



# the pioneer

Established 1865

**InSIDE**

**MONEY 10**  
INDIA TARGETING 20 PER CENT ETHANOL BLENDING IN PETROL, SAYS HARDEEP PURI

BHUBANESWAR, THURSDAY FEBRUARY 27, 2025; PAGES 12 ₹4

www.dailypioneer.com

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

## ONCE IN A MYRIAD YEARS



**66.21 CRORE KUMBH DIPS**  
DEVOTEES TAKE A HOLY DIP AT SANGAM ON THE OCCASION OF MAHA SHIVRATRI DURING THE MAHA KUMBH MELA 2025 IN PRAYAGRAJ  
Story on page 5



MLAs Sanjay Saraogi, Jibesh Kumar, Sunil Kumar, Raju Kumar Singh, Krishna Kumar Mantu, Vijay Kumar Mandal and Moti Lal Prasad during their swearing-in ceremony as Cabinet Ministers, in Patna

## BJP seeks its pound of flesh in Bihar

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

A day after Prime Minister Narendra Modi sounded the poll bugle in Bihar, the BJP got a huge pounce in the Nitish Kumar led NDA government as the latter inducted seven new faces into his council of ministers incidentally all from alliance partner BJP.

The expansion, which could be the last before the Assembly elections for this year-end are announced, raises the total number of ministers to 36, the maximum permissible in the state with a 243-strong Assembly. A careful calculation of the BJP's support base seems to have been at work in the Cabinet expansion that took place a day after the party's national president chaired a meeting of the "core group" and before that PM visited Bihar for a rally and announcement of some reforms and projects.

Governor Arif Mohammad Khan administered the oath of office to the new ministers who all are members of the assembly. The state also has a legislative council.

The development took place

on a day the state BJP president Dilip Jaiswal, the former minister for revenue and landforms, gave up his Cabinet berth citing the party's policy of "one person, one post". The new ministers include Jibesh Kumar, who was a member of the state Cabinet till August 2022, when the chief minister abruptly quit the NDA, accusing the BJP of trying to "break" his JD(U).

Jibesh Kumar, who returns to the state cabinet with just two days left for the commencement of the Budget Session in the Bihar Assembly, told reporters, "I am ready to discharge the responsibility to the best of my ability".

Other inductees are Sanjay Saraogi, a fifth-term MLA from Darbhanga, and Sunil Kumar, who represents Bihar Sharif, in the CM's pocket borough Nalanda, for as many times, thrice on a JD(U) ticket before crossing over to the BJP in 2015. "I look forward to discharging the new responsibility. Earlier, I used to pose questions to the government. Now, I shall be expected to reply to queries from fellow members," said

Saraogi.

Another former JD(U) face was Raju Kumar Singh, the MLA from Sahebganj in Muzaffarpur, who had won the seat in 2020 on a ticket of Vikassheel Insaan Party (VIP), floated by former Bollywood set designer Mukesh Sahni. The VIP had won altogether three seats but all the MLAs joined BJP two years ago after Sahni burnt his bridges with the saffron party, losing his cabinet berth in the bargain.

Another notable face was Krishna Kumar Mantu, the MLA from Anourn in Saran district, who was recently in the news for organising a "Kurmi Chetna Rally" in Patna, with a view to reaching out to the powerful OBC community to which the JD(U) supreme belongs. The remaining two inductees were Vijay Kumar Mandal, who represents Sikti in Araria district and Moti Lal Prasad, the MLA from Riga in Sitamarhi.

Besides, with the exception of Sunil Kumar, all hail from the region north of the Ganges, where the NDA has been performing better than the rival RJD, Congress and Left combine.

## Centre replies to SC on convicted MPs

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI**

The Centre has opposed in the Supreme Court (SC) a plea seeking life ban on convicted politicians, saying imposing such a disqualification was solely within the domain of the Parliament. In an affidavit, the Centre said the prayer in a plea, seeking the same, amounted to re-writing of the statute or directing the Parliament to frame a law in a particular manner which was wholly beyond the powers of judicial review.

"The question whether a life-time ban would be appropriate or not is a question that is solely within the domain of the Parliament," the

affidavit said. By confining the operation of penalty to an appropriate length of time, deterrence was ensured while undue harshness was avoided, it added.

There was, said the Centre, nothing inherently unconstitutional in limiting the effect of penalties by time and it was a settled principle of law that penalties were limited either by time or by quantum.

"It is submitted that issues raised by the petitioner have wide ranging ramifications and clearly fall within the legislative policy of the Parliament and the contours of judicial review would be suitably altered in such regard," the affidavit



said.

The plea in the top court filed by advocate Ashwini Kumar Upadhyay seeks a life ban on convicted politicians.

In its affidavit, the Centre underlined the apex court had consistently held that the legislative choice over one option or the other couldn't be questioned in courts over its efficacy or otherwise.

Under Section 8 (1) of the Representation of the People Act, 1951, the period of disqualification was six years from the date of conviction or in case of imprisonment, six years from the date of release, it added.



Union Home Minister Amit Shah, Union Minister of State L. Murugan, Tamil Nadu BJP President K Annamalai and others during the inauguration of a BJP office, in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu

## Amit Shah challenges MK Stalin

**KUMAR CHELLAPAN ■ CHENNAI**

The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK)-led Tamil Nadu Government has become anti-national and an embodiment of corruption thanks to Chief Minister (CM) MK Stalin and his son Udhayanidhi Stalin, the deputy CM of the state, according to Amit Shah, the Union Minister for Home Affairs.

The Home Minister made the revelation in Coimbatore on Wednesday, speaking to reporters. Shah was in Coimbatore to attend the night-long Mahashivratri pooja held by Sadhguru at the Isha Yoga Center in the outskirts of the city.

Shah's statement was in response to Stalin's declaration on Tuesday that the DMK was ready for a language war against the Centre. Stalin has been alleging that the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) was trying to impose Hindi on non-Hindi speaking states under the New Education Policy 2020.

While stoutly denying Stalin's allegations, Amit Shah said that the NDA government has done a lot to promote and popularise Hindi. "Stalin and his son have institutionalised corruption. Charges of corruption are galore under the DMK ruling dispensation," said the home minister. He described the anti-Hindi campaign launched by

Stalin was an attempt to cover up the allegations of corruption and favoritism against Stalin and his family.

Shah also scoffed at Stalin for making unsubstantiated claims that the Centre was trying to bring down the number of Lok Sabha seats in Tamil Nadu. "There is no such plan and the common man knows it well that it would not be easy to do so," he said. Shah also declared that the corruption ridden Tamil Nadu state government led by Stalin would be thrown out in the 2026 Assembly election and the NDA would form the next government in Tamil Nadu to lead the state to the path of development.

## Kedarnath temple to open on May 2

**PTI ■ RUDRAPRAYAG**

The doors of the Kedarnath temple in the Garhwal Himalayas will be reopened for devotees on May 2, after remaining closed for about six months during the winter season.

The gates will open at 7 am on May 2, as announced by Vijay Prasad Thapliyal, the Chief Executive Officer of the Shri Badrinath-Kedarnath Temple Committee, on Wednesday.

With the announcement of the opening of Kedarnath temple, the dates for the opening of all four sacred sites in the Garhwal Himalayas have now been fixed.

Badrinath Dham will open on May 4, while Gangotri and Yamunotri Dhams will open on April 30, on Akshaya Tritiya. These four sites together form the Chota Char Dham, a small pilgrimage circuit.

The auspicious hour and date for the opening of the Kedarnath temple were decided by religious gurus and Vedpathis on the occasion of Mahashivratri, after offering prayers at the Omkareshwar temple in Ukhimath, the winter abode of Baba Kedar, he said.

Apart from the chief priest of Kedarnath temple Rawal Bhimshankar Ling, Kedarnath MLA Asha Nautiyal, temple committee officials, religious functionaries and hundreds of devotees were also present at the Omkareshwar temple which was decorated with flowers for the occasion.

## In Bhadrak Jilted lover held for slitting GF's throat

**Tried to evade arrest by consuming poison**  
**PNS ■ BHADRAK / BALESWAR**

A murder suspect, Biswaranjan Puhan consumed poison at Chudamani village under Basudevpur block in Bhadrak after spotting approaching police team, fearing arrest for his alleged involvement in a gruesome crime.

Puhan had been evading police since allegedly killing his girlfriend by slitting her throat at Lingapada village under Soro block in Baleswar district. The deceased was identified as Jyotirmayee Rana (25).

In response, police formed as many as four teams to track down the suspect, focusing their search efforts across various locations.

Inputs led police to a forest area near Talasahi in Basudevpur. In the morning, as officers closed in, the suspect took the drastic measure of consuming poison.

However, police shifted him to



a hospital in Basudevpur before transferring him to the District Headquarters Hospital. Later, he was arrested after his condition became stable.

Notably, the accused allegedly slit Jyotirmayee's throat when she refused to accept his marriage proposal.

Biswaranjan came in contact with Jyotirmayee while they were studying at the Upendra Nath College in Soro and later moved to Bengaluru for work. While Jyotirmayee was employed as a

supervisor in a security company, Biswaranjan worked as a food delivery agent.

Later, Jyotirmayee returned to Odisha and took up a private job while Biswaranjan quit his job and moved back to his village. Two months ago, she returned to her native place. Their relationship broke up due to Biswaranjan's liquor addiction. From then, Biswaranjan was allegedly harassing her and the deceased's family had lodged a case regarding this at the Soro police station.



Mahadeep is placed atop the Lingaraj Temple in Bhubaneswar on Mahashivaratri on Wednesday. Thousands of devotees witnessed the annual divine spectacle.

## BJP leaders deliberate on State leadership change

**NALINI SAHU ■ BHUBANESWAR**

The Odisha unit of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is gearing up for a major leadership transition, with discussions intensifying over the appointment of a new State president and other key office-bearers. A strategic meeting in this regard took place on Wednesday at the residence of Deputy Chief Minister Kanak Vardhan Singh Deo here.

Present at the gathering were Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi, current BJP State president Manmohan Samal, State in-charge Vijay

Pal Singh Tomar and BJP national general secretary Tarun Chugh, among others.

According to sources, the primary agenda was to build a consensus on leadership roles within State-run corporations, commissions and boards. These decisions are seen as crucial to fortifying the party's organisational base in preparation for upcoming electoral challenges.

Tarun Chugh told the media, "Odisha BJP will soon have a newly-appointed president. As part of the ongoing electoral process across the country, a new leadership

structure will emerge in Odisha."

Chugh said, "We do not operate only during elections but remain active throughout the year, working for the welfare of the people and the nation. Our cadre-based approach fosters long-term commitment and mission-oriented work."

Manmohan Samal is among the frontrunners likely to retain his position. However, other strong contenders include former State president Samir Mohanty, former Union minister Bishweswar Tudu and senior leader Golak

Mohapatra.

Party insiders believe that the leadership decision is crucial for maintaining internal unity and boosting electoral readiness. The outcome is expected to shape the BJP's strategy in Odisha, where it faces stiff competition from the Naveen Patnaik-led Biju Janata Dal and the Indian National Congress.

In addition to appointing a new State president, the BJP is also considering key placements in State-run corporations and boards to strengthen its influence within administrative circles.



# MORTH norms flouted on SMA use in BBSR roads

Huge scam, contractor-official nexus alleged

**SAROJ MISHRA**  
BHUBANESWAR

The Odisha Works Department's decision to lay stone mastic asphalt (SMA) on roads in at least ten locations across the capital city Bhubaneswar has sparked a huge row.

Road engineering experts and citizens alike are questioning the necessity of using this high costly material, suspecting a scam in the project execution.

The Works Department, it seems, has deliberately overlooked the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MORTH) guidelines and wrote letters to the Chief Secretaries, Engineer of Chiefs and Chief Engineers (Roads) of Public Works Department of various States regarding



stone mastic asphalt use

The MORTH in its guidelines stated that stone matrix asphalt (SMA) should be used only in areas where frequent road renewal is not possible due to high congestion or lack of diversion routes. Additionally, MORTH had advised that bitumen mastic is an expensive material and should not be used as a routine practice.

Despite these clear instruc-

tions, the Odisha Works Department has opted for SMA in Bhubaneswar, where traffic is primarily composed of cars and four-wheelers, and most road maintenance is carried out at night, ensuring minimal congestion. Experts argue that the choice of SMA in such areas raises serious doubts about the department's intent.

Road engineering experts point out that a regular bitumen road lasts around five

years while mastic asphalt roads last six years. The marginal one-year increase in durability does not justify the significantly higher costs. SMA is typically used on National Highways (NHs) and bridges, where heavy vehicles, like trucks, frequently travel and cause high wear and tear. The decision to use this high-cost material in Bhubaneswar's city roads appears unjustified and

wasteful, they said.

They have expressed doubts over the contractor's qualification to execute such works.

Sources reveal that the agency responsible for the SMA work has no prior experience in NH construction. Additionally, the technical qualifications of the contractor were reportedly not evaluated before awarding the project.

A road engineering expert further stated that SMA is mainly used on highways, bridges, and intersections where sudden braking and heavy loads require superior shock absorption. Its use in urban roads, without assessing traffic patterns, waterlogging issues, and future maintenance challenges, indicates serious procedural lapses in project planning.

He questioned who will be accountable for road damage due to the frequent road dig-

ging by agencies like the TPCODL, BSCL, BSNL, and WATCO for utility services, which raises another concern. If these newly laid high-cost SMA roads are damaged, who will bear the responsibility? Will Works Department officials, including the Secretary, EIC, and Chief Engineer, be held accountable, he questioned.

The violations of MORTH guidelines, selection of an expensive technology and awarding of the contract to an inexperienced agency point towards corruption. Experts believe there is a nexus between department officials and contractors, with kickbacks suspected in the deal.

To ensure transparency, experts demanded a thorough Vigilance probe to investigate the financial irregularities and identify those responsible for the questionable project execution.

## Rs 10 cr for Akhandalamani Temple



### Announces Dy CM Parida

**PNS** ■ BHADRAK

The State Government has allocated Rs 10 crore for the development of the Baba Akhandalamani Temple at Aradi in Bhadrak district.

The announcement was made by Deputy Chief Minister Pravatī Parida on the auspicious occasion of Mahashivratri on Wednesday after having a darshan of Baba Akhandalamani along with Higher Education and Culture Minister Suryabanshi Suraj.

She informed that the funds would be spent for the

completion of the Parikrama project in the shrine. More funds would be allocated if needed. The move is expected to increase the attraction of the Baba Akhandalamani shrine as a centre of spiritual reverence within the region.

In Aradi Dham, a distinctive two-day Mahashivratri festival is underway at the shrine of Baba Akhandalamani. Devotees have been thronging the temple in large numbers to have the darshan of Baba Akhandalamani and offer their prayers. The devotees gathered around the temple, lighted lamps and prayed for the welfare of their families and loved ones.

## In Cuttack dist

# UTP dies; kin allege custodial death



### Road blockade held demanding probe

**PNS** ■ CUTTACK

Family members of an under-trial prisoner (UTP) staged a road blockade at Khuntuni area in Cuttack dis-

trict on Wednesday alleging foul-play following the death of Mohammed Tayab, an inmate awaiting trial at the Adarsh Jail.

As per reports, trouble began on Tuesday night when Tayab, who had been held in custody for an ongoing legal matter, complained of feeling unwell. Subsequently, prison

authorities rushed him to the Athagarh Hospital. However, upon arrival, doctors declared him dead. In response, Tayab's family from Pankala village, along with their supporters, staged the road blockade along Khuntuni-Narsinghpur route alleging that he was tortured in custody. They have also demanded a thorough investigation into the conditions surrounding his untimely death.

Upon being informed, the Tigiria police reached the spot and tried to pacify the agitators. The family continued to insist on transparency and justice, urging a thorough inquiry into Tayab's death.

## In Boudh

# 24 ganja peddlers held during anti-Maoist op



**PNS** ■ BOUDH

A joint team led by Boudh police while carrying out an anti-Maoist search operation apprehended 24 individuals suspected of involvement in a large-scale ganja smuggling network.

Working alongside the Border Security Force (BSF), District Voluntary Force (DVF) and Kantamal police, the team nabbed the persons from Matakupa forest on the border between Kandhamal and Boudh districts.

During the operation, the

team seized over six quintals of ganja in addition to seven mobile phones and five torches from the accused.

Headed by the Boudh SP and other senior police officials, the search operation was launched after intelligence reports suggested Maoist movements.

The Boudh Sub-Divisional Police Officer (SDPO) and the Kantamal Inspector-in-Charge (IIC) spearheaded the search mission.

Further interrogations revealed that the arrested individuals were primarily

labourers, recruited by an organised crime syndicate to facilitate the transportation of ganja to designated distribution points. One apprehended suspect is a minor.

The adult suspects will be soon produced before court while investigation is continuing to identify the mastermind of this sophisticated smuggling network.

Police sources indicate ongoing efforts to dismantle the smuggling operation and capture its leading figures, seeking to reduce Maoist funding channels tied to illegal narcotics.

# OUTR's Research Conclave tomorrow

**PNS** ■ BHUBANESWAR

The Odisha University of Technology and Research (OUTR) is set to host Research Conclave 2025 on February 28 under the chairmanship of its Vice-Chancellor Prof Bibhuti Bhusan Biswal.

This event marks a significant step in fostering intellectual synergy and interdisciplinary collaboration by bringing together renowned researchers, scholars and students on a common platform.

The programme, which will have the presence of Director, IMMT, Dr Ramanuj Narayan, is envisioned as a catalyst for innovation. The conclave seeks to bridge the gap between academic research and real-world application, encouraging the pursuit of practical, sustainable solutions to contemporary challenges.

For the conclave, a rigorous selection process led to the short-listing of 120 outstanding research papers, reflecting cutting-edge ideas, technologi-

cal breakthroughs and transformative approaches aimed at advancing energy efficiency and sustainable progress from students in the fields of basic science, engineering, technology and management. As the first initiative of its kind at OUTR, the conclave envisions to cultivate a culture of scientific exploration and collaborative problem-solving, reinforcing the transformative power of research in shaping a technologically advanced and resilient future.

## HITTING THE BULL'S EYE

# Expanding heritage city Puri is an insane proposition

The Naveen Patnaik administration has evidently focused immeasurable attention on the age-old temple town of Puri. King Anangabhima Deva, who managed his vast kingdom sitting at his fort in Cuttack in the twelfth century, chose the present-day location called Puri for setting up a Vishnu temple of the unique kind. The place on the sea had absolutely no habitation until the majestic temple came up. The exact location was identified as a divine one where natural disasters including lightning strikes would not occur, as it had great cosmic advantages. After the deities were installed in temple with utmost devotion, it is understood that the king organised to pick purest-breed Brahmin priests from Ujjain and Kanauj regions of Madhya and Uttar Pradesh. Later, the monarch brought in other service-providing communities picked from around Odisha, then called Utkal. The temple town gained fame and importance over the centuries only for the unique deities. But the human



**BISWARAJ PATNAIK**

settlement remained small until the end of the nineteenth century. Only after the British trounced the last Gajapati King and forced him to serve permanently in Puri as the temple superintendent, did a sizeable number of people migrate to Puri to live there as residents.

The 'temple town on sea' remained small and beautiful until the 1980s when the Congress regime took over with Janaki Ballav Patnaik as Chief Minister. Around this time, holy sage Prabhupada

preached the 'Sanatana' dharma through his ISKCON movement which became very popular across the globe, particularly among Christians from developed countries, who were excitedly converting to Hinduism. A population boom also happened for the serene coastline that attracted growing number of tourists. By the turn of the century, Puri had become just desirably big which could be managed fairly well by the local administration and civic authorities. And the little breezy town still remained unspoilt. However, after the mining boom happened at the turn of the century, even street-level business entrepreneurs who had grabbed opportunities to make fortunes began buying land at all locations, particularly in Puri. The BJD biggies posing to be great Jagannatha devotees poured in resources to make the town world-class. Naveen got Puri drastically transformed to make it the face of Odisha. Lately, just before the big unexpected fall, Naveen had planned a new Puri contiguous to

the existing stretch, which could not see the light of day, which was a blessing.

Now the BJP government is taking on from where the BJD left. They are planning the Puri project to most certainly cause huge disaster.

No doubt, by modern standards, urbanisation is one of the symptoms of development as it is closely linked with modernisation and bigger livelihood opportunities. On the other hand, it can also attract a number of adverse social, material and environmental issues likely to cause immense adverse impacts on the lives of the residents. When cities, large or small, are expanded insanely only to accommodate people and concrete structures, very large stretches of ancient green cover that constitute the breathing lungs for the zone, get scraped permanently. Consequently, oxygen drops in quantity and temperatures soar even in non-summer seasons. Concrete housing schemes gulp up land

while malls and other civic centres come up matching without ever being able to replenish adequate green cover. Besides, poorly-planned urbanisation can lead to congestion, higher crime rates, air and water pollution, increased levels of inequality and social exclusion that eventually make lives of residents miserable. Further, multiple inequality issues within the city limits give rise to grave economic, spatial and social dimensions. Poor air and water quality, insufficient water availability, waste disposal problems and high energy consumption get exacerbated by the increasing population density and demands of urban environments.

Incidentally, the UN Habitat organisation has made it clear that the current rapid urbanisation, especially in cities of the developing world, is bringing about many challenges in the spatial distribution of people and resources as well as in the use and consumption of land. In some regions, urban land has grown much faster than usual,

resulting in more inefficient land use patterns. Most of the horizontally-sprawling cities find it gradually harder to deal with an ever increasing urban population, and they are not sustainable over the long term owing to overwhelming negative externalities such as congestion, infrastructure issues, pollution and social disaggregation.

In 1950, only 30 per cent of the world population lived in urban areas, and by 2014, nearly 54 per cent have begun living in urban areas. Going by the current trend, by 2050, about 68 per cent of the world population will be urban, implying that the world can face much more complicated challenges in accordance with the rapid changes in urban setting and demands of the urban population.

Mindlessly whimsical urbanisation may also result in adverse effects such as overpopulation and growth of slums, costs of living, increase in crime rates, problems of land, air and water pollution, incurable social strife and stress.

**PNS** ■ BHUBANESWAR

The XIM University hosted its 5th Undergraduate Scholarship Awarding Ceremony for students on Tuesday. The university's undergraduate degree programme offers a globally aligned curriculum,

featuring a wide variety of courses that provide a strong foundation for students to pursue their career goals.

The XIM University has established the scholarship programme to support outstanding students with their studies.

This year, the university awarded scholarships to 108 students from 12 undergraduate programmes. The total value of the scholarships is 1.30 crore rupees.

Chief guest for the occasion Yeshwant Kumar Jethwa, Director of Vigilance, Odisha, emphasised the importance of

goal setting, focus, overcoming fear of failure and surrounding oneself with like-minded people. He also stressed the significance of good character, integrity, empathy and kindness in achieving success.

University Vice-Chancellor Father Antony R Uvari said the scholarship initiative aims to encourage students from all backgrounds, including meritorious, SC, ST, and EWS students, to strive for excellence. The students should continue setting targets, preparing a roadmap and working tirelessly towards their goals.

The ceremony concluded with a vote of thanks by Father S Antony Raj, SJ, who expressed gratitude for the collective efforts and dedication of the university in fostering a supportive learning environment and ensuring equitable educational opportunities.

