



31 Naxalites, 2 cops killed in encounter

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
RAIPUR

In a major crackdown operation against the Left Wing Extremism, security forces gunned down 31 Naxalites, including 11 women during a fierce encounter in Chhattisgarh's Bijapur district on Sunday. Two security personnel were also killed and as many others injured in the face-off. More than 650 security personnel entered the Indravati National Park area from different sides and eliminated 31 Naxalites in their den, Chhattisgarh's Deputy Chief Minister Vijay Sharma said.

Chief Minister Vishnu Deo Sai said the end of Naxalism in the country and the state is certain. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Union Home Minister Amit Shah, the state will get rid of Naxalism by March 2026, he added. With this incident, 81 Naxalites have been gunned down by security forces in separate encounters in Chhattisgarh so far this year. Responding to the operation, Union Home Minister Amit Shah said that Naxals will be eradicated by March 31, 2026 and no citizen of the country has to lose his life due to it. "I also reiterate my resolve that before 31 March, 2026, we will completely eradicate Naxalism from the country so that no citizen of the country has to lose his life due to it," he wrote on "X" in Hindi. The home minister said in the direction of making India Naxal-free, the security forces have achieved a big success in Bijapur, Chhattisgarh. The latest gunfight took place



Security forces during an anti-Naxal operation in Chhattisgarh

PTI

at a forest in Indravati National Park area in the morning when a joint team of personnel from different security forces was out on an anti-Naxalite operation, Inspector General of Police, Bastar Range, Sundarraj P said. Personnel belonging to the District Reserve Guard (DRG), Special Task Force (STF) and Bastar Fighters, all units of the state police, were involved in the operation, he said. "So far, bodies of 31 Naxalites clad in 'uniform' have been recovered from the encounter site. Besides, a huge cache of weapons, including AK-47, INSAS, SLR and .303 rifles and Barrel Grenade Launchers (BGL), and explosives have also been seized from the site," the official said. Two security

personnel, one belonging to the state DRG and the other from the STF, were killed in the gunfight and two others suffered injuries, he said. The two injured jawans, reported to be out of danger, were being airlifted to a better medical facility for treatment, he said. Reinforcement has been rushed to the spot and search operation is still underway in the area, he added. Security forces have been continuously getting success in this direction and moving rapidly towards achieving the goal. The end of Naxalism, which is like "cancer", from the country and the state is certain, he said in a statement. "The sacrifice of our soldiers will not go in vain. I pray to

God for the departed souls to rest in peace and provide strength to the bereaved families, and for the speedy recovery of the injured jawans," Sai said. Hailing the security forces, Deputy CM Vijay Sharma said the national park area in Bijapur was considered as a safe haven for Naxalites, where more than 650 security personnel entered from different sides and eliminated 31 Naxalites in their den. All the deceased Naxalites were clad in uniform and automated weapons were recovered from them, he told reporters. "The IEDs (Improvised Explosive Devices) laid (by Naxalites) on the path of development of Bastar will be

cleared and we are working with full commitment to ensure basic amenities like schools, hospitals, water, road, anganwadis (government-run women and child care centres) and mobile towers reach the entire region," he said. Out of the 81 Naxalites gunned down in the state so far this year, 65 were killed in the Bastar division comprising seven districts, including Bijapur. Last year, 219 Naxalites were neutralised by security forces in separate encounters in Chhattisgarh, according to police. On October 4 last year, 38 Naxalites were killed following an encounter in Abhujmaad area along the Narayanpur-Dantewada inter-district border in the Bastar region.

Delhi BJP President Virendra Sachdeva, BJP Delhi in-charge Baijayant Panda, BJP National General Secretary BL Santosh, BJP MPs from Delhi and newly-elected MLAs before a meeting after the victory in Delhi Assembly elections, at the Delhi state office in New Delhi
Photo: Ranjan Dimri/The Pioneer

BJP huddles for new Delhi CM

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

After the party's historic victory in the Delhi Assembly elections, senior BJP leaders began crucial meetings to find its leader to head the next government in the national capital as party president JP Nadda met Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Sunday where key decisions regarding the future of Delhi's governance were discussed. BJP's strong performance across all regions and communities in the polls has left the party with a wide pool of potential chief ministerial candidates. With larger political messaging often guiding the party's choices in choosing its chief ministers in different states, insiders believe that Delhi would be no exception. The BJP won 48 seats in the 70-member Assembly defeating the AAP which secured 22 seats. This was the BJP's first win in Assembly polls in 27 years and the AAP's first defeat after three successive

victories since 2013. The BJP is also planning a grand swearing-in ceremony after Prime Minister Narendra Modi returns from his visit to the US after February 13. PM Modi will be on a two-day visit to meet US President Donald Trump on February 12 and 13. The swearing-in ceremony will be a grand event that will mark the BJP's return to power in Delhi after 27 years and BJP is planning to invite all the major leaders and chief ministers of the NDA alliance, celebrities and renowned personalities. Delhi BJP chief Virendra Sachdeva wrote to Lieutenant-Governor V K Saxena, seeking time from him for a meeting with the 48 newly-elected party MLAs. "I along with the BJP MPs from Delhi and our newly elected 48 MLAs wish to meet you at an early date. Please, allow an appointment at an early date according to your convenience," the letter said. Earlier today, AAP leader and Chief Minister Atishi

tendered her resignation to the Delhi L-G, who has asked her to continue till the ruling party stakes claim to form the government. Sachdeva also held The BJP, which went to the election without announcing a Chief Ministerial face, has started high-level meetings to decide the head of government, with five leaders emerging as key contenders. With larger political messaging often guiding the party's choices in choosing its chief ministers in different states, political watchers believe that Delhi would be no exception. While visible faces such as Parvesh Verma, a leader from the Jat community who defeated AAP supremo Arvind Kejriwal, and seasoned organisational leaders like Satish Upadhyay, Vijender Gupta, Ashish Sood and Pawan Sharma are being talked about, the BJP has a history of elevating leaders with a relatively low public profile.

Manipur ready for change of guard



CM N Biren Singh hands over the letter of resignation from the post of Chief Minister to Governor Ajay Kumar Bhalla at the Raj Bhawan in Imphal accompanied by party MLAs

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
IMPHAL/NEW DELHI

In a swift turn of events in months of strife-torn Manipur, Chief Minister N Biren Singh on Sunday tendered his resignation to Governor Ajay Kumar Bhalla at the Raj Bhawan in Imphal. Singh's resignation came hours after he returned from Delhi after his meeting with Home Minister Amit Shah. Through his resignation the CM urged the central government "to continue the stringent and fool-proof revised mechanism of Free Movement Regime (FMR) with the biometric being stringently applied time bound and faster border which is underway." He also requested the Centre to continue the "crackdown on

border infiltration and to formulate policy for the deportation of the illegal immigrants and the fight against drugs and narco terrorism." "It has been an honour to serve the people of Manipur thus far. I am extremely grateful to the central government for time actions, interventions, developmental work and implementation of various projects for safeguarding the interests of every single Manipuri," Biren said in his letter. "My sincere request to the central government through your good office is to continue with the same. I take the opportunity to enumerate the most important ones of them... To maintain the territorial integrity of Manipur which

has a rich and diverse civilizational history over thousands of years," the letter added. On Saturday, Singh convened a meeting with BJP-led ruling alliance MLAs at the CM Secretariat. The meeting was held in the wake of the opposition Congress seeking to move a no-confidence motion against the government led by Singh. More than 250 people have been killed and thousands rendered homeless since ethnic violence broke out in the state in May 2023. Meanwhile, state BJP president A Sharda confirmed that chief minister N Biren Singh tendered his resignation to governor in the interest of the people of the state. "We are yet to receive further instructions from the party," he told reporters. Sharda asserted that Singh worked tirelessly for the development and integrity of the state. "He has been trying to bring peace in the state since the ethnic violence broke out on May 3, 2023. The BJP will continue to work hard for the integrity of the state," she added. Congress termed N Biren Singh's resignation as "belated" and said people of the state were now awaiting a visit by "our frequent-flier Prime Minister" Narendra Modi.

BUDDH SUTRA

Tibetan Buddhist monks participate in Kangyur (the Tibetan name for the Buddhist sutras) procession at Mahabodhi temple in Bodhi Gaya
PTI

Atishi quits, Delhi Assembly dissolved

STAFF REPORTER ■
NEW DELHI

A day after Capital's verdict, Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) leader and Chief Minister Atishi tendered her resignation to the Lieutenant-Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena who has asked her to continue till the winning side BJP stakes claim to form the government. Atishi, who retained her Kalkaji seat, handed over her resignation to Saxena at Raj Niwas. Later, the Lt Governor also dissolved the Seventh Legislative Assembly of the national Capital. The notification, dated February 7, stated, "In exercise of the power conferred upon me by subsection (2)(b) of section 6 of the Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi Act, 1991, I, Vinai Kumar Saxena, Lieutenant Governor of Delhi, hereby dissolve the Seventh Legislative Assembly of the National Capital Territory of Delhi with effect from 8th February, 2025." Besides, the Election Commission of India (ECI) officially concluded the process of Delhi Legislative Assembly Election 2025, with the submission of the "Due Constitution Notification" containing the

AAP leader Atishi submits her resignation as Delhi Chief Minister to Lt Governor VK Saxena in New Delhi
PTI

list of newly elected candidates to the Lieutenant Governor. The same was submitted to LG by Ajoy Kumar, Principal Secretary of the ECI and R Alice Vaz, Chief Electoral Officer of Delhi. Also present on the occasion were B C Patra, Secretary, ECI, and Rajesh Kumar, Special Chief Electoral Officer of Delhi. Atishi served as Delhi's Chief Minister for nearly five months. She took oath as chief minister in September last year after AAP convenor and her predecessor Arvind Kejriwal resigned from the post amid corruption allegations against him. Five women candidates, including outgoing chief minister Atishi won in the Delhi Assembly poll 2025, down from eight in the 2020 elections. Atishi is the only woman candidate of AAP who won this time. The BJP is expected to stake claim to power next week after Prime Minister Narendra Modi returns from a foreign visit, party leaders said. In a related development, newly-elected MLAs of AAP met party supremo Arvind Kejriwal at his Ferozshah Road residence a day after the party faced drubbing in the Delhi assembly election, winning only 22 out of the total 70 seats it contested.

Dry spell to cast on Shimla apple variety

PTI ■ SHIMLA

A prolonged dry spell has got Shimla farmers worrying about the apple crop, which is now threatened by a hampered production. Desired cooling hours (1,200 to 1,600 below 7 degrees Celsius) for traditional varieties and 600 hours for early varieties have not come by this season. Farmers were also restricted from new plantations due to unfavourable weather conditions, Fruit Vegetable Flower Growers Association President Harish Chauhan told PTI on Sunday. About 90 per cent of apple orchardists in the state are still on traditional varieties, while the remaining have adopted high density plantations. "Snow during winter months also kills insects and diseases but we are

witnessing a one-month shift in weather for the past three years which has affected apple production," Chauhan said. The state saw a rain deficit of 97 per cent in October last year, 99 per cent in November, and 84 per cent this January, the ninth lowest since 1901, Meteorological expert Sandeep Sharma said. In all, the rain deficit was 41 per cent in the post-monsoon season (October to December), with December the only exception with 21 per cent of excess rain. Rain deficit from February 1 to 9 was 38 per cent, with the state receiving 16.2 mm of precipitation against a normal of 26.3 mm, the Met said. Sufficient chilling hours and moisture during winters is essential for a good apple crop, while hailstorms at flowering stage prove harmful.

The temperature has to remain below 7 degrees for appropriate chilling, which varies with latitude as the apple growing area falls mainly in the temperate zone, according to scientists. An increase in temperature tends to harm the apple production, while early spouting in stone fruit in low hills could affect the yield and the crop, said Sujaat Chauhan, an apple orchardist from Sandhu village. Farmers had dug pots in several areas for new plantation but a dry spell that led to less moisture in the land halted the process, says Sushil Dhalla, another apple grower. The cost of plantation is high as one plant costs between Rs 150-200, he said. "We were unable to sow the peas crop due to dry spell and are hoping to see rain and snow in February," another farmer, Rajhuber said.

Climate change affects arrival of winged guests

T K ROY ■ NEW DELHI

Global climate change has impacted the arrival of migratory birds to National Zoological Park (NZP) wetlands here this month besides several such habitats all over the country. However, NZP still managed to welcome few species of migratory water birds including Common Teal, Common Sandpiper and Great Cormorant. Sharing this information, eminent ecologist T K Roy said on Wednesday National Zoological Park (NZP) has cluster of four smaller wetlands which support the habitat for water birds both resident and migratory and especially breeding bird Painted Stork's large breeding colony since past many decades. Asian Waterbird Census (AWC), part of International Waterbird



Census recorded this year partially lesser water bird species diversity, he said. Giving details, Roy said 19 species of total population 609 includes 16 resident species and three migratory species in comparison to AWC 2024 i.e. 17 species of total population 1,249 includes 15 resident species and 02 migratory species. In 2025, among three migratory species includes only one Common Sandpiper, one Great

Cormorant, three Common Teals and among 16 resident species largely 382 Painted Storks, 58 Indian Cormorants, 37 Little Egrets, 41 Great White Pelicans, 19 Indian Spot-billed Ducks and 19 Common Moorhen in comparison to last year (2024) among 15 migratory species largely Painted Storks 985, Indian Cormorants 127 Great White Pelicans 46, Common Moorhen 17, Black-headed Ibis 12, Indian spot-billed Duck 10.

