not just the numbers, but the diversity of women who show up. From visually impaired runners to first-timers and competitive athletes, Pinkathon continues to reflect how women's running in India is evolving, becoming more inclusive, confident, and visible."

Piyusha Lohar won the 3 km race in 12:23, followed by Ovi Patil (13:00) and Jyoti Punjabi (14:16).

In the 5 km category, Yamini Thakare finished first with a time of 18:18, while Komal Khandekar (20:16) and Shreya Ojha (22:03) were placed second and third.

The 10 km race was won by Padma Karande in 42:06, with Anchal Marwah (48:16) and Shalini Singh (48:52) completing the podium.

### Raphinha, Yamal score as Spanish leader Barcelona beats Villarreal

ASSOCIATED PRESS  
■ Madrid

Raphinha and Lamine Yamal celebrated each other's goals with a raised arm and hands linked as Barcelona won 2-0 at 10-man Villarreal on Sunday to stay four points clear of Real Madrid at the top of La Liga.

Raphinha won a penalty after being fouled when cutting inside. He took a slow run-up and sent goalkeeper Luiz Junior the wrong way in the 12th minute for his seventh league goal of the season and Barca's 50th.

Yamal also grabbed his seventh this season, striking from close range in the 63rd after being set up by midfielder Frenkie de Jong following a goalmouth scramble. It was a seventh straight win in all competitions for coach Hansi Flick's side.

Barcelona was without central defender Andreas Christensen, who tore the ACL in his left knee in training on Saturday.

Villarreal defender Renato Veiga was shown a straight red card late in the first half for a heavy tackle from behind on Yamal, who briefly had treatment on the ground. Villarreal's defeat allowed Atletico Madrid to move into third place with a 3-0 win at Girona. Atletico has played two more games



than Villarreal.

**Atletico cruises to victory**  
Midfielder Koke put Atletico ahead in the 13th minute with a fine half-volley from just outside the penalty area and into the top right corner.

Atletico goalkeeper Jan Oblak made a stunning save to keep out Axel Witsel's close-range shot midway through the half, clawing it off the line one-handed near the left post. Atletico doubled its lead in the 38th when midfielder Conor Gallagher's strike from 20 meters (yards) deflected off a defender and wrong-footed goalie Paulo Gazzaniga.

Atletico's traveling fans gave midfielder Thomas Lemar a warm welcome when he came on for Girona

## Neeraj's 90m feat shines amid India's doping crisis

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
■ New Delhi

Despite a rare blip in form, Neeraj Chopra was the biggest saving grace for India's doping-marred athletics landscape after getting the 90m "monkey off his back" even as the sport's administrators worked towards making the country a hub of big-ticket events in a bitter-sweet 2025.

The 27-year-old Chopra went past the coveted mark, considered the gold standard in javelin throw, in the Doha Diamond League but suffered a heartbreak when he failed to win a medal in the World Championships final in Tokyo later in the year.

Young Sachin Yadav outperformed Chopra to emerge as a potential world-class javelin thrower with a fourth-place finish.

But the doping menace showed no signs of decline with several top Indians caught in the net, including Olympian javelin thrower Shivpal Singh and former Asian Games medallist discus thrower Seema Punia.

An athlete-coach duo was also suspended for doping in a first of its kind instance, while two minor athletes too joined the Hall of Shame.



There was a silver lining though, as India staged two World Athletics Continental Tour events, with Chopra hosting and winning one of them.

The country also mounted bids on some high-profile continental and global events, including the 2031 World Athletics Championships with Ahmedabad as the proposed venue.

**Marriage and 90m high for Chopra**  
One of the most eligible bach-

elors in the country, Chopra tied the knot with tennis player Himani Mor in an intimate ceremony in a private resort in Himachal Pradesh with just a few close relatives and family members present.

The outside world got to know of the event only after Chopra himself posted the marriage photos in his social media handles.

A few months later, Chopra sent his spear to 90.23m to become the third Asian and 25th overall to achieve the feat.

Chopra clinched three more major titles — the Paris Diamond League, the Golden Spike meet and the inaugural NC Classic. He realised his dream of hosting a world-class event in front of the home crowd and family members.