## XIM Univ awards scholarship to 108 students



The XIM University hosted its 5th Undergraduate Scholarship Awarding Ceremony for students on Tuesday. The university's undergraduate degree programme offers a globally aligned curriculum, featuring a wide variety of courses that provide a strong foundation for students to pursue their career goals. The XIM University has established the scholarship programme to support outstanding students with their studies. This year, the university awarded scholarships to 108 students from 12 undergraduate programmes. The total value of the scholarships is 1.30 crore rupees. Chief guest for the occasion Yeshwant Kumar Jethwa, Director of Vigilance, Odisha, emphasised the importance of goal setting, focus, overcoming fear of failure and surrounding oneself with like-minded people. He also stressed the significance of good character, integrity, empathy and kindness in achieving success. University Vice-Chancellor Father Antony R Uvari said the scholarship initiative aims to encourage students from all backgrounds, including meritorious, SC, ST, and EWS students, to strive for excellence. The students should continue setting targets, preparing a roadmap and working tirelessly towards their goals. The ceremony concluded with a vote of thanks by Father S Antony Raj, SJ, who expressed gratitude for the collective efforts and dedication of the university in fostering a supportive learning environment and ensuring equitable educational opportunities.



# Bridge work incomplete in Jajpur dist for years

Ten panchayats remain disconnected

AKSHAY ROUT ■ JAJPUR

Construction delays in Jajpur district are leaving rural communities disconnected and incomplete bridge projects stand as symbols of administrative neglect.

As an instance, the bridge at Rasulpur block remains unfinished nine years after construction began, affecting as many as ten panchayats in the area. This bridge over the Brahmani river near Brahmabarada was initiated



in 2016 with an allocated budget of Rs 10.42 crore. Though a target was set for its completion by 2018, it is yet to be achieved.

Despite resolving land acquisition issues, construction on this vital infrastructure is stalled. As a result, residents are forced to cross the river

using temporary roads or boats, especially vulnerable during the monsoon when these journeys can become perilous. The residents of ten panchayats in Rasulpur block face daily hardships. Simple tasks like attending school or accessing markets and banks become significant challenges

due to the lack of a permanent bridge. Past incidents of boat capsizes have added to their concerns; yet, pleas for assistance remain largely ignored.

"We are facing lots of problems due to the absence of a bridge. We request the administration to complete the work soon," said Nakula Nayak, a local resident.

Residents are demanding action and accountability to ensure the improvement of road communication in their daily lives.

"Necessary measures will be taken and the bridge work will be expedited soon," said an official.

# In Bhadrak 3 hurt as trucks collide, fall off bridge

PNS ■ BHADRAK

At least three persons sustained serious injuries after two trucks fell off a bridge on the National Highway 16, close to Gelpur Square in Bhadrak district on Wednesday.

According to sources, the driver of both the vehicles and a helper were critically injured in the tragic accident. They have been admitted to the District Headquarters Hospital.

As per reports, the accident occurred when a truck moving at high speed collided with a stationary container truck. According to locals, the sta-



tionary container was heavily loaded with electrical equipment and a huge DJ set, covering a significant portion of the bridge.

The approaching sand-laden truck crashed into the immobile container, leading to the fall of both vehicles from the bridge.

Residents have expressed concern over the safety of the highway, particularly with stationary vehicles posing hazards on the busy road.

# In Jeypore Passengers stranded as flight abruptly cancelled

PNS ■ JEYPORE

Passengers were left stranded at the Jeypore Airport in Koraput district on Tuesday following an abrupt cancellation of their flight from Jeypore to Visakhapatnam.

As a result, the passengers had to wait for more than six hours at the airport allegedly with no assistance from the airline, India One Air.

The flight cancellation was due to unspecified technical issues. The flight was initially set to depart at 11:50 am.

Despite checking in, as many as nine passengers allegedly faced the inconvenience without any further updates or support from the airline.



Meanwhile, adding to the complexity of the situation, there are concerns regarding the aircraft's subsequent use. It has been alleged that the same plane, instead of heading to Visakhapatnam, was redirected to Bhubaneswar with another set of nine passengers.

Neither the airport officials

nor the airline has allegedly issued any statement addressing the grievances or outlining remedial measures for the incident. Meanwhile, the passengers have expressed dissatisfaction over communication gaps and the absence of immediate resolutions, emphasising a need for more effective customer service in such scenarios.

# In Jagatsinghpur IIC axed for duping woman cop on marriage pretext

PNS ■ JAGATSINGHPUR

Tapan Nahak, former Inspector-in-Charge (IIC) of Kujang police station, on Wednesday was placed under suspension following allegations of misconduct and abuse of official position.

Nahak was in the news for allegedly maintaining a physical relationship with a woman Home Guard under the pretext of marriage.

As per the official order, Nahak has been placed under suspension with immediate effect in the interest of public service and to ensure fairness inquiry.

It was alleged that during his tenure as the Additional Inspector-in-Charge at



Jagatsinghpur police station, Nahak allegedly pursued a romantic relationship with the Home Guard under the pretext of marriage. Nahak subsequently was transferred as IIC of Kujang police station.

Despite promises of com-

mitment, he is accused of failing to follow through on these assurances, leading to the victim filing a complaint at the Sadar police station.

Nahak is reported to be absconding after the complaint was lodged.

# Maoist health camp found on Odisha borders

Sophisticated medical equipments found

PNS ■ MALKANGIRI

The security forces have discovered a Maoist-operated health camp within the dense forests of Chintalnar, located on the Odisha-Chhattisgarh border, during an operation conducted by the Central Reserve Police Force's (CRPF) CoBRA battalion.

The police seized sophisticated medical equipments including an automated eye-testing device, hot water bags, alongside a generous supply of pharmaceuticals. The utilisation of such advanced medical devices typically re-

quires skilled technicians.

Under such circumstances, the question remains whether there are some trained professionals among the Maoists or the rebels sought the help of any doctor and other paramedical staffs to conduct the health camp in the area.

It has been reported that Maoists were extending their health services to local villagers. The unexpected presence of state-of-the-art equipment indicates the involvement of trained professionals within these groups. Police are investigating whether any government technician or staff has supplied these devices or has any possible links with the Maoists is now subject to further investigation by the concerned agencies.

# Western Odisha to get 4 new airstrips

Total number of airports to rise to 8

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

The State Government will set up four new airstrips in western Odisha, taking the total number of airports in the region to eight. The new airstrips will come up at Jamadarpali (Sambalpur), Satibhata (Bargarh), Gotma (Nuapada) and Tusura (Balangir).

This was informed by Transport Minister Bibhuti Bhushan Jena in the State Assembly while replying to a question from Bolangir MLA Kalikesh Singh Deo recently.

As of now, there are four airports in western Odisha - Jeypore Airport (Koraput), Veer Surendra Sai Airport (Jharsuguda), Rourkela Airport (Sundargarh) and an airstrip at Utkela (Kalahandi). All these four airports operate with direct connectivity to

Bhubaneswar. The Transport Minister also revealed that the government is planning to upgrade the Jeypore Airport from 2B category to 3C at a cost of Rs 64.4 crore. The Tusura airport in Balangir district would also be upgraded to 2B, for which Rs 65 crore has been sanctioned.

The reasons for the delay in taking up these projects are land acquisition and aerodrome licensing, the minister stated.

This apart, four more airports that will be made operational at Raisuan and Barbil in Keonjhar district, Gudari in Kandhamal, Dandabos and Amarda in Mayurbhanj district. These airports will cater to the central, north and west-central regions of Odisha.

Moreover, the State Budget has also made a provision to establish a greenfield airport at Paradip to accelerate industrial growth, export and import.

# In Mayurbhanj 100 students walk 20 km to air grievance to DM



Allege low-quality food is school; corporal punishment

PNS ■ BARIPADA

More than 100 students of the Basipitha School in Khunta block of Mayurbhanj district undertook a 20-kilometre journey on foot to air their grievances directly to

the district Collector on Tuesday.

The students, primarily from Class-VII and Class-IX, expressed dissatisfaction over the inadequate food provisions in their hostel and corporal punishment by the headmaster.

The students left the hostel campus at around 12 am and reached the office of

Mayurbhanj Collector at

around 6 am. Surprisingly, the school authorities and the headmaster had no information about the development.

As Collector Hema Kanta Say was busy, the district Sub-Collector listened to the grievances of the students via a video call and promised a thorough investigation into the hostel's conditions.

"We are provided stale, undercooked and lower-quality

food at our school. Whenever we complain, we get a little bit of quality food for a couple of days. But lower-quality of food is served again after some days," rued the students.

However, the headmaster said Rs 30 is provided by the government for each student to provide them food on a daily basis. The amount is not enough to provide them quality food.

# Youth climbs atop electric tower



Rescue efforts ongoing

PNS ■ BALANGIR

A youth on Wednesday climbed atop an electric tower in a village of Balangir due to unknown reasons. This created concern among the locals.

The youth Siddheswar Bhoi is a resident of Kharmar Munda under the Puntala police station. After Bhoi undertook the perilous climb, soon police and Fire Service personnel rushed to the spot after getting information.

Their primary challenge was to ascertain the youth's motive, which so far was a

mystery to the authorities. Some locals claimed that it is not for the first time that Bhoi climbed atop an electric tower; he indulged in similar acts in the past as well.

It is said that Bhoi is mentally unstable and is under treatment.

"My son told me that he was going for a bath when he left home at around 8 am today. Later, I came to know that he has climbed atop the electric tower. We had consulted a doctor as my son is having some mental disorder," said Bhoi's father. Latest reports said efforts were on to persuade to get down from the tower.

# Live streaming of PM-KISAN scheme held



By ICAR-CIFA

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Krishna Vigyan Kendra, Khordha in collaboration with ICAR-Central Institute of Freshwater Aquaculture, Bhubaneswar and Directorate of Agriculture and Food Production, Department of Agriculture and Farmers Empowerment, Govt of Odisha jointly organised live-streaming of PM-KISAN Samman Nidhi programme on Monday at the Kausalyaganga Campus.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi released the 19th instalment of the PM-KISAN scheme at Bhagalpur, Bihar in

which more than 9.8 crore farmers received the benefits amounting Rs 22,000 crore. Dr PK Sahoo, Director, ICAR-Central Institute of Freshwater

Aquaculture, Bhubaneswar, was the chief guest and he briefed about the PM-KISAN Scheme to the farmers and farmwomen present on the event. He emphasised the significance of the installment, in supporting small and marginal farmers, encouraging them to utilise the funds effectively to enhance agricultural production. PC Beura, ADM, Khordha, stressed upon the role of agriculture towards the food security of the country.

RN Senapati, Chief District Agricultural Officer, Khordha, mentioned about the beneficial schemes operated by Central and State Governments for the farming community. N Mund, District Fisheries Officer, highlighted the role of fisheries and aquaculture in increasing and diversifying farm income.

Earlier Dr Harapriya Nayak, Senior Scientist & Head, KVK-Khordha, ICAR-CIFA, welcome the guests. Five Progressive farmers/farmwomen were felicitated for their significant contributions in agriculture and allied sector. An exhibition was organised.

# Bargarh Dhanu Yatra New Ranga Mahal construction soon

PNS ■ BARGARH

All is set for construction of a new Ranga Mahal in Bargarh for the town's famous Dhanu Yatra festival with an estimated cost of Rs 12.79 crore.

The project has already received government approval and the land identification process has begun. As per initial plans, the new Ranga Mahal is likely to be built behind Nishamani School in the government bus-stand area. In this connection, Bargarh Collector Aditya Goyal and Public Works Department Executive Engineer Arun Pandey have inspected the proposed land.

According to officials, approximately 60 decimals of land is required for the project. Since the construction relates to the Tourism Department, the final location was yet to be decided, said the Executive Engineer. However, the Collector said the Ranga Mahal construction would start soon.

# Vasectomy of M'giri youth: NHRC seeks report

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) on February 19 directed to the Principal Secretary, Department of Health and Family Welfare, Government of Odisha, to submit updated report in respect of Non Surgical Vasectomy (NSV) of a victim, within six weeks.

While adjudging the case to a petition filed by lawyer and rights activist, Radhakanta Tripathy, the NHRC passed the order after receiving reports from the State Government.

Tripathy officials of the health officials of Mathili Sub-Divisional Hospital, Malkangiri had performed vasectomy on one Divyang (dumb) unmarried youth Ganga Durua of Kosarabata

village on 3.8.2023 for the sake of highlighting increased cases of vasectomies in the area. It is stated that the operation was carried out on the basis of the ASHA worker's report but without taking any consent of the victim, Tripathy stated.

Hence, Tripathy filed a petition seeking intervention of the Commission in the matter for impartial investigation of the case and compensation to the victim.

Pursuant to the directions of the Commission, a report dated 4.10.2023 of the Additional Director (MH and FW) was submitted by the Special Secretary (MS) Health and Family Welfare Department, Government of Odisha vide letter dated 9.11.2023. It was reported that the compensation of Rs 2,000 was paid to the beneficiary through the ASHA

worker namely Rekha Mandal as the victim did not have a bank account. But it was found to be against the procedure of Direct Beneficiary Transfer and the amount disbursed to ASHA had to be recovered and to be paid directly in the bank account of the actual beneficiary, the report said.

It further said that the operating surgeon has been issued show-cause notice by the CDM and PHO, Malkangiri regarding lapse in determining eligibility and conducting of surgery without proper screening of client.

Subsequently, the Commission recommended to the Chief Secretary, Government of Odisha, to make payment of Rs 1 lakh to the victim as compensation and submit compliance report.

Later, the Commission re-

ceived a copy of communication dated 02.09.2024 from the District Magistrate, Malkangiri showing that compensation amount of Rs 1 lakh has been paid to the victim on 21.06.2024.

"After intervention of the Commission, it was further stated that Department of Health and Family Welfare was taking necessary steps for recanalization of non surgical vasectomy (NSV) in case of victim after obtaining voluntary consent from the victim and by following due procedure. However, there has been no updated report in this regard. Therefore, let direction be issued to the Principal Secretary, Health and Family Welfare to submit updated report in respect of NSV of victim, within six weeks," the Commission in its report stated.



# CBI names Abhishek Banerjee in job scam chargesheet

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■**  
NEW DELHI

The political circuit in West Bengal remained abuzz on Wednesday after it came to light that the CBI, in its recently submitted third supplementary chargesheet in the multi-crore cash-for-school job case, referred to an audio file of a recorded conversation from 2017 and named a certain Abhishek Banerjee who demanded ₹15 Crore for the illegal appointments.

The central agency, in the chargesheet, never clarified the identity of this Abhishek Banerjee, although the name bears exact resemblance to the name of Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's nephew and Trinamool Congress national general secretary, against whom the state's political opposition has, in the past, repeatedly alleged involvement in the scam. The TMC MP has already appeared before central probe agencies — the ED and the CBI — multiple times and faced examinations in connection with the alleged recruitment irregularities.

Later in the day, the MP's lawyer Sanjay Basu released a press statement and called the charge sheet submitted before a special CBI court claims "misleading and unsubstantiated" and branded it as "nothing more than a fishing expedition aimed at harassing my



TMC leader Abhishek Banerjee

Pioneer photo

client." The 28-page chargesheet in question, a 'certified to be true' copy of which is in possession of PTI, was filed by the CBI on February 21, indicts Sujay Krishna Bhadra alias 'Kalighater Kaku' (uncle of Kalighat) and two others in connection with irregular appointments of teachers in state-run primary schools made through the selection process of Teachers Eligibility Test (TET), 2014. The CBI identified Bhadra as the Chief Operating Officer of M/S Leaps and Bounds Private Limited. Previously the ED had named TMC leader Abhishek Banerjee as the CEO of the company who had also remained one of its directors for a limited period.

In its chargesheet, the CBI refers to a "meeting held in 2017 at Bhadra's Behala residence" where charge-sheeted accused Kuntal Ghosh, Shantanu Banerjee and two others, Aurobindo Roy Barman and Surajit Chanda, were also present. The agency states that at the insistence of accused Kuntal Ghosh, his staff 'Aurobindo Roy Barman had recorded the conversation on his mobile phone and later transferred the audio file to his laptop which was later recovered during investigation'. While claiming that the purported conversation discussed the modus operandi of collection of bribes from undeserving candidates and getting them illegally appointed by manipulating the result, the

CBI states that the appointments were secured by Ghosh, Banerjee and Bhadra "through accused Partha Chatterjee, the then Education Minister". "There was a rift between Abhishek Banerjee and accused Partha Chatterjee on the issue of illegal appointment and the accused Sujay Krishna Bhadra was heard saying that Abhishek Banerjee had demanded ₹15 Crore for the illegal appointment already done and when Sujay Krishna Bhadra express (sic) his inability to collect more money since the candidates had already paid ₹6.50 Lakhs each, then Abhishek Banerjee told Sujay to stop their appointment else he would get those candidates arrested or get the candidates posted at distant places," the CBI states referring to the recorded conversation on page 15 of the charge sheet. "It was also revealed that Sujay Krishna Bhadra, Santanu Banerjee and Kuntal Ghosh were planning for a collection of a bribe amount from additional 2000 candidates, for their appointment, to the tune of ₹100 Crore for paying off Partha Chatterjee, Abhishek Banerjee and Manik Bhattacharya (co-accused former primary board president and TMC MLA now out on bail) ₹20 Crore each and sharing the remaining amount among

themselves," the agency further stated in its charge sheet. Responding to the chargesheet claims, Banerjee, in his statement, alleged being "unjustly targeted by the agency". "Despite my client's full cooperation with the Enforcement Directorate (ED) and the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) — appearing whenever summoned and providing all necessary documents — the CBI has resorted to baseless allegations. Notably, the ED, responsible for investigating alleged proceeds of crime, has not filed any chargesheet against my client, underscoring the absence of incriminating material against him," the lawyer's statement read. "The alleged third supplementary chargesheet is nothing more than a fishing expedition aimed at harassing my client. The CBI has failed to provide a shred of corroborative evidence, with no supporting documents appended to its claims. This is yet another instance of my client being unjustly targeted," the statement added. Banerjee referred to the "previous failed attempt by the ED" to implicate him and hit back at the "political forces" who have now turned to the CBI for "misusing central agencies to push their agenda".

# India's approach to Africa based on mutually beneficial ties: S Jaishankar

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■**  
NEW DELHI

India's approach towards Africa has been guided by a deep-rooted commitment to build mutually-beneficial partnerships, unlike "extractive" models of engagement, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar said on Wednesday, amid China's relentless attempts to expand influence in the continent.

India and Japan, with their complementary strengths, are well-positioned to support Africa's development in a sustainable and inclusive manner, he said. The external affairs minister was delivering a lecture at the Japan-India-Africa Business Forum.

"India's approach to Africa has always been guided by a deep-rooted commitment to building long-term, mutually-beneficial partnerships," he said. "Unlike extractive models of engagement, India believes in capacity-building, skill development and technology transfer, ensuring that African countries not only benefit from investments but also develop self-sustaining growth ecosystems," he added. India is Africa's fourth-largest trading partner, with bilateral trade reaching nearly USD 100 Billion and growing steadily, Jaishankar noted. India has also made significant



External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar addresses the Japan-India-Africa business forum on Wednesday

PTI

commitment to Africa's connectivity and infrastructure development, with more than USD 12 Billion in concessional credit and over 200 completed projects spread across the continent in areas such as railways, power generation, agriculture, and water supply, he said. Jaishankar said India's development projects sectors such as power plants, transmission lines, cement, sugar and textile factories, technology parks and railway infrastructure generated local employment and changed lives in Africa. India's deep and longstanding engagement with Africa can make it a natural bridge, whether geographically or in the industrial value chain, he argued. "With India set for continued rapid economic growth, it serves as an ideal hub for

Japanese companies seeking to expand into Africa and the Middle East," he said. "Japanese investments, India's solid industrial base and digital capacities and Africa's talent and consumption can come together to create beneficial outcomes for all stakeholders," he added. Jaishankar is of the view that India and Japan can also collaborate to strengthen resilient supply chains for African countries, particularly in critical and emerging sectors. "The growth and prosperity of Africa will not only benefit its people but also contribute to broader global stability and economic progress," he said. "India and Japan, with their complementary strengths, are well-positioned to support Africa's development in a sustainable and inclusive manner," he said.

# CBSE allows schools to set up branches under new rule



Representative photograph of a classroom

Pioneer photo

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■**  
NEW DELHI

The Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) has relaxed affiliation norms for its schools, allowing them to set up branch schools under the same name and affiliation number, according to officials. However, both schools will be required to have separate set of resources in terms of physical and academic infrastructure. There will be a seamless transition of branch schools to the main school and they will not be considered as new admissions according to the rules.

While the main school will be allowed to run classes from 6 to 12, the branch schools can run classes beginning from pre-primary to grade 5. "The management and ownership of both the branches shall be the same and both schools shall share the same administrative and academic practices. There shall be a common website for both the branches and the website shall categorically have a section dedicated to branch school," said CBSE Secretary

Himanshu Gupta. "The admissions for both branches will be managed by the main school besides maintaining the accounts of both schools. There shall be a seamless transition of students from branch school to main school and the students will not be considered as new admissions but will be considered promoted to Class 6 through natural progression," he added. While both schools would be required to keep separate teaching and non-teaching staff, the salaries would be disbursed by the main school only, he said. At present, the CBSE does not permit opening branch schools and each school of the same group requires a different affiliation number. "The board shall communicate with the principal of the main school for all issues, though it is not limited to the same," Gupta said. The norms for minimum physical infrastructure requirements, the safety of students as well as the teacher and pupil ratio will have to be separately followed by both branches, he said.

# Ayush Ministry confers National Dhanwantari Ayurveda Award to three distinguished practitioners

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■**  
NEW DELHI

The Ministry of Ayush conferred the prestigious National Dhanwantari Ayurveda Awards for the current year on three distinguished practitioners for their exceptional contributions to the field of traditional Indian medicine. This year's recipients of the coveted award are Vaidya Tara Chand Sharma, renowned Nadi Vaidya and author, Vaidya Maya Ram Uniyal, a distinguished scholar of Dravyaguna Vigyana with six decades of service; and Vaidya Sameer Govind Jamadagni, founder

of the Vishwa Vyakhyanmala national conference. Each recipient receives a citation, a trophy featuring a statue of Lord Dhanwantari, and a cash prize of ₹5 Lakh. The National Dhanwantari Ayurveda Awards represent India's commitment to advancing holistic healthcare while preserving traditional medical knowledge, an Ayush ministry statement said. Prataprao Jadhav, Union Minister of State for Ayush (IC), conferred the awards upon the three distinguished Vaidyas during an event held in Mumbai on February 20.