Roy said Wetlands International's annual Asian Waterbird Census (AWC) part of the global International Waterbird Census is carried out in the month of January in 27 countries together in Asia and Australasia including India. This exercise includes active volunteers under coordination of the AWC State Coordinators as per the confirmed annual dates by National Coordinator. AWC supports the conservation and management of wetland and waterbirds globally. The AWC here was conducted on January at the smaller wetlands of NZP with active support of NZP Director. Participants included serious birders, professor as volunteer from Amity International University, Ramanujan College, NZP Curator.



GUEST COLUMN

Sighting of Himalayan griffon vulture a positive sign



GS Rajwar

During my visit to the Himalaya in Garhwal during the last week of December 2024, I encountered about a dozen vultures feeding on a mule carcass on Moryana Top hill in Tehri district. Since this species has been categorised as a Near-Threatened (NT) species of vulture in India in the Red List of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), its sight and that too in a group is a good sign. A researcher identified its picture as the Himalayan Griffon vulture (*Gyps himalayensis*). The population of this vulture species is also decreasing. The other species of vultures recorded in India include the Indian vulture (*Gyps indicus*) or long-billed vulture, slender-billed vulture (*Gyps tenuirostris*) or Himalayan long-billed vulture, Egyptian vulture (*Neophron percnopterus*) or the white scavenger vulture, red-headed vulture (*Sarcogyps calvus*) or the Asian king vulture, the white-rumped vulture (*Gyps bengalensis*), also known as Indian white-backed vulture, griffon vulture (*Gyps fulvus*), also known as Eurasian griffon, the cinereous vulture (*Aegypius monachus*) or the

black vulture and the bearded vulture (*Gypaetus barbatus*), also known as lammergeier. The population of Indian vulture, slender-billed vulture, red-headed vulture and white-rumped vulture is categorised as critically endangered in the IUCN Red List, Egyptian vulture as endangered while cinereous vulture and bearded vulture are categorised as near threatened along with the Himalayan griffon. Only one species, the griffon vulture has been placed in the least concern category of the IUCN Red List with its population increasing.

Vultures are also known as keystone species in the ecosystem. Himalayan griffons are found in rocky areas and mountain peaks in the Indian Himalayan region. These vultures, mostly reside in altitudes between 1,200 and 5,500 metres. These large vultures have pale plumage compared to the griffon vulture and distinct stout bills. They possess white heads, which is one of the identification features. Himalayan griffons are usually not seen near villages or human settlements. They mainly feed on the carcasses of large mammals and monitor other scavenging birds to locate the dead animals or carcasses. They live in small colonies or groups, often dominating feeding areas and preventing other vultures from sharing the carcass. Himalayan griffons build nests within caves and are known to return to the same nesting site. The Himalayan griffon is the second-largest Old World vulture species, native to the Himalaya, foothills in north and north eastern India and

the Tibetan plateau which can live up to 40-45 years of age, plays a role in controlling the spread of harmful pathogens that cause diseases like anthrax, cholera, foot and mouth disease, rabies and distemper, and it also prevents the contamination of water sources.

The vultures almost vanished in India and neighbouring countries for a long time, and due to restrictions on some drugs and conservation efforts these species are not being recorded in some parts of India. The vultures were earlier an abundant and ubiquitous bird in India and they hovered over sprawling landfills, looking for cattle carcasses. Sometimes they also were involved in bird hits with aircrafts during take offs. These scavengers are considered nature's sanitation service because of their important role in removing dead animals that contain bacteria and pathogens from our environment and without them, there may arise disease spread and an epidemic. The near-extinction of the birds across India in the 1990s led to the spread of disease-carrying pathogens from an excess of dead animals, killing more than a half million people from 2000 to 2005. According to a BBC report, the decline of Indian vultures led to 5,00,000 human deaths. The story of vulture decline started in 1994 when farmers began giving the drug diclofenac to cattle and other livestock for pain, inflammation and other conditions. But it was poisonous to the vultures that fed on these animals, destroying their kidneys. The main cause of their de-

cline was the rampant use of diclofenac, a cheap non-steroidal painkiller for cattle that is fatal to vultures. During the monitoring of the vulture population of Keoladeo National Park in 1990s, Vibhu Prakash of the Bombay Natural History Society observed a decrease in the number of vultures. The declining population of vultures was also noticed by

lion-strong vulture population declined to near zero because of diclofenac. As per the State of India's Birds Report, the ban on the veterinary use of diclofenac in India since 2006, the decline has slowed in some areas, but few species have suffered long-term losses of 91-98 per cent.

A study published in the



the villagers in northern India in mid 1990s. But more than three decades ago, India's vultures began dying because of this drug used to treat sick cows. The decline in the vulture population happened not only in India, but also in neighbouring countries Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh. By the mid-1990s, the 50 mil-

American Economic Association journal shows that the unintentional decimation of these heavy, scavenging birds allowed deadly bacteria and infections to proliferate, leading to the deaths of a large number of people. The vultures play an important role in securing human health and protecting wildlife. A study esti-

mated that between 2000 and 2005, the loss of vultures caused around 1,00,000 additional human deaths annually, resulting in more than \$69 billion per year in mortality damages or the economic costs associated with premature deaths. These deaths were due to the spread of disease and bacteria that vultures would have otherwise removed from the environment. The stray dog population also increased, bringing rabies to humans. Unlike vultures, dogs were ineffective at cleaning rotting remains, leading to bacteria and pathogens spreading into drinking water through runoff and poor disposal methods. Some other threats to vultures are the use of pesticides and herbicides, other toxins, lead poisoning, vehicle collisions, electrocution and starvation.

Vultures in India live in communities. In India, the white-rumped vulture, Indian vulture and red-headed vulture have suffered the most significant long-term declines since the early 2000s, with populations dropping by 98 per cent, 95 per cent and 91 per cent, respectively. The Egyptian vulture and the migratory griffon vulture have also declined significantly, but less catastrophically. The 2019 livestock census in India recorded more than 500 million animals, the highest in the world. Vultures, highly efficient scavengers, were historically relied upon by farmers for quickly removing livestock carcasses. The sensitivity to diclofenac differed in various species of vultures. The white-rumped vulture is more sen-

sitive to diclofenac. The Himalayan griffon and the Eurasian griffon were less affected because they were found in smaller initial populations and were exclusively mountain-dwelling populations. The people of the Parsi community in India leave the dead bodies exposed in high towers called Towers of Silence for the vultures to feed. Due to the decline in the vulture population, they have been forced to drop the ancient customs for hygiene reasons.

According to the State of India's Birds report, India's remaining vulture populations are now concentrated around protected areas where their diet consists more of dead wildlife than potentially contaminated livestock. Some other drugs developed as alternatives to diclofenac such as acetofenac, ketoprofen and nimesulide have also been reported to be toxic to vultures. Diclofenac for human use was still being diverted into veterinary uses through the illegal sale of multidose vials intended for humans for use in cattle in 2011. The ban was strengthened by the ban on vials larger than a single human dose (3 ml) in 2015, but vials were still manufactured illegally. While the ban on diclofenac has been successful in Nepal and Bangladesh, it was widely available in India. The drug is still in use in some European countries such as Spain, which is a native of 90 per cent of European vulture population.

Several conservation efforts are now in place to protect and increase the vulture populations

in the country. Captive breeding programmes for the Indian vulture were started to help recover its numbers, though this method is slow and difficult because vultures are long-lived. Important vulture conservation programmes include the establishment of the Vulture Conservation Breeding Centre (VCBC) in Pinjore, Haryana by the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) and the Haryana Forest Department, efforts by the organisation 'Saving Asia's Vultures from Extinction', and the programmes in Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Assam and Madhya Pradesh. The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change has started an Action Plan for Vulture Conservation 2020-2025 for vulture breeding programmes. The population of vultures is recovering slowly in India with a strict ban on the drugs causing harm to the vultures. There are some examples of sights of vulture populations in some parts of India. There is certainly hope for the comeback of vultures in India and neighbouring countries.

(The author is professor emeritus of Sparsh Himalaya University, Dehradun and a fellow, Linnean Society of London. Views expressed are personal)

Kafal ripens early, experts blame climate change

PNS ■ BAGESHWAR

The popular fruit kafal generally ripens during April but climatic changes have resulted in this fruit ripening even before the end of winter in parts of Kumaon and regions. Former head of the geography department at Kumaun University in Nainital, Prakash Chandra Tiwari says that due to global warming, the sensitivity of trees to the rising temperatures also rises.

It is pertinent to mention here that the winter temperatures did not drop much and for long this time due to factors like reduced rain and snowfall during this winter.

Changes in weather have affected the ripening of kafal. It is already being sold in the market in the Lohaghat region of Champawat district. Journalist Dinesh Pandey says that in the remote forests of Lohaghat, ripe kafals are being



seen on the trees which is surprising the locals too. Concerned citizens opine that early ripening of this fruit is a result of climatic changes.

Experts point out that cutting of trees in the mountains and the increased use of concrete and other materials for constructions and roads is

causing warmer winters every year. The maximum and minimum temperatures during the winter are rising every year, they state. People associated with the kafal business say that its current price is Rs 200 per kilogramme which drops to about Rs 80 per kilogramme during season when the fruit is in abundance.

Routes2Roots launches 'Rhythms and Ragas' – a three-book series celebrating Indian classical arts

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

Routes2Roots, a Delhi-based non-profit organisation dedicated to promoting art, culture and heritage, in association with Parragon Publishing, unveiled a three-book series titled Rhythms & Ragas at a special launch event held at the India Habitat Centre. The books, which explore Kathak, Hindustani classical vocal and Bharatanatyam, aim to educate and inspire readers about the rich traditions of Indian art forms. Nainital-Udhm Singh Nagar MP Ajay Bhatt was present on the occasion along with the founders of Routes2Roots, Rakesh Gupta and Tina Vachani along



with Parragon Publishing managing director Vineet Sharma artists and culture enthusiasts. The Rhythms & Ragas series comprises three books—Kathak by Richa Jain, Hindustani Classical Vocal by Anirban Bhattacharya and Bharatanatyam by Varun Khanna. The books delve into each art form's origins, evolu-

tion, history, and traditions. Commenting on the launch, Gupta said, "For over 20 years, Routes2Roots has been dedicated to imparting cultural education to students in India and abroad. Launching these three books is a significant step in our ongoing commitment to fostering a deeper appreciation and understanding of Indian art forms. We hope Rhythms & Ragas reaches millions of readers worldwide, inspiring them to explore and cherish our rich artistic heritage."

Vidyut Pensioners Parishad urges action on pending pension issues in Uttarakhand

PNS ■ DEHRADUN

The members of Vidyut Pensioners Parishad of Uttarakhand appealed to UJVNL, PTCUL and UPCL to take steps at both the corporation and government levels to resolve pension-related issues of the retired employees which are pending for years. The ninth Maha-Adhiveshan of the Parishad was held here on Sunday.

The event was attended by managing director of UJVNL Limited (UJVNL) Sandeep Singhal as the chief guest along with other guests including director (Operations) of Power Transmission Corporation of Uttarakhand Limited (PTCUL) GS Budiyal and director (Finance) of Uttarakhand Power Corporation Limited (UPCL) Kamal Sharma. Addressing the gathering, the president of Vidyut Pensioners Parishad RP Thapliyal urged the management of the three bodies to take steps at both the corporation and government levels to resolve pension-related issues.

The general secretary of the Parishad GS Jain presented a memorandum to the officials that highlighted the concerns of pensioners and requested the authorities to address them. Singhal addressed the retired employees from remote areas of the State and acknowledged



their contributions to the power sector. He emphasised that the vast experience of retired employees continues to benefit the three corporations both directly and indirectly. He highlighted Uttarakhand's ongoing efforts to establish itself as a leading energy-producing State, focusing not only on hydropower but also on alternative energy sources.

He mentioned that significant progress is being made in areas such as green energy, battery energy storage systems and geothermal energy. Singhal assured the pensioners that their concerns were being addressed on a priority basis at the corporation level and will continue to be resolved promptly in the future. Budiyal also spoke about the corporation's consistent efforts in power generation and transmission, highlighting the completion of several projects in recent years.

NATIONAL CAPITAL REGION PLANNING BOARD
(A Statutory Body under Ministry of Housing & Urban Affairs, Govt. of India)
1st Floor, Core-4B, India Habitat Centre, Lodhi Road, New Delhi-110003

File No. 9188951

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Farmers' role crucial in India's development: VP Dhankhar

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
JAIPUR/NEW DELHI

Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar on Sunday said that no one can undermine the role of farmers in India's journey towards development. Addressing the Akhil Mewar Region Jat Mahasabha in Chittorgarh, the vice-president said the farmers possess political strength and economic capability, adding they should not depend on anyone's help. "When the economic situation of farmers improves, the country's situation improves. After all, farmers are the providers and they should not look to anyone or depend on anyone for help because farmers with their strong hands possess political strength and economic capability," Dhankhar said. "No matter what



happens, no matter how many obstacles arise, no one can undermine the role of farmers in India's journey towards development. Today's governance system bows to the farmers," he added. Remembering the Jat reservation movement that took place 25 years ago, the vice-president urged that never forget the support and efforts of this society gave social justice. Today the results of that effort are visible in the administrative services of the country and the state, he added. Encouraging the farmers to take advantage of Agricultural Science Centers, Dhankhar said, "There are over 730 Agricultural Science Centers to help farmers. Don't leave them alone, go there and ask them. What services will you offer us? Learn about new technologies and government policies. The vice-president empha-

sised the farmers' participation in trade and value addition of agricultural products. "Why isn't the farmer increasing the value of their products? Several businesses are running on the products of farmers, like flour mills, oil mills and many more. We should collaborate and make sure the farmer focuses on livestock. I feel great joy when dairies expand. There should be more growth in this sector," he said. Urging the youth to engage in agricultural business, Dhankhar said, "My appeal is to farmers and to the sons and daughters of farmers agriculture production is the world's largest and most precious trade. Why are farmers not involved in the trade of their products? Why aren't they participating in it? Our youth is talented."