He, however, came up short in the Diamond League Finals, finishing second to German Julian Weber. He was bidding to regain the trophy he had won in 2022, but was barely able to touch the 85m mark.

But the most unexpected

happened during the World Championships in Tokyo in September at the very venue where he achieved fame and Olympic gold in 2021.

Struggling with back pain, defending champion Chopra was ousted after the fifth and penultimate round with a best effort of 84.03m that left him eighth overall. He was outperformed by debutant compatriot Yadav (86.27m) who logged a creditable fourth-place finish.

Chopra, who had also won a silver in the 2022 edition, has not finished outside the top-2 since winning gold in 2021 Tokyo Games. After that, he has either won or finished second in 24 international events.

**Never-ending doping menace**  
India continued to occupy the second spot in the global list of athletes ineligible to compete due to doping offences, with 128 athletes in the list released by Athletics Integrity Unit (AIU).

Some of the country's top athletes caught for doping included Shivpal, Pune Half Marathon winner Pradhan Vilas Kirulakar, sprinter Sekar Dhanalakshmi and 2014 Asian Games medallist hammer thrower Manju Bala.

Two minors were also

handed three-year bans by the National Anti-Doping Agency (NADA).

Former Indian junior team head coach Ramesh Nagpuri was suspended for "complicity" in doping.

Two more coaches -- Karamveer Singh and Rakesh -- were also suspended for "complicity" and "administration of prohibited substances" respectively.

Asian Games silver medal-winning long distance runner Kartik Kumar accepted a three-year ban from the US Anti-Doping Agency after testing positive for a range of banned anabolic agents during out-of-competition tests there.

Towards the end of the year, 18-year-old Sanjana Singh, who had won gold medals in women's 1500m and 5000m in the SAAF Senior Athletics Championships in Ranchi, and her coach Sandeep Singh were provisionally suspended for a doping offence.

Later, former Asian Games gold-winning discus thrower Seema Punia got a 16-month ban for failing a dope test, adding to her checkered doping record, which included two previous violations, one of them at the junior level when she was merely 17.

## Morocco opens 35th Africa Cup of Nations with 2-0 win over Comoros

ASSOCIATED PRESS  
■ Rabat (Morocco)

A spectacular bicycle kick earned royal approval for Ayoub El Kaabi as host Morocco opened the 35th Africa Cup of Nations with a 2-0 win over Comoros on Sunday.

Home fans including Moroccan Crown Prince Moulay Hassan, who greeted the players before kickoff, had endured a frustrating game as island nation Comoros, ranked 108th in the world, stubbornly held out against one of the tournament favorites.

Comoros goalkeeper Yannick Pandor even saved an early penalty from Soufiane Rahimi.

Brahim Diaz finally broke the deadlock in the 55th minute, setting off relieved celebrations around the stadium, before El Kaabi sealed the win with an overhead kick in the 74th.

The prince, watching from his royal box, was unable to conceal his delight as he applauded.

Morocco's quest to become a soccer superpower is a family affair. It was a passion for the prince's grandfather,



Hassan II, and the current king, Mohammed VI, who oversaw one of the most aggressive buildouts in African sporting history to achieve his aim. The Kingdom is set to be a main co-host of the 2030 World Cup with Spain and Portugal.

Mohammed VI's portrait was beside Gianni Infantino as the FIFA president proclaimed in French before kickoff, "This will be the best ever Africa Cup of Nations!"

The only blemish from a Moroccan point of view was an early injury to team captain Romain Saiss, who wiped away tears as he left the field.

"He felt something behind

his knee but we don't know if it is muscular or something else," Morocco coach Walid Regragui said. "We hope it's not too serious and that we can get him back later."

**Spectacular light show**  
Excitement had been building for hours Sunday and wintry showers failed to dampen the mood. Beninese artist Angélique Kidjo, Moroccan singer Jaylann and French-Moroccan rapper Lartiste performed the tournament's official song for the first time during a spectacular light show for the opening ceremony.