"The National Dhanwantari Ayurveda Awards showcase India's immense contribution to global healthcare. These visionaries have demonstrated exceptional dedication in promoting Ayurveda worldwide, perfectly aligning with our mission to integrate traditional wisdom with modern healthcare systems," Jadhav said. Adding his perspective, Ayush Secretary Vaidya Rajesh Kotecha remarked, "Through decades of research and innovation, these practitioners have modernised Ayurveda practices while maintaining

their authentic essence. Their work exemplifies how traditional knowledge can be adapted to address contemporary health challenges." Vaidya Tara Chand Sharma, renowned for his mastery as a Nadi Vaidya, has also distinguished himself as an insightful author. His thought-provoking publications have opened new doors for explorative Ayurveda learning, encouraging a new generation to dive deep into the science of life, the statement said. His career, adorned with numerous accolades, is a testament to his impact on the ever-

evolving landscape of Ayurveda, it stated. Equally inspiring is the journey of Vaidya Maya Ram Uniyal from Uttar Pradesh, a visionary in Dravyaguna Vigyana. With over six decades of unwavering dedication, his prolific writings and stellar administration have inspired many, the statement added. His recognition with the Vanoushadi Vanaspati and Lifetime Achievement Awards further cements his legacy in raising Ayurveda's stature worldwide. His work exemplifies how tradition, when blended with modern insight, can become a global

force for wellness, the statement said. Adding to this is Vaidya Sameer Govind Jamadagni, whose contributions span more than four decades, the statement said. The founder of the Vishwa Vyakhyanmala national conference and Vishwa Ayurveda Prabodhini, he has built platforms that have transformed Ayurveda education. His initiatives have not only advanced innovative practices but have also sparked global dialogues that continue to enrich Ayurveda's relevance in contemporary healthcare, the statement said.

# GainBitcoin scam: CBI seizes cryptocurrencies worth ₹23.94 Crore

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■**  
NEW DELHI

The CBI has seized cryptocurrencies worth more than ₹23.94 Crore during its two-day countrywide search operation in the GainBitcoin scam case that concluded on Wednesday, officials said. The central probe agency has also seized multiple hardware crypto wallets, 121 documents, 34 laptops and hard disks, 12 mobile phones and multiple email and instant messaging application dumps, they said.

"Following the nationwide searches conducted on February 25 and 26 in connection with the GainBitcoin cases, the Central Bureau of

Investigation (CBI), using in-house capabilities, has seized significant incriminating evidence and virtual digital assets, further unravelling the extent of the cryptocurrency fraud," a spokesperson said in a statement. The agency has sent the electronic devices for forensic analysis to uncover further details regarding the misappropriation of funds and potential international transactions linked to the scam, the officials said. The CBI launched the search operation at 60 locations in Delhi, Pune, Nanded, Kolhapur, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Chandigarh, Mohali/Jhansi, and Hubli on Tuesday as part of its probe into the scam. The

operation concluded on Wednesday. The ponzi scam perpetrated through a web of platforms, including flagship site www.gainbitcoin.com, was allegedly masterminded by Amit Bhardwaj (now deceased) and his brother Ajay Bhardwaj, the officials said. Launched in 2015, the illicit operation was camouflaged under the facade of Variable Tech Pvt. Ltd, they said. The investors were lured by the offer of a 10 per cent monthly return in Bitcoin over 18 months. They were urged them to purchase the digital currency from external exchanges and deposit it with GainBitcoin through "cloud mining" contracts,

the central agency said. "The model followed a multi-level marketing (MLM) structure, commonly associated with pyramid-structured ponzi schemes where payouts are dependent on bringing in new investors," the spokesperson said. In its early days, investors received payouts in Bitcoin, fuelling the illusion of a lucrative venture. However, as the influx of new capital dwindled by 2017, the charade began to crumble. "In an attempt to cover up the losses, GainBitcoin unilaterally switched payouts to their alleged in-house cryptocurrency called MCAIP, which had significantly less value than

Bitcoin, further misleading investors," the statement said. The scale and complexity of the scam resulted in the registration of multiple FIRs across India, from Jammu and Kashmir to Maharashtra and from Delhi to West Bengal. The Supreme Court had handed over the investigation into the case to the CBI due to the expansive nature of the operation and the international ramifications it entailed. The agency has launched a probe to unravel the full extent of the fraudulent activities, identify all implicated parties and trace the misappropriated funds, including those that may have crossed borders.

# Congress backs Kerala ASHA workers protests, seeks fair wages and benefits

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■**  
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

Protests by a section of ASHA workers in Kerala, demanding a hike in honorarium and other benefits, are set to become a political showdown as the Congress announced on Wednesday that it is taking over the agitation against the CPI(M)-led LDF government. A section of accredited social health activist workers has been agitating outside the Kerala Secretariat for the past two weeks, demanding an increased honorarium and other benefits. In a statement, KPCC General Secretary (in charge of organisation) M Liju said that

the Congress will protest by burning the circular issued by the government, which, according to him, "threatens" the agitating ASHA workers to return to work or else be replaced by others. Announcing a series of protests, Liju said that on Thursday, under the leadership of all Mandalam Congress Committees, the circular will be burned in protest in front of all Panchayat offices. Mahila Congress workers will also participate. "On Monday, March 3, protest marches will be held towards the Secretariat in Thiruvananthapuram and the Collectorate in other districts under the leadership of DCCs," he said. The Congress

move came after the CPI(M) alleged anarchic influence in the ASHA workers' protest. The Congress alleged that the LDF government is attempting to remove protesting ASHA workers, who are raising legitimate demands and replace them with CPI(M) sympathisers. Instead of addressing their rightful demands—such as an increase in honorarium, payment of the meagre pending honorarium and incentives, and access to welfare benefits—the government is trying to humiliate and threaten them into ending their protest. "Congress will strongly oppose this move at any cost," Liju said.



# Saints ensured respectable place for women in society, says Murmu

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ BHOPAL

President Droupadi Murmu on Wednesday said saints in India have ensured a respectable place for women in the society and the country is now moving "from women-development to women-led development".

"The contemporary spiritual leaders could play an important role in building a self-reliant, harmonious and environment-friendly India," Murmu said addressing a mass wedding function at Bageshwar Dham in Garha village, at Madhya Pradesh's Chhatrapur district, where 251 couples got married.

"The saint community has played a major role in removing social evils from the society by raising voice against them, and ensured a respectable place for women in the society. Today, as our country moves from women-development to women-led development, we must all contribute to making our daughters and sis-



President Droupadi Murmu with Madhya Pradesh CM Mohan Yadav during a mass marriage ceremony in Chhatrapur, Madhya Pradesh PTI

ters strong and capable," Murmu said.

She urged people to pay attention to women's education, health and safety. "Our small efforts would empower them," the president said and also advised women to make continuous efforts for their education and self-reliance.

"In our tradition, saints have shown the path to the people for centuries. They have raised

their voice against the social evils prevalent in contemporary society. They have also raised their voice against discrimination based on caste, gender, etc," she said.

Be it Guru Nanak, Sant Ravidas, Sant Kabir Das, Meera Bai, or Sant Tukaram, all have inspired people to follow the right path through their teachings, Murmu said. The saints have made people aware of the

superstitions prevalent in society and taught them to shun untouchability and caste-based discrimination, she said.

Praising the Bageshwar Dham for organising the mass wedding function, Murmu said that to make these women self-dependent, sewing machines and other necessary goods are being given to them. "I appeal to all women to continuously strive to educate themselves and become self-reliant. When you succeed, our society and our country will succeed. We have set a goal to celebrate the centenary of our independence in 2047 and make India a developed nation," Murmu said.

Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Mohan Yadav said that the couples, who got married at the mass wedding function, will be provided a financial help of Rs 51,000 each as part of the state government schemes. Governor Mangubhai Patel and Bageshwar Peeth's seer Dharendra Shastri also addressed the function.

# Punjab Government alleges CBSE dropped Punjabi from Class 10 exam

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ CHANDIGARH/NEW DELHI

The Punjab government on Wednesday alleged that the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) had dropped Punjabi from the list of subjects for the Class 10 Board exams in the new draft norms while the Board officials maintained that the list was only indicative and no subjects would be dropped.

The CBSE officials clarified that the draft norms do not mention 13 other languages and reiterated that they would continue to be offered. The 13 other languages are Russian, Nepali, Limboo, Lepcha, Sindhi, Malayalam, Odia, Assamese, Kannada, Kokborok, Telugu, Arabic and Persian, they said.

The CBSE on Tuesday approved draft norms for conducting the Class 10 Board exams twice a year. The draft norms will now be put in the public domain and the stakeholders can submit their feedback by March 9, following

which the policy will be finalised.

Punjab Education Minister Harjot Singh Bains alleged that the new policy was attempting to drop Punjabi from the subjects' list and claimed that his government would not tolerate any attack on the language.

"We strongly object to the CBSE's new exam pattern scheme which attempts to erase Punjabi. Punjabi must be designated as the main language in Punjab and, further, be included as a regional language for the rest of the nation as it is spoken and read across multiple states. Any attack on Punjabi will not be tolerated," Bains said in a video shared on social media.

CBSE Examination Controller Sanyam Bhardwaj, however, said there would be no change in the list of subjects. "There is no change in the list of subjects offered at present. The list in the draft policy is indicative. All subjects offered at present will continue in the Class 10 Board exams in both phases," he said. According to the draft norms,

Class 10 students will be able to take the CBSE Board exam twice in an academic session or choose between the two — one in February and another in May — from 2026 onwards. The first phase will be held from February 17 to March 6 and the second between May 5 and 20. Candidates will also have the option to appear for both phases.

Additionally, students will be allowed to skip specific subjects in the second attempt if they are satisfied with their performance in the first. They can skip particular subjects in the first phase as well. The National Education Policy (NEP) recommended allowing all students to take exams on up to two occasions during any given school year to eliminate the "high stakes" aspect of the Board exams.

The CBSE has clarified that no separate supplementary exam would be conducted under this system. Instead, the second phase will serve as the supplementary exam for those students who want to improve their scores.

# ED attaches land worth ₹8 Crore linked to drug trafficking

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ HYDERABAD/NEW DELHI

The Enforcement Directorate on Wednesday said that it has attached land parcels in Madhya Pradesh and bank deposits worth about ₹8 Crore as part of a probe into a drugs trafficking-linked money laundering case against a Hyderabad-based entity that ran an "illegal" Internet pharmacy.

An order has been issued by the Hyderabad ED office under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) to provisionally attach the properties of JR Infinity Private Ltd, its promoter Aashish Jain and his family members, the federal probe agency said in a statement. The ED investigation stems from a May 2022 complaint filed against the accused by the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB).

According to the agency, Jain was running an "illegal" Internet pharmacy from the premises of JR Infinity Private Limited.

# UP cops get 10-yr term in woman officer murder case

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ BAREILLY (UP)

Bareilly court has awarded 10 years rigorous imprisonment to four police constables for attempting to murder a senior woman officer in 2010. Special public prosecutor Manoj Bajpai said after completing the hearing, special judge Suresh Kumar Gupta of the anti-corruption court-I on February 21 convicted constables Ravindra, Manoj Kumar, Ravindra Singh, and Dharmendra while handing out the sentence on February 25.

In 2010, Kalpana Saxena, then superintendent of traffic police, received information regarding constables extorting money from truck drivers. Saxena, accompanied by her bodyguard, went to the spot in her private car at around 6.30 pm, where she saw the four constables allegedly extorting money from the truck drivers.

When she tried to apprehend them, the constables fled in their car. When chasing the policemen, they attempted to run her over.

When Saxena refused to let go, the accused pushed her onto the road, inflicting injuries. An FIR was lodged at the Cantt police station, and the constables were immediately suspended. After a thorough investigation, police filed a chargesheet, leading to the court's conviction. Saxena, an IPS officer of the 2010 batch, is currently serving as a deputy inspector general (DIG) in the Ghaziabad Police Commissionerate.

# Two days to complete rescue: Telangana Minister

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NAGARKURNOOL (TELANGANA)

Telangana Irrigation Minister N Uttam Kumar Reddy on Wednesday said that the whole rescue operation to extricate eight persons who remain trapped in the SLBC tunnel after it partially collapsed on Saturday, will be completed in two days with increased pace of action as it has been decided to go into the silt in search of the trapped men.

Addressing a press conference, the minister said he along with his cabinet colleague Komatireddy Venkat Reddy and officials from Army, NDRF, SDRF and others held discussions and assessed the situation.

"The whole operation has been reviewed with all the officials, including from NDRF, Army, SDRF, District Collector and superintendent of police...We have made a concrete plan of action today that we will go ahead into the silt (in the tunnel). Now we are hoping that we can com-



The project site where a portion of the tunnel collapsed in Nagarkurnool district on Wednesday PTI

plete the whole operation in two days. We have decided a plan of action and decided a timeframe, and now we will go forward," he said.

The minister said the rescue

operation was slowed down on Tuesday keeping in view the safety of the lives of the rescuers.

Dewatering in the collapsed tunnel will go on and the

Tunnel Boring Machine (TBM) that is struck inside will be cut into pieces by using gas cutters and removed. After this, the Army, Navy, Rat Miners and NDRF teams will make another serious effort to rescue the eight persons who are missing without compromising on the rescuers' safety, the minister explained.

He said the state government has roped in the best experts who have experience in building tunnels at border areas, retired army officials and people who participated in the rescue operations wherever tunnel accidents happened and sought their opinion.

"We have not completely given up our hopes. We are going forward with our work with an intention to save them and bring them out," he replied when asked if he still has hopes that the trapped individuals are alive.

Eight personnel working on the Srisailem Left Bank Canal (SLBC) tunnel project were trapped after a portion of the tunnel collapsed on February 22.

# BJP's releases 'Sankalp Patra' for Municipal elections in Gurugram

STAFF REPORTER ■ GURUGRAM

Former state president of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Rajya Sabha MP and Gurugram election in-charge Subhash Barala released the BJP's 'Sankalp Patra' for the upcoming Municipal Elections in Gurugram on Wednesday.

While reading the manifesto, Barala claimed that this manifesto is for the development of Gurugram and a better future for Gurugram.

BJP is committed to making the lives of the people of the Municipal Corporation Gurugram (MCG) simple and easy, and serving the public is the priority of BJP.

Subhash Barala said that according to the vision of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, we all together will put all our strength into developing Gurugram and the state.

He said that under the leadership of Chief Minister Nayab Singh Saini, the BJP government is moving forward with the resolution to develop Haryana. Similarly, earlier, we have a resolution to make Gurugram clean and pothole-free.

During the release of the Sankalp Patra, District President Kamal Yadav, Mayor Candidate Rajrani Malhotra, MLA Mukesh Sharma, State Secretary Gargi Kakkar, National Vice-President of Minority Front Zakir Hussain and other leaders were also present during the event.

Speaking about the manifesto made for the MCG area, Barala said that road repair and maintenance work will be done before the monsoon season of 2025. Special attention will be given to main roads like AIT Chowk and Southern Refine



Former state president of BJP Subhash Barala releases 'Sankalp Patra' for the upcoming Municipal Elections in Gurugram on Wednesday Pioneer photo

road (SPR) so that people get immediate relief.

"A dedicated city development fund will be set up through a public-private partnership model and CSR contribution for projects like multi-level parking, community centre and road repair. Smart signals and an integrated traffic management system (ITMS) will be implemented to address the traffic problems of Gurugram," he said.

MP Subhash Barala said that 80 new garbage collection vehicles in the corporation area, more employees for daily garbage collection and replacing congested grounds with modern, eco-friendly garbage processing facilities will improve waste management.

He said that we would also ensure that the waste is disposed of promptly at the Bandhwari landfill site, and heavy fines will be imposed in case of delay. Developing infrastructure to prevent water logging during the rainy season will be a priority. Clean water will be provided to the citizens by installing public drinking water filters.

Barala asserted that we aim to make the city free from street animals and provide electrici-

ty and water supply 24 hours a day. He said that work will be done in collaboration with the state government to expedite the completion and operation of the tar plant from waste in Gurugram.

By starting the 'Green Mobility Campaign' for a clean environment of the city, we will work to promote EV charging stations, advanced e-mobility solutions and e-bike/e-cycle rental services, he claimed.

Barala said that to make the city sparkling, beautification projects will be started in all the wards including park maintenance, roadside plantation and decorative painting to enhance the beautification of the area. He said that the unapproved colonies would be legalised.

To provide better transport facilities to the people, we will develop walking and trekking in the entire city on the lines of Chandigarh. We will ensure streetlights are installed on every rind of the city.

Speaking on the Sankalp Patra, Barala said that the person who has been occupying a land for 20 years will be given ownership rights. The houses which are in the name of women will be given exemption in house tax.

# Where faith, tradition fuse: Maha Kumbh ends on note of devotion

PTI ■ MAHAKUMBH NAGAR

The Maha Kumbh, billed to be the world's largest gathering, ends on Wednesday as it began 45 days ago with lakhs of devotees surging towards the waters of the Sangam, the confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna and mythical Saraswati, for a dip on the auspicious day of Shivratri.

The mega religious carnival wound to a close in a montage of images of the stampede that killed at least 30 people, the devout across every spectrum taking a dip in the belief it would cleanse their sins, huge crowds jostling not just at the Sangam but also stations and bus stands in north India and many a political slugfest over contested numbers and how clean the waters were.

According to the Uttar Pradesh government, 64.77 crore people have visited Prayagraj since January 13, a number that exceeds the populations of all countries except China and India. President Droupadi Murmu, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, top ministers and film stars were among those who went to the Kumbh. It was a gathering of the faithful and believers but also of those driven by interest in the fabled Kumbh, where religion meets culture, where spiritual-

ity and tradition fuse, and where AI and modern-day technology this time blended with ancient stories of gods and miracles. The stars were aligned too with seers claiming that celestial permutations and combinations during the event took place after 144 years. It was a massive logistical exercise.

The religious fair witnessed unprecedented security measures, including anti-drone systems and AI-enabled cameras, to man the Mahakumbh Nagar's UP's makeshift 76th district set up for the event. It was spread across 40 hectares which remained abuzz with activity 24x7 over the past six weeks.

As tourists and pilgrims from distant corners began returning home and vendors, from across the country, readied to shut shop, many were seen trying to take a dip before the Kumbh finally ends. The ritual bath is at the centre of the pilgrimage. Devout Hindus believe the coveted sacred dip at the Sangam leads to 'moksha' or salvation, especially during the once-in-12-years planetary alignments.

"To me, the Maha Kumbh would conclude when the last of the devotee has taken the dip. Put differently, you can say that the mela would end with

the start of the new day at 'Brahm Muhurt' or early morning on Thursday," Chidanand Saraswati, the president of Parmarth Niketan Ashram, Rishikesh, who is camping at Prayagraj, told PTI. Held every 12 years, the Maha Kumbh showcased India's age-old spiritual traditions, from the grand processions of akharas (monastic orders) and the ash smeared Naga sadhus, to modern tech-savvy babas, all of whom camped by the Sangam banks, drawing devotees from across the globe.

The akhara seers participated in three of the total six 'snans', known as Amrit snans — Makar Sankranti (January 14) Mauni Amavasya (January 29) and Basant Panchami (February 3). Though not a Amrit Snan, Maha Shivratri dip was among the last of the total six 'snans', the other two being Paus Purnima (January 13) and Maaghi Purnima (February 11-12).

The second Amrit Snan on January 29 is when chaos - and tragedy — broke out. The stampede near Sangam banks, leading to 30 deaths allegedly due to overcrowding. The tragedy triggered a political slugfest with West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee slamming the Yogi Adityanath-led government to say it was an



An aerial view of devotees taking holy dip at Sangam on the occasion of 'Mahashivratri' during the ongoing 'Maha Kumbh Mela' in Prayagraj in Uttar Pradesh on Wednesday PTI

'Mrityu Kumbh' and the BJP hitting back.

The Samajwadi Party and the Congress accused the Yogi Adityanath-led government of concealing the stampede toll. But the devotees driven by faith, remained undeterred and kept growing in numbers even as a Central Pollution Control Board report on Ganga water quality triggered another controversy.

As millions took dip in the confluence of rivers, the water quality also came under question amid claims of high levels

of faecal bacteria and total coli form. Chief Minister Adityanath rejected the claims and said in the state assembly that Ganga water at the Sangam was fit for both 'snan and aachman' (bathing and ritual drinking).

The opposition, including the SP, also questioned the pilgrim foothall cited by the government but the government cited the source of the numbers -- over 3,000 cameras, including 1,800 AI-enabled ones, underwater drones and 60,000 personnel.

"Along with AI cameras, we also maintained regular touch with railways, roadways and airport personnel to corroborate pilgrim data," a senior official told PTI.

The Kumbh, a familiar trope in Hindi films of the past when brothers and families separated in the surging crowds only to be united at the end, also saw nearly half a dozen fire incidents. Fortunately, there were no casualties.

"As many as 50 fire stations, 20 fire posts were always on standby to meet any situation," Chief

Fire Officer Pramod Sharma noted.

In a first, "underwater drones" capable of diving up to 100 meters were deployed to provide round-the-clock surveillance at Sangam area, the Culture Ministry had said ahead of the Kumbh.

Faith was the overriding factor, bypassing all considerations and apprehensions. This was apparent with the arrival of devotees like Bihar's Raushan Sah, who arrived for the dip along with his octogenarian mother and other family members. His brother was there on the day of the stampede but it mattered little.

"It was god's will so I could attend the Kumbh. I was here on Makar Sankranti day, and on the day the stampede happened," added Kirpal Singh from Jhansi.

The division between night and day blurred with pilgrims pouring into the ghat areas at all hours and vendors selling 'puja' ware while security personnel sought to manage the surge. With 'Divya Kumbh, Bhavya Kumbh, Surakshit Kumbh' as its tagline, the Kumbh was billed as a great example of security and cleanliness. Security and sanitation personnel worked round-the-clock in multiple shifts to keep the area safe and clean. State

officials said 37,000 police personnel, 14,000 home guards were deployed at Maha Kumbh for security arrangements while 2,750 AI-based CCTVs, three Jal Police stations, 18 Jal Police control rooms, 50 watchtowers were installed.

"Besides large-scale security arrangements, there has been regular monitoring of the social media 24x7 to check any spread of misinformation regarding the Maha Kumbh," DIG (Kumbh) Vaibhav Krishna told PTI as he oversaw law and order throughout the mega event from the ground.

Bhutan King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck was among those who paid a special visit to the Mela and took a holy dip too.

Besides showbiz stars, business tycoons, including Mukesh Ambani and Gautam Adani, along with family members visited the mela. Laura Powell, the widow of Apple founder Steve Jobs, British rock band Coldplay's Chris Martin, also came for the dip.

Actor-turned-sadhvi Mamata Kulkarni, anointed as a mahamandeshwar of the Kinnar Akhara also hogged limelight, triggering a controversy following objection from some seers, leading to her resignation, which was later withdrawn.





www.dailypioneer.com

facebook.com/dailypioneer | @TheDailyPioneer | instagram.com/dailypioneer/

PAPER WITH PASSION

## Disparities rising

One billion Indians have minimal purchasing power despite rapid growth says a Blume Ventures and Marcellus report

In a startling revelation about the state of the Indian economy, recent findings of a study highlight that nearly one billion Indians possess little to no spending power. According to a report by Blume Ventures—supported by insights from Marcellus Investment Managers—India's consumer market is undergoing profound structural changes, marked by deepening disparities and a shifting focus towards premium products for the wealthy. At the heart of the report is the disconcerting revelation that India's true "consuming class" is far smaller than what many might assume. The report identifies only about 130–140 million people as part of this active consumer base—roughly equivalent to the entire market of a country like Mexico. In addition, an extra 300 million Indians are categorised as 'emerging' or 'aspirant' consumers. The report underscores that India's consumer market is not broadening by adding new entrants into the wealthy segment; instead, it is deepening. In practical terms, while the overall size of the affluent population remains relatively stagnant, the existing wealthy are growing even wealthier.