Parliamentary panel calls for security assessment of Indian missions abroad

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

A Parliamentary panel has recommended that the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) should conduct a "comprehensive security assessment" of all missions and posts of India taking into account the geopolitical situation, potential threats and vulnerabilities in host countries. In its report, the Committee on External Affairs has also noted that India currently lacks resident missions in 42 countries. While acknowledging the challenges involved in establishing new missions, the committee recommended "accelerating efforts to bridge these gaps, particularly in countries where India has significant economic or strategic interests or a large diaspora presence". The fourth report of the committee on external affairs (2024-25) on demands for grants (2024-25) of the Ministry of External Affairs' was presented in

Parliament last week. The panel is headed by Congress MP Shashi Tharoor. The committee further said in its report that it has also "taken note of the criteria" for establishing new missions, focusing on economic partnerships, strategic cooperation, diaspora engagement and multilateral diplomacy. "The committee has also been informed about ongoing efforts to operationalise missions in other strategic locations such as Fukuoka (Japan), Kazan (Russia) and Yekaterinburg (Russia) and future plans for opening five missions in Europe and Latin America and Caribbean regions," it said. The parliamentary panel has made a slew of other recommendations including on the security of Indian missions abroad in view of the geopolitical situation and other factors. "In view of recent developments, the committee feels that the security of Indian missions and posts abroad is paramount for

ensuring the safety of personnel, the protection of sensitive information and the continuity of diplomatic functions," the report said. The MEA has informed the panel that the safety and security of Indian missions and posts is "continuously reviewed". The committee has recommended that "the ministry should conduct a comprehensive security assessment of all missions/posts taking into account the geopolitical situation, potential threats and vulnerabilities in host countries", the report said. Adequate resources should also be allocated for the protection of physical and digital infrastructure of the Indian missions, it added. The recommendations assume salience given the situation in countries like Bangladesh as also in parts of West Asia, and with New Delhi flagging in the last several months the issue of space being provided to anti-India activities in Canada that has affected the bilateral ties.

AIIMS to acquire automated biomedical waste conversion rig

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) is all set to get an automated biomedical waste conversion rig that can disinfect pathogenic biomedical waste such as blood, urine, sputum and laboratory disposables, without the use of costly and energy-intensive incinerators. Science and Technology Minister Jitendra Singh will formally commission the waste conversion rig, 'Srijanam', developed by CSIR-National Institute for Interdisciplinary Science and Technology, Thiruvananthapuram, on Monday. The prototype equipment, with a daily capacity of 400 kg, can handle 10 kg degradable medical waste per day in the initial phase and convert it into soil additives. "With its potential to transform treated waste into value-added soil additives with minimal human intervention, our technology provides a safer solution for healthcare facilities, avoids



the risk of spills and occupational exposure, and assists in preventing uncontrolled spread of infectious microbes," said C Anandharamkrishnan, Director, CSIR (NIIST). The technology, once validated, will be ready for full-scale implementation after securing approval from competent authorities. Through this technology,

CSIR-NIIST aims to provide an innovative and alternative solution for the safe, inexpensive and environment-friendly disposal of pathogenic biomedical waste, Anandharamkrishnan said. The technology has been validated by expert third parties for its antimicrobial action and non-toxic nature of the treated material. Incineration is a costly, ener-

gy-intensive strategy that forces the stakeholders to adopt simpler and cheaper, but sometimes illegal means, to dispose of biomedical waste. The CSIR-NIIST technology can also disinfect laboratory disposables for direct recycling. Soil studies have confirmed that the treated biomedical waste is superior to organic fertilizers like vermicompost. India produces 743 tonnes of biomedical waste daily, which presents a significant challenge for proper management and disposal. Improper segregation, open dumping, open burning and inadequate incineration lead to severe health hazards, such as the release of harmful human carcinogens, particulate matter and ash residues. Increased biomedical waste generation demands more transportation facilities, increasing the risk of accidents and spills. The WHO has also emphasised the importance of innovative and alternative protocols for pathogenic biomedical waste disposal, a statement from CSIR-NIIST said.

President Murmu to take holy dip in Sangam

PNS ■ MAHAKUMBH NAGAR

President Droupadi Murmu, the First Citizen of India, is set to visit the sacred land of Prayagraj and take the holy dip in Sangam on Monday. During her visit, which will last over eight hours, she will experience the Mahakumbh's grandeur and spiritual significance. She will also offer prayers at the revered Akshayvat and Bade Hanuman Temple. Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath will also be present on this occasion. President Murmu will begin her day at the Sangam Nose, where she will take a ceremonial dip at the Triveni Sangam, reinforcing the deep-rooted faith in Sanatan Dharma. Notably, the country's first President, Dr Rajendra Prasad, had also taken a holy dip during the Mahakumbh in the past. President Droupadi Murmu will then visit the sacred Akshayvat tree, which is considered a symbol of immortality in Sanatan culture, and offer her prayers. The site holds great signifi-



cance in Hinduism and is mentioned in ancient scriptures. This center provides detailed information about the Mahakumbh Mela through advanced digital tools, allowing devotees from India and abroad to experience the grandeur of the event more closely. The President is scheduled to leave Prayagraj for New Delhi in the evening. In light of the President's visit, strict security arrangements have been put in place across the city.

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Jail gets fake Presidential order to free murder accused

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■
LUCKNOW

Saharanpur police have launched an investigation after a forged document, allegedly issued in the name of the President of India, was sent to the district jail in an attempt to secure the release of a murder accused. Jail authorities grew suspicious and flagged the fraudulent order before any action could be taken. According to Senior Jail Superintendent Satyaprakash, the fake release order was for an inmate named Ajay, who is currently facing trial in a murder case. The document was purportedly issued by the "President's Court," a non-existent judicial body. Upon verification, jail officials confirmed that the order was a forgery, prompting immediate action.

VHP calls for uniform law governing religious donations for all faiths

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
PRAYAGRAJ/NEW DELHI

Alok Kumar, the international president of the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), on Sunday urged the Centre to enact a uniform law governing religious donations for all faiths. Speaking after a three-day meeting of the VHP here, Kumar questioned the existence of separate laws for religious donations. "When Muslims donate land to Allah, it becomes Waqf property. But what happens when Hindus donate to temples, Christians to churches, or Sikhs to gurdwaras? Why are there different laws for different religions," he asked. Referring to the Waqf Act of 1954, he claimed two Congress Rajya Sabha members questioned the then-Law Minister about having a separate law for Muslims. "The Minister had said he was considering a common law for all. Now the time has come for the government to implement such a law," Kumar said.



On the issue of "reclaiming" temples in Kashi and Mathura, the VHP functionary said, "We have assured the Hindu community that we will take all constitutional steps to regain these temples." The meeting also discussed the issue of "freeing" Hindu temples from government control. Kumar said temples across various states have been under government control for 208 years, with laws mandating that 12 per

cent of temple revenue be deposited in government coffers as administrative expenses. He cited a gathering at Vijayawada in Andhra Pradesh attended by "2.5 Lakh people" to demand temple freedom, and announced plans for similar large-scale meetings in north and South India in the coming months. "We will meet the Chief Ministers and legislators of different states to submit memorandums on this issue," he said.

Kumar emphasised that temple governance should remain in the hands of devotees, with representation from all sections of society, including Scheduled Castes and women. He also claimed that if temples were freed from government control, they could generate an additional ₹1 Lakh Crore in revenue for welfare initiatives for Hindus, such as healthcare, religious education, and temple maintenance.

On Waqf properties, Kumar expressed satisfaction with the government's recent actions and mentioned the VHP's recommendation to a Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) on the Waqf Amendment Bill that Waqf claims should not apply to the scheduled tribal areas. The JPC has considered our suggestion and recommended it," he said. On the demand from certain quarters to declare India a Hindu Rashtra, Kumar said, "There is no need for such a declaration as India is already a Hindu Rashtra. We do not seek a state with an explicitly religious constitution." The meeting was attended by representatives from across India and abroad, including from the UK, the US, Canada, Germany, Hong Kong, Mauritius, South Africa, France, Thailand, Nepal, Bangladesh and Guyana. Senior RSS leaders Dattatreya Hosabale and Bhaiyaji Joshi, along with religious figures like Swami Paramanand and Buddhist scholar Lama Choshphel Zotpa, were also present.

Ex-CM Nishank's daughter accuses film producers of ₹4 Crore fraud

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
DEHRADUN

Former Union minister and Ex-Uttarakhand chief minister Ramesh Pokhriyal Nishank's daughter Aarushi Nishank has accused two Mumbai-based film producers of duping her of ₹4 Crore after promising her a role in a movie. However, the two film producers have termed the allegations as "false". On the basis of a complaint filed by Aarushi Nishank, an FIR has been lodged against the two under various sections of the BNS, including extortion, cheating and fraud, forgery, criminal intimidation and criminal conspiracy, investigating officer sub-inspector Manmohan Singh Negi said here. In the complaint, she has alleged that Mansi Varun Bagla and Varun Pramod Kumar Bagla offered her an important role in a Hindi film they were producing



and lured her to invest ₹5 Crore in it after promising big returns in the movie's earnings. Trusting them, she initially transferred ₹2 Crore to the accused through her firm Himshree Films. She also made additional payments to them subsequently bringing the total amount to ₹4 Crore, the complaint alleged. However, the two later informed her that she had been replaced

by another actor in the movie and its shoot in India had been completed, she alleged. Aarushi Nishank asked the two to return her money but they refused to do so and also allegedly threatened her. Aankhon Ki Gustakhiyan - the movie in which Aarushi was offered a role - starred Vikrant Massey and Shanaya Kapoor in lead roles.

IIT Madras to host third edition of IINvenTiv expo



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

The third edition of IINvenTiv, a national research and development expo, will feature projects not just from IITs but also NITs, IISc Bengaluru and IISERs this time, according to IIT Madras

Director V Kamakoti. The expo scheduled from February 28 to March 1 is being hosted by IIT Madras. It will be inaugurated by Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan, with special emphasis on technologies in mature Technology Readiness Level

(TRL) stages, which are ready for commercialisation and can be transferred to the industry during the event itself. "This time IINvenTiv will feature research and development projects from all the IITs, NITs, IISc and IISERs besides top government and private engineering institutes that rank within the top 50 in NIRE. The primary objective is to increase awareness among industry of these technological breakthroughs and achieve better industry-academia collaboration," Kamakoti said. "Over 300 exhibits from participating institutions will be featured at the with a good representation from startups that have been initiated based on the R&D from these institutions. Special emphasis would be placed on technologies in mature TRL stages which are ready for commercialisation and can be transferred to the industry during the

event itself," he added. IINvenTiv is a flagship event of the Ministry of Education, which was first held in 2022 at IIT Delhi featuring exhibits only from Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs). The second edition of the event with participating institutions from top 50 of NIRE, apart from IITs, NITs, IISc and IISERs, was held at IIT Hyderabad last year. The highlights of the third edition include release of a coffee table book on leading technological innovations from Indian higher education institutions and a "chintan shivir". "A Chintan Shivir or brainstorming session will be organised for each thematic area, featuring leading experts from government, industry, academia and start-ups, with each session featuring a lead talk followed by a discussion on what is the current research and development, focus and industry need, a rapporteur from each session will be responsible for drafting an

outcome paper that will be presented at the closing of the event," Kamakoti said. "The focus in these discussions would be on the specific needs of the industry and how academic institutions can gear their research efforts to meet these requirements. The role of government and start-ups will add to the discussion," he said. The thematic areas that would be covered include artificial intelligence and machine learning technologies, aviation, defence and space, marine technology, medical and healthcare engineering, rural technology, smart cities and infrastructure, advanced manufacturing (industry 4. and 5.0) and circularity and sustainability. A coffee table book on leading technological innovations from Indian higher education institutions, which have led to great impacts on the industry, will be released during the event.