But the highlight for the

Moroccan fans - judging by the sea of smartphones to capture the moment - was the appearance just before kickoff of the king's eldest son beside Infantino and Patrice Motsepe, the president of the Confederation of African Football. Prince Moulay Hassan shook hands with the Comoros players and then posed for a photo with the Morocco team, seemingly unperturbed by heavy rainfall.

**Atlas Lions ready to roar**  
The Atlas Lions, as Morocco is known, are backed by many to lift what would be just their second Africa Cup title 50 years after their only success in 1976. The final is January 18 next year.

Morocco is the highest-ranked African team at No. 11. The Atlas Lions became the first African team to reach the World Cup semifinals in 2022.

Comoros proved to be a difficult opponent on Sunday.

"I am very proud of my players," Comoros coach Stefano Cusin said of his team's battling performance. "We have a lot of youngsters. I think we gave a good image of Comoros."



### Matt Kuchar ends the year with emotional PNC victory with son

ASSOCIATED PRESS  
■ Orlando

Matt Kuchar couldn't imagine a better ending to a year when he lost his father than to finally win the PNC Championship with his son. There was no stopping them Sunday in a record-smashing performance that led to an 18-under 54 and a whopping seven-shot victory.

The tournament that is all about family and fun ended with Kuchar wiping away tears as his voice cracked while speaking about how much it meant without his father, who died in February.

The finish was simply surreal to him. Cameron Kuchar, who was able to use one tee box forward as a high school student, hammered another drive and watched his father hit 7-iron to 18 inches.

Kuchar gave his son the honor of tapping in for the final touch on an unforgettable week for the Kuchar family.

"I don't know if you believe in karma, if you believe in fate, whatever you believe in, there's something magical that does exist," Kuchar said as tears began to form. "I'm a believer in God that Dad is up above looking down, and what happened on 18, I could hardly stand up and hit a shot. For me to hit it to a foot, makes me think there's something more out there. Just miss Pops."

Peter Kuchar, who at one time was the top-ranked doubles tennis player in Florida, first became a presence on the golf scene when he caddied for his son when Kuchar won the US Amateur in 1997, and when he was low amateur at the Masters and U.S. Open the following year.

### Aston Villa beats Man United 2-1 to seal 10th straight win

ASSOCIATED PRESS  
■ Manchester (England)

Morgan Rogers scored two brilliant solo goals to down Manchester United 2-1 and keep Aston Villa in the hunt for the Premier League title. The win at Villa Park on Sunday was a 10th straight victory in all competitions for Unai Emery's team, which is third in the standings and three points off leader Arsenal. Rogers whipped two curling shots into the top corner — either side of Matheus Cunha's goal for United.

The midfielder fired Villa in front in the 45th minute when cutting in from the left. His second came in the 57th — again curling the ball beyond the dive of United goalkeeper Senne Lemmens.

The win maintains Villa's outstanding run, which has seen it win 11 of its last 12 games in the league.

"Our supporters should be proud of everything we are doing together," Emery said. Wins on Saturday for Arsenal and second-placed Manchester City saw the top two pull away.

But Villa's latest victory was another show of its title credentials since recovering from a desperate start to the season.

## Fiorentina Clinch first Serie A win in 5-1 rout

ASSOCIATED PRESS  
■ Milan

Beleaguered Fiorentina finally got its first Serie A win of the season after its opponent played nearly the entire match with 10 men.

Fiorentina eased to a 5-1 victory at home to Udinese, which had goalkeeper Maduka Okoye sent off with less than eight minutes on the clock.

It was Fiorentina's first win in 16 league matches and saw the last-placed team cut the gap to safety to five points. Midtable Udinese beat defending Serie A champion Napoli last weekend.

However, the visitors got off to the worst possible start as Okoye came rushing out of the penalty area and clattered into Moise Kean who was clear through on goal. The stopper, who also touched the ball with his arm, was shown a straight red card.

Fiorentina took the lead in the 21st minute when Nicolò Fagioli tapped a free kick towards Rolando Mandragora, who fired a low shot underneath Udinese's replacement goalkeeper Razvan Sava.