This trend of 'premiumisation' has seen brands pivot towards offering high-end, upgraded products that cater specifically to the rich. For example, ultra-luxury housing and premium smartphones are experiencing surging sales. In contrast, lower-priced alternatives are struggling. Affordable homes now represent a mere 18 per cent of the overall market. Moreover, the booming 'experience economy'—evident in the rapid sell-out of high-priced concert tickets for international artists like Coldplay—further illustrates the evolving consumption pattern that favours upscale offerings over mass-market products. A critical dimension of the report is its analysis of income inequality in India. The long-term trend of widening disparities has been stark. The top 10 per cent of Indians now control 57.7 per cent of the national income—a dramatic increase from 34 per cent in 1990. Conversely, the bottom 50 per cent have seen their share decline from 22.2 per cent to just 15 per cent. The affluent continue to prosper, while the majority of the population grapples with stagnant incomes, diminished savings, and mounting debt. The situation is particularly alarming for India's middle class. The report reveals that the middle 50 per cent of India's tax-paying population has experienced income stagnation over the past decade. The situation is alarming as financial savings are nearing a 50-year low. The insights from the report paint a sobering picture of the Indian economy. While the nation boasts rapid growth in certain sectors and an expanding base of emerging consumers, the benefits of this growth are unevenly distributed. The government must focus on strategies that not only promote growth but also ensure that economic gains are more broadly shared. Investments in education, upskilling and initiatives to revive the middle class's purchasing power will be crucial in steering India towards a more balanced and inclusive economic future.



### PICTALK



Vendors display earthen pots for sale, on the outskirts of Ahmedabad

# Allahbadia's remarks: Digital decency under fire



RAJDEEP PATHAK

Ranveer Allahbadia's remarks underscore growing concerns over declining entertainment standards and highlight the urgent need for stricter regulations

The recent uproar over content creator Ranveer Allahbadia's controversial remark on comedian Sammy Raina's show, India's Got Latent, has sparked widespread condemnation across political, social and cultural spectrums. The backlash began with netizens expressing outrage and quickly escalated into a national debate, drawing criticism from political leaders, women's rights organisations and public figures, so much so that Shiv Sena MP Naresh Ganpat Mhaske even raised the matter in Parliament. Veteran artist Raza Murad and singer B Praak expressed their dismay at the decline in the quality of entertainment, questioning how obscenity could be passed off as humour.

Moreover, the joke in question had been lifted from a previous 'Western' online video, reinforcing concerns about not just the vulgarity in digital content but also its lack of originality. Social media swiftly linked the question to Truth or Drink, a comedy show from Australia hosted by Sammy Walsh. In the original episode, Walsh presented the same bizarre hypothetical to comedian Alan Fang.

The controversy surrounding Ranveer Allahbadia, also brings to the forefront, a critical constitutional debate—where do we draw the line between freedom of speech and responsibility in content creation? Article 19(1)(a) of the Indian Constitution guarantees the Fundamental Right to 'Freedom of Speech and Expression', but it comes with reasonable restrictions under Article 19(2), including public decency and morality. The focus must shift from merely advocating Fundamental Rights to instilling a deeper commitment to Fundamental Duties.

Article 51A of the Indian Constitution enshrines these duties, urging citizens to uphold the dignity of women, respect India's rich cultural heritage and foster a spirit of scientific temper and humanism. In today's digital age, where content creation holds immense power, social media influencers must be more aware of these responsibilities. The recent incident—among many others in the past, though



none as brazen—reflects a troubling cultural decline. The relentless pursuit of profit and popularity has overshadowed the essence of responsible communication. Merely imitating Western trends for the sake of TRPs not only erodes societal values but also exposes influencers to unintended consequences. Upholding decency and cultural integrity in digital spaces is not just a moral obligation but a necessity for preserving the ethos of our nation.

**The Historical Context of Drama**  
This discussion further leads us to the historical context of artistic responsibility, as encapsulated in the 'Natyashastra', an ancient Indian treatise on drama and performance. Authored by sage Bharata between 200 BCE and 200 CE, 'Natyashastra' is the cornerstone of Indian performing arts. While advocating ethical storytelling. It stresses discipline, humility and cultural integrity in performances. The text warns against arrogance and artistic misuse, highlighting the role of art in societal upliftment and moral education. If lessons of 'Natyashastra' were to be imbibed by content creators, they would recognise the power of their platforms and exercise restraint in their expression. Historically, India has also had a vibrant tradition of live performance and satire in the form of 'Bahurupias', a community of street performers



ARTICLE 19(1)(A) OF THE INDIAN CONSTITUTION GUARANTEES THE FUNDAMENTAL RIGHT TO 'FREEDOM OF SPEECH AND EXPRESSION', BUT IT COMES WITH REASONABLE RESTRICTIONS UNDER ARTICLE 19(2), INCLUDING PUBLIC DECENCY AND MORALITY.

who entertained audiences through mimicry, storytelling, and political satire. Unlike today's digital comedians, 'Bahurupias' adhered to ethical storytelling, ensuring their humour remained socially constructive rather than destructive. Offending sensibilities in their era could lead to stringent punishments, yet they managed to craft thought-provoking and respectful humour. The 'Bahurupiyas', named after Sanskrit "bahu" (many) and "roop" (form), are traditional impressionists known for their ability to assume multiple identities depicting their art that required deep cultural understanding. Dhirubhai Thakar, the renowned Gujarati literary historian, highlighted the significance of folk traditions like Bahurupias, stating, "The Bahurupia tradition is a testament to how humour, when wielded responsibly, can be both entertaining and enlightening."  
**Setting Norms**  
In the face of rising controversial digital content, a structured ethical framework is essential to balance creative freedom with social responsibility. Indian knowledge systems have long emphasised a two-fold approach—one for creators and another for consumers, much like Master Abhinavagupta's—(an illustrious Spiritual Master who injected new meaning into the Shaiva Philosophy, which 1,000 years later became more popularly known as Kashmir

Shaivism)—the distinction between 'Nata' (performer) and 'Rasika' (audience). Digital creators should be trained in ethical communication, while audiences must develop discernment. Social media influencers, given their reach, need structured value-based training, akin to traditional performers, with a self-regulatory body overseeing content. Strengthening community guidelines on platforms like YouTube and Instagram to align with Indian cultural and legal norms can curb harmful content. Additionally, inspired by 'Natyashastra's' role in guiding performers, public awareness campaigns can foster responsible digital consumption beyond punitive measures. In On Liberty (1859), John Stuart Mill emphasises the ethical boundaries of personal freedom, asserting that individual liberty must be limited when it infringes upon others. He says, "The liberty of the individual must be thus far limited; he must not make himself a nuisance to other people."  
The Ranveer Allahbadia controversy is not an isolated incident but a reflection of a larger societal issue—the gradual erosion of ethical entertainment. The challenge lies not just in regulating social media but in fostering a culture of conscious content creation and consumption.  
(The writer is Programme Executive, Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti; views are personal)

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### STALIN DEFIES CENTRE ON LANGUAGE

Madam—This refers to the report "Stalin accuses Centre fuelling language war" (February 26). The anguish, resentment and objection being raised by TN Chief Minister MK Stalin are not without reason. Though the present three-language policy (Hindi, mother tongue and English) is convenient, effective and acceptable to everybody, the Centre has always been unnecessarily trying to impose Hindi on the people in the southern belt. The blind love for Hindi not only constrains the government to spurn regional languages but also opposes English, which is a living, dynamic and wonderful language that helps to unite the people across the globe. The work being done in English will not be as effective and feasible, if done in Hindi or any other Indian language. In fact, most Indians, including politicians, are crazy to learn and speak in English, and they prefer to educate their children in English medium schools. It is a naked truth that those who are fluent in English have a better chance to gain lucrative jobs in India and abroad. For the common people, the mother tongue is the first option, while the second choice is English and not Hindi. Hence, the government must adhere to the present three-language formula and avoid undesirable conflict and confrontation between the Centre and the southern states by thrusting Hindi on them.  
T T Sakaria | Delhi

### VC APPOINTMENT RULES CRITICISED

Madam—This is with reference to the opinion article titled 'New VC appointment rules undermine state autonomy'. Centralisation of power has become the mantra of the present dispensation at the centre. One by one, the autonomy of merely every other institution is taken for a toss by this government. With instances like stifling the selection process of the Chief Election Commission by omitting the honourable Chief Justice of India from the committee to these recent draft guidelines on VC appointments through a governor-led panel, all glaring examples of centre

## Judiciary: The beacon of hope



The editorial, 'Liberty is sacrosanct' (February 26), is appropriate as it calls for a 'balance between ensuring justice and upholding individual rights'. By and large, the judiciary in India has played its role very well in protecting the constitution, safeguarding the liberties of citizens, and upholding the democratic values in the country. The Supreme Court has repeatedly decided

and declared that bail should be the rule and jail the exception. The Supreme Court is right in deciding that bail should be treated as a right and not as a privilege. If an accused is cooperative in the investigation and trial, he should not be detained unnecessarily. Pre-trial detention should be used rarely and not commonly. In the recent past, the Supreme Court gave relief to AAP leaders Kejriwal and Sisodia and freed them before the Delhi assembly elections so that all parties have a level playing field. The editorial is right in emphasising that pre-trial detention should not be prolonged. In the atmosphere of despair, intrigue, and revenge, the judiciary is the only beacon of hope and protector of individual liberty.  
Vinay Kr Malhotra | Ambala Cantt

excesses. Opposition rules state governments have genuine fears as every voice of dissent is being muted by systematic destruction of federal structure as envisaged in our great constitution. Academics hold so much importance for the future of the country. If it is also muddled with political appointments who would definitely give priority to their high command orders over academic excellence, then we are really running short of time for reversing this trend. Opposition needs to unite and take a collective stand against these draft guidelines and make sure that these guidelines don't turn into law.  
Deepak Sharma | Panchkula

### ENSURE WOMEN SAFETY

Madam—Crimes against women underscore the urgent need for collective action. The incident of Nirbhaya's gang rape in Delhi and the Kathua rape case highlight the grim reality of women's safety in India. We must create a society where women feel safe and secure. Formulating deterrent laws and ensuring swift justice is crucial. The government's efforts to strengthen laws and

increase punishment for crimes against women are a step in the right direction. However, more needs to be done to ensure that women feel safe in their daily lives. We must unify our efforts to promote gender equality, challenge patriarchal norms, and support survivors of violence. By working together, we can build a more just and equitable society where women thrive. For instance, the "Pink Saris" initiative in Uttar Pradesh, where women vigilantes wear pink saris to protect themselves and others from violence, is a testament to the power of collective action. Similarly, the "Nirbhaya Squad" in Delhi, a team of police officers dedicated to ensuring women's safety, is another example of efforts being made to address this issue. Together, we can make a meaningful difference and create a brighter future for women. Let's work together to build a society that values and respects women's rights and safety.  
Shreyanshi Jain | Ujjain

## A legacy of visionary education and unyielding innovation

BIT Mesra not only honours its storied past but also paves the way for future innovations in areas like AI, rocket science and STEM empowerment

Education is the cornerstone of societal transformation, shaping individuals who drive progress and innovation. BIT Mesra, celebrating seventy years of excellence, exemplifies how a visionary commitment to learning can create enduring impact. Founded in 1955 by industrialist B M Birla at a time when India was laying the groundwork for its technological future, BIT Mesra quickly emerged as a prestigious centre for innovation. Originally established to foster technological growth, it has expanded over the decades to offer diverse programmes in engineering, science, management, architecture, and space research. Today, a dedicated faculty of 600 and a vibrant student body of over 10,000 continue to make the institution a hub for knowledge and creativity. The Platinum Jubilee celebrations underscored both the rich legacy and forward-thinking vision of BIT Mesra. Dignitaries, including President Droupadi Murmu, attended the event, where discussions highlighted the



institute's contributions to advancing technology—particularly in artificial intelligence and machine learning—and recognised the increasing participation of women in STEM fields. These milestones not only celebrate past achievements but also pave the way for future innovations. BIT Mesra's impact on India's technological journey is profound. The establishment of the country's first Department of Space Engineering and Rocketry in 1964 set a precedent for pioneering research, while collaborations with organisations like ISRO keep its

to meet future demands. Creating and sustaining such an institution is a collaborative effort. Leadership, faculty, students, and alumni all contribute to a culture that values excellence, innovation, and independent thought. As industries and technologies evolve, BIT Mesra's role expands from merely imparting education to equipping individuals to navigate change, lead advancements and contribute meaningfully to society. Fostering interdisciplinary research, nurturing entrepreneurship and promoting inclusive education are essential strategies for ensuring its continued relevance. With seventy years of legacy behind it, BIT Mesra remains both a guardian of its proud traditions and a dynamic force for future progress. Its ongoing mission is to build on its storied past while relentlessly pushing the boundaries of knowledge, research, and education in an ever-changing world.  
(The writer is a staffer with the Pioneer; views are personal)



SAKSHI PRIYA





## FIRST COLUMN

### OUR REAL WEALTH: RELATIONSHIPS

In the relentless pursuit of material success, we often overlook the true wealth in our lives—our relationships



RAJYOGI BRAHMKUMAR NIKUNJ JI

Our lives revolve around the relationships that we have inherited by birth as well as the ones that we made after birth and also they continue after we rest in peace i.e. death. Isn't it so ironic that throughout our lives we struggle hard to maintain our relationships and yet we cannot achieve that perfect balance in our relations, be it personal or professional?

The reasons for this may be numerous, however, to make the long story short one would find that most of the reasons are so common and at times quite foolish on our part that we find it funny when we sit down and think about those silly reasons which become the very cause for turning our relationships sour. It's a fact that all of us are living a fast-paced life where we get extremely busy accumulating financial assets and physical comforts. So lost have we got in this race to achieve something, that we hardly find time to sit back and think as to where our relationships are heading to.

Our craze for materialism has made us forget that material belongings are devoid of meaning if there is no peace or happiness within. Today we have reached a stage where instead of humans, we have made smart gadgets, material belongings and social status as our companions. We are gradually getting transformed into machines with no heart, feelings or emotions. As a result, our relationships have become strained. So, always nurture your relationships and handle them with utmost care



because it's too painful an experience when a person we know suddenly becomes a person we know. There is a well-known saying that 'we see things not as they are but as we are.' While our physical eyes see everything and everyone the same way, it is the thoughts and feelings that accompany the act of seeing that form an impression in the mind about what we are seeing.

On the other hand, if we are in a negative frame of mind, we might perceive things negatively. We all fail to understand the fact that whether it's friendship or relationship, all bonds are built on trust, without it we won't achieve anything. Hence we should try our best to remain safe from a dreadful habit called assumption which creates mistrust leading to suspicion, anger, enmity and finally separation. We should also refrain from playing the blame game that's the biggest hindrance to maintaining good relations. It's normal for all of us to blame the opposite party in case of a failed relationship, because nobody would ever take responsibility on the self, however, we should remember that when we point one finger at someone, the other three are pointing at us, so it is always better to take personal responsibility and accept our folly rather than create an environment of hatred for each other.

A relationship is like a house. When a light bulb burns out, do we go and buy a new house? Not really, we fix the bulb and move on. The same applies to our relationships too, we keep on nursing our egos to such an extent that it leads to misunderstanding, creating a heavy atmosphere. Hence we should realize that having an easy and cooperative nature towards everyone would help us to be flexible and humble. We should always give value to our relationships and should make an effort to nurture them, rather than lose them on trivial matters. Supreme Almighty can fulfill all relationships with us. Hence, when we experience the relations of father, teacher, preceptor, companion and friend with HIM, then it becomes easy to give love to all other human beings and leads us to the understanding that we are all children of the same father and need to take care of everyone around us. Lastly, we should not forget that a real relationship has trust, faith, tears, fights, pain, arguments, patience, secrets, jealousy and overall - LOVE. So, love all and get loved in return by all. This is the key to positive & peaceful living.

*(The writer is a spiritual educator and popular columnist; views are personal)*

# Future-proofing employability: The skills will set you apart



DIENSH SOOD

The future belongs to those who embrace continuous learning, adapt to emerging trends and cultivate a blend of technical and soft skills



The rapidly evolving global landscape of the job market presents exciting opportunities and formidable challenges. With technological advancements reshaping industries and global hiring trends influenced by economic shifts, the most valuable asset for professionals will be their skills. Understanding market demands and proactively adapting will be crucial for those considering a career transition.

### The Demand for Skills in a Rapidly Evolving Market

According to the World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs 2023 report, the most demanded skills by 2027 will include artificial intelligence (AI), enormous data competency, creative and analytical thinking, leadership, social influence, and continuous learning. However, only 50 per cent of employees today have access to adequate learning opportunities and six out of ten will need upskilling within the next few years. This widening skills gap presents both a challenge and an opportunity for professionals to invest in their development and distinguish themselves in a competitive job market. Businesses, too, are grappling with the rapid pace of technological change. By 2027, nearly 44 per cent of workers' core skills will be impacted, creating an urgent need for companies and employees to embrace continuous learning. Those who adapt swiftly will find themselves in high-growth sectors with ample career opportunities.

### Bridging the Skills Gap

By 2025, an estimated 97 million new jobs will be created globally, driven by AI, the Internet of Things (IoT), and robotics. Yet, many of these positions may remain unfilled due to a shortage of skilled professionals. In India, AI adoption has already reached 48 per cent across industries, with banking and financial services leading at 68 per cent, followed by technology at 60-65 per cent. However, the lack of qualified tal-



IN INDIA, AI ADOPTION HAS ALREADY REACHED 48 PER CENT ACROSS INDUSTRIES, WITH BANKING AND FINANCIAL SERVICES LEADING AT 68 PER CENT, FOLLOWED BY TECHNOLOGY AT 60-65 PER CENT. HOWEVER, THE LACK OF QUALIFIED TALENT THREATENS TO SLOW THIS PROGRESS

ent threatens to slow this progress. India produces 1.5 million engineering graduates annually, yet only 45 per cent meet industry standards, and just 10 per cent secure jobs, according to Team Lease Digital. The challenge extends beyond technical expertise—employers are also looking for strong communication, problem-solving, and teamwork skills, often overlooked in traditional education.

### The Changing Nature of Work

The rise of automation, AI, and robotics is shifting job requirements. The McKinsey Global Institute highlights that social, emotional, and higher cognitive abilities are becoming more critical while manual and basic cognitive skills are declining.

### The Education System's Role in Workforce Readiness

To meet the demands of Industry 4.0, education must evolve. Despite India's extensive network of over 40,000 institutions and nearly 1,000 universities, there remains a disconnect between academic learning and industry requirements. According to NASSCOM, India's technology sector will need over

one million engineers with AI and emerging technology expertise within 2-3 years. However, the digital skills gap will increase from 25 per cent to 30 per cent by 2028, underscoring the urgency for a job-ready workforce.

### Closing the Gap Through Collaboration

A key solution lies in stronger collaboration between universities and online learning platforms. Real-world, industry-aligned education can significantly enhance employability. A recent Hire-Pro report revealed a stark disconnect in perception: while 70 per cent of colleges believe their graduates are job-ready, only 16 per cent of employers agree. With Gen Z set to make up 27 per cent of the global workforce by 2025, bridging this gap is critical.

### The Role of Technology in Job Creation

The digital revolution continues to transform industries. Cloud computing, AI, and machine learning are driving innovation, with 59 per cent of IT professionals in large companies having already deployed AI solutions, according to the IBM Global AI Adoption Index 2023. By 2026, India's IT sector alone is projected to contribute \$350 billion to the GDP. However, workforce readiness remains challenging, highlighting the need for urgent action to close the skills gap.

### The Power of Continuous Learning

Success in today's workplace is no longer defined solely by a degree. Employers increasingly prioritise skills over formal education, making continuous learning essential for career advancement. Upskilling

through workshops, online courses, and certifications is now a necessity rather than an option. Many companies partner with e-learning platforms to provide tailored training programmes, ensuring employees acquire technical and soft skills. This investment in learning and development benefits individuals and strengthens businesses in the long run.

### The Growing Value of Soft Skills

While technical expertise is critical, soft skills such as problem-solving, communication, and adaptability are equally valuable. In a dynamic and fast-changing work environment, professionals with strong interpersonal skills will have a competitive edge, enabling them to lead teams, collaborate effectively, and manage complex projects.

### The Future: Adaptability is Key

The workforce of the future will belong to those who embrace skill development and lifelong learning. Whether you're a fresh graduate or an experienced professional, adaptability will be the key to long-term success. Educational institutions and online platforms must work together to equip professionals with the right mix of technical and interpersonal skills. In a world where change is the only constant, staying ahead requires a commitment to growth and a willingness to evolve with the times.

*(The writer is a Co-Founder and MD of Orane International, a Training Partner with the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC), and a Network Member, of India International Skill Centres, an initiative of GoI; view express are personal)*

# How antibiotic-free poultry empowered a mother and her community

By raising chickens with natural remedies instead of antibiotics, women in Uttar Pradesh are safeguarding their health and boosting their incomes

Four-month-old Angel Singh is a post-term baby. Having been born after a ten-month pregnancy, many of her family members were afraid she would be weak and sickly. But Pinky always knew her child would be healthy despite being born a month after what is considered a normal nine-month pregnancy period.

Angel's weight and other health indicators at birth proved her mother right. Much of Pinky's confidence stemmed from the fact that she was regular with her antenatal checkups (ANC). She also focussed on a nutritious diet of leafy greens which she sourced from her small vegetable patch at the back of her house in Uttar Pradesh's Samsa Tarhar village in Bahraich, the second

most backward district in India. As her pregnancy progressed, Pinky, a small poultry farmer, diversified her diet to include antibiotic-free eggs and poultry. This was to be a smart move.

Not only because it helped her stay healthy and increase her weight and haemoglobin levels, but more importantly, thanks to her poultry training, she was able to ensure whatever she ate was free of antibiotics. By using natural feed and herbal remedies while raising her chickens, she was able to cut the risk of developing antimicrobial resistance (AMR), a condition arising from the consumption of meat and eggs of poultry fed with antibiotics to promote quick growth and prevent diseases. Just how critical this practice



SWAPNA MAJUMDAR

was can be gauged from the worrying fact that, in 2019, over 297, 000 deaths in India were directly attributed to AMR. Moreover, the poultry environment has been a reservoir of multi-drug resistant bacteria according to the most recent study of four poultry farms in Uttar Pradesh by the Centre for Science and Environment which found rampant use of antibiotics for

growth promotion and disease prevention. The WHO recognizes the non-therapeutic use of antibiotics in feed and water in food-producing animals to contribute to the development of AMR in humans. Pinky realised this was possible only after she joined the backyard poultry (BYP) farming initiative to empower women and enhance food security and incomes implemented by the Aga Khan Foundation (AKF) under their aspirational district programme. After being trained by them in poultry farming techniques, biosecurity, and disease management using proven herbal and natural formulations to prevent the development of antibiotic resistance, Pinky, then in her second trimester of pregnancy, understood that the bene-



fits of being a poultry entrepreneur were more than just being economically empowered. "It was an opportunity to take charge of my own health and destiny and that of my unborn child," says Pinky. It is not just Pinky who is bringing change. Like her, 60 women from marginalised communities in 120 villages in four blocks in Bahraich trained as poultry farmers by AKF are making a

difference in their lives and communities through sustainable and ethical poultry farming practices after each was given 50 pre-vaccinated 21-day-old Sonali breed chicks free along with support for feeding and constructing chicken coups. It was the AKF strategy to impart rigorous, yet easy-to-understand hands-on demonstration and training on using commonly found medicinal plants and herbs as alternatives to antibiotics that helped the women, mostly uneducated; understand the importance of adopting ethnoveterinary methods or traditional practices for treating animal health and illness. "I used to give antibiotics to keep my poultry healthy before I met the AKF team. Yet, many died.