Sale, consumption of liquor, non-veg food banned in Katra

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
JAMMU

Authorities have extended two more months of the ban on the sale, possession and consumption of liquor and non-vegetarian food in Katra, the base camp for pilgrims visiting Mata Vaishno Devi shrine in Jammu and Kashmir's Reasi district, officials said on Sunday. The prohibition will be enforced on the 12-km track from Katra to the holy cave on the Trikuta hill and adjoining areas, they said and added that the order would remain in force for two months from the date of its issuance, unless revoked earlier. Katra sub-divisional magistrate Piyush Dhotra has prohibited the sale, possession and consumption of liquor and non-vegetarian food, under Section 163 of the



Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, the officials said. Besides the track, the prohibition would be applicable in villages within a distance of up to two Km on either sides of the track, including Arli, Hansali and Matyal villages, within 200 metres on either sides of Katra-Tikri road, including villages Chamba, Serli and Bhagta and within 200 metres on either side

of Katra-Jammu road including villages Kundrorian, Kotli Bajalian, Nomain and Maghal, the officials said. The ban also covers 200 metres on both sides of Katra-Reasi road from Katra to Nau Devian and Aghar Jitto and Nau Devian markets, within 200 metres on either side of railway station Katra-Sool Road and within 100 metre on either side of Panthal-Domail road.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Delhi dislodges AAP

In a landmark political shift, the BJP has stormed to power in the 2025 Delhi Assembly elections, marking its return after 27 years

Am Aadmi Party (AAP) that ruled for ten years has been ousted by the BJP. It is one of the major setbacks that AAP has suffered since its inception. Despite its misadventures it always remained voters favourite in Delhi. Now with the BJP making a comeback it has suffered not only a big jolt to the party morale but also to the brand Kejriwal. In a historic political shift, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has secured a decisive victory in the 2025 Delhi Assembly elections, ending the AAP's decade-long governance in the national capital. This marks the BJP's return to power in Delhi after 27 years. The BJP won 48 out of the 70 Assembly seats, surpassing the majority mark of 36 seats. In contrast, AAP managed to secure only 22 seats, a significant decline from its previous tally of 62 seats in the 2020 elections. The Congress party failed to open account, continuing its decline in the region. Notably, AAP's prominent leaders faced unexpected defeats. Aam Aadmi Party chief



Arvind Kejriwal lost the New Delhi seat to BJP's Parvesh Verma by a margin of 4,089 votes. Similarly, former Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia was defeated in the Jangpura constituency. Senior AAP leaders, including Saurabh Bharadwaj in Greater Kailash and Somnath Bharti in Malviya Nagar, also lost their seats. After ten years in power, AAP encountered strong anti-incumbency sentiments, with voters expressing a desire for change.

Legal troubles and corruption allegations against key leaders, including Kejriwal and Sisodia, further diminished public trust in the party. Meanwhile, the BJP successfully leveraged AAP's shortcomings, presenting a development-driven governance model that resonated with the electorate. This electoral outcome serves as a critical juncture for AAP. The party must undertake a comprehensive introspection. Perhaps it is time it realised that it would be a good idea to remain with the INDIA bloc and playing solo is not always a good idea. One of the major reason for its defeat might have been the division of votes. Congress though did not gain but pulled it down. Addressing the corruption allegations transparently and implementing internal reforms will be essential to rebuild credibility. Reassessing policy positions and strengthening grassroots connections can help the party reconnect with its core voter base. In his concession speech, Arvind Kejriwal acknowledged the defeat and extended his congratulations to the BJP, expressing hope that the new government will fulfill its promises to the people of Delhi. The results of the 2025 Delhi Assembly elections send a strong and clear message to all political parties—governance, credibility and adaptability matter more than rhetoric. The political parties cannot rely solely on past achievements; they must continuously evolve and deliver on public expectations. Ultimately, there are no shortcuts to winning voters' trust— even freebies have their limits.

PICTALK



Tourists take a ride on a hot air balloon, in Manali

The new geopolitical communication era



CHAITANYA K PRASAD

With emerging technologies, evolving geopolitical alliances and the dominance of visual storytelling, the way messages are crafted and delivered is being redefined

One of the critical areas where visible changes will be witnessed post-January 2025 is the communication landscape geopolitically. This era is positioned to redefine the very speedways of global communication, with a pivotal question arising: Are we on the verge of a 360-degree transformation in communication delivery, content orientation, outreach mechanisms, and the tools we deploy? Geopolitically, the communication ecosystem will embrace a new language—a language of immediacy, focused messaging, results-driven delivery, and the prioritisation of measurable outcomes to identify realistic patterns and global impacts.

As the world steps into this new chapter of geopolitical shifts, communication strategies are becoming more sophisticated, dynamic and multidimensional. The need of the hour is to analyse the new alliances afoot in the shifting political landscape and the major geopolitical developments. The evolving political climate is challenging traditional paradigms, compelling communication specialists, diplomats, and policymakers to rethink how messages are crafted, delivered, and received on a global stage.

The era demands a communication framework that not only transcends borders but also bridges divides with precision, creativity, and authenticity. In 2025, the phrase "a picture is worth a thousand words" takes on greater resonance. Visual communication has become the most impactful way to deliver messages. A single, well-composed image has the power to convey emotions, ideas, and narratives that words may struggle to encapsulate. Building on this, the explosion of short-form videos, and 30-second reels, for instance, has transformed the landscape further.

Their brevity and emotional depth make them tools of unparalleled influence in shaping public opinion, mobilising support, and even defusing tensions. This evolution places immense responsibility on communicators in the geopolitical arena. Diplomacy, once conducted primarily behind



closed doors, is increasingly playing out in the public domain through curated visuals, symbolic gestures and strategic messaging amplified by digital platforms. For foreign policy, the challenge is to balance transparency and strategy, using these tools to build trust while maintaining sensitivity.

As social media continues its rapid rise, many ask whether traditional media can still hold its ground in the face of this digital juggernaut. Social media has undeniably globalised and democratised communication, giving individuals, governments, and organisations a direct channel to their audiences.

It thrives on immediacy, engagement, and the power to go viral, making it an essential tool in geopolitical communication. However, traditional media is far from obsolete. In an era of information overload, its role as a trusted gatekeeper remains critical. While social media is the messenger of the moment, traditional media provides depth, analysis, and context—elements that are crucial for informed decision-making. For communication to be effective in this new geopolitical era, the two mediums must complement each other, creating a holistic narrative that is both immediate and enduring. The rise of artificial intelligence has added another layer of



SOCIAL MEDIA HAS UNDENIABLY GLOBALISED AND DEMOCRATISED COMMUNICATION, GIVING INDIVIDUALS, GOVERNMENTS AND ORGANISATIONS A DIRECT CHANNEL TO THEIR AUDIENCES

complexity to global communication. AI-driven analytics enable unprecedented insights into audience behaviour, preferences, and sentiments, allowing for hyper-personalised messaging. These tools are invaluable for diplomats and foreign policy experts, who can now craft messages with immense precision and predict their impact with greater accuracy. However, with these advancements come ethical dilemmas. The line between strategic communication and manipulation can easily blur, necessitating robust frameworks to ensure accountability and fairness. As the communication landscape becomes more intricate, the demand for skilled specialists is growing. These professionals are not just channels for information, they are strategists, analysts, and creators who understand the nuances of messaging in a diverse and rapidly changing world. Traditional media must evolve to remain relevant, embracing digital innovations and audience-centric approaches. Meanwhile, social media must grapple with issues of misinformation, polarisation, and echo chambers, striving to become a platform that unites rather than divides. In this era, communication is no longer just about delivering a message; it is about shaping perceptions, building relationships, and driving action. As

the world becomes increasingly interconnected, the ability to communicate effectively will be one of the most powerful tools in navigating the complexities of a neo-geopolitical era. In an era marked by shifting alliances and evolving global priorities, multilateral institutions face both challenges and opportunities. The reworking of commitments by key nations to international frameworks has drawn notice to the fragility of global consensus, raising questions about the role and relevance of these institutions in addressing shared challenges like public health, climate change, and economic inequality. This shifting landscape calls for a more nuanced approach to diplomacy within multilateral spaces, with a renewed focus on collective responsibility. For these institutions to thrive in a complex geopolitical climate, they must leverage communication technologies to foster transparency, engage diverse stakeholders, and amplify their ability to drive action. Whether through the lens of a camera, the reach of a tweet, or the depth of an investigative report, the stories we tell and how we tell them will shape the world in ways we are only beginning to understand.

(The writer is a former civil servant. Views are personal. Inputs by Vaishnavie Srinivasan and Zoya Ahmad)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

WTO NEEDS REFORM

Madam — It is with reference to the editorial page article "WTO is at a crossroads; Reform or perish" February 8. WTO is the world's largest international economic organisation, established in 1995 with 166 members representing over 98 per cent of the global trade and global GDP. Before the WTO, there was the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT), a global trade organisation with 23 countries. Every member country is obligated to follow the laws and policies framed by WTO rules. India is a significant member of the WTO. Trade disputes are addressed by the WTO's dispute settlement process. It is the WTO that makes efforts to promote transparency in decision-making by encouraging participation and, in particular, the use of the consensus rule.

As an international platform, the WTO regulates and negotiates additional trade liberalisation. In recent days, the WTO has been facing many challenges related to changes in the global economy and geopolitical context. Its members have not been able to agree on new rules on agricultural goals, highlighting the conflicting interests between developed and developing countries. Difficult trade relations between the two largest world economies and WTO members—the US and China—also put a strain on the WTO. Unilateral trade measures such as raising tariffs on iron and steel threaten the multilateral trading system. This highlights the WTO might need to be reformed to meet current concerns such as national security, environmental standards, and the impact of technology on trade. If urgent reforms are not undertaken, the global trading system may soon witness the demise of the institution once deemed indispensable.

P Victor Selvaraj | Tirunelveli

ZERO SEATS FOR CONGRESS IN DELHI

Madam — It will be painful for the Congress for the massive loss in the Delhi elections when people voted against them consistently for the last 3 terms 0-0-0. The most pathetic observation is that they

BJP returns to power in Delhi



The BJP's long wait of 26 years to return to power in Delhi has ultimately come to an end after it registered an emphatic victory in Delhi Assembly polls. In fact, Delhi was the only erstwhile BJP-ruled state where victory remained elusive for the BJP even under the strong Modi wave since 2014. Hence, this victory has come as a big relief for the saffron party, which faced unceremo-

couldn't manage even a single seat in the last 3 assembly elections. Capital is Congress's home ground under the leadership of Sonia Gandhi.

The greed for power and dynastic politics made Priyanka Gandhi run all the way from Delhi to Wayanad to come back victorious in the by-election. There's a saying in the villages that 'If one has to assess the quality and power of a person in the village, ask the locals. The same yardstick proved right when there were no takers for Congress locally in Delhi and scoring 0-0-0 in their report card reflects that the quality of the Congress party is under a scanner. For the Congress to survive, the realistic approach must be to keep Rahul and Priyanka from the main limelight and keep them in a low profile so that the party can rebuild the faith for a better future of the party.

A P Thiruvadi | Chennai

RBI CUTS INTEREST RATES

Madam — It is a first-rate cut in nearly five years by RBI and it signifies a shift in monetary strategy. With this cut, RBI has clear-

ly sent a signal that it wants to boost lending, stimulate consumer demand and nurture investment. In the recent months, core inflation has shown easing out, providing much-needed headroom to the RBI to implement this rate cut. And a slowdown in the economic growth forced the RBI to take the plunge now. By lowering the borrowing cost, RBI wants to encourage businesses to expand, boost consumption, and help economic growth. Now banks will be happy to extend credit more freely, but they need to be wary of what they have witnessed with their microfinance and unsecured loan portfolios in recent months. In the real estate sector, SMEs will take a sigh of relief, and individual borrowers will see a reduction in their EMIs and, in turn, more money in their pockets, coupled with recent income tax cuts, which will create a positive environment for the consumption boom to take place.

Bal Govind | Noida

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Flying faster-than-sound travel closer to reality

Boom Supersonic successfully tested its prototype supersonic aircraft, proving that supersonic commercial travel is not just a dream but an imminent reality



RAJNEESH BHANDARI

A significant milestone in commercial aviation history has been achieved. Boom Supersonic, a Colorado-based startup, completed a successful test flight of its prototype supersonic aircraft XB-1, demonstrating that commercial air travel at faster-than-sound speeds is not only feasible but may soon be available for frequent flyers, cutting average intercontinental flight times in half.

When we think of supersonic commercial aviation, Concorde often springs to mind. Concorde was an iconic aircraft that flew passengers across the Atlantic in just three hours. It was the first commercial supersonic aircraft, and it flew twice the speed of sound for Air France and British Airways from 1976 to 2003. Concorde was retired in 2003 due to excessive costs, high fares and loud noise. Since then, aerospace giants like Airbus and Boeing have never delivered a commercial-scale replacement. So, what makes Boom different? Boom's team didn't vent past failures as insurmountable obstacles. Instead, they



saw them as engineering challenges to be overcome with a fresh mindset. Unlike traditional companies that would try to upgrade a subsonic plane to go faster, Boom's team designed every component, from the aerodynamic shape and propulsion system to the fuel system, specifically for supersonic travel. The company exemplifies how ignoring legacy assumptions and knowledge can unlock groundbreaking solutions. Boom's engineers embraced the concept of "unlearning," jettisoning assumptions that certain design elements were necessary or that certain hurdles were insurmountable. Unlearning allowed Boom to innovate with advanced composite materials, wing design and a new noise-reduction strategy.

They rewrote the rules of the game, overcame longstanding technical barriers and ignited fresh interest in supersonic flight. Established players like Boeing and Airbus often shy away from radical changes for fear of failing or canalising profitable products. Boom took calculated risks, embraced uncertainty, and refined each step through rapid data-driven iteration. Historically, supersonic jets are fuel guzzlers. Boom's approach combines aerodynamic optimisation with advanced high-performance materials and a propulsion system designed ground-up to minimise fuel consumption. The propulsion system (Symphony) will run on zero aromatic 100 per cent sustainable aviation fuel (SAF) for sustainable commercial supersonic flights. As a start-up, Boom operates with lean teams. This contrasts sharply with the massive bureaucratic hierarchy within aerospace giants. Swift prototyping, quick feedback loops, and a willingness to pivot ensure that new technology is tested and integrated faster than what Boeing or Airbus might manage.