Albert Gudmundsson's fine strike and Cher Ndour's header put Fiorentina comfortably ahead at halftime.

Kean scored twice after the break, either side of Umar Sole's consolation goal for Udinese.



**An even earlier red**  
Atalanta managed to snatch a 1-0 victory against 10-man Genoa, which saw red in very similar circumstances to Udinese. Genoa goalkeeper Nicola Leali was sent off in the third minute for a foul on Atalanta forward Gianluca Scamacca.

Atalanta, as expected, dominated possession but Genoa - which looked far more dangerous with its chances — remarkably appeared to have held on for a draw before Isak Hien headed in a corner in the fourth minute of stoppages.

United States midfielder

Yunus Musah made his first Serie A start for Atalanta since the second round on Aug. 29.

**Genoa remained two points above safety**  
Safety hopes A last-gasp equalizer from Stefano Moreo saw Pisa snatch a 2-2 draw at Cagliari. Pisa inched to within three points of safety. Cagliari was left three points above the relegation zone. Man United captain Bruno Fernandes set to miss games after injury against Villa (Eds: Eds: UPDATES: Adds quotes.)

Birmingham (England), Dec 22 (AP) Manchester United captain Bruno Fernandes could be out for "a while" after pulling up with an injury against Aston Villa on Sunday.

United coach Ruben Amorim said Fernandes had sustained a soft tissue injury in the first half of the Premier League game at Villa Park. Villa won 2-1.

"I think it's soft tissues, so it's going to take a while. We'll see," Amorim told Sky Sports. Fernandes appeared to hurt his hamstring when pulling up. He played on until the break but was replaced by Lisandro Martinez for the start of the second half.

Fernandes was then seen walking uncomfortably along the sideline as he made his way to the bench for the second half.

## New Zealand beat West Indies to win 3rd test by 323 runs

ASSOCIATED PRESS  
■ Mount Maunganui

Jacob Duffy took 5-42 as New Zealand bowled out the West Indies for 138 on a deteriorating fifth-day pitch to win the third test by 323 runs on Monday and take the three-match series 2-0.

Duffy surpassed Richard Hadlee's New Zealand record of 80 wickets in a calendar year and finished the series with 23 wickets at an average of 15.4 including three five-wicket hauls.

He bowled more than 154 overs as the workhorse of the New Zealand attack in the three tests.

"I saw that list at lunchtime and there were some cool names on there, so to be up there on any sort of list with those sort of names was special," Duffy, who was voted Player of the Series, said of his bowling record.

New Zealand's win ended a series in which both teams had to cope with significant

ly depleted pace attacks and in which a slew of batting records fell.

The West Indies were without Shamar Joseph and Alzarri Joseph. Duffy became New Zealand's pace spearhead after injuries sidelined Matt Henry, Will O'Rourke, Ben Sears, Kyle Jamieson, Nathan Smith and Blair Tickner.

The third test was a feast for statisticians. Devon Conway made 227 and Tom Latham 137 in a 323-run opening stand in New Zealand's first innings of 575-8 declared. Conway then made 100 and Latham 101 in a partnership of 192 in the second innings before New Zealand declared at 306-2, leaving West Indies a target of 462 to win after being bowled out for 420 in the first innings.

Conway was the 10th test player and first New Zealander to score a double-century and a century in the same match and he and



Latham were the first openers to score centuries in both innings of a test.

Latham and Conway accumulated 515 runs across two innings, a record total for an

opening pair. Latham also followed his father, Rod, by featuring in opening partnerships of more than 100 in both innings of a test.

"I don't think it's sunk in

yet. It will take some time for me to get my head around what happened in this test match," Conway said, "but I'm really glad we got the win."

New Zealand faced some criticism for the lateness of its declarations in both innings on a pitch at Bay Oval which had been relatively docile for the first three days. Cracks had appeared and plates had begun to form by Day 4 and on the last day, the ball had begun to bounce irregularly.

**Last Day**  
Still, Brandon King and John Campbell survived 16 overs and scored 43 before stumps on the fourth day, leaving New Zealand needing to take all 10 wickets on the last day to win. Campbell and King then batted through the first hour Monday to frustrate the New Zealand bowlers. King reached his half-century from 63 balls.