After joining their programme, I gave a health tonic of turmeric water mixed with jaggery, chirata for deworming and azola, a protein rich fern, to boost their immunity. None of my chicken fell ill," shares a Rambha Devi, a poultry farmer in village Samroha. Raghvendra Singh, AKF district coordinator, skill development, who is closely associated with the BYP programme, contends the 10 per cent mortality rate normally associated with chicks has come down to 4.5 per cent among the 3000 chicks given to AKF poultry farmers because of their use of natural feed and traditional herbal remedies. Consequently, almost 90 per cent of their chicken was sold and the remaining was used for home consumption. The

health of families, especially children, consuming these antibiotic-free poultry and eggs, has improved say frontline health workers working in these villages. Further, an AKF evaluation shows that each poultry farmer made a profit ranging between Rs 10,000-14,000. This success has prompted the women to invest in another 50 chicks even if it means taking a loan from their self-help group as it will no longer be given free. But this isn't stopping them, especially Pinky, who is buying 100 chicks. "The benefits I have gained from being a poultry farmer cannot be measured only in monetary terms. It has changed my life."

*(The author is a journalist writing on development and gender; views are personal)*



# US, Ukraine near economic deal with mineral rights but no security promise: Officials

**PTI ■ KYIV**  
Ukraine and the US have reached an agreement on a framework for a broad economic deal that would include access to Ukraine's rare earth minerals, three senior Ukrainian officials said on Tuesday. The officials, who were familiar with the matter, spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly. One of them said that Kyiv hopes that signing the agreement will ensure the continued flow of US military support that Ukraine urgently needs. The agreement could be signed as early as Friday and

plans are being drawn up for Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to travel to Washington to meet President Donald Trump, according to one of the Ukrainian officials. Another official said the agreement would provide an opportunity for Zelenskyy and Trump to discuss continued military aid to Ukraine, which is why Kyiv is eager to finalise the deal. Trump, speaking to reporters in the Oval Office, said he'd heard that Zelenskyy was coming and added that "it's okay with me, if he'd like to, and he would like to sign it together with me". Trump called it a big deal that

could be worth a trillion dollars. "It could be whatever, but it's rare earths and other things." According to one Ukrainian official, some technical details are still to be determined. However, the draft does not include a contentious Trump administration proposal to give the US USD 500 billion worth of profits from Ukraine's rare earth minerals as compensation for its wartime assistance to Kyiv. Instead, the US and Ukraine would have joint ownership of a fund, and Ukraine would in the future contribute 50 per cent of future proceeds from state-owned resources, including minerals, oil, and gas.

One official said the deal had better terms of investments and another one said that Kyiv secured favourable amendments and viewed the outcome as "positive". The deal does not, however, include security guarantees. One official said that this would be something the two presidents would discuss when they meet. The progress in negotiating the deal comes after Trump and Zelenskyy traded sharp rhetoric last week about their differences over the matter. Zelenskyy said he balked at signing off on a deal that US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent pushed during a visit to Kyiv earlier this month, and

the Ukrainian leader objected again days later during a meeting in Munich with Vice President JD Vance because the American proposal did not include security guarantees. Trump then called Volodymyr Zelenskyy "a dictator without elections" and claimed his support among voters was near rock-bottom. But the two sides made significant progress during a three-day visit to Ukraine last week by retired Lt. Gen. Keith Kellogg, Trump's special envoy to Ukraine and Russia. The idea was initially proposed last fall by Zelenskyy as part of his plan to strengthen Kyiv's hand in future negotiations with Moscow.

# Hamas to turn over bodies of four Israeli hostages

Hundreds of prisoners to be released in exchange

**PTI ■ CAIRO**  
Hamas will return the bodies of four dead Israeli hostages on Thursday in exchange for Israel's release of hundreds of Palestinian prisoners, the group said, just days before the first phase of the ceasefire between the warring parties was to expire. Israel has delayed the release of some 600 Palestinian prisoners since Saturday to protest what it says is the cruel treatment of hostages during their release by Hamas. The militant group has said the delay is a "serious violation" of their ceasefire and that talks on a second phase are not possible until the hostages, and Israel last weekend delayed the scheduled prisoner release in protest. Hamas spokesman Abdul Latif al-Qanun told The Associated Press on Wednesday that Hamas would hand over the bodies of four Israelis the next day. In exchange, Israel would release the Palestinian prisoners, as well as an unspecified number of women and minors detained since the militant group's October 7, 2023 attack on Israel that sparked the conflict. An Israeli official confirmed

that the bodies of four hostages were expected to be turned over but provided no further details. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to talk to the media. Israel and Hamas had already said on Tuesday that an agreement had been reached to return the bodies of the hostages, but no date had been announced. Hamas has released hostages, and the bodies of four dead hostages, in large public ceremonies during which the Israelis were paraded and forced to wave to large crowds. Israel, along with the Red Cross and UN officials, have said the ceremonies were humiliating to the hostages, and Israel last weekend delayed the scheduled prisoner release in protest. The deadlock over the exchange had threatened to collapse the ceasefire when the current six-week first phase of the deal expires this weekend. The latest agreement would complete both sides' obligations of the first phase of the ceasefire — during which Hamas is returning 33 hostages, including eight bodies — in exchange for nearly 2,000 Palestinian

prisoners. It also could clear the way for an expected visit this week by the White House's Mideast envoy, Steve Witkoff, to the region. Witkoff has said he wants the sides to move into negotiations on the second phase, during which all remaining hostages held by Hamas are to be released and an end to the war is to be negotiated. The Phase 2 talks were supposed to begin weeks ago, but never did. The ceasefire, brokered by the United States, Egypt and Qatar, ended 15 months of heavy fighting that erupted after Hamas' October 7, 2023, attack that killed some 1,200 people in Israel and took about 250 people hostage. Israel's military offensive has killed over 48,000 Palestinians, according to Palestinian health officials, displaced an estimated 90 per cent of Gaza's population and decimated the territory's infrastructure and health system. The Hamas-run Health Ministry does not differentiate between civilian and militant deaths, but it says that over half of the dead have been women and children.

# Pope being treated for double pneumonia

**PTI ■ ROME**  
Pope Francis was sitting upright and receiving therapy for double pneumonia Wednesday, the Vatican said, as Argentines and Romans alike gathered in the Eternal City to pray for his recovery. Francis remained in critical condition. The Vatican said that it hoped to have information later in the day about the results of a CT scan taken Tuesday evening to check on the status of the complex lung infection that has kept him hospitalised since Feb. 14.



Candles and flowers for Pope Francis are seen at the Agostino Gemelli Polyclinic, in Rome, Wednesday, where the Pontiff is hospitalised since Friday. AP/PTI

The Vatican said the pope had a peaceful night and was up, sitting in his armchair on Wednesday receiving therapy. Doctors have said he isn't out of danger, but hasn't had any further respiratory crises since Saturday. The dean of the College of Cardinals, meanwhile, was designated to lead the Vatican's prayer vigil in St. Peter's Square on Wednesday night, thrusting a key figure in a future possible conclave into the spotlight. On Tuesday night, the faithful from Francis' homeland gathered in the Argentine church of Rome for a special Mass presided over by Cardinal Baldassarre Reina, the pope's vicar for Rome. The rector of the church, the Rev. Fernando Laguna, said that he hoped the pope could feel the embrace of the community's prayer from the Gemelli hospital where he is recovering. "I can't go to Gemelli, because for him to recover he must be isolated," he said. "I know that I hug him and that he hugs me when I pray. And now I would like to embrace the pope."

# US air base in Italy goes on lockdown for several hours over unspecified incident

**PTI ■ ROME**  
A US air base in Italy went on lockdown Wednesday for several hours over an unspecified incident. There were no injuries. Naval Air Station Sigonella was locked down "due to an ongoing situation," according to initial posts on the base's official Facebook page.

The posts suggested that what ever happened occurred at a gate for the base. It urged service members to "avoid traveling on highway SP105 between Marinai Housing Complex" and a part of the base. The posts didn't elaborate on what happened. After several hours, a new post described the alert ending at around 11:25 a.m. (10:25 GMT) and traffic

again being allowed on the base. "We are grateful to our Navy Security Force personnel for their quick response," the post added. US Navy Lt. Andrea Perez, a spokesperson at the base, told The Associated Press there were "no injuries" from the incident and further details would be released later

Wednesday. NAS Sigonella is outside of Catania on the island of Sicily. It's on a base for the Italian Air Force. NAS Sigonella hosts US Navy P-8 Poseidon reconnaissance aircraft, as well as MQ-4C Triton drones. There's also a US Space Force personnel based there who work on identifying possible missile threats in the region.

# Israelis bid farewell to mother, two sons killed in captivity in Gaza

**PTI ■ TEL AVIV**  
Holding flags, orange balloons and signs that said "forgive us", tens of thousands of Israelis lined highways as the bodies of a mother and her two young sons, killed in captivity in the Gaza Strip, were taken for burial on Wednesday. The plight of the Bibas family has come to embody the profound sense of loss and grief still permeating Israel after the militant Hamas group's October 7, 2023 attack that triggered the war. Footage of a terrified Shiri Bibas clutching her two red-headed sons — 9-month-old Kfir and 4-year-old Ariel — as they were taken to Gaza by militants is seared into the country's collective memory. Israel says forensic evidence shows the boys were killed by their captors in November 2023, while Hamas says the family was killed along with their guards in an Israeli airstrike. Their bodies were handed over earlier this month as

part of a ceasefire deal that paused the Israel-Hamas war. Israelis endured another moment of agony when testing showed that one of the bodies returned by Hamas was identified as someone else. Shiri's body was returned the following night and positively identified. Yarden Bibas was abducted separately and released alive in a different handover last month. His wife and their two children will be buried in a private ceremony near Kibbutz Nir Oz near Gaza, where they were living when they were abducted. The three will be buried next to Shiri's parents, who were also killed in the attack. People — lined up on the side of the roads as far as the eye could see — sobbed and embraced each other as the casket made their way along the 100 kilometer (60 miles) route from central Israel to the cemetery. Hundreds of motorcycles, each with an Israeli flag and orange ribbons, rode solemnly behind the convoy. In the city of Tel

Aviv, thousands gathered to watch a broadcast of the eulogies, many dressed in orange. Kfir was the youngest of about 30 children taken hostage. The infant, with red hair and a toothless smile, quickly became well-known across Israel. His ordeal was raised by Israeli leaders on podiums around the world. The extended Bibas family has been active at protests, branding the color orange as the symbol of their fight for the "ginger babies." They marked Kfir Bibas' first birthday with a release of orange balloons and lobbied world leaders for support. Family photos aired on TV and posted on social media created a national bond with the two boys and made them familiar faces. Israelis learned of Ariel Bibas' love for Batman. Photos from a happier time showed the entire family dressed up as the character. On Wednesday, many people dressed up in Batman costumes and saluted as the caskets passed.

# Five Indian-origin men sentenced to jail, caned over brawl at Singapore hotel

**PTI ■ SINGAPORE**  
Five Indian-origin men were sentenced to jail terms between two and three years and caning for being part of a riot that led to the death of a former bouncer at a Singapore hotel. Sridharan Elangovan was given 36 months in jail and six strokes of the cane; Manojkumar Velayanatham was given 30 months in jail and four strokes; Sashikumar Pakirsamy was given 24 months in jail and two strokes; Puthenvilla Keith Peter was given 26 months' jail and three strokes; and Raja Rishi was given 30 months' jail and four strokes.

Each of them pleaded guilty to a charge of rioting at Singapore's Concorde Hotel and Shopping Mall in 2023, a Channel News report said. Sridharan, 30, Manojkumar, 32, and Sashikumar, 34, were members of a secret society group. Another man, Asvain Pachan Pillai Sukumaran, 30, was earlier handed a murder charge after he allegedly killed former bouncer Mohammad Isrrat Mohd Ismail, 29. The Indian-origin man's case is pending. Six other men, between 25 and 33 years old, were named in court documents as co-accused who took part in the riot. Isrrat and his friend

Muhammad Shahrulnizam Osman, 30, were former bouncers at Club Rumours and members of another secret society. On August 19, 2023, a group of about 10 people, including several of the accused, were drinking at Club Rumours at Concorde Hotel and Shopping Mall when Isrrat and Shahrulnizam, who wanted to pass Isrrat's wedding invitation card to club staff, sat near the entrance of the club opposite to the accused persons. At about 6 a.m., as the club was closing, Isrrat and the accused had a verbal exchange during which the former bouncer was stabbed multiple times.

French President Emmanuel Macron travelled to Washington seeking to convince US President Donald Trump to stand by Europe's side in his talks with Russia about ending the war in Ukraine. As Macron left the White House, he called the meeting a "turning point" — yet Trump made no promises. Macron was the first European leader to visit Trump since his reelection, aiming to capitalise on their friendship to urge Trump not to "be weak" in dealing with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

# Macron got no promises on Ukraine but called meeting with Trump 'turning point'

**PTI ■ WASHINGTON**  
Trump's recent statements that echo Putin's narrative and plans to have direct negotiations with Moscow have left European allies and Ukrainian officials worried. Following Monday's meeting, Macron praised Trump's move towards Putin in an interview on Fox News, saying it may lead to a truce between Russia and Ukraine in the coming weeks. "But my message was to say be careful because we need something substantial for Ukraine," Macron said. "We want peace swiftly, but we don't want an agreement that is weak," Macron said earlier in a joint news conference with

Trump. Any deal with Russia, Macron insisted, must be able to be "assessed, checked and verified". Asked at the news conference by an Associated Press reporter what makes Trump believe he can trust Putin in negotiations about Ukraine, Trump answered, "I may be wrong, but I believe he wants to make a deal." Macron is known for his bold diplomatic moves. In February last year, he was the first European leader to publicly consider sending Western troops to Ukraine. In December, as he welcomed Trump to Paris to celebrate the reopening of the Notre Dame Cathedral, he hastily arranged

a three-way meeting at the Elysee Palace with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. And last week, he called an emergency meeting of key EU leaders and British Prime Minister Keir Starmer — who is scheduled to meet with Trump Thursday — to insist Europeans have a say in talks to end the war in Ukraine. Macron, who came into office in 2017, is one of the few leaders who got to know Trump during his first term. "We call each other several times a week," Macron told the French online news channel HugoDecrypte, according to excerpts released on Tuesday.

house in the Karrari district in Omdurman, suggesting that there were people dead on the ground. Sudan has been in a state of civil war since 2023 when tensions between the military and a notorious paramilitary group, the Rapid Support Forces, exploded into open warfare. The fighting has wrecked urban areas and has been marked by atrocities, including mass rape and ethnically motivated killings, that amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity, especially in the western region of Darfur, according to the United Nations and international rights groups.

# Thousands offer prayers at Nepal's Pashupatinath Temple

**PTI ■ KATHMANDU**  
Thousands of devotees from across Nepal and neighbouring India thronged the revered Pashupatinath Temple since early morning to offer prayers on Maha Shivratri on Wednesday. People queued up at the Pashupatinath Temple at the bank of Bagmati River in Kathmandu since late Tuesday to have darshan of the Shiva Linga. Authorities have made special arrangements to accommodate the influx of devotees at Pashupatinath, said Milan Kumar Thapa, the member secretary of the Pashupati Area Development Trust (PADT). The local administration has banned the sale and consumption of marijuana, hemp, alcohol, meat and fish during the festival.

Those violating this rule face legal action. The temple opened at 2.15 am and devotees were allowed to enter the shrine from all four gates to have darshan of the Shiva Linga. More than one million devotees from Nepal and India are estimated to arrive at the Pashupatinath Temple on Wednesday. The authorities have deployed 4,000 security personnel and 10,000 volunteers for the safety of the devotees and the smooth conduction of prayer at the temple. The main shrine and the temple premises have been eloquently decorated with flowers, colourful lights, paper flags and banners, creating a stunning night-time ambience.

To streamline temple visits, officials have arranged eight queues inside and four outside the temple. Authorities have designated different routes to manage the crowd effectively. Devotees can enter through various points such as Mitrapark, Gaushala, and Pingalasthan, with systematic queues ensuring smooth movement. Additionally, planners have prepared a separate lane via Tilganga Ram Temple if needed. The Maha Shivaratri Main Celebration Committee has been formed under the chairmanship of Minister for Tourism and Culture Badri Prasad Pandey to offer free meals, drinking water, and medicines to the devotees on the occasion in coordination with different organisations.

About one lakh 50 thousand devotees have already offered prayers till 9.30 am on Wednesday, said Rewati Raman Adhikari, a senior official at the Pashupati Development Trust. She said the number will cross one million by Thursday morning. Around 3,500 Sadhus, including about 700 Naga Babas, have arrived at the temple from India, Adhikari said. The official said the Naga Sadhus will be offered free meals, water, sanitation facilities, accommodation, and medicines. Adhikari said the Sadhus would be given cash incentives depending on their ranks, a maximum of NRs 15,000, as Dakshina before they leave on Thursday. Maha Shivaratri is observed through fasting, offering prayers,

performing rituals, visiting Shiva temples, and commemorating the night dedicated to Maheshwar or Mahadev, the Lord of the Lords. Maha Shivaratri also symbolises illuminating the darkness of ignorance with the light of knowledge thereby removing ignorance and suffering. It is believed that offering prayers at Shiva Linga, which symbolises the Supreme Being, brings happiness, joy, overall well-being, and finally salvation to the devotee. People consider Falgun Krishna Chaturdashi as per the Hindu calendar, an auspicious day when Lord Shiva grants mercy to the poor and distressed, as Maha Shivratri. During the Maha Shivaratri, the devotees purify themselves, visit Shiva temples, and offer Lord

Shiva milk, sweets, Dhatura flowers, and Bel leaves. They believe that observing a fast and staying awake all night in devotion grants spiritual fulfilment and liberation from the cycle of birth and death. Many people light bonfires and sing sacred chants and hymns while preparing offerings. Traditional music and dance performances are organised at the Gaurighat, Mrigasthali and Kirateshwar ashrams around the temple on the occasion. Pashupatinath attracts devotees from Nepal, India, and other South Asian countries on this grand occasion. Lord Shiva is worshipped not only by the Hindus but also by Buddhists and Kiratis. Some worship Lord Shiva in the form of Bhairava.

# Toll in Sudan military plane crash rises to 46

**PTI ■ CAIRO**  
The death toll from a Sudanese military plane crash in the city of Omdurman increased to at least 46 people, officials said Wednesday. The Khartoum Media Office said the crash also injured 10 others. The Antonov aircraft crashed Tuesday while taking off from the Wadi Sayidna air base north of Omdurman, the military said in a statement. Omdurman is the sister city of the capital, Khartoum. The military said that armed forces personnel and civilians were killed in the crash. It didn't say what caused the crash. The ministry said that the aircraft crashed over a civilian

house in the Karrari district in Omdurman, suggesting that there were people dead on the ground. Sudan has been in a state of civil war since 2023 when tensions between the military and a notorious paramilitary group, the Rapid Support Forces, exploded into open warfare. The fighting has wrecked urban areas and has been marked by atrocities, including mass rape and ethnically motivated killings, that amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity, especially in the western region of Darfur, according to the United Nations and international rights groups.



# Maldives Parliament passes amendment to reduce number of Supreme Court judges, suspends three

PTI ■ MALE

The Maldives Parliament on Wednesday passed an amendment to reduce the number of Supreme Court judges from seven to five and hours later three top judges were suspended prompting the main opposition to allege misuse of the ruling party's majority.

The suspension of the judges came shortly before a hearing on a petition to quash the constitutional amendment that disqualifies MPs for changing political parties was to take place, local media reports said. A row erupted in Parliament as the main opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) accused the ruling People's National Congress (PNC) of using its absolute majority to completely disregard the concerns raised by Counsel General Fathima Filza regarding the bill.

The Parliament took the floor vote on the bill on Wednesday morning after ejecting three parliamentarians from the MDP and the bill was passed with a majority vote of 68-9, news portal Sun.mv said. "This legislative change,

according to the bill, seeks to align the judiciary more closely with the nation's constitutional principles and ensure it serves the best interests of the people," Public Service Media (PSM News), the state-run news agency, said.

"As the highest judicial authority in the Maldives, the Supreme Court wields considerable influence over the nation's legal framework," the PSM News added.

The newly passed amendment mandates that the Supreme Court bench consist of five justices, including the Chief Justice. "Additionally, the Judicial Services Commission (JSC) is now tasked with recommending the removal of any justice deemed unfit for their role, with such recommendations submitted to parliament," it said, adding, a two-thirds majority vote in parliament is required to remove a justice.

Accordingly, hours later, the Judicial Services Commission (JSC) announced the suspension of three Supreme Court justices: Justice Dr Azmiralda Zahir, Justice Mahaz Ali Zahir, and Justice Husnu Al Suood. These suspensions were con-

firmed by the JSC to PSM News as "a consequence of an ongoing criminal investigation conducted by the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) pursuant to Section 25(o) of the Judicial Services Commission Act."

Earlier in November 2024, a subsection was added to Article 73 of the Constitution, specifying new conditions for the removal of MPs, prompting former Kendhoo MP Ali Hussain to petition the court to quash the amendment, news-portal Adhadu.com said.

A hearing of the constitutional case was scheduled for 11:00 am on Wednesday after Ali requested the court to issue an interim order to suspend procedures for MP disqualification until a final decision is reached in the case, it added.

The justices were suspended without ratifying the new bill, the portal said, adding, "Last night, Counsel General Fathimah Filza advised that it is unfair to investigate and dismiss a judge solely for the purpose of the bill."

Opposition and legal experts have said the bill is unconstitutional and its only purpose is to exert the government's influ-

ence on the courts, it added. Sun.mv said that the amendment to the Judicature Act was submitted on Sunday night and the bill was presented, debated on and accepted into the Parliament on Tuesday.

Counsel General Filza noted that downsizing the Supreme Court's bench would mean that two justices would need to be removed. She questioned whether removing the justices without giving them a chance to defend themselves is fair, it said.

Filza opined that if Supreme Court justices, who the JSC has not raised competency questions regarding, are to be removed due to a legislature to downsize the court's bench, it creates a situation where the justices' competency is called into question, the news portal said.

"The Judiciary Committee reconvened for an emergency meeting again on Tuesday night after it received Filza's comments regarding the bill," the portal added.