The prototype aircraft smoothly transitioned through Mach 1 (the speed of sound) and touched Mach 1.1. This technology demonstration will help refine the design ahead of the company's next goal: launching a full-scale 60 to 75-seater supersonic jet called Overture. The founders' vision is that passengers can fly supersonically at tickets comparable to business class fares. Imagine cutting a 7-hour transatlantic flight to 3.5 hours. Suddenly, a business meeting in Delhi and a dinner date in London are feasible on the same day. Overture is being designed to fly 7800 km. It can fly nonstop on routes like Delhi to Frankfurt or New York to London. Faster travel time can be a game-changer for business travellers and high-priority cargo. While Airbus, Boeing, and other established players have the resources and legacy to make big moves, it often takes a nimble newcomer with a fresh perspective and first-principles thinking to challenge what's possible. (The writer is an author, innovator and founder of NeuroEquilibrium; views are personal)



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FIRST COLUMN

LIFE IS A MOUNTAIN: CLIMB YOUR PEAK, YOUR WAY

Just like climbing a mountain, life's true joy comes from the ascent, not just the summit



OP SINGH

I have come to believe life is a lot like climbing a mountain. It's not a race or a competition, and it's not about finding a shortcut. The absolute joy of life isn't standing at the summit—it's in the climb. It's in slipping on loose gravel, feeling the burn in your legs, and wondering halfway through if you should turn around. But when you catch your breath at a ridge or find your footing after a stumble, you realise something powerful: the climb isn't about the mountain—it's about who you become along the way.

Each of us has a mountain to climb. It doesn't need to be Everest or Kilimanjaro. It doesn't have to impress anyone else. What matters is that your mountain challenges you, excites you and pushes you to grow. And yes, the climb will be messy. The trail will disappear just when you think you're getting somewhere. The air will get thin. You might even feel like quitting. But that's the beauty of it—the mountain shapes you with every step. Every great climb starts with a dream—one so audacious it gives you butterflies. Don't let its enormity overwhelm you. Focus on taking the next step, then the one after that. Progress isn't about giant leaps but small, consistent efforts.

Moving forward, even a little each day, builds the path to big dreams. Mountains don't reward the fastest or most competent climber—they reward perseverance. Talent may get you started, but resilience carries you through fatigue, failure, and seemingly impossible moments. You don't need to be perfect; you need to keep climbing. Your journey is unique; not everyone will understand or agree with it. That's okay. When the trail disappears, create your path, even if it's messy.



The best routes are discovered through improvisation and authenticity, not by meeting others' expectations. Slips and falls are inevitable, and they hurt. Yet, each stumble teaches something valuable about the terrain, limits, and strength. Mountains don't demand perfection—they demand persistence. Learn from every fall, and rise stronger. The mountain doesn't care who reaches the summit first. It isn't about trophies or comparisons. The climb is about pushing yourself, growing beyond your comfort zone, and becoming someone who belongs at the summit.

True success is transformation, not competition. The best climbers don't focus solely on themselves. They lend a hand, share tools, and cheer others on. Life's peaks are more meaningful when shared. Those who help will often support you, making the climb richer for everyone. When you reach your summit, pause and reflect. Did your climb inspire others? Did you leave the path better for those who follow? Success isn't standing alone at the top; it's in the legacy you leave—the encouragement, improvements, and hope for others to climb higher. Ultimately, the climb makes life beautiful.

The summit is fleeting, but the slips, breakthroughs, lessons, and growth endure. These moments shape you into someone worthy of the top. If your mountain feels daunting, don't let the height scare you. Start small. Take one step at a time. You don't need to move fast or know the whole path. Just keep climbing. One day, standing at your summit, you'll look back and realise it wasn't about the peak. It was about the person you became along the way. That's the valuable reward of the climb—knowing every inch of it was unapologetically yours.

(The author is DGP & Head of Haryana State Narcotics Control Bureau, with three books to his credit; views are personal)

Trump's vision for Gaza: Paradise or purgatory?



NILANTHA ILANGAMUWA

President Donald Trump's proposal for Gaza is more than just another audacious policy move—it is a collision of commerce, geopolitics and power



Everyone saw it unfold. This is the harsh reality of life in the Devil's paradise, where desires are transformed into laws, ambitions become twisted ethics, and behaviour is coerced into the very fabric of the system. The truth? To survive here, one must bow to the powers that be, no matter the cost. Conscience and integrity are irrelevant—praise those in power or face annihilation. President Donald Trump welcomed Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu—an alleged war criminal wanted by the International Criminal Court—as the first foreign leader in his second term, declaring his grand vision to take control of Gaza, turning it into a "brave new Levantine Riviera" by cleansing over 2 million Palestinians.

Nevertheless, the proposal has sparked strong opposition. Saudi Arabia, a key ally of Trump, swiftly condemned it, insisting that no nation would recognise Israel without the creation of an independent Palestinian state. Jordan and Egypt also rejected the idea of accepting millions of displaced Palestinians. The mere announcement of this plan starkly illustrates the chaotic grandeur of Trump's vision. Yet, his proposal, however audacious, was no accident of rhetoric. It was a calculated, methodical blueprint, crafted long before Trump's second term in office. With Netanyahu—a willing ally in these manoeuvres—Trump painted a picture of Gaza not as a refuge for the Palestinian people, but as a commercialised "paradise" defined not by its displaced residents, but by foreign investments and a transformation into a luxury resort.

Trump's proposition, laden with both visionary ambition and horrific repercussions, challenges the entrenched paradigm. This proposal, as reported, was not born of sudden whim, but the culmination of years of deliberation within Trump's inner circle—an enterprise in which his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, played a pivotal role in positioning the geopolitical and commercial components across Asia.

Kushner's claim, in a recent interview with the Financial Times, that his "ability to see trends before others" uniquely positions him to capitalise on opportunities others find unpalatable, resonates with the underlying logic of Trump's plan. It's a logic that blurs the line between statecraft and property development, where geopolitical ambitions are pursued not merely for strategic suprema-



THE ARAB WORLD, ONCE INTOXICATED BY THE IDEA OF PAN-ARAB UNITY, HAS REPEATEDLY SUCCUMBED TO ITS INTERNAL FISSURES, NEVER ABLE TO OVERCOME THE CORROSIVE FORCES OF REALPOLITIK AND SELF-INTEREST

cy but also as a means to expand a business empire throughout Asia. This fusion of commerce and conquest is as disquieting as it is unprecedented, conjuring images of modern-day feudalism, where land and people are subjugated to serve the profit motives of a privileged few. What is truly striking, however, is that Trump's plan could offer a rare and pivotal opportunity for Arab nations, whose history of disunity has long hindered their collective potential.

Regional players—Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iran, Qatar, Jordan, and others—have long danced to contradictory rhythms, using Palestine as a symbol to justify their betrayals, while failing to act with sincerity or consequence.

These rivalries, cultivated over decades of political expediency, have reduced Palestinians from champions of an independent cause to mere pawns in a game that has been further complicated by internal rifts within Palestinian movements.

For far too long, the Arab states have abandoned Palestine's plight in favour of personal ambition and strategic alliances, turning the Palestinian cause into a commodity—moulded and shaped according to the whims of foreign powers. This latest manoeuvre must be understood within the context of the convoluted history of Arab disunity—an entangled web of colonial subterfuge, sectarian fragmentation, and a legacy of betrayal that has persistently eroded Palestinian sovereignty and reduced their cause to a tragic geopolitical instrument.

The Arab world, once intoxicated by the idea of pan-Arab unity, has repeatedly succumbed to its internal fissures, never able to overcome the corrosive forces of realpolitik and self-interest. Behind the veneer of solidarity and proclamations of support for Palestinian self-determination, there lies a catalogue of secretive agreements, covert operations, and Machiavellian plots that have long entangled the region.

While the Sykes-Picot Agreement remains the most infamous symbol of colonial partition, it is far from the only clandestine accord that has shaped the fate of Palestine.

Lesser-known pacts, such as the Husayn-McMahon Correspondence, which promised Arab independence in exchange for rebellion against the Ottoman Empire, were later betrayed in favour of European imperial ambitions.

Similarly, the post-World War II period saw Arab states engage in secret dealings with both Western and Soviet powers, each prioritising their strategic interests over Palestinian rights. Agreements such as the Baghdad Pact and the Eisenhower Doctrine—purportedly aimed at regional stability—left the Palestinian cause sidelined in favour of Cold War allegiances, perpetuating cycles of betrayal.

And perhaps most insidious of all were the secret negotiations between Arab leaders and Israel, at times tacit and other times more explicit, often involving quiet exchanges of territory, economic support, or even military cooperation, all under the guise of broader diplomatic manoeuvres. These acts of realpolitik—often driven by the selfish interests of a few at the expense of the many—have left Palestine isolated, its sovereignty forfeited in a game of geopolitical chess. The fractured nature of Arab leadership, perpetuated by sectarianism and divergent national ambitions, only serves to deepen the wound. While leaders such as Egypt's Nasser sought to rally the Arab world under a banner of unity, his efforts were consistently thwarted by rivalries and internal conflicts.

Today, these past betrayals reverberate in the region's collective psyche, leaving Palestinian aspirations still choked by the suffocating embrace of powers both external and internal, with the dream of a unified Arab world and a free Palestine rendered ever more elusive by the cynical. Yet, it is precisely this history that

makes Trump's audacious proposal so paradoxically compelling. Here lies an opportunity for the perennial exiles—the Palestinians—not as pawns in a geopolitical chess game, but as potential agents for the reawakening of Arab unity.

For decades, Palestinian suffering has been wielded as a symbol of resistance, a poignant reminder of an exodus that began with the Nakba in 1948. However, the continued instrumentalisation of Palestinian tragedy by neighbouring Arab regimes—who have long used the plight of these people as a rhetorical tool without offering substantial solutions.

It is within this environment of ambivalence and simmering tension that Trump's proposal must be viewed as a paradigm-shifting moment. The convergence of statecraft and property development, epitomised by Trump and Kushner's ambitions, signals a departure from conventional geopolitical paradigms. We are stepping into an era where the shifting power of oligarchies is increasingly driven by the convergence of economic gain and political opportunism—a transformation with far-reaching consequences for the future of West Asia.

Whether this radical reimagining of Gaza could catalyse Arab unity remains uncertain, inherently tied to the unresolved contradictions within the region's historical legacy. Trump's Riviera dream for Gaza is as much a test of American resolve as it is a crucible for Arab unity—a proposition that, if realised, could compel the Arab states to transcend their long-standing acrimony and mistrust.

However, the likelihood remains that this bold gambit, with all its extravagant rhetoric and ambitious visions, will only serve to deepen existing rifts, leaving Palestinians once again at the mercy of external schemes.

(The writer is a journalist and a policy analyst. Views expressed are personal)

Uttarakhand leads the way: The first state to implement Uniform Civil Code

Uniform laws that empower women will be the common thread binding the nation in oneness and uphold the constitutional spirit

Uttarakhand has led the way in formalising laws for women of different faith as equal, upholding the spirit of the constitution. Babasaheb Ambedkar would have been a contented man knowing that Uttarakhand has become the first state in India to have put an end to the disparity in legal protection provided to women, as till now, they were governed by their respective personal laws based on religion and customary state practices.

By implementing the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) from January 26, 2025, with less than 2 per cent of total land area and less than 1 per cent of total population, Uttarakhand has taken the lead in reinstating the ethos of social equality, part of our syncretic cul-



GEETA BHATT

The courageous step taken by this young state will pave the way as a paradigm for others to follow similar footsteps. For the first time post-independence, a legislative body has drafted rules for marriage, divorce, inheritance of property, and live-in relationships. UCC has been used as a political tool ever since it was

tabled for discussion in the Constituent Assembly when Babasaheb, as Chairman of Drafting Committee, had expressed need for uniformity in fundamental laws, both civil and criminal. UCC was placed under a sub-committee which proposed to list it as a non-justiciable right hence, making it non-disputable in the courts.

Majority of the members of this sub-committee were in agreement with the proposal except Minoos Masani, Hansa Mehta and Rajkumari Amrit Kaur who wrote to Patel stating, "One of the factors that have kept India back from advancing to nationhood has been the existence of personal laws based on religion". The dissent observed by the women members of the constituent assembly got support from Dr BR Ambedkar, KM Munshi and Alladi K Aiyar. The opposition from the Muslim members ensued the UCC under Directive Principles Article 44, where the Constituent Assembly was not obliged to enforce the provision and at the same time, the provision could be implemented by the legislatures in the future.