But both openers were out within five balls - King for 67 and Campbell for a dogged 16 from 105 balls - and that provoked a slump that saw five wickets fall before lunch. Duffy took three of those, two with deliveries that lifted uncomfortably.

Duffy then dismissed Roston Chase after lunch with a ferocious ball that reared to shoulder height from just short of a length, giving Glenn Phillips his third catch of the day.

Shai Hope batted 78 balls for 3 runs and was out lbw, kicking away a full toss on his off stump to give Ajaz Patel his third wicket of the day. Patel had 85 career wickets coming into this test, which was his first in New Zealand for five years. His first wicket of the match was his first-ever wicket in a test in New Zealand.

Kemar Roach (4) batted with a hamstring injury and was bowled by a ball from Phillips which turned and took the inside edge.

Anderson Phillip and Tevin Imlach held out for 14 overs until Phillip (10) fell lbw to Rachin Ravindra. Duffy returned to claim his fifth wicket and end the innings after 80.3 overs when he bowled Jayden Seales.

### Close series

The West Indies were competitive for long periods in all three tests. In the first test, Justin Greaves batted 564 minutes for 202 and the West Indies batted 163.3 overs to reach 457-6 and draw the match. That was the highest fourth-innings score since tests were limited to five days. Kemar Roach batted almost five hours for 58.

Latham made 145 and Rachin Ravindra 176 in New Zealand's second innings of 466-8 declared. The second test, which New Zealand won by nine wickets, was a contrast in which Mitch Hay's 61 on debut was the highest score for both teams.

The West Indies made 205 and 128 and New Zealand made 278-9 and 57-1, chasing 55 to win in the fifth innings. Duffy took 5-38 as New Zealand bowled the West Indies in 46.2 overs in their second innings to set up the easy run chase.

## India look to consolidate lead against Sri Lanka in 2nd WT20I

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
■ Visakhapatnam

The Indian women's cricket team will look to raise its fielding standards by a few notches and build on a comprehensive opening win when it squares off against Sri Lanka in the second WT20I on Tuesday.

Playing its first international game after a historic World Cup triumph last month, Harmanpreet Kaur's side didn't need to break much sweat in the batting and bowling departments during an eight-wicket win over the island nation. However, the team's fielding, especially catching, left a lot to be desired despite the bowlers managing to restrict the Lankans to a paltry 121 for 6.

"We are working on our fielding. Don't know why we keep dropping catches. It is wet out here, but it is not an excuse. That is something we really need to think about. In the next match, we will come about with better approach,"



skipper Harmanpreet Kaur had said after the match.

The Indian team had a well-deserved six-week break following the World Cup high. The players converged for a week-long camp at the Centre Of Excellence in Bengaluru after that.

Some rustiness in fielding was pretty much expected and the seasoned skipper feels that the team would be getting into the groove very

soon. "We are playing after a month. We don't want to unnecessarily challenge ourselves. We just want to do well for the team. "We just wanted to bowl first and see how it goes. We wanted to show the better approach," Harmanpreet had said.

On paper, India are overwhelming favourites to win the series against Chamari Athapaththu-led visitors.

In the form of her life,

Jemimah Rodrigues commenced her post World Cup journey from where she left during the title victory.

She looked in rhythm and was especially severe on Shashini Gimhani, a left-arm wrist spinner, which is a rare breed in women's cricket.

Gimhani bowled a lot of over-pitched deliveries and failed to get her length right and Rodrigues alone creamed her for half a dozen boundaries.

The biggest gain for India was 20-year-old left-arm spinner Vaishnavi Sharma, who was recently ignored at the WPL auctions.

Although Vaishnavi went wicket-less, she gave away only 16 runs and didn't concede a single boundary.

For Shafali Verma, the series is an important one and she would like to be more consistent while batting in the format that suits her game. In the opening game, Sri Lanka's inept performance didn't test India's batting much.