Anara Naem, the deputy chair of the Judiciary Committee, had on Tuesday declared to abstain from the vote but on Wednesday voted in favour of

the bill, a media report said, adding, "The reversal in her stand came after the PNC threatened disciplinary action against parliamentarians who fail to back the bill."

However, another PNC politician, Ahmed Azaan Marzooq, walked out as voting began, the report pointed out.

Sun.mv said that the opposition parties, including the MDP and The Democrats questioned the timing of the bill, and accused the government of attempting to influence the country's highest judicial authority and subvert judicial independence.

Meanwhile, the PSMNews said the composition of the Supreme Court has fluctuated over the years and added that initially, the bench comprised five justices.

"This number increased to seven upon the establishment of the permanent Supreme Court in 2010. The count was reduced back to five in 2014 under former President Abdulla Yameen's administration, only to be increased to seven again during former President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih's tenure," the PSM News added.

# 18 dead in bus crash in eastern Thailand



An investigator inspects the accident site where a bus travelling from northern Thailand overturned in eastern Prachinburi province, killing multiple people on Wednesday.

PTI ■ BANGKOK

A chartered bus overturned in eastern Thailand early Wednesday morning, killing 18 people and injuring 31, officials said. The accident occurred in Prachinburi province during an overnight journey from northern Thailand to coastal Rayong province for a municipal study tour.

The Department of Land Transport said it would coordinate with police in investigat-

ing the latest road accident and would intensify inspections of all public transport vehicles to ensure they meet safety standards.

Road safety is a major problem in Thailand, which according to the World Health Organisation ranks ninth out of 175 member countries for road traffic deaths.

The issue was highlighted in October last year, after 23 young students and teachers

died in a horrific bus fire while on a school field trip. Negligent maintenance and inspections were suspected of contributing to the tragedy.

In December 2023, a bus crash in the western province of Prachuap Khiri Khan killed 14 people and injured more than 30 others. The vehicle was carrying 49 people when it ran off the road and hit a tree. Police investigated the possibility that its driver had fallen asleep.

# Iran accelerates production of near weapons-grade uranium

PTI ■ VIENNA

Iran has accelerated its production of near weapons-grade uranium as tensions between Tehran and Washington rise after the election of US President Donald Trump, a report by the United Nations nuclear watchdog seen by The Associated Press on Wednesday showed.

The report by the Vienna-based International Atomic Energy Agency said that as of Feb. 8, Iran has 274.8 kilograms of uranium enriched up to 60%. That's an increase of 92.5 kilograms since the IAEA's last report in November.

That material is a short, technical step away from weapons-grade levels of 90%.

A report in November 2024 put the stockpile at 182.3 kilograms. It had 164.7 kilograms last August.

"The significantly increased production and accumulation of high enriched uranium by Iran, the only non-nuclear weapon State to produce such nuclear material, is of serious concern," the confidential report stated.

According to the IAEA, approximately 42 kilograms of 60% enriched uranium is theoretically enough to produce one atomic bomb, if enriched further to 90%.

The IAEA also estimated in its quarterly report that as of Feb. 8, Iran's overall stockpile of enriched uranium stands at 8,294.4 kilograms, which represents an increase of 1,690.0 kilograms since the last report in November.

The Trump administration said Iran must be prevented from acquiring nuclear weapons.

"President Trump has put the Iran Regime on notice by reimposing Maximum Pressure and is committed to ensuring the

regime never gets a nuclear weapon. He has also made clear he is open to talks with Iran to come to an agreement that fully addresses the outstanding issues between our two countries," National Security Council spokesperson Brian Hughes said.

Trump's first term in office was marked by a particularly troubled period in relations with Tehran. In 2018 he unilaterally withdrew the US from Iran's nuclear deal with world powers, leading to sanctions hobbling the economy, and ordered the killing of the country's top general.

Under the original 2015 nuclear deal, Iran was allowed to enrich uranium only up to 3.67% purity and maintain a stockpile of uranium of 300 kilograms.

Iran's accelerated production of near weapons-grade uranium puts more pressure on Trump as he's repeatedly said he's open to negotiations with the Islamic Republic while also increasingly targeting Iran's oil sales with sanctions as part of his reimposed "maximum pressure" policy.

Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has final say on all state matters, in a speech in August opened the door to talks with the US, saying there is "no harm" in engaging with the "enemy."

However, more recently he tempered that, saying that negotiations with America "are not intelligent, wise or honorable" after Trump floated nuclear talks with Tehran.

Iran has maintained its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes only, but IAEA Director General Rafael Mariano Grossi has previously warned that Tehran has enough uranium enriched to near-weapons-

grade levels to make "several" nuclear bombs if it chose to do so.

Iranian officials have increasingly suggested Tehran could pursue an atomic bomb. US intelligence agencies assess that Iran has yet to begin a weapons program, but has "undertaken activities that better position it to produce a nuclear device, if it chooses to do so."

The IAEA already warned last December that Iran was poised to "quite dramatically" increase its stockpile of near weapons-grade uranium as it has started operating cascades of advanced centrifuges.

That move came as a response to the Board of Governors at the IAEA passing a resolution condemning Iran for failing to cooperate fully with the agency. In the past, Iran has repeatedly responded to the board's resolutions by further enhancing its nuclear program.

Wednesday's report also said that Iran has also not reconsidered its September 2023 decision to ban some of the agency's most experienced inspectors from monitoring its nuclear program.

"The Director General deeply regrets that Iran, despite having indicated a willingness to consider accepting the designation of four additional experienced Agency inspectors, did not accept their designations," the report said.

Additionally, the report says that "no progress was made towards resolving the outstanding safeguards issues in relations to Varamin and Turqzabad," the two locations in Iran where the nuclear watchdog has questions about the origin and location of man-made uranium particles found there.

The report also said that Grossi held telephone discussions with

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi at the beginning of this year, during which he "reiterated his readiness to work with Iran to resume implementation" of a deal the agency and Tehran agreed two years ago.

The Joint Statement included a pledge by Iran to resolve issues around Varamin and Turqzabad where inspectors have questions about possible undeclared nuclear activity, and to allow the IAEA to "implement further appropriate verification and monitoring activities."

"Foreign Minister Araghchi indicated Iran's preparedness to cooperate with the Agency and raised the possibility of the Director General visiting Tehran again," the report said.

The IAEA report also said the agency verified that Tehran had increased the number of operating cascades of advanced centrifuges, powerful machines that spin rapidly to enrich uranium. Cascades are clusters of centrifuges.

The report said Iran had increased the number of IR-6 centrifuges by 5 to a total of 7 at its underground nuclear plant at Fordo.

The nuclear watchdog also verified that Iran had increased the number of operating cascades of IR-2m centrifuges by 12 to a total of 27 at its underground nuclear plant in Natanz.

Under the original 2015 nuclear deal, Iran was allowed to enrich uranium to only 3.67% with a limited number of its first-generation centrifuges at the underground Natanz Fuel Enrichment Plant only.

The more advanced model of centrifuges that Iran is using now enrich uranium at a much faster pace than the baseline IR-1 centrifuges.

# Guterres to visit Bangladesh in March, 'forcibly displaced Rohingya' on agenda

PTI ■ DHAKA

United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, who is scheduled to visit Dhaka from March 13-16, has said the UN would continue to mobilise the international community to support Bangladesh as a host to the forcibly displaced Rohingyas.

On Wednesday, Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha (BSS), the state-run news agency, said Guterres' office confirmed the dates of his visit, which follows an invitation from the Chief Adviser of Bangladesh Muhammad Yunus.

A release from the Bangladesh Permanent Mission in UN said the invitation was handed over by Khalilur Rahman, High Representative of the Chief Adviser on the Rohingya Issue

and Priority Matters, during his meeting with the Secretary-General on February 7 in New York, the BSS said.

In a letter to Yunus on February 25, Guterres said he shared the Bangladesh chief adviser's concerns regarding the impact of the Rohingya crisis on Bangladesh and the region, as well as the worsening humanitarian situation in Rakhine in Myanmar.

"I will continue to exercise my good offices, including through my Special Envoy on the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, to work closely with regional actors, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and other stakeholders, towards a political solution to the crisis in Myanmar, including creating conditions conducive to the safe and vol-

untary return of the Rohingya to Rakhine," his letter read.

The UN chief said he has requested his senior managers to provide guidance to the United Nations Country Teams in Bangladesh and Myanmar on how "we can maximise humanitarian aid and livelihood support to communities in Rakhine." Quoting the letter, the BSS further said that Guterres hoped that the 'High-level Conference on the situation of Rohingya Muslims and other minorities in Myanmar' would be an opportunity to galvanise renewed global attention and contribute to developing a wider range of solutions for Rohingya and other minorities.

"We await the agreed outcomes and plans for the Conference, following Member State consultations, to under-

stand how the United Nations system can best support the process," he said. The UN secretary general also reiterated the strong solidarity of the United Nations with Bangladesh and its support for the transition process under Yunus' leadership, the BSS added.

According to the UNHCR, the United Nations refugee agency, about one million Rohingya refugees live in the largest refugee camp in the world in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. The Rohingyas are an ethnic minority who have been denied citizenship in Myanmar, making them the world's largest stateless population. Most arrived in 2017, fleeing persecution, large-scale violence and human rights violations, as per the UNHCR.

# Microsoft workers protest sale of AI, cloud services to Israeli military

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

Five Microsoft employees were ejected from a meeting with the company's chief executive for protesting contracts to provide artificial intelligence and cloud computing services to the Israeli military.

The protest on Monday came after an investigation by The Associated Press revealed last week that sophisticated AI models from Microsoft and OpenAI had been used as part of an Israeli military programme to select bombing targets during the recent wars in Gaza and Lebanon.

The story also contained details of an errant Israeli airstrike in 2023 that struck a vehicle carrying members of a Lebanese family, killing three young girls and their grandmother.

Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella was speaking about new products at an employee town hall meeting at the company's corporate campus in Redmond, Washington. Workers standing about 15 feet to his right then

revealed T-shirts that when they stood side-by-side spelled out the question "Does Our Code Kill Kids, Satya?"

Photos and video of the incident, which was live-streamed throughout the company, shows Nadella kept speaking and did not acknowledge the protesters. Two men quickly tapped the workers on the shoulders and ushered them out of the room.

"We provide many avenues for all voices to be heard," Microsoft said in a statement provided to the AP.

"Importantly, we ask that this be done in a way that does not cause a business disruption. If that happens, we ask participants to relocate. We are committed to ensuring our business practices uphold the highest standards."

Microsoft did not answer Tuesday when asked whether the employees involved in the protest would face disciplinary action. The company also previously declined to comment about the AP's February 18

story about its contracts with the Israeli military.

In October, Microsoft fired two workers for helping organise an unauthorised lunchtime vigil for Palestinian refugees at its headquarters. Microsoft said at the time that it ended the employment of some people "in accordance with internal policy" but declined to give details. A group of workers has been raising concerns within the company for months about Microsoft providing services to the Israeli military through its Azure cloud computing platform. Some employees at the company have also spoken out in support of Israel and said those supporting Palestinians have made them feel unsafe.

The AP's investigation included exclusive details drawn from internal company data and documents, including that the usage of AI models by the Israeli military through Azure increased nearly 200 times after the October 7, 2023, attack by Hamas militants. The AP's report was shared and

discussed among Microsoft employees on social media and within the company's internal systems. In a community forum designated for employees to raise concerns with senior leadership, an employee shared links to the AP report. More than a dozen others questioned whether the company was violating its stated principles to defend human rights and not to let its AI models be used to harm people, according to screenshots reviewed by the AP.

Abdo Mohamed, a researcher and data scientist who was one of the Microsoft workers fired over the October vigil, said the company is prioritizing profits over its own human rights commitments.

"The demands are clear," said Mohamed, who works with a group of Microsoft workers called No Azure for Apartheid. "Satya Nadella and Microsoft executives need to answer to their workers by dropping contracts with the Israeli military."

# Trump administration creates registry for immigrants who are in US illegally

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

The Trump administration is creating a registry for all people who are in the United States illegally, and those who don't self-report could face fines or prosecution, immigration officials announced on Tuesday.

Everyone who is in the US illegally must register, give fingerprints and provide an address, the Department of Homeland Security said in a statement. It cited a section of the Immigration and Nationality Act — the complex immigration law — as justification for the registration process, which would apply to anyone 14 and older.

The announcement comes as the

administration seeks to make good on campaign promises to carry out mass deportations of people in the country illegally and seal the border to future asylum-seekers.

"An alien's failure to register is a crime that could result in a fine, imprisonment, or both," the statement said. "For decades, this law has been ignored — not anymore."

On its website, the US Citizenship and Immigration Service said it would soon create a form and process for registration.

In one of his 10 inauguration day executive orders related to immigration, President Donald Trump initially outlined plans for creating a registry and required that

Homeland Security "immediately announce and publicize information about the legal obligation of all previously unregistered aliens in the United States to comply."

It was not immediately clear how many people living in the country illegally would voluntarily come forward and give the federal government information about who they are and where they're living. But failure to register would be considered a

crime, and the administration has said its initial priority target for deportation is people who've committed crimes in the US.

**PUBLIC NOTICE**

Our Client Smt. Alka Luthra intends to get her Husband's (It. Sh. Sunil Luthra) self-acquired property Flat 03-09-08 (T-3) at Golden belt crescent, valley view estate, Gurugram, registered in her name. Any claim/interest contrary to that may be submitted along with documents within 15 days of this publication.

**Kunal Kahol, (Advocate)**  
E-171, G1, GK-III, New Delhi-110048

**PUBLIC NOTICE**

My client Mr. Rajesh Kandhari and Mrs. Archana Kandhari intends to purchase Entire Third Floor with right of builtup Property No. 43, in Block-A-1, (A-1/43), measuring 126 Sq.Mtrs, situated at Janak Puri, New Delhi from S. Arvinder Singh (45% share), Mrs. Harvinder Kaur (29% share), S. Kanwal Deep Singh Arora (16% share) and S. Pawandeep Singh (10% share) the present owner who lost the Original Conveyance Deed dated 07.08.2001, Registration No. 9233. If anybody including Bank, Financial Institutions, persons, relative has any claim, right, interest whatsoever in the said property shall inform within 15 days to the undersigned with documentary evidence. In the event of no response to this notice, then My client shall presume that title of the said property is unencumbered and clear.

**Karnail Singh, (Advocate)**  
K-8, Basement, Jangpura Extension New Delhi. Contact No. 9811163363 & 9953683363

**PUBLIC NOTICE**

I, Ashwani Sharma, son of Late Sh. Dinesh Kumar, resident of 578, Sector-15, Part-1, Gurugram do hereby solemnly affirm and declare as under:

1. That I am contesting the election of Member from Ward No. 13 of the Municipal Corporation Gurugram as a candidate set up as Independent.
2. That I hereby declare that, at the time of filing of the nomination form, a criminal case bearing FIR. No. 0288/2017, registered at Police Station Civil Lines, Sector-15, Part-2, Opp. Galaxy, Gurugram under Section 279, 336, 337 & 338 of the Indian Penal Code 1860 is under trial adjudication against me before the Hon'ble Court of Ms. Anshuman, Judicial Magistrate, 1 Class, Gurugram, vide case No. H.R.G.R. 030261232017 (Ch11895).

**THE PIONEER CLASSIFIEDS**

• CHANGE OF NAME •

**I, Sanaj Bano W/o** No.15562952X Hav Mohammed Arif, R/o- Phogri, Nagaur, Rajasthan- 341303, have changed my name from Sanaj Bano to Shahhaj, vide affidavit dated 26/02/2025 before Notary Public Delhi.

**PD(1585)C I, Jagdish Parsad, Father of** No.12876853W RFN/HK Dashrath, R/o- Ward No.- 4, 12 Khand 12, Ganga Nagar, Rajasthan- 335707, have changed my name from Jagdish Parsad to Jagdish Kumar, vide affidavit dated 26/02/2025 before Notary Public Delhi.

**PD(1586)C I, hitherto known as Pradeep** Kumar Verma S/o- Late Daya Nand, R/o - D1C/47 A, Janak Puri, Delhi- 110058, have changed my name and shall hereafter be known as Pradeep Kumar for all purposes.

**PD(1587)C I, Gulab Kanwar, W/o** No.15705449L L/NK Rajput Dashrath Singh, R/o- Parsotamnagr, PO- Odhav, Ahmedabad, Gujarat- 282375, have changed my name from Gulab Kanwar to Rajput Gulabkanwar Dashrath Singh, vide affidavit dated 26/02/2025 before Notary Public Delhi.

**PD(1588)C I, Khumukcham Tampha Devi,** W/o (L) Khumukcham Tenden Singh, Ex-TS-Naik, REGTI, No-04352400Y, permanent resident of Heitup Makhong Leikai, PO, Kakching & P.S. Waikhong, Kakching district, Manipur - 795103, inform that my name was wrongly written as Tampha Kuki in the Pension Payment Order No. S/046240/96 (Army). The actual name is Khumukcham Tampha Devi and will use in all future purposes.

**PD(1590)C I, Suresh, S/O. Shri Hira Lal,** R/O. J-282, Jahangirpuri, Delhi -1100 33, That, I, Have Changed My Name from Suresh Kumar To Suresh, For All Purposes.

**PD(1591)C**

**PUBLIC NOTICE**

Notice is hereby given that my client Balraj Singh Negi is the owner and is in process to avail the LAP against his property Space bearing no. 115, on first floor without roof rights, having its super area 60.87 sq. mtrs. plinth covered area 46 sq. mtrs. (said space) out of Plot no. 1, measuring area 325 sq. yds. part of Plot no. 1, measuring 500 sq. yds. out of Kharsa no. 456, in the area of Village, Mandawali Fazalpur, in the block of Aruna Park, in Block-C, now known as Property no. C-1A, building known as "Sikka Ms Chamber" Aruna Park, Laxmi Nagar, Vikas Marg, Delhi-110027, (having loan from AU Small Finance Bank), having acquired the same vide Sale Deed dated 27/2019 Doc no.4371 executed by Kavita Khullar. He confirmed that below mentioned Document pertaining to the Property in Question is not available with him and for the same, he already lodged the FIR dated 17/06/2023.

Chattel Sale Deed dated 23.08.1996 executed by Mrs. Sikka Promoters Private Limited in favour of Mrs. Savita Arora and Mrs. Sunam Arora (Doc. No. 4476) All persons having any claim against or in respect of the said Property, or any part thereof, by way of sale, exchange, mortgage (equitable/registered or otherwise), gift, trust, inheritance, family arrangement, maintenance, bequest, partnership, possession, lease, sublease, tenancy, license, lien, charge, pledge, easement or otherwise whatsoever, are hereby requested to notify the same in writing to us with supporting documentary evidence at the address mentioned below within 07 days from the date hereof, failing which the claim of claims, if any, of such person or persons will be considered to have been waived and/or abandoned.

**Kamal Kant Gupta (Advocate)**  
Unit No. FF-2, First floor, Mahalaxmi Metro Tower Sec-4, Vasthali, Giza, U.P., Mob. 9810963551

**PUBLIC NOTICE**

Public at large is hereby informed that my Client, Sh. Ratan Kumar, S/o Sh. Lekhrum, residing at H. No. 226, Near Booster Pump, Baba Mohalla, Village & P.O. Aya Nagar, Delhi-110047, has severed all relations with his son, Sh. Deepak Kumar, due to his misbehaviour and misconduct towards my Client and his family members. My Client has debarred his son, Sh. Deepak Kumar, from all his movable and immovable property/properties. Furthermore, my Client declares that he has no control over his son, Sh. Deepak Kumar. My Client and his family shall not be responsible for any acts, conduct, behaviour, dealings, debts, or credits of Sh. Deepak Kumar. Any person(s) dealing with him shall do so at their own risk, and my Client and his family shall bear no liability in this regard. Yours faithfully,

**Karnail Singh, (Advocate)**  
K-8, LGF Jangpura Extn. New Delhi. Contact No. 9811163363



# NGL Fine-Chem, promoters settle disclosure lapses case with SEBI

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Pharmaceutical company NGL Fine-Chem and its promoters have settled a case with market regulator, Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) of alleged shareholding disclosure violations by paying a total settlement amount of ₹92.21 Lakh. The case was settled by NGL Fine-Chem, along with PCI Ferrmone Chemicals, Rajesh Lawande and Rahul Nachane. Of the total payment, NGL Fine-Chem paid ₹54.42 Lakh, while the other three remitted ₹12.6 Lakh each. This settlement followed an application from the entities requesting SEBI to resolve the alleged violations under its

settlement regulations. Acknowledging the settlement, the markets regulator in its order on Tuesday said, "In view of the acceptance of the settlement terms, receipt of the amounts by SEBI, the instant adjudication proceedings initiated against the applicants vide Show Cause Notice dated December 29, 2023 is disposed of in terms of the Settlement Regulations". The case arose from an issue pertaining to incorrect disclosure of shareholding status. SEBI's examination began after NGL Fine-Chem in July 2022 sought exemption from the requirement to make an open offer after shares were transferred to a Trustee.

While reviewing the application, SEBI allegedly found that the promoter and promoter group's shareholding increased from 65.45 per cent in June 2019 to 73.83 per cent in September 2019. The exemption application was later withdrawn, but SEBI examined the disclosure errors for the period March 2002 to June 2019. The investigation revealed that NGL Fine-Chem incorrectly disclosed PCI Ferrmone Chemicals as "public and non-promoter" instead of "promoter and promoter group" for the quarters from December 2002 to June 2019. Additionally, it was alleged that NGL Fine-Chem had

made incorrect disclosure in 31 quarters regarding the shareholding of PCI Ferrmone Chemicals in the company. Also, it was alleged that the promoters Rajesh and Rahul did not include PCI Ferrmone's shareholding in their takeover disclosures from 2011-2019. These findings pointed to violations of SEBI's Listing Agreement and Listing Obligations and Disclosure Requirements (LODR), regulations due to incorrect disclosures, as well as breaches of SEBI's Substantial Acquisition of Shares and Takeovers (SAST), regulations for failing to disclose promoter shareholding accurately.

# India targeting 20 per cent ethanol blending in petrol, says Hardeep Puri

PTI ■ GUWAHATI

India is looking at increasing its target to blend ethanol with petrol to more than 20 per cent and has formed a committee under the NITI Aayog for this, Petroleum Minister Hardeep S Puri said on Wednesday. Addressing the Advantage Assam 2.0 business summit in Guwahati, he said 19.6 per cent blending has already been achieved. "We will be looking at more than 20 per cent blending of biofuel. Already a NITI Aayog group has been set up and they are looking into it," he said. "We had set a target of 20 per cent blending by 2026, but already achieved 19.6 per cent. I am sure we will touch



Union Minister Hardeep Singh Puri with Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma during Advantage Assam 2.0 Investment and Infrastructure Summit 2025 in Guwahati

20 per cent next month," he added. Puri said that the country has a capacity of 1,700 Crore litre of blending, and already 1,500 Crore litre are being utilised.

With India spending \$150 Billion on different types of fuel imports, he said that one area where the attention is lacking is green hydrogen. "The green hydrogen price is

presently \$4.5. If you can bring it closer to \$2.5, there will be a revolution. We will see a massive shift to green hydrogen from traditional fuel," the minister told leaders of PSU and private energy firms present at the session on hydrocarbons. He said that every country is moving towards clean energy, but it has to be done by surviving the challenges and demands of the economy. "For an economy like India growing at six-seven per cent, it needs fuel. We need to survive the present for a cleaner future," he added. Puri said all the fossil fuel production companies will achieve net zero by 2045, even though India has developmental challenges.