A compromise made between those in support and those in disagreement of the UCC. The changing social milieu has seen a trend in rigorous churning to shed away repressive, orthodox practices so as to evolve a social structure which believes in equal rights. This led to the codification of matrimonial, inheritance, succession and adoption laws for the

Hindus from 1955-56. The women's rights under Muslim Personal law were challenged by Shah Bano in 1985 demanding maintenance from her husband. The landmark Supreme Court judgement in favour of Shah Bano was later overturned when the incumbent Rajiv Gandhi-led Congress government, under pressure, enacted the Muslim Women



(Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act, 1986. The lingering wait for gender rights saw a ray of hope after 30 years when on the plea filed by Shayara Bano and others, who were victims of matrimonial dispute, the Supreme Court declared "talaq-e-biddat" or instantaneous triple talaq as unconstitutional in 2017. This time the government of the day stood by the rights of Muslim women and vindicated the crusade undertaken by Shah Bano by legally prohibiting triple talaq and protecting the rights of married Muslim women by bringing The Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Act in 2019. Though the present government has asserted equal rights and status to Muslim women

by bringing this act, there are miles to go as social customs of polygamy and Halala still looms large. The judiciary has reminded the legislators to fulfil their obligation towards the Constitution and promote equal rights for women. A five-member panel constituted in the chairmanship of retired justice Ranjana Prakash Desai diligently worked on the draft for two years besides holding public interactions, taking suggestions from people of the state and internal meetings of the panel to discuss the points to be taken under the draft. The bill in its four parts covers marriage and divorce, succession, live-in relationships. The section 4 of the bill outlines that "neither party has a spouse living at the time of the

marriage" with marriage age of 21 and 18 for man and women respectively, making polygamy and child marriage illegal. The bill also requires compulsory registration of marriages within 60 days where the couple has equal right to dissolve the marriage through a decree of divorce only through court proceedings. The Bill says that marriages can be dissolved only through the provisions of the law "notwithstanding any usage, custom, tradition, [or] personal law of any party to the marriage." This bill provides legal safeguards to protect women who cohabit in a live-in relationship.

(The writer is Director, Non Collegiate Women's Education Board, University of Delhi; views are personal)

Government looking at procedural easing to further promote FDI: Official

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The government is looking at further easing of procedures in certain sectors to attract more foreign direct investments (FDI) into the country, a government official said. The department for promotion of industry and internal trade (DPIIT) has held stakeholder consultations with different government departments, regulators, industry associations, advisory and law firms, pension funds, private equity and venture capitals. The department sought their views on ways to further attract foreign direct investments into the country. "We have completed the consultations. The department has received suggestions on different issues. Things have not yet been finalised... Looking at easing of norms at the procedural front," the official said. However, the official did not disclose the sectors where the government is considering the procedural easing. In the consultations, issues which were raised included permitting e-commerce players to receive FDI in inventory-based models of online trade for export purposes only; easing press note 3 by defining beneficial ownership; and some tweaking of the policy for single-



brand retail trading. Under this press note, government approval is mandatory for investors from countries sharing land borders with India in any sector. Foreign direct investment inflows into India have crossed the \$1 Trillion milestone in the April 2000-September 2024 period. The key sectors attracting the maximum of these inflows include the services segment, computer software and hardware, telecommunications, trading, construction development, automobile, chemicals, and pharmaceuticals.

The investment in India rose by 45 per cent year-on-year to \$29.79 Billion in April-September this fiscal. Experts suggested that steps such as implementing time-bound approvals for FDI applications, clear guidelines for approvals, and a seamless single-window clearance system will help India further improve its business climate for overseas players. "India's FDI inflows are largely into brownfield projects, but the real opportunity lies in greenfield expansion. A plug-and-play infrastructure ecosystem, coupled with streamlined land acquisition processes, efficient dispute

resolution, and easy clearances can unlock India's full investment potential," Rumki Majumdar, Economist, Deloitte India, said. Rudra Kumar Pandey, Partner, Shardul Amarchand Mangaldas, said that at present, the approval process for FDI often involves cumbersome bureaucratic procedures, creating an environment of uncertainties - as generally speaking the overall timeline goes beyond six months and in some cases even 9-12 months. "This perception can be addressed by introducing greater transparency, particularly in the objectives and criteria the government considers when assessing FDI applications. Clear guidelines and timelines for approvals would help eliminate uncertainty, ensuring that investors feel secure and informed," Pandey said. One of the most impactful reforms would be the introduction of "deemed approvals", he said, adding, under this system, FDI applications that are not processed within a specified timeframe would be automatically approved, thereby eliminating unnecessary delays. Avimukt Dar, Founding Partner, IndusLaw, suggested the government provide clarity and alignment on the meaning of beneficial owners under press note 3.

Markets to track inflation data, global trends this week: Analysts

PTI ■ NEW DELHI



Investors would track a host of macroeconomic data announcements scheduled this week, including inflation numbers, and also monitor global market trends, and trading activity of foreign institutional investors, analysts said. The ongoing quarterly earnings announcements and the rupee-dollar trend would also influence the markets. "This week is set to be dynamic for global and Indian markets, driven by key macroeconomic data releases and corporate earnings. Market sentiment will be shaped by inflation figures, industrial production data, and major earnings announcements," Master Trust Group Director Puneet Singhania said. On Wednesday, the US inflation data for January will be in focus. Later in the day, Fed Chair Jerome Powell's testimony will be closely watched for insights into interest rate expectations, Singhania said. "For India, inflation and industrial production data will be released on February 12," he said. On Thursday, the UK's GDP

growth data will be released and on Friday the US retail sales data for January will provide insights into consumer spending, Singhania said. Corporate earnings will also drive market sentiment. Major companies reporting earnings include Eicher Motors, Grasim Industries, Vodafone Idea, Steel Authority of India, he added. The BJP on Saturday trounced the Aam Aadmi Party in Delhi and returned to power in the city after more than 26 years, extending its saffron imprint and dealing a body blow to the Arvind Kejriwal-led party whose top leadership crumbled or barely made it. "The sentiments in the Indian market are slowly improving in response to an excellent Budget and the rate cut by the MPC. The victory of the BJP in

Increase in MSME financing right step to boost biogas industry: IBA



PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Indian Biogas Association (IBA) on Sunday said the proposed increase in MSME financing in the General Budget 2025 is a right step to boost biogas industry. With a strong push for manufacturing, green energy, and digital transformation, this Budget sets the stage for Aatmanirbhar and Viksit Bharat, an IBA statement said. From the standpoint of the fledgling biogas/CBG (compressed biogas) industry, the announced increase to the MSME Credit Guarantee Scheme will significantly benefit the biogas industry, which often faces challenge in securing credit with reasonable terms, it noted. By expanding the credit guarantee cover from ₹5-10

Cr, the scheme ensures easier access to collateral-free loans, thus reducing financial barriers for the CBG developers, it pointed out. Additionally, the revised MSME classification criteria allow for almost 2-2.5 times higher investment and turnover limits as compared to earlier regime. The amendment ensures that now even the larger-capacity CBG projects are eligible for these incentives, it noted. While the recent Budget takes adequate steps in supporting the MSME sector, inclusion of specific policy measures for the CBG industry would have made it even more conducive for the sector, it suggested. So, to foster the growth of the biogas and CBG producers, the IBA has already requested the Indian government for development of a framework that allows the biogas plant

promoters to sell carbon credits in both international and domestic platforms, enhancing financial viability and aiding climate targets, it stated. The policies further must include funding for collection of agricultural residues, subsidised transportation costs, and expansion of the anti-crop burning scheme as that existing in Haryana to the rest of the country, it suggested. Investment in CBG production would be stimulated through a corporate tax holiday and, in turn, investment would boost employment and cleaner energy, it also suggested. Tax incentives would yield losses in the short-term, but with CBG producers, about 100 commercial plants generating ₹1,200 Crore in FY25, there will be long-term benefits. These steps will greatly enhance sustainability, economic development, and elevate India's clean energy standing, it said. Overall, the recently presented Indian Budget is a consumption-driven blueprint that gives the economy a much-needed push by increasing domestic demand, improving credit access, and encouraging entrepreneurship, it added.

Significant reduction in gold smuggling post July import duty cut, says CBIC Chief

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Gold smuggling has reduced significantly since July 2024 when the government slashed import duty on the precious metal to 6 per cent, Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs (CBIC) Chairman Sanjay Kumar Agarwal said. As per the latest available data, Customs and DRI officers seized 847 kg of gold worth ₹544 Crore at various airports in the April-June period of the current fiscal. In July, the government reduced customs duty on gold to 6 per cent from 15 per cent. "After the rate of duty was reduced on gold in the last year's budget, there is a significant reduction in the smuggling of gold," Agarwal told PTI in an interview. Although Agarwal did not reveal the quantum or value of gold seizures, he said authorities are keeping regular watch over the international passenger traffic, porous borders, and commercial cargoes coming into the country to cut the smuggling of narcotics through any route. Smuggling is the secret movement of goods across national borders to avoid customs duties or import or

export restrictions. It typically occurs when either customs duties are high enough to allow a smuggler to make a large profit on the clandestine goods or when there is a strong demand for prohibited goods, such as narcotics or weapons. The Directorate of Revenue Intelligence (DRI), under CBIC, is the apex agency of the Indian customs in the field of anti-smuggling in India. During the 2023-24 financial year, DRI officers alone seized 1,319 kg of gold and smuggling through India's porous eastern borders, particularly with Bangladesh and Myanmar, has also emerged as a major concern for law enforcement agencies. This is part of the 4,869.6 kg of gold seized by the CBIC, including by Customs officers, in 2023-24. 1,922 persons were arrested by the CBIC during the year. As per DRI's Smuggling in India Report released in December, India has become a major destination for illicit gold imports, with gold and silver predominantly originating from Gulf states such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia, where these metals are sourced and available at lower prices.

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Maruti Suzuki India aims to bolster charging infrastructure in the country before it drives in a VITARA with plans to establish the model as a primary vehicle in a household, according to a senior company executive. The auto major also plans to boost after-sales support, bring in a leasing model and more finance options to encourage customers to buy the model. "One of the major concerns for the customer is the adequacy of the public infrastructure in terms of the chargers. So we are planning to have a fast charger at a frequency of 10 kilometers in the top 100 cities," Maruti Suzuki India (MSI) Senior Executive Officer (Marketing and Sales) Partho Banerjee told PTI in an interaction. Currently top 100 cities in the country account for almost 97 per cent of the total EV sales, he stated while elaborating on the plan. "We believe that the customer who will be buying the car will be moving out of the city as well so we want to make our e VITARA as the primary car, not the secondary car and to make it a primary car, it is very important to provide a good after-sales support," Banerjee



said. As per the industry figures, electric passenger vehicles in the country today are mostly bought as a second or third vehicle in a household. Banerjee said the auto major is planning to have 1,000 cities where it will be providing the EV after-sales support in case someone is having an emergency, he added. "So this more or less covers the entire India. We want to make e VITARA as the primary car, then only the EV car penetration will go up," he stated. MSI unveiled the electric SUV in the Bharat Mobility Global Expo. The e VITARA will first be exported to a few key markets overseas before being put on sale in India. The production of the model is expected to commence later this year at MSI's Gujarat plant which would also cater to all

Saudi's USD 63-Billion giga project Diriyah sees keen interest from Indian investors

PTI ■ NEW DELHI/DAVOS

Several Indian firms have shown a keen interest in investing in Diriyah, a \$ 63-Billion Saudi Arabian giga project, while some big names like Tatas and Oberois having already signed up, its CEO Jerry Inzerillo said. Diriyah, being billed as the City of Earth, is being built on the outskirts of Saudi Arabia's capital Riyadh and it will have homes for 100,000 people and office space for a further 100,000 plus. This new city will include over 40 luxury hotels, more than 1,000 shops, over 150 restaurants and cafes, a university, arts and cultural assets, museums, an opera house, a 20,000-seater multipurpose event arena, a golf course and an international equestrian and polo centre, among other facilities. The \$63.2 billion real estate development and tourism project aims to restore the historic birthplace of the modern Saudi Kingdom and the site includes the UNESCO World Heritage Site of At-Turaif. "At Diriyah we are keen to enhance the impact of India as one of Saudi Arabia's biggest trading partners, ranking among the top in bilateral



trade, with a trade volume of approximately \$52.8 Billion in 2022-23," Inzerillo told PTI. He was in Davos for the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting 2025. Inzerillo said over 3,000 Indian companies are already operating in the Kingdom, contributing to sectors such as construction, IT, energy, and telecommunications, strengthening the economic partnership between the two nations. "Diriyah is very keen to work with firms here already and those based in India itself. This is a \$63.2 Billion project backed by the Public Investment Fund and it means the investment opportunities in Diriyah are countless and cover multiple asset classes," he said. "The scope for the Indian investment community and partners is enormous. Diriyah

already has multiple partners on board from around the world, but there remains an amazing array of opportunities for Indian companies and organisations across the full spectrum of urban development to partner with Diriyah," Inzerillo said. He said India is an important part of their global investment outreach strategy and they have hosted CEOs and founders of prominent companies in India, to showcase Diriyah and Saudi Arabia. "There is already a lot of interest from Indian companies - especially the hotel sector with the Taj Hotel group set to open their 250th property here in Diriyah with 202 rooms. "An Oberoi Hotel is being developed close to our new equestrian and polo centre and these two properties are

among the more than 40 luxury hotels being built at Diriyah," he said. Inzerillo said companies and investors from India can also benefit from a number of new investment packages tailored across various sizes and asset classes, including for mixed-use, residential, hospitality, office, education and healthcare assets. "Given the size and economic impact India has in the Kingdom - we are confident that Indian firms will have a significant part to play in the continued success of The City of Earth," he said. He said Diriyah will also have a major role in helping showcase Saudi Arabia in the most beautiful light for tourists from India and other countries. "Two of our biggest attractions - the UNESCO World Heritage Site of At-Turaif and neighbouring Bujairi Terrace - are heavily featured and have welcomed over three million visits since opening just over two years ago. "For Indian tourists and others their journey into the Kingdom will typically start at Diriyah and we are confident that Indian visitors will play a major part in our anticipated 50 Million visits a year from 2030 onwards," he said.