### SQUADS

**India:** Harmanpreet Kaur (C), Smriti Mandhana (VC), Deepti Sharma, Sneha Rana, Jemimah Rodrigues, Shafali Verma, Harleen Deol, Amanjot Kaur, Arundhati Reddy, Kranti Gaud, Renuka Singh Thakur, Richa Ghosh (WK), G Kamalini (WK), Sree Charani, Vaishnavi Sharma.

**Sri Lanka:** Chamari Athapaththu (c), Hasini Perera, Vishmi Gunaratne, Harshitha Samarawickrama, Nilakshika De Silva, Kavisha Dilhari, Iresha Dulani, Kaushini Nuthyanga, Malsha Shehani, Inoka Ranaweera, Shashini Gimhani, Nimesha Madushani, Kawya Kavindi, Rashmika Sewwandi, Malki Madara.

## No disappointment over being wicketless, says Vaishnavi Sharma

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
■ Visakhapatnam

Young Indian left-arm spinner Vaishnavi Sharma said she was delighted to have executed her plans despite going wicketless on her women's T20I debut, revealing that listening to the national anthem helped her settle her pre-match nerves.

The 20-year-old made an impressive international debut in the series opener against Sri Lanka, returning economical figures of 0/16 from four overs as India cruised to an eight-wicket win. Vaishnavi built sustained pressure through her spell, offering little room to the Sri Lankan batters as India restricted the tourists to 121/6 before overhauling the target with 32 balls to spare.

Despite finishing wicketless, the youngster said she was satisfied with her outing. "No disappointment (on



being wicketless), I am very happy that I was able to execute my plan, rest there are four matches still remaining," Vaishnavi said at the post-match press conference on Sunday. Like most debutants, nerves were inevitable and Vaishnavi revealed listening to the national anthem play helped her regain composure.

"Yes, I was nervous before the National Anthem. After the National Anthem, I calmed down."

Vaishnavi also spoke

warmly about the backing she received from the team management and senior players, particularly skipper Harmanpreet Kaur who encouraged her to trust her strengths.

"She was telling me that I have done a good job in the past. You have done a great job. You have given incredible performances." She was giving me her blessing."

The young spinner further highlighted the clarity and calm Harmanpreet brings to the team environment.

## Connolly open to batting anywhere for Punjab Kings in maiden IPL

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
■ New Delhi

Punjab Kings' latest recruit Australian all-rounder Cooper Connolly prides himself on being versatile and is open to batting at any position the team deems fit in his maiden IPL season next year.

Known for his aggressive batting, sharp fielding and handy left-arm spin, Connolly was snapped up by Punjab Kings for ₹ 3 crore at the mini-auction earlier this month.

"I like to model my game on being able to be versatile in any position. So whether that's at three, whether that's in the middle, I'm happy to perform any role," Connolly said at a virtual media interaction on Monday. The 22-year-old has been in sensational form for Perth Scorchers, scoring two blistering fifties, in the ongoing Big Bash League batting at number 3.

However, Punjab Kings are particularly keen on his ability to finish games and handle high-pressure situations, as highlighted by skipper Shreyas Iyer post the auction.

"I feel like I'm still learning the role at number three for the (Perth) Scorchers. It's a role I enjoy. But if the role in the IPL is different, that's totally understandable because it's a world class team. "To just be in the middle order would be sort of a nice opportunity just to sort of knuckle down and get to work in the middle order," he added.

Connolly has quickly established himself as one of the most promising young talents in Australian cricket. He made his T20I and ODI



debut in September last year before earning his Baggy Green in January.

The Western Australian also impressed during the ODI series against India, producing a calm, match-winning knock under pressure. Reflecting on his rapid rise over the past three years, Connolly said adapting to the demands of international cricket has been crucial.

"I think over the last three years, it's been about understanding how different the international level is. It's about adjusting to that, understanding how bowlers are trying to get me out more and how I can counter that." "I've had to earn the right to be in the Australian set-up. So it's about learning from guys like Travis Head, Steve Smith, how they go about it and how they sort of train to all those standards."

"I'm just trying to tweak my game slowly and add more strings to it as I move forward."