# NCLT asks RCAP lenders to complete all procedural issues

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT) has directed lenders and monitoring committee to complete all procedural issues by March 12 for the ownership transfer of debt-ridden Reliance Capital (RCAP) to IndusInd International Holdings Limited (IIHL). The Mumbai-bench of NCLT on Wednesday heard the matter related to the resolution process of RCAP and asked all parties to complete all pending procedural aspects before the next hearing on March 12. An IIHL spokesperson said that IIHL voluntarily offered to release ₹2,750 Crore in equity capital into Reliance Capital's account to demonstrate its commitment to completing the transaction. The tribunal accepted the proposal. The Court directed all stakeholders, including the Committee of Creditors, Monitoring Committee, IIHL, and the Administrator, to complete all outstanding

procedural formalities by March 12, the spokesperson added. Since the last hearing of NCLT on February 10, seven meetings of the Monitoring Committee were held on various steps of implementation of the approved resolution plan. Besides, the intermediate escrow agreement has been finalised and the escrow accounts have been opened and are ready to accept disbursement. IIHL emerged as the successful resolution applicant with the highest bid of ₹9,650 Crore in April 2023 for acquiring the troubled financial services firm under the Corporate Insolvency Resolution Process (CIRP) of the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC). With the acquisition, IIHL aims to ramp up banking, financial services, and insurance (BFSI) business more than three-fold to \$50 Billion in the next five years as against the current valuation of \$15 Billion (as of September 30, 2024).

# New India Coop Bank vault had ₹10 Crore, books ₹122 Crore: EOW

PTI ■ MUMBAI

New India Cooperative Bank's Prabhadevi branch had a capacity to keep ₹10 Crore at a time, but the cash in hand book showed there was ₹122.028 Crore in the safe on the day of Reserve Bank of India (RBI) inspection, police have said. The Mumbai Police's Economic Offences Wing (EOW) is conducting a probing into the embezzlement of ₹122 crore at the New India Cooperative Bank and has so far arrested three persons, including two former top executives of the lender. The RBI's inspection team visited the corporate office branch of the bank at Prabhadevi on February 11, where they found ₹122 Crore cash was missing from the safe, an official said on Tuesday. The balance sheet at the corporate office branch was showing ₹133.41 Crore at the bank's safe at Prabhadevi and Goregaon branches, and ₹122.028 was the figure on the balance sheet of Prabhadevi

branch on that day, he said. During the probe, the EOW found the capacity of the safe at the corporate office to store cash was only ₹10 Crore, and they actually found ₹60 Lakh in the vault. At the Goregaon branch safe, they found ₹10.53 Crore cash on the day of the RBI inspection, according to the official. The vault at the Goregaon branch also had a capacity to store ₹10 Crore. The EOW is now probing why auditors looking into the bank's financial records did not raise an alarm over the missing cash from the bank, he said. Various CA firms audited the balance sheets, daily reports and the books of cash in hand. It was their role to verify the cash, which was kept in the safe, he said. Meanwhile, the EOW has summoned representatives of half-a-dozen firms which conducted audit of the fraud-hit lender at different times, another official said. These financial services firms were involved in statutory,

concurrent or internal audits during 2019-2024, the period when the alleged embezzlement took place, he said. As the initial audit of the lender was done by Sanjay Rane Associates, a partner in the firm Abhijeet Deshmukh, is being quizzed by the EOW for the last four days. Now, the probe agency has summoned another partner in the chartered accountancy firm, Sanjay Rane, to record his statement, the official said. Representatives of all auditing firms linked to the lender have been called from Wednesday onwards to record their statements, the official informed. "If needed, the EOW will seek forensic audit of the bank's financial records to ascertain how ₹122 Crore was misappropriated," he said. Bank's former CEO Abhimanyu Bhoan, who is among three persons arrested so far for the alleged fraud, had signed all audit reports and balance sheets of the bank, the official said.

# Centre, Paytm partner for startup mentorship

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The government has inked an agreement with Paytm (One97 Communications Ltd) under which the company would provide mentorship, infrastructure support, market access, and funding opportunities to startups, an official statement said on Wednesday. The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed by the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT) with Paytm to foster innovation and accelerate the growth of manufacturing and fintech startups in India, the commerce and industry ministry said. "As part of this collaboration, Paytm will provide mentorship, infrastructure support, market access, and funding opportunities to startups, helping them scale and innovate," it added. This initiative, it said, aims to equip entrepreneurs with essential resources, enhancing their ability to

develop cutting-edge payment and financial technology solutions. According to the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT), the partnership aims to support fintech hardware startups through mentorship and innovation guidance, helping them develop and scale payment and financial technology solutions. "It also focuses on regulatory and compliance assistance by organising workshops and providing guidance in collaboration with industry and government bodies," the ministry said. Additionally, the partnership offers infrastructure and market access support, enabling startups to test, validate, and refine their products while leveraging Paytm's extensive merchant network. The MoU was signed by Sumeet Kumar Jarangal, Director, DPIIT, and Vijay Shekhar Sharma, Founder and CEO, Paytm, in the presence of senior officials.

DPIIT Joint Secretary Sanjiv said, "By leveraging Paytm's fintech expertise and infrastructure, we aim to support entrepreneurs in overcoming challenges, scaling their ventures". Sharma said that Paytm is committed to empowering entrepreneurs through mentorship, financial support, and access to cutting-edge technology. As part of its Paytm for Startups initiative, the company will launch dedicated programs to support fintech hardware manufacturers. "These initiatives include mentorship programs, access to funding through investor connections and incubation programs, regulatory guidance with industry-focused workshops, and periodic tracking and impact assessments," it said. The DPIIT has earlier signed similar pacts with several firms including professional networking platform Apna; Rukam Capital, Aavaana capital, Bhaane Group, Flipkart, and ITC.

# CBI FIR against Godrej Properties in Chandigarh project

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Godrej Properties on Wednesday said it is "surprised" over the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) registering an FIR against the company for alleged violations of environmental rules in a completed project in Chandigarh and will take steps to protect the interest of the customers. CBI has registered an FIR against Berkeley Realtech Ltd and Godrej Estate Developers for alleged cheating and corruption in developing their project in Chandigarh in alleged violation of wildlife laws, an official had said on Tuesday. The CBI acted on the conclusions arrived in a preliminary enquiry registered in 2023 on a complaint from an under secretary at Punjab Raj Bhawan. The CBI has alleged that Berkeley Square, developed by Berkeley Realtech Ltd (now known as RSA Motors Private Ltd), and Godrej

Eterna, developed by Godrej Estate Developers in Chandigarh's Industrial Area, had allegedly violated environmental laws. The project allegedly fall within the 10 km radius eco sensitive zones of the Sukhna Wildlife Sanctuary and the City Bird Sanctuary, the PE findings attached with the FIR said. Reacting to the development, Godrej Properties spokesperson said, "We are surprised with this development, which was just brought to our attention. This action by the Agency appears to be in furtherance to the notices which we had received last year regarding Godrej Eterna (Project), citing lack of National Board of Wildlife (NBWL) clearance as a violation of Environmental Clearance (EC), because the project fell within 10 kms of Sukhna Wildlife Sanctuary." These notices were immediately challenged by the company along with all consequent actions thereof before the High Court of

Punjab and Haryana in Chandigarh, demonstrating that no blanket Eco-Sensitive Zone (ESZ) of 10 kms was imposed by the Supreme Court, the company said. "The said matter is subjective and we have put on record all facts that clearly substantiate that there is no violation from our side in this matter," the spokesperson said. The fundamental allegation is that clearance from NBWL was not obtained, which constitutes a violation of EC, the company said. "However, the EC never stipulated any condition mandating clearance from NBWL. Furthermore, the Union Territory of Chandigarh vide Gazette Notification on January 18, 2017 notified the final limits of the Environmentally Sensitive Zone at a maximum of 2.75 km from the boundary of the Sukhna Wildlife Sanctuary. Our Project is 6.6 km away from the boundary of the Sukhna Wildlife Sanctuary," the spokesperson said.

"The grant of approvals by the concerned departments, in the absence of NBWL clearance, which was never explicitly required under the EC, is being treated as a criminal offence 10 years after the completion of the project with requisite approvals ie OC and CTO and despite us fully complying with the conditions therein," the spokesperson added. As a responsible developer, Godrej Properties said it has always complied with the conditions and directions contained in the project approvals and have not violated any law. "We are taking advice from our counsels and will take all necessary steps to safeguard the interest of the project and its customers," the company spokesperson said. Godrej Properties is one of the leading real estate developers in the country. It has a significant presence in Delhi-NCR, Mumbai Metropolitan Region (MMR), Pune and Bengaluru.

# IndiGo leases three Boeing 787-9s

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Domestic carrier IndiGo on Wednesday said it will induct three more Boeing 787-9 planes in its fleet under a damp lease arrangement with Norse Atlantic Airways, as it prepares to launch flights to Europe from mid-summer this year. Currently, the Gurugram-headquartered airline operates two widebody Boeing 777 planes, wet leased from Turkish Airlines, to Istanbul from Delhi and Mumbai. Earlier this month, IndiGo had announced signing a deal for one Boeing 787 with Norse Atlantic Airways. The delivery of this first widebody B787 is on-track, and it is scheduled to start operations on the Delhi-Bangkok route from March 1, 2025, IndiGo said in the statement. IndiGo has signed "another firm agreement with Norse Atlantic Airways for damp lease of three Boeing 787-9 aircraft. These aircraft will be arriving in India in the second half of 2025 and will be serving

long-haul routes out of India," it said. In a damp lease, the lessor provides the maintenance along with the aircraft but not the crew and insurance. The damp lease of these three planes is initially for six months as per the pact but can be extended up to 18 months, subject to regulatory approvals, the airline said, adding that both parties remain committed to explore opportunities for further extension, subject to regulatory approvals. IndiGo and Norse will continue exploring opportunities to contract additional aircraft and increase their collaboration further. This significant milestone affirms IndiGo's strategic commitment to broadening its global presence and offering its customers a wider range of travel opportunities, the airline said. IndiGo is extending its partnership with Norse Atlantic Airways for damp lease of additional three Boeing 787-9 aircraft, which will make strategic inroads and

establish the brand in the European market, said Pieter Elbers, Chief Executive Officer at IndiGo. "As we execute our broader strategy to strengthen and extend our international network, we are steadily advancing towards our vision of becoming a global player by 2030, firmly rooted in India and driven by continuous expansion," Elbers added. IndiGo also said it is consistently expanding its global footprint with an aim to cater to the growing demand for international travel to and from India. Once all these four B787 are delivered to the airline, IndiGo will have a total of six widebody planes, comprising four B787s and two B777s in its fleet. Its current operation fleet stands at 355. Besides wet and damp lease of widebody aircraft to spread its wings in the international market, IndiGo has also placed a firm order for 30 Airbus 350-900 aircraft with an option for additional 70 aircraft, with deliveries expected to commence from 2027.

# 88 per cent parents seek action on minors faking age

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

A majority of parents surveyed favour a mandate for apps to shut down accounts of children opened by age misrepresentation or seek parental guidance for the continuation of the same, online survey firm LocalCircles said on Wednesday. The Digital Personal Data Protection Act 2023 mandates online platforms to verify the age of children and seek explicit parental consent before processing their data. The survey report said that some parents believe that many children have falsely represented their age when signing up on the platforms, and with no checks and balances existing on most platforms, they were able to sign up and use such platforms. "88 per cent of parents surveyed in favour of DPDP rules mandating that platforms (social media, OTT, online gaming, etc.) identify any minor accounts with age misrepresentation and proactively either seek parental consent or shut such accounts," the survey said. Out of 21,760 parent respondents, only four per cent favoured continued usage of the platforms without age verification. Out of 22,518 respondents, 58 per cent of parents favoured that internet platforms should rely on content type consumed, uploaded, profile information, images etc for age identification. The survey conducted between December 27 and February 23 claims to have received over 44,000 responses from parents of school children located in over 349 districts of the country. There was a difference in the number of responses to each question asked in the survey.

# India's proposed FTA with UK explained

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India has signed 13 free trade agreements (FTAs) and six preferential pacts with its trading partners to promote exports of goods and services, besides ensuring greater market access for the domestic industry. Since 2014, the country has signed three such agreements with Mauritius, the UAE and Australia, and EFTA (European Free Trade Association). India is actively negotiating similar pacts with the UK and EU. On February 24, Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal and UK Secretary of State for Business and Trade Jonathan Reynolds announced resumption of negotiations for the proposed FTA between the two countries. The India-UK negotiations are resuming after a gap of over eight months. The talks were

launched on January 13, 2022. So far 14 rounds of talks have been completed. **What is an FTA?** A free trade agreement is a pact between two or more countries to eliminate or reduce import duties on a maximum number (90-95 per cent) of goods traded between them. It also aims to minimise non-trade barriers on a significant portion of imports from partner nations while easing regulations to boost service exports and bilateral investments. **What are the different types of trade agreements?** FTAs are sometimes referred to by different names depending on their scope and depth of economic cooperation. These include PTA (preferential) or RTA (regional), or BTA (bilateral). WTO uses the abbreviation RTA to denote all types of such economic engagements. In a PTA, duties

are eliminated on a specified number of goods (India-Thailand). Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement - India-Singapore (CECA) or Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement - India-Korea, Japan (CEPA) or Trade and Economic Partnership Agreement (TEPA) are comprehensive in nature. **What are the benefits of these pacts?** Zero-duty entry into partner country markets helps in the diversification and expansion of export markets. Level playing field vis-a-vis competitors who may have already entered FTAs with partner countries. **How do countries protect the interest of domestic companies in these agreements?** FTAs provide for maintaining sensitive, negative or exclusion lists of items on which limited

or no tariff concessions are granted. Also, in case of surge in imports and injury to the domestic industry, a country is allowed to take recourse to trade remedial measures such as anti-dumping and safeguards on imports. **With which countries has India signed these pacts?** India has inked trade deals with Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Korea, Japan, Australia, the UAE, Mauritius and ASEAN and EFTA blocs. According to think tank Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI), India has shifted its FTA focus from eastern (ASEAN, Japan, Korea) to western partners after securing deals with key Asian economies. India is now prioritizing FTAs with the UK, EU, and US to expand exports and strengthen trade ties with major western economies. **What is the aim of India-UK**

**FTA?** To boost trade and investment by reducing tariff and non tariff barriers and improving market access. It would also help expand opportunities in technology, healthcare, and education. **What gains would India achieve from the FTA in merchandise trade?** In FY24, India's merchandise exports to the UK were valued at \$12.9 Billion. GTRI Founder Ajay Srivastava says the pact is expected to have a limited impact on increasing these exports because over half of Indian products already enter the UK with low or no tariffs. The average tariff on goods imported from India into the UK is 4.2 per cent. There won't be any benefit from reducing duties for Indian products worth \$6.8 Billion, as they already face no tariffs in the UK, even without the FTA.

# India needs 1.2-1.5 tax buoyancy for 6.5-7 per cent growth: EY

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India has to maintain a tax buoyancy in the range of 1.2-1.5 to achieve a growth of 6.5-7 per cent, an EY report said on Wednesday. The report also said that the government may need to strengthen revenue mobilisation, particularly by increasing the tax-to-GDP ratio from the estimated 12 per cent in FY26 (Budget Estimates) to 14 per cent by FY31. India's fiscal strategy must focus on enhancing tax buoyancy, prudent expenditure management, and continued structural reforms to ensure sustainable growth, EY said. "EY India Chief Policy Advisor D K Srivastava said the FY26 budget strategically balances fiscal consolidation with growth imperatives. "However, for India to achieve a medium-term growth trajectory of 6.5-

7.0 per cent and realize its Viksit Bharat vision, it must ensure tax buoyancy remains in the 1.2-1.5 range. This would help create the necessary fiscal room to accelerate infrastructure expansion, enhance social sector spending, and maintain fiscal discipline," Srivastava added. The EY India Economy Watch report noted that over the past three years, gross tax revenue buoyancy has gently moderated, from 1.4 in FY24 to 1.15 in FY25 (RE) and projected to be 1.07 in FY26(BE). "Maintaining tax buoyancy in the 1.2-1.5 range could help the Government of India achieve 6.5-7 per cent GDP growth," the EY Report said. Indian economy is projected to grow in the range of 6.3-6.8 per cent in the next fiscal. In the current fiscal, the GDP growth is estimated to be 6.4 per cent.



# Praggnanandhaa set to battle David Navara in Prague Masters

**PTI ■ PRAGUE**  
On a high after his triumph at the Tata Steel Masters, Indian Grandmaster Praggnanandhaa got a good draw and will take on local star David Navara in the first round of the Prague Masters. Starting as the second seed, Praggnanandhaa will have his task cut out with the white pieces against Navara, who has been around for a long time as one of the top European players. Praggnanandhaa will have five games as white in the 10-players, nine-rounds tournament which adds to his advantage of being one of the top favourites to annex the crown. The other Indian in the fray, Aravindh Chithambaram, will start his campaign against another local player, Nguyen Thai Dai Van, who impressed everyone recently by winning the challengers section of the Tata Steel tournament and qualified for the premium event in 2026. In other games of the opening round, top seed Wei Yi of China will have black pieces against German Vincent Keymer, Dutch Anish Giri will also start as black against Le Quang Leim of Vietnam, while American Sam



Shankland will have the slightly favourable colour against 16-year-old Turkish talent Gurel Ediz. Praggnanandhaa will have white games against Dai Van, Aravindh, Wei Yi and Quang Leim as the tournament progresses. The Indian has a last round game with Giri, who is also tipped for a podium finish and is someone who can turn things around. Aravindh could well be the dark horse of the tournament given his ability to calculate deep and his insatiable hunger for success. Like Praggnanandhaa, Aravindh also has

five games as white in the tournament but needs to get in to the groove early. Wei Yi has been maintaining himself in the top 10 of the world rankings and can be a very hard nut to crack. What makes him a feared opponent is his ability to play dynamic chess at the highest level when the opportunity demands. In the challengers' section Divya Deshmukh is the lone Indian participant and will face Ivan Salgado Lopez of Spain. Divya had a forgettable Tata Steel challengers and will like to recover some of the lost ground here.

# Inter Miami beats Sporting KC, 3-1

**PTI ■ FORT LAUDERDALE (USA)**  
Lionel Messi opened the scoring with a masterful strike in the 19th minute, and Inter Miami beat Sporting Kansas City 3-1 in the second leg of the CONCACAF Champions Cup's first round. Luis Suárez and Tadeo Allende also scored as Inter Miami advanced with a 4-1 aggregate on Tuesday night to face Jamaica Premier League champion Cavalier FC in the round of 16 on March 6. Messi also scored in Miami's 1-0 win at Kansas City in the first leg last Wednesday. Memo Rodríguez scored for Kansas City — the team's first goal of 2025. Miami scored on all three of its first-half shots despite Kansas City getting the majority of opportunities early, with six shots and three on goal. Messi slipped a through ball to Suárez, then controlled Suárez's pass off his chest and rifled it past John Pulskamp into the bottom right corner. Messi also started Miami's second scoring opportunity with a perfectly placed ball into the path of Jordi Alba, who found Allende for the finish in the 45th minute.



Two minutes later, a misplayed touch by Kansas City's Jacob Davis led to Suárez's difficult goal that he bounced past Pulskamp. "There is this level of quality that guys like Messi, Suarez (bring)," Kansas City coach Peter Vermes said. "They know the moments in the game. They just know them. They operate at such a different level than other players, and they've done it at all leagues and levels. ... If you let them get ahead of you, the game can open up because with one chance they can break you." The 37-year-old Messi, who played every minute in Miami's first two matches, checked out in the 69th

minute on Tuesday. Suárez and veteran Sergio Busquets each played 81 minutes. Miami coach Javier Mascherano said he talked to his veterans about managing their minutes throughout the season to keep them healthy. That made room for contributions from younger players like the 26-year-old Allende. "We will try this season to push them as much as we can because we believe in them," Mascherano said of Miami's young players. "Obviously, I love to work with the old guys, or the big men, but I know that the young players can give us much." Kansas City had plenty of chances with 10 shots and four

on goal. Dejan Joveljic appeared to make it 1-1 in the 40th minute, but he was ruled offside. Rodríguez entered in the 58th minute and scored from outside the box five minutes later. Kansas City, still trying to find its footing after significant offseason turnover, remains winless in 2025. The FIFA Club World Cup trophy was on display at Chase Stadium ahead of the tournament's start in June. The tournament, which will feature Inter Miami and European powers Real Madrid and Manchester City, among others, will take place in 11 U.S. Cities in an expanded format with 32 teams. "It's a privilege to have the trophy here," said World Cup chief tournament officer Manolo Zubiria, "and for Inter Miami to be the first club that has it here in the U.S. ... A lot of excitement building up. The clubs are ready. We're ready." Inter Miami will open the monthlong tournament on June 14 against Al Ahly of Egypt at Hard Rock Stadium, the 65,000-seat home of the NFL's Miami Dolphins.

# Indian senior women's team loses to Korea 0-3



**PTI ■ SHARJAH**  
The Indian senior women's team went down to Korea 0-3 in their concluding Pink Ladies Cup match at the Al Hamriya Sports Club Stadium in Sharjah on Wednesday. The Koreans, placed 20th in the FIFA rankings, led 2-0 at half time. While Choi Yoojung (8') and Choi Daygeong (27') put Korea Republic in the lead in the first half, Mun Eunjung rounded off the tally in the 81st minute. In the Pink Ladies Cup, India

played three matches winning the opener against Jordan, before losing to Russia and Korea. As expected, the Koreans proved too hot to handle and camped themselves in the Indian half right from the word go. Credit goes to Crispin Chhettri's girls for closing the gaps early. It took the sting out of Korean attacks to some extent, but was not enough to keep their rivals at bay for a long time. Relentless pressure forced the Indian defenders to allow a few infringements near their area and one of them



# Mbappé to miss match against Real Sociedad

**PTI ■ MADRID**  
Kylian Mbappé was not included in Real Madrid's squad for the Copa del Rey match against Real Sociedad on Wednesday. Coach Carlo Ancelotti said Tuesday Mbappé was going to be available for the first leg of the semifinals in Basque Country, but the France star did not fully recover from a tooth problem and was left out of the traveling squad for the match. Also not included were regular starters Thibaut Courtois and Federico Valverde, who are going to be

rested by Ancelotti. Mbappé had missed practice on Tuesday after having a tooth removed, according to Spanish media. Mbappé has scored six goals in his last five matches in all competitions, including a hat trick in the return leg of the Champions League playoffs against Manchester City. Brazil forward Endrick and Brahim Diaz are the likely replacements for Mbappé in attack. Barcelona and Atletico Madrid drew 4-4 in the first leg of the other Copa semifinal in Barcelona on Tuesday.