Ministry of DoNER working with Amazon, two other companies to boost Bamboo market: official

PTI ■ CHENNAI

The Ministry of Development of North East Region would explore the market opportunities for Bamboo in domestic and overseas markets and it was working with Amazon and two other companies in this connection, a senior government official has said. Besides promoting Bamboo locally, the Ministry would also look for shipping them to neighbouring countries like Bangladesh, Myanmar, Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (MDoNER) Secretary Chanchal Kumar said. At a recent roadshow in Chennai, Union Minister for Communications and Development of North Eastern Region Jyotiraditya M Scindia said nearly 38 per cent of the Bamboo was produced in the North Eastern States. This provides a huge opportunity for Chennai which has a huge furniture-making industry, he said. "Today, we can grow that Bamboo, process it to manufacture furniture and export it (to other parts of the country). Right now, my Ministry is working with Amazon and two other companies to adopt self-



help groups in the North East. Starting with two states - Tripura and Nagaland, where we plan to do end-to-end value processing of Bamboo. So, the possibilities are endless," Scindia said. In a brief interaction with PTI, the Ministry's Secretary Chanchal Kumar said the government intends to promote Bamboo products in both domestic and overseas markets. "We are going to market it. Marketing can be domestic and export. You have to come with quality. These companies will be helping them (Self Help Groups in North East) in designing world-class Bamboo items like furniture, and boards. So it will help the farmers

aggregate and take it to the end user. The entire value chain has to pick up," Kumar said. Elaborating on the initiative he said that after the companies entered into a tie-up with the ministry, it (the ministry) will help the companies to market the products easily. "Once it captures the domestic market, then we will go international. The ultimate aim is to go to the markets of neighbouring countries including Bangladesh, Thailand, and Myanmar," he noted. He underlined that the North East holds a majority of Bamboo resources in the country and offers a great opportunity to the furniture industry in Chennai.

Narcotic drug seizure declines about 22 per cent in 2024

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Narcotic drug seizures have declined by about 22 per cent year-on-year to over 1,087 tonnes in 2024, government data showed. In 2024, 1,087 tonnes of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances (NDPS) worth ₹16,966 Crores were seized in 72,496 cases across the country. The Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs (CBIC) authorities had seized 1,389 tonnes of NDPS worth ₹16,123 Crore in over 1.09 Lakh cases in 2023. To curb the smuggling of narcotics, the Customs Department is keeping a watch over international passenger traffic, porous borders, and commercial cargo coming into the country, CBIC Chairman Sanjay Kumar Agarwal told PTI. "We keep on making the cases but the border is porous. We are able to catch (smugglers) but still a lot may be coming which may go unnoticed," Agarwal said, without disclosing the quantum of seizures. As per the government data, in 2024 as many as 94.19 lakh narcotic drug tablets valued at ₹376 Crore were seized at ports in just two cases.



Must-Do Yogasanas

BY YASH GUPTA
Breathe in! Breathe out! As long as you live there are certain things that you cannot control but there are other things that you can control. Having control over your senses is considered one of the wealth and the path is through yoga. The list of activities is forever going,

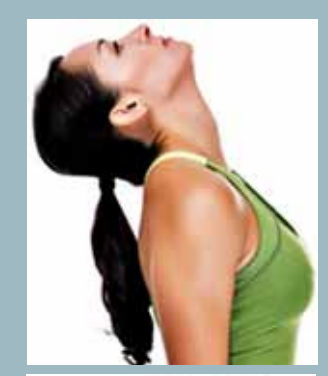
there is no end to what to do for better mental and physical health. Some exercises do not go well with the body because of the body structure, past injuries, or ongoing health issues. But here are 5 yogasanas that are recommended and are equally beneficial for everyone. You can do it during office hours and 2 of them are recommended as for starting your day.



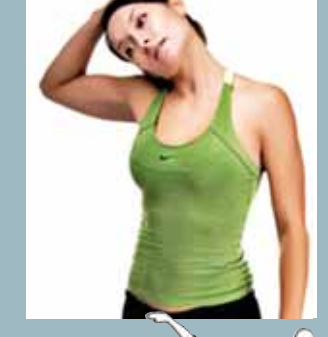
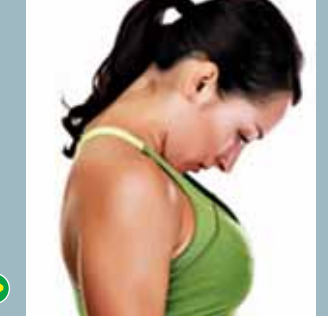
Tadasana: The most common asana for a healthy spine is the tadasana, just be barefoot and balance your body weight on both legs equally, join the feet together and lock your fingers together, and stretch up lengthening your spine, come on your feet, lift your heels and hold the position. Keep breathing and after a while slowly come down, relax your feet and hand by the side. Repeat 2-3 times.
People with shoulder injuries can just lift the shoulder without raising hands and elderly people can also do it while sitting on a chair.



Malasana: As soon as you wake up, it is highly advisable to begin the day with lukewarm water and sit in malasana for a while. All you have to do is sip a glass of water like tea sip by sip fold your knees completely and come down in a deep squat position, stay there for a while, and also you can just touch Mother Earth and offer gratitude. Works magic for relief in bowel movements and what could have been a better start than offering your gratitude to Mother Earth.
People having knee issues, can try pulling knees towards the chest while sitting on the cushion surface.



Neck stretch and movements: It is believed that all of the stress accumulated is usually in the neck and shoulder region. Work on your neck and it will help you release all your stress even in the middle of office hours or any other work. Simply relax your neck and sit in an upright position with a spine, take a deep breath in and out and close your eyes (recommended for better results) stretch your neck to the sides, and try touching your shoulder without lifting them. After a few rounds relax and start rotating your neck clockwise and anti-clockwise and open your eyes slowly.
People suffering from survival do it very gently and not more than two rounds.



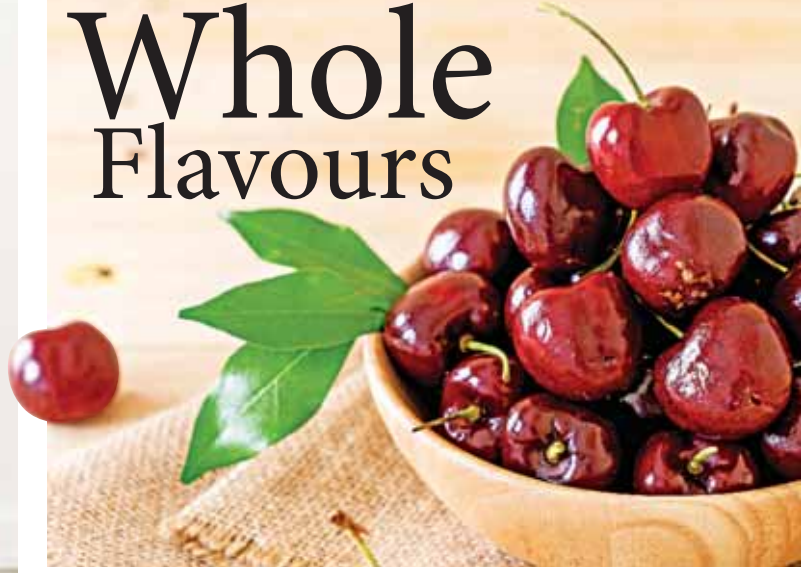
Nadi Shodhan: The King of all the pranayam, the instant stress buster and balancing the entire body. Place your right thumb on your right nostril and inhale from the left press the ring finger close left nostril and release the right exhaling breath, inhale through the right, and exhale through the left.

Yogic breathing: The most effective way to increase prana or vital life force is the pranayamas, simple yet effective and soothing too. It is also known as conscious breathing. Sit in an upright position, relax yourself, and relax your body, place one hand on your chest and the other on your navel. Start breathing in slowly, expanding your chest and stomach slowly, don't rush it and when you reach full capacity, even more slowly release the breath slowly contracting your abdomen and chest. Repeat 3-5 times.
Do not hold your breath and do not rush, the slower the breathing process the better.



The author is an Art of Living faculty, meditation and mind coach, and professional yoga trainer.

Whole Foods Whole Flavours



TEAM VIVA

Eating well isn't just about counting calories or following strict diet rules; it's about embracing a balanced lifestyle that fuels your body with nutrient-rich, delicious foods. When we choose fresh, wholesome ingredients, we not only boost our health but also enhance the flavours and textures of our meals. Whether you're looking to add more plant-based goodness to your

plate, experiment with creative ingredient combinations, or simply prepare meals that are both nutritious and satisfying. From salads packed with fiber and antioxidants to hearty grains and protein-rich legumes, each dish is crafted to bring out the best in natural ingredients while keeping things easy, flavourful, and fulfilling. These carefully curated recipes prove that healthy food can be just as your favourite comfort meals.

Barley Salad With Chickpeas And Cherries



Ingredients

- Salad:**
- 1 cup hulled barley (uncooked)
 - 14.5 oz can chickpeas, drained & rinsed
 - 1/2 cup diced celery
 - 1/4 cup chopped green onion
 - 1 cup pitted & halved cherries
 - 1/4 cup toasted slivered almonds
 - 2 oz crumbled goat cheese
- Dressing:**
- 2 tbsp fresh lemon juice
 - 1 tbsp white balsamic vinegar
 - 1 tbsp grape seed oil
 - 1/2 tsp Dijon mustard
 - 1 tsp honey
 - 1/2 tsp kosher salt
 - 1/8 tsp black pepper

Directions

- Cook barley in salted boiling water (3 cups) for 45-60 mins until chewy. Drain, rinse, and cool.
- Mix barley with chickpeas, celery, green onion, and almonds.
- Whisk dressing ingredients and toss with the salad.
- Gently fold in cherries and goat cheese.
- Serve immediately or chill for up to 1 hour.

Note: Add cherries and almonds just before serving to maintain texture and prevent discoloration.

Chilean Cherry, Wild Rice, and Quinoa Salad



Ingredients

- 3/4 cup wild rice
 - 1/2 cup quinoa
 - 2 cups fresh Chilean cherries, pitted & halved
 - 2 celery stalks, diced
 - 3/4 cup smoked Gouda cheese, diced
 - 1/2 cup toasted, chopped pecans
- Vinaigrette:**
- 1/4 cup extra virgin olive oil
 - 1/4 cup fruity vinegar (raspberry or strawberry)
 - 1 tsp Dijon mustard
 - 3/4 tsp salt
 - 1/4 tsp freshly ground pepper

Directions

- Cook wild rice in boiling water for 30 mins, add quinoa, and cook 15 mins more. Drain, rinse, and cool.
- Toast pecans in the oven at 350 F for 8 mins or in a skillet until fragrant. Cool and chop.
- Whisk vinaigrette ingredients in a large bowl.
- Toss rice, quinoa, cherries, celery, Gouda, and pecans with the vinaigrette.
- Serve at room temperature or chilled

POWER OF SELF-CARE



Self-care is often neglected yet the most important part that defines your overall health. Authentic self-care fits with your needs, values, and lifestyle. Self-care need not be copied such as using gratitude journaling, bubble baths, etc., rather it should be something that aligns with your body and mind and nourishes your soul.

- **Importance of self-care:** To be honest, as a psychiatrist, I have felt that self-care is a biological necessity as it has a direct relation to improving mental and physical health.
- **Stress reduction:** - When a person stays in persistent stress, the body's cortisol levels rise, leading to poor sleep quality and anxiety too. But to alleviate stress, it's best to practice self-care activities such as deep breathing, mindfulness practices, exercise, etc. These activities are responsible for activating the parasympathetic nervous system.
- **Boosting up emotional health:** The activities that are guided towards self-care are responsible for releasing the 'feel good'

neurotransmitters namely dopamine and serotonin. They, in turn, improve the mood and relieve the symptoms of anxiety and depression. So working on you is an excellent approach to improve the quality of life and gain emotional regulation.

- **Improving physical health:** Self-care activities are inclusive of a good quality night sleep, consuming a well-balanced diet, and engaging in regular physical exercise. They lay the foundation for a healthy mind and body.
- **Better decision making:** When your mental health stays sound, it creates an opportunity to develop a recharged brain that is efficient in problem-solving and is more focused on chores.

Authentic self-care isn't about perfection or following trends, it's about tuning into yourself and making intentional choices that enhance your well-being.



True self-care aligns with your unique needs and lifestyle, fostering balance, resilience, and emotional well-being



CREATING A SELF-CARE ROUTINE

Identification of needs: Think about the self-care activity that you need the most and aligns with your lifestyle, values, and thoughts. You may need it in physical form such as exercise or sleep, emotional form such as therapy or journaling, social form such as connecting with friends, and spiritual form like prayer, nature therapy, etc.

Wise choice - After identification of your

needs, choose activities that are in alignment with your personality. For instance you may prefer solitude or social gatherings as per your nature.

Building a routine: After choosing the activity that you are interested in, plan a simple yet flexible schedule that is easy to follow. Begin by practicing 1-2 habits and try to fix them in your current routine.

