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**INSIDE**

**MONEY 10**  
INDIA IMPORTED 49 BILLION EURO WORTH OF RUSSIAN OIL IN 2024

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## AAP WIPED DELHI'S MONEY: CAG

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

Exposing a string of wrong decisions and omissions, a report by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) has revealed the Delhi government incurred a massive loss of ₹2,026.91 Crore because of alleged irregularities in the implementation of the now-scrapped excise policy in 2021-22.

Titled 'Performance Audit on Regulation and Supply of Liquor in Delhi', (Audit Report No 1 of the year 2024)", the CAG report is one of 14 on the previous Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) government's performance, which was tabled in the Delhi Assembly by the new Rekha Gupta-led dispensation. The report also flagged violations in the process of issuing licences. AAP leaders, including then chief minister Arvind Kejriwal and former deputy chief minister Manish Sisodia, were arrested in the case lodged by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) and the Enforcement Directorate (ED).

The report estimated a revenue loss of ₹941