# Barcelona, Atletico Madrid draw 4-4 in Copa del Rey semifinals

**PTI ■ MADRID**  
Barcelona and Atletico Madrid both rallied from two goals down in a frantic 4-4 draw in the first leg of the Copa del Rey semifinals. Atletico scored twice in the first six minutes on Tuesday before conceding four unanswered goals and coming back to even the match with goals in the final 10 minutes, including the equalizer by substitute Alexander Sorloth three minutes into stoppage time. "It's the worst result after we were up 4-2," Barcelona playmaker Pedri said. "It had already happened in the league and again now. We have to be more careful, we have to learn to keep it from happening." Atletico had beaten Barcelona 2-1 in Barcelona in the Spanish league when the teams last met in December, with Sorloth scoring the winning six minutes into stoppage time. "We never give up," Atletico forward Julián Álvarez said. "We always keep our heads up, believing that we can come



back. That's what we always do. We played a great match but there are still 90 minutes left." Barcelona saw Atletico jump to an early lead with goals by Álvarez in the first minute and Antoine Griezmann in the sixth, but the hosts tied the game by the 21st minute thanks to goals two minutes apart by Pedri and Pau Cubarsí. The Catalan club took a 3-2 lead into halftime after Iñigo Martínez scored in the 41st. Robert Lewandowski increased the lead in the 74th. Atletico pulled closer with Marcos Llorente in the 84th and Sorloth got the equalizer from close range. The second leg will be at Atletico's Metropolitan Stadium will be in April. The winner will play either Real Madrid or Real Sociedad, which will play their first-leg match on Wednesday in Basque Country. Barcelona last won the competition in 2021 and Atletico in 2013. The teams will meet again in the Spanish league in a match in Madrid on March 16. Until the semifinal stage, the Copa's knockout rounds were played in single-elimination games. Spanish media said a fan was detained following conflicts between Barcelona supporters and police.

# Prince William welcomes England football coach

**PTI ■ LONDON**  
Thomas Tuchel went from a castle to a palace on a busy day for England's recently hired men's soccer coach. Tuchel, who will take charge of his first England match next month, was welcomed at Windsor Castle by Prince William. "Great to meet with new England men's manager Thomas Tuchel today, and hear about plans for the team," read a message from the Prince and Princess of Wales on their X account, along with a photo of the prince and Tuchel shaking hands in a doorway at the castle. Their meeting at Windsor lasted more than an hour, Britain's Press Association reported. Continuing the royal theme,

# Lewis Hamilton starts F1 preseason testing for Ferrari

**PTI ■ SAKHIR (BAHRAIN)**  
Lewis Hamilton has started Formula 1 preseason testing for Ferrari in the next step in his bid to win an eighth F1 title with his new team. The 40-year-old British driver left Mercedes to join Ferrari this season after spending 12 years and winning six of his seven world titles with the Silver Arrows. After Hamilton drove out of the garage Wednesday in the red car No. 44 at the circuit in Bahrain, F1's social media posted the message: "Lewis Hamilton. Ferrari driver" followed by a heart emoji. Hamilton joined the team last month and will line up in the 2025 season alongside Charles Leclerc, who has been at Ferrari since 2019.



Each team is allowed one car on track at a time during preseason testing, and Wednesday's morning session saw Hamilton joined by Andrea Kimi Antonelli, the 18-year-old Italian rookie who has taken over his old seat at Mercedes. Among the other drivers on track were Liam Lawson, who's partnering champion Max Verstappen at Red Bull this

season, McLaren driver Oscar Piastri and two-time champion Fernando Alonso of Aston Martin. Two factors mean preseason testing could be less useful in predicting the teams' race pace this year. The weather so far Wednesday has been windy and unusually cool for Bahrain, unlike a typical F1 race weekend.

# Rublev loses in first round in Dubai Championships

**PTI ■ DUBAI**  
Third-seeded Andrey Rublev followed up his Qatar Open title with a first-round exit at the Dubai Championships, losing to qualifier Quentin Halys 3-6, 6-4, 7-6 (5). For the 77th-ranked Halys, who next faces Roberto Bautista Agut, it was his first victory over a top-10 opponent. "At the moment, it's a bit hard to comprehend," the 28-year-old Frenchman said on Tuesday. "Mentally, it was a very difficult match. Andrey is maybe tired from his week in Doha. Beating a top-10 (opponent) is a significant moment in your career. I'm



happy it happened today." The ninth-ranked Rublev had won the Dubai title in 2022. On Saturday, he beat Jack Draper to win the Qatar Open. Also Tuesday, top-seeded Daniil Medvedev beat Jan-Lennard Struff 6-4, 7-6 (4) and will next face Giovanni Mpetshi Perricard. Second-seeded Alex de

Minaur lost to 2014 U.S. Open champion Marin Cilic 6-2, 3-6, 6-3. Nuno Borges eliminated eighth-seeded Arthur Fils 6-2, 6-1. Other winners Tuesday included fifth-seeded Ugo Humbert, Matteo Berrettini, Felix Auger-Aliassime and qualifier Christopher O'Connell.

# Chelsea thrashes Southampton 4-0 in Premier League

**PTI ■ LONDON**  
Chelsea wasn't so reliant on Cole Palmer this time. On a frustrating evening for the England star, his Chelsea teammates stepped up — as demanded by their manager — to share the goals in a 4-0 thrashing of last-place Southampton in the Premier League on Tuesday. Christopher Nkunku, Pedro Neto, Levi Colwill and Marc Cucurella were the scorers as Chelsea ended a three-match losing run by beating a team destined to go down, perhaps as one of the worst-performing teams to ever play in the Premier League. Southampton has just nine points from 27 games. As for Palmer, he will wonder how he didn't get on the score sheet and add to his 14 league goals so far this season. The best of his many

opportunities at Stamford Bridge came midway through the first half when he was played clean through one-on-one with Southampton goalkeeper Aaron Ramsdale. He delayed and delayed and then shot too close to Ramsdale, who parried the effort away. After wasting another chance in the second half, Palmer appeared to laugh at himself. Palmer is on his driest run since joining Chelsea from Manchester City in September 2023. He hasn't scored in seven games now. On the eve of the match against Southampton, Chelsea manager Enzo Maresca said Palmer's dip in productivity has probably arisen because "we rely on him for everything." Maresca returned to that same theme after the game. "He has to continue to work, continue to be happy, continue to



laugh the way he does," the coach said. "We are completely happy with

him. It is normal to go through a moment where you struggle to score but it doesn't matter. Just

continue and you are going to score many goals." Chelsea climbed to fourth place in

the standings. The Premier League is likely to get five qualification berths for next season's Champions League. Another loss for Bournemouth, another win for Brighton Bournemouth is a more unlikely contender for Champions League qualification, its ambitions boosted by an 11-match unbeaten run in the league from late November to the end of January. However, the unheralded south-coast club has now lost three of its last four league matches, the latest being a 2-1 reverse at Brighton after Danny Welbeck scored the 75th-minute winner — three minutes after coming off the bench. Justin Kluivert had equalized for Bournemouth in the 61st, canceling out Joao Pedro's 12th-minute opener from the penalty spot after he was fouled by goalkeeper Kepa Arrizabalaga.

Bournemouth started the match in sixth place — one point behind fifth — but dropped to seventh and has now been joined on 43 points by Brighton, another improbable candidate for Champions League qualification. It was a fourth straight win in all competitions for Brighton since a 7-0 loss at Nottingham Forest. Palace wins in front of Thomas Tuchel. Crystal Palace beat Aston Villa 4-1 at home, with Ismaila Sarr scoring twice for the hosts in a match watched by England men's coach Thomas Tuchel. Jean-Philippe Mateta and Eddie Nketiah also metted for Palace, with Morgan Rogers replying for Villa. Fulham won 2-1 at Wolverhampton thanks to a goal in the first minute by Ryan Sessegnon and a winner by Rodrigo Muniz.



# Indian team should win Champions Trophy: Lalchand Rajput

**PTI ■ SHARJAH**

For Lalchand Rajput, it was a plunge into an unknown territory when he was appointed manager of a young Indian team for the inaugural T20 World Cup in 2007. No one gave them a chance, but they still triumphed.

Nearly 18 years later, the 63-year-old former player is backing an Indian team full of world beaters to not just win another prestigious ICC event, but do so convincingly.

"This Indian team looks ruthless. They try to dominate and win every game. They don't want to give the opponents a chance to come back into the game. That is the attitude. And the way they are playing, I think they should win the Champions Trophy convincingly," Rajput said.

Rajput is currently the head coach of UAE cricket team, and watched Virat Kohli score his 51st ODI century in the six-wicket win over Pakistan in Dubai on Sunday, and he now expects skipper Rohit Sharma to smash his way to a big hundred.

"So Virat got a 100. All boxes are ticked. Now it's only up to Rohit to get a big 100," Rajput quipped, adding that the "Indian team have a clear instinct that that will just finish their opponents."

"We have always seen that India



play better when the platform is big." But the veteran coach had a word of caution as well for the team, which registered comfortable victories against Pakistan and Bangladesh and will next play New Zealand in their last group game on Sunday.

"See, in cricket, you cannot take it

lightly. Every game is important, because if you take one or few overs lightly, that can change the game as well. So we have got to be at our best every time. We don't want to relax at any moment," he remarked.

"Both the games India has won comfortably. But in cricket, we can't say anything, we have to take one

game at a time. We don't have to take New Zealand lightly. New Zealand is a better team (than Pakistan and Bangladesh), they have also won both the games and their morale is also high," he pointed out.

On Kohli's superlative performance, the former India player said: "I think Virat played a fantastic

innings, you know, and he showed his class. We always think of King Kohli, I think he proved again. Big match, big match temperament. Big match player."

With the team in such great form, he is not in favour of ringing in any changes for the upcoming match, which is only of academic interest with both sides already in the semi-finals.

"I don't think they will try anything (new) because when the team is doing well, you go with the same momentum."

"Unless there is some injury, or somebody wants to be rested, but I don't think there will be any change. It's up to the management because there are few days in between. But I would always say that you always continue with the winning team," Rajput said.

Fielding is the only area where this Indian team can do even better, the former Afghanistan and Zimbabwe coach said.

"Yes, fielding, we can always do better. Because at the crucial stage, we cannot drop catches. So, fielding is one aspect where we can always do better."

"Last game, I was there. I will definitely come for the next game as well. New Zealand and semifinals, and hopefully, the finals as well," he signed off.



## Committee formed to revise norms for assistance to NSFs

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**

The sports ministry has constituted a six-member committee to revise the norms for providing financial assistance to National Sports Federations (NSFs) keeping in mind the "emerging challenges" facing India and the country's bid to host the 2036 Olympics.

The committee would be headed by joint secretary (sports) Kunal, and includes executive director (Teams) Ritu Pathik, Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS) CEO N S Johal, former TOPS CEO commodore (Retd) PK Garg, and president of Indian Weightlifting Federation (IWF) Sahdev Yadav.

Yadav is also the treasurer of the Indian Olympic Association (IOA).

In a note marked to all members of the committee, Tarun Pareek, the under secretary in the sports ministry, said, "The undersigned is directed to say that the norms of providing financial assistance to National Sports Federations (NSFs) under the Scheme of Assistance to NSFs were revised by the Ministry vide letter dated 28.2.2022.

"...A new Olympic Cycle has started which necessitated the need for review of the norms in view of the evolving circumstances, which demand a comprehensive review to address the emerging challenges and India's aspiration to host 2036 Olympic Games," read the circular which is in PTI's possession.

"Accordingly, it has been decided to constitute a committee consisting of the following to suggest the revised norms of scale of assistance for various components under the Scheme of Assistance to NSFs."

Last November, India submitted a 'Letter of Intent' to host the 2036 Olympic and Paralympic Games, to the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) Future Host Commission, taking the first concrete step in an ambitious plan after months of informal dialogue with the IOC.

Under the Scheme of Assistance to NSFs, the national sports federations are assisted for several purposes such as organising tournaments inside the country, participation in international tournaments organised abroad, purchase of equipment, organising coaching etc.

Among other things, the NSFs also take care of the requirements for customised training of top level and promising sportspersons.

In the latest annual budget, the NSFs will be entitled to a ₹400 Crore assistance from the ministry, which is a marginal increase from the ₹340 Crore allocated last year. The specifics of the committee's mandate are not mentioned in the ministry circular.

But its formation comes a few weeks after a top ministry source told PTI that a graded system of funding was being mullied. Under this system only those NSFs which comply with the good governance norms of the draft national sports bill will be entitled to their full share of the ministry grant.

"If you are fully compliant with the good governance provisions than you get your entire share but if it is not the case then there could be cuts when such a system comes into effect. But it is only an idea under consideration as of now," a source in the sports ministry had said.

"The implementation can greatly improve transparency and performance of the NSFs," he had insisted.



## Vijender calls for 'fresh and fair' elections in BFI

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**

India's first and only male boxer to have won an Olympic medal, Vijender Singh has called for "fresh and fair" elections in the crisis-ridden Boxing Federation of India (BFI) and said that he would not hesitate to be among the candidates if "given a responsibility".

The 39-year-old, whose 2008 Beijing Olympics bronze marked the beginning of arguably the best phase of Indian boxing before things went downhill little over a decade later, is currently playing his trade in the professional circuit. However, he hasn't competed since 2022.

"I would like to stand for the elections whenever they happen. I have fought all my life, it would be another fight for me. I have no idea whether I will find support but I am not afraid to place myself out there," Vijender said.

"If there is an opportunity for me to make a change, I will give it my best. But that does not mean I am retiring as an athlete. I would never do that," he added.

In a post on his X account, the star boxer said for Indian boxers to do well, it is imperative that they train abroad.

"For that, we need to conduct fresh and fair elections ASAP to build a strong federation. I will be more than happy to contribute my experience if given any responsibility by our government. @PMOIndia @mansukhmandviya," posted

the Haryana-pugilist, who was the first Indian male boxer to win a world championship medal (a bronze) back in 2009 and to be ranked world number one.

His comments come a couple of days after the Indian Olympic Association (IOA) handed over boxing's administration to an ad-hoc committee, citing a delay in the conduct of Boxing Federation of India's (BFI) elections.

The Ajay Singh-led BFI has promised to challenge the decision in the Delhi High Court and has called the IOA's order illegal. The tenure of BFI office-bearers ended on February 3.

The administrative mess has been in the making for months owing to internal complaints against alleged financial misconduct, and turf wars between officials, who do not have a history of cohesive functioning.

The IOA's five-member ad-hoc committee has been entrusted to oversee the sport's administration until elections are held.

The panel is led by former Athletics Federation of India (AFI) treasurer Madhukant Pathak and includes long-time boxing federation officials such as Rajesh Bhandari (vice-chairman), DP Bhatt, Virendra Singh Thakur, and former Asian champion Shiva Thapa, who serves as the sole players' representative.

The administrative logjam has had a cascading effect on the boxers' performance and training as well.

## Virat Kohli can break Tendulkar's 100-century record, says Jaffer

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**

Former India opener and Mumbai stalwart Wasim Jaffer believes Virat Kohli will continue to play for at least three to four more years and is well on track to break Sachin Tendulkar's record of 100 international centuries.

Kohli (36) currently has 82 international centuries across all formats, with his latest coming in India's commanding six-wicket victory over Pakistan in the Champions Trophy in Dubai.

But before this, Kohli had struggled for runs at home.

"As a cricket fan you want to see Virat as much as you can. With the form he was in (against Pakistan), nobody wants to see him get out. When he makes runs everybody is happy, and I am sure everyone wants Virat to play for 3-4 more years and break all records," Jaffer said during the launch of India Corporate T20 Bash (ICBT20), a corporate cricket



league, here on Wednesday.

"The century record is one that looks like Virat is going to break. When Sachin Tendulkar made 100 centuries it looked it will never be broken but the way Virat made runs since 2010 it looks he will break that impossible thing. If Virat breaks that Sachin Tendulkar will also be very happy," he added.

Jaffer, a member of the steering committee of the league, was also all praise for Shubman Gill but said it is unfair to compare him with Kohli.

"It will be unfair on Shubman

to judge him with Virat Kohli, Shubman is making his own road. He is playing terrific cricket. In England series, he was man-of-the-series, he made a good start to the Champions Trophy and I hope he will continue because everybody has expectations from him. He and the likes of Yashvi Jaiswal are going to take Indian batting forward.

"It is nice to watch the way he is playing cricket," he said.

Former South Africa opener Herschelle Gibbs, who is the brand ambassador of the ICBT20, echoed Jaffer's views, stating that Kohli has a lot of

cricket left in him.

"I think its long time because of his (Kohli's) fitness and his hunger, he can go for at least another 4 years. He is in the same boat like AB de Villiers, AB might have retired a bit too early but there were never issues with their fitness and hunger. Virat's hunger for runs is unbelievable," Gibbs said.

"The way he copes pressure specially while chasing in ODI cricket is phenomenal," Gibbs said India are favourites to win the Champions Trophy, and also lauded Gill as a "special player".

"Shubman is a special talent, he is technically correct and bit more talented," he said.

"India are obviously the favourites, they look very strong. But South Africa are also in a good space, obviously I understand their history when it comes to big tournaments but hopefully they can rectify that and we can see South Africa and India in final. But India looks formidable."

## Subhman Gill consolidates top spot in ICC ODI rankings

**PTI ■ DUBAI**

India opener Subhman Gill on Wednesday consolidated his position atop the ICC ODI batting rankings after playing a big role in his team's qualification for the semifinals of the Champions Trophy.

Gill, who scored a match-winning 101 not out against Bangladesh and 46 against Pakistan in Group A matches played in Dubai this past week, has gained 21 rating points and moved up to 817 rating points, increasing the gap with second-placed Babar Azam from 23 to 47 points.

Virat Kohli's unbeaten 100 against Pakistan has helped him overtake Daryl Mitchell of New Zealand to fifth position while KL Rahul has moved up two places to 15th position after notching an unbeaten 41 against Bangladesh.

New Zealand batters Will Young (up eight places to 14th) and Tom Latham (up 11 places to 30th) have moved up after scoring centuries against Pakistan while Rachin Ravindra's ton against Bangladesh has lifted him 18 places to 24th. Glenn Phillips is another Kiwi batter to gain, up 12 places to 28th position.

## ICC clears bowling action of Matthew Kuhnemann

**PTI ■ MELBOURNE**

Australia's left-arm spinner Matthew Kuhnemann, who was reported for an illegal bowling action during the second test against Sri Lanka last month, has been cleared by the ICC after undergoing extensive testing in Brisbane.

The development means Kuhnemann will be able to resume playing for Australia in the test tour of the Caribbean scheduled later this year.

"Kuhnemann's action has now been deemed to be legal and the left-arm spinner will continue to bowl in international cricket," the ICC said in a statement.

The 28-year-old Kuhnemann had undergone an independent bowling assessment at the National Cricket Centre in



Brisbane, where it was revealed that the amount of elbow extension for all his deliveries was within the 15-degree level of tolerance permitted under the ICC Illegal Bowling Regulations, the apex body said.

Despite being called for his action, Kuhnemann played a pivotal role in Australia's 2-0

resolved. It has been a challenging period for Matt however he has carried himself exceptionally well.

"He has had the full support of Australian cricket and he can now move forward to the next phase of his international career with great confidence."

After the test series in Sri Lanka, match officials asked for an independent assessment of Kuhnemann's bowling action. The ICC allows bowlers a maximum of 15 degrees of flex in their bowling arm, and anything beyond that is deemed illegal. The spinner, who made his Test debut for Australia in 2023, has 25 wickets to his name so far from five matches. Kuhnemann will be available for selection for the three-Test series in the West Indies across June and July.

# Champions Trophy: Pakistan to play for pride against Bangladesh

**PTI ■ RAWALPINDI**

Their dreams of defending the Champions Trophy (CT) title at home shattered, an under-fire Pakistan team will seek to play for pride when it faces an equally insipid Bangladesh in a dead rubber here on Thursday.

With the tournament offering very little margin for error, Pakistan crumbled to suffer heavy defeats to New Zealand and arch-rivals India, which left them on the brink of elimination before the Kiwis confirmed it with their win over Bangladesh.

Disgruntled fans are now calling for sweeping changes in the country's cricket structure starting from the very top of the pyramid, days after the first global tournament in Pakistan in 29 years got underway.

This marks the third straight time Pakistan has bowed out in the group stages of a global white-ball tournament, following early exits in the 2024 T20 World Cup and 2023 ODI World Cup.

At a time when teams have embraced a fearless, aggressive approach, Pakistan seemed to be stuck in the past. Their top order remains passive, playing out deliveries in hope rather than intent, waiting until the 35th over to accelerate.

Their struggles were glaring, as they showed no urgency, playing a staggering 161 dot balls against New Zealand in Rawalpindi and 147 against India in Dubai.

Poor shot selection, substandard fielding, and untimely injuries have only deepened Pakistan's woes.

The loss of game-changing opener Fakhar Zaman to injury left a huge void at the top, and his replacement, Imam-ul-Haq, failed to make an impact.

Meanwhile, star batter Babar Azam and captain Mohammad Rizwan have



also fallen short of expectations, offering little resistance when it mattered the most.

Pakistan has historically relied on its formidable pace attack to win matches, but frontline quicks Shaheen

Afridi, Naseem Shah, and Haris Rauf have looked rusty and ineffective, failing to provide the firepower they once promised.

Beyond the field, Pakistan's perpetual instability has been a major factor in their

downward spiral.

A system plagued by constant upheaval has seen the team cycle through countless selectors, eight different coaches, including World Cup-winning South African Gary Kirsten, and

four captains in just three years.

With chaos at the top, Pakistan's struggles on the pitch seem inevitable.

On the spin-friendly tracks of Dubai and Karachi, Pakistan bafflingly named

only one specialist spinner in Abrar Ahmed, leaving their bowling unit toothless. Like Pakistan, last edition's semifinalists Bangladesh have also been knocked out of the tournament after successive defeats to India and New Zealand.

Their batting lineup, barring glimpses of resilience from Towhid Hridoy, captain Najmul Hossain Shanto, and Jaker Ali, has largely failed to fire.

Despite thriving on spin-friendly conditions at home, the Bangla Tigers have struggled against slower bowlers, a weakness thoroughly exposed in this campaign.

Bangladesh's inability to capitalise on key moments, particularly their sloppy fielding, has cost them dearly.

Dropped catches in both matches have only added to their woes. However, up against an off-colour

Pakistan, Bangladesh could sense an opportunity to finish their campaign on a high and salvage some pride.

**Teams (from):**

**Pakistan:** Mohammad Rizwan (captain), Salman Ali Agha (vice captain), Babar Azam, Fakhar Zaman, Kamran Ghulam, Saud Shakeel, Tayyab Tahir, Faheem Ashraf, Khushdil Shah, Usman Khan, Abrar Ahmed, Haris Rauf, Mohammad Hasnain, Naseem Shah, Shaheen Shah Afridi.

**Bangladesh:** Nazmul Hossain Shanto (captain), Soumya Sarkar, Tanzid, Hasan, Tawhid Hridoy, Mushfiqur Rahim (wicketkeeper), MD Mahmud Ullah, Jaker Ali Anik, Mehidy Hasan Miraz, Rishad Hossain, Taskin Ahmed, Mustafizur Rahman, Parvez Hossain Emon, Nasum Ahmed, Tanzim Hasan Sakib, Nahid Rana.