Tracking progress: Keep a record of your self-care activities and also reflect on your feelings post accomplishing them.

Real Madrid vs Atletico Madrid ends in 1-1 draw

PTI ■ MADRID

Kylian Mbappé scored in his first capital derby against Atletico Madrid as Real Madrid fought back for a 1-1 draw and kept its slim lead of the Spanish league on Saturday.

Next up for Mbappé and Madrid is a trip to Manchester City on Tuesday for the first leg of their Champions League knockout round playoff.

Julián Álvarez put Atletico ahead from the penalty spot in the 35th minute. Mbappé equalised in the 50th for the hosts, which stayed one point ahead of Atletico in the standings.

Jude Bellingham hit the crossbar with a header as Madrid searched for a second goal. Atletico goalkeeper Jan Oblak made saves to deny Rodrygo, Vinicius Júnior and Mbappé to split the points at the Santiago Bernabeu.

"We knew how to hang in there and had our chances," Álvarez said. "We are in the fight and will stay in it right to the end."

Atletico, which spent big last summer to acquire Alvarez and other reinforcements, is trying to add to league titles in 2021 and 2014 under coach Diego Simeone.



Barcelona, in third place, is five points behind Madrid before visiting Sevilla on Sunday. Mbappé had missed the first Atletico derby of the season, a 1-1 draw in September, because of injury.

First half to Atletico
A spate of injuries left Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti relying on a makeshift backline of Lucas Vázquez, regular midfielder Aurélien Tchouaméni, youth player Raul Asencio, and Fran García.

A reckless stretch of his boot by Tchouaméni that ended up tripping Samuel Lino was spotted by a video review referee and sent Álvarez to the penalty spot. The former Man City striker gently stroked his penalty down the middle as Thibaut Courtois dove to his left.

Antoine Griezmann showed again his great value to Atletico with precision passing even under duress. The French midfielder twice placed perfectly weighted balls that left Alvarez and Lino in good position to get off shots inside the area, but clumsy touches by both ruined the opportunities.

"It is a draw that leaves both teams thinking they could have gotten a better result," Simeone said. "We had some situations that we lacked the clarity we needed to resolve better."

Second half to Real
Rodrygo sparked the Madrid comeback just after halftime when he dribbled past Javi Galan and Lino on the right side and slipped a ball to Bellingham in the heart of the box. Bellingham's scuffed shot hit a defender and fell to Mbappé to rifle home for his first goal against Atletico.

down the left side and scooped the ball for Bellingham, who smashed a header off the woodwork.

Someone changed both his full backs with Reinildo and Nahuel Molina in the 63rd, but Oblak still had to come to Atletico's rescue on three occasions.

"It is going to be a tightly contested league until the very end," Ancelotti said.

Changes for Man City
Ancelotti hinted that he will make changes to his starting 11 for City, most likely in midfield since he has few options in defense other than including Ferland Mendy, and will find it hard to touch his attack. That means that Dani Ceballos could likely make way for Eduardo Camavinga or Luka Modric. Former Madrid defender Marcelo was honored before kickoff after he announced his retirement this week.

Sancet hat trick
Oihan Sancet scored a hat trick to lead fourth-placed Athletic Bilbao's 3-0 rout of Girona as the Basque club moved to within one point of Barcelona.

Ernesto Valverde's Athletic, which only fields players from or near the Basque Country region of northern Spain, hasn't lost in 14 consecutive rounds, dating back to a defeat at Girona on October 6.

Antony scores but Celta wins
Antony scored his first goal since joining Real Betis on loan from Manchester United, but Celta Vigo rallied from two goals down to earn a thrilling 3-2 comeback victory.

Antony deftly curled in a shot from inside the box to put Betis ahead before Diego Llorete headed in a second goal in the 22nd.

Betis twice hit the woodwork before Fran Beltran started Celta's fightback with a powerful strike from outside the area in the 63rd. Javi Rodriguez scrambled in the equalizer before Williot Swedberg got the 87th-minute winner.

Support for Kirian
Alejandro Baena and Ayoze Pérez scored in Villarreal's 2-1 win at Las Palmas.

The teams stopped playing momentarily in the 20th minute to join the fans in applauding Kirian Rodriguez, who wears No. 20, in a show of support for the Las Palmas midfielder. Rodriguez announced this week that he will be stepping away from soccer for a second time to treat recurring cancer.



Australia secures first test series win in Sri Lanka in 14 years

PTI ■ GALLE

Australia wrapped up a comprehensive 2-0 series victory over Sri Lanka, sealing the second test with a commanding nine-wicket win in Galle on Sunday.

Top order batter Marnus Labuschagne flicked a delivery from retiring Sri Lankan player Dimuth Karunaratne to mid-wicket to complete the triumph, just 15 minutes before lunch on the fourth day. It's Australia's first test series win on Sri Lankan soil since 2011.

Their last success here came under Ricky Ponting's captaincy, a 1-0 victory in 2011. However, they suffered a 3-0 whitewash in 2016 under Steve Smith's leadership, and the 2022 series ended in a 1-1 draw. This time, with Smith standing in as captain for Pat Cummins, the victory was a welcome redemption.

"I thought it was a real good series and we played well from the outset," said Australia captain Steve Smith, who was named Player of the Series after his consecutive hundreds.

"Everyone had their methods and stuck to it over a long period of time and to score that many runs was great.

"All our spinners and lone quick Mitchell Starc did quite well. Been a great series win." Australia approached the

MI Cape Town wins maiden SA20 title

PTI ■ JOHANNESBURG

Pace spearhead Kagiso Rabada produced an inspired bowling performance to lead MI Cape Town to their maiden SA20 title with a comfortable 76 runs win over two-time champions Sunrisers Eastern Cape in the final at the Wanderers here.

After finishing last in the previous two seasons, the Rashid Khan-led MI Cape Town hardly put any foot wrong in the third season.

Rabada on Saturday night claimed 4/25 in 3.4 overs to dismiss Sunrisers Eastern Cape for just 105 in response to MI Cape Town's 181 for 8 - the second-highest score in a SA20 final.

Rabada was ably supported by player-of-the-match Trent Boult, who took two wickets for just nine runs from his four overs, spin twins George Lindo (2/20) and skipper Rashid (1/19).

Chasing 182, the Aiden Markram-led Sunrisers, which had registered consecutive



wins over Joburg Super Kings and Paarl Royals in the last two matches, could not maintain the momentum and except Tom Abell and Tony de Zorzi, no other batter could live upto the expectations.

Leg-spinner Rashid, who had surprised the cricket world by leading Afghanistan to the semifinals of the T20 World Cup last year, has added another feather in his already illustrious career.

Earlier, in the same tournament, he became the highest wicket-taker in the T20 format.

High on confidence after five wins on the trot before the final, MI Cape Town won the toss and chose to bat.

In-form Ryan Rickelton (33 off 15; 1x4, 4x6s) and Rassie van der Dussen (23 off 25; 2x6s) showed their intent from the onset, giving an aggressive start to MI Cape Town's innings.

Craig Overton bowled an economical first over in which only three runs came but in the second over Rickelton smashed sixes over deep third man and fine-leg besides a straight four over Marco

Jansen's head.

Overton too was not spared as Van der Dussen hit a six over square leg while Rickelton continued his attacking game against Jansen by hitting two brilliant sixes in the fourth over.

But MI Cape Town suffered consecutive blows which gave Sunrisers a chance to make a comeback in the game.

Rickelton was the first to depart, deceived by a slower ball from Overton and Liam Gleeson took a fine catch.

In the very next over, Liam Dawson dismissed Reeza Hendricks, who failed to open his account.

MI scored 52 runs for the loss of two wickets in the Powerplay.

The wickets stemmed the flow of runs as left-arm wrist spinner Dawson gave only four runs in the seventh over.

Van der Dussen looked uncomfortable from the beginning and was the next to depart stumped by Tristan Stubbs off Dawson in the ninth over.

Shuttler Sindhu pulls out of BAMTC 2025

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Two-time Olympic medallist shuttler PV Sindhu has pulled out of the Badminton Asia Mixed Team Championships in China due to a hamstring issue, dealing a huge blow to the country's chances of improving the colour of their medal in the prestigious edition.

The tournament is set to be played in Qingdao from February 11-16 with the Indian shuttlers currently undergoing training at a camp in Guwahati. Besides Sindhu, the other leading players in the camp are Lakshya Sen, and HS Prannoy, along with the formidable doubles pair of Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty. Sindhu was a part of the squad that won bronze in the previous edition of the tournament.

"It is with a heavy heart that I share I won't be travelling with the team for BAMTC 2025. While training on the 4th (February) in Guwahati, I felt a twinge in my hamstring. Despite my efforts to push through with heavy taping for our country, an MRI has revealed that my recovery will take slightly longer than I initially expected," said the 29-year-old Sindhu in a post on 'X'. Sindhu has grappled with injuries since winning her maiden women's singles gold medal at the 2022 Commonwealth Games in Birmingham.

However, the star shuttler sustained a left foot stress fracture injury during the Games, which kept her out of all remaining tournaments in 2022, including the World Championships and the World Tour Finals.

India are placed in a tough Group D alongside runners-up South Korea and Macau. They will begin their campaign against Macau on February 12, which will be followed by a tough outing against South Korea on February 13.

After India, New Zealand is one of strongest teams in CT: Ashwin

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Spin great R Ashwin has scolded India and New Zealand the strongest sides heading into the Champions Trophy but warned teams against taking Australia lightly despite the loss of key players to injuries as they "bring their A-game" into marquee tournaments.

The ICC event starts in Pakistan on February 19 with India playing all their matches in Dubai under a hybrid model agreement.

"India has the home advantage in Dubai, and it almost like every other team is playing an away match against India. This is a problem for the other teams, for sure," Ashwin said on his YouTube channel.

With the long-forgotten tri-series making a return after a gap of many years, Ashwin wondered if India should also have played in a triangular tournament instead of a bilateral series



against England for better preparation before the Champions Trophy.

"Is this preparation with England enough for the Indian team ahead of CT in Dubai? Should we have played a tri-series too? Pakistan, New Zealand and South Africa are playing in Pakistan conditions, which would help them in the CT.

"India only played against England in India, and moreover, we don't have a lot of pleasant memories of playing T20s in Dubai. The toss becomes really crucial in Dubai. I think winning the toss becomes crucial."

Ashwin said New Zealand, despite the absence of the long-serving pace duo of Trent Boult and Tim Southee, who have quit playing the 50-over format, will pose a challenge to India.

"After India, New Zealand is one of the strongest teams in the Champions Trophy. Since the likes of Southee and Boult are not playing, there is



a question mark about their bowling attack. Who will accompany Moutenry? Will it be Will O-Rattke, who has the potential to be a runaway champion of next generation. Will it be Ben Sears?

"They have an experienced spin attack with Michael Bracewell and Glenn Phillips. Mitchell Santner is the

captain, how is he planning to marshal his resources. New Zealand is definitely a strong team. They are one of the challengers to India." As far as Australia are concerned, Ashwin observed that they transform into a formidable outfit when the stakes are high in ICC events.

"Steven Smith as captain is a

marriage made in heaven. Smith is going to captain the team in the Champions Trophy. Will Smith, Head, Maxwell and Labuschagne pull through the team to the semis. I always believe that Australia is a champion team that always brings its A-game in marquee tournaments.

"Considering Australia have a few issues in their bowling department, a lot will depend on Smith's form and captaincy."

Skipper Pat Cummins and Josh Hazlewood were on Thursday ruled out of the Champions Trophy due to injuries.

They are also without Mitchell Marsh, who is grappling with a back injury and was ruled out of the tournament on January 31, and Marcus Stoinis, who announced on Thursday that he would be retiring from ODI cricket, removing himself from the squad.

Ashwin also expressed his excitement at the return of tri-series tournaments after a gap of many years.

"Another moment of happenstance is the return of the tri-series. Yeah, there are bilateral series happening, including the India-England one. But it feels like England isn't playing serious enough cricket.

"In the recent series against

Pakistan, England's template worked, and the absolutely trampled them. Brooke and Duckett scored heavily.

"I don't think the Champions Trophy in Pakistan will have such pitches. It will be far from easy for bowlers, and probably, England's firepower would be back to shooting blanks in the tournament.

The great off-spinner, who announced his retirement from international cricket during the Border-Gavaskar Trophy in Australia, added, "90s kids would definitely understand this fascination for tri-series.

"Now, South Africa, New Zealand, and Pakistan have decided to reignite the interest in the tri-series and organise a tournament. The revival of tri-series tournaments would breathe life into the ODI format that is gradually getting overlooked.

"The tri-series might be a perfect curtain raiser for what's in store for these teams at the Champions Trophy."

He called South African captain Temba Bavuma one of the "luckiest" cricketers.

"South Africa also have an all-rounder conundrum. Will they play Wiaan Mulder, and can Rabada be the spearhead throughout the tournament? Will Marco Jansen leave an impact in Pakistan?

"South Africa is in the group of death with England, Afghanistan and Australia. Will England play like how they did in India, or transform into something else entirely in CT 2025?

"South Africa is going to be led by (Tema) Bavuma, who I think is one of the luckiest cricketers. They have qualified for the WTC finals, and have played quite good cricket.

"Will Tristan Stubbs be benched? Will Mulder and Jansen play together along with one of Keshav Maharaj and Shamsi?"