Connolly also said he is looking forward to working closely with Australia's World Cup-winning captain Ricky Ponting, who is the head coach of Punjab Kings.

"I've heard a lot of good things about him. I haven't

done a lot of work with him just yet. So, I'm looking forward to spending some time with him and sort of doing some tweaks to my batting and seeing what his thoughts are on it." He is also looking forward to face some of the best bowlers in the world at the IPL.

"Everyone goes to this tournament (IPL) because it's probably going to be the most competitive. And also looking forward to getting over there and challenging myself against some of the best bowlers in the world."

Aware that IPL conditions will be vastly different from the fast, bouncy pitches of Australia, Connolly said adapting to spin would be a big challenge.

"Yeah, it's very different to Australia. We've obviously got some fast, bouncy wickets. But that challenge of playing spin is a challenge that is tough for everyone."

"So, it's just about picking the brains of people that have done it for a long period of time and understanding how they go about it, I guess, and their method into my game and see how I can sort of play in those spinning conditions."

## Vijay Hazare Trophy: Gill, Abhishek, Arshdeep in Punjab squad

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
■ Chandigarh

Indian ODI skipper Shubman Gill, world's number 1 T20 batter Abhishek Sharma and pacer Arshdeep Singh were on Monday named in the Punjab squad for the Vijay Hazare Trophy, in line with BCCI's diktat of mandatory participation in the National One-Day Championship.

Gill, who was dropped from India's T20 World Cup squad and Arshdeep, who is a white-ball regular might just be available for two to three games with ODIs against New Zealand set to



Abhishek Sharma



Shubman Gill



Arshdeep Singh

start on January 11. Punjab, clubbed in group C along with favourites Mumbai, will play their first

two games against Maharashtra (December 24) and Chattisgarh (December 26). These are the games in

which Gill and Arshdeep's availability is expected.

Abhishek, who will only be summoned for T20Is, might



## PM Sharif awards U19 Asia Cup champions

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
■ Karachi

Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif on Monday announced a special cash award of 10 million rupees for Pakistan's U19 Asia Cup-winning squad members. The Pakistan colts thumped India by 191 runs on Sunday to claim the title.

Sharif made the announcement at a reception for the team and officials in Islamabad where he lauded the team's performance.

Sarfraz Ahmed, the mentor and manager of the team, told the media after the reception that the Prime Minister

has announced cash award of 10 million (Approx USD 36,000) to each of the players.

Sarfraz said he was enjoying working with a bunch of talented players who had a great future in the sport.

Head coach Shahid Anwar credited win to a long process of selecting the squad and giving each player enough exposure of 50-overs cricket.

"The process started in June when we picked around 70 players after trials and then reduced the number to 20. Most of these players were then given chances to play 50-over cricket at domestic level," Anwar said.

## Shakib shines as MI Emirates beat Desert Vipers in ILT20

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
■ Dubai

Shakib Al Hasan's all-round show helped MI Emirates register a composed four-wicket victory over the table toppers Desert Vipers to extend their winning streak in the ILT20.

After a disciplined bowling performance in the first innings, MI Emirates overcame early pressure, before Kieron Pollard and Shakib guided the team to victory.

The Desert Vipers managed to score 124 courtesy Dan Lawrence's gritty 35 off 34 balls, but MI Emirates navigated a tricky chase with relative ease.

With the ball, spinner Shakib's two wickets for 14 runs led the charge and kept the Vipers in check, before Zahoor Khan's death bowling ensured the total remained below par.

In reply, MI Emirates stumbled in the powerplay and



lost momentum in the middle overs, but Pollard's 26 off 15 balls flipped the contest decisively.

Even after his dismissal, Shakib held firm to see the chase through, striking the winning boundary to complete a controlled four-wicket win with 15 balls to spare.

In the first innings, the

Vipers made a subdued start in the powerplay, as Chris Woakes was excellent up front, conceding just 15 runs from his three overs.

MI Emirates tightened their grip through the middle overs as Shakib struck twice in a miserly spell to remove Zaman and Sam Curran (4 off 4), conceding just eight runs in two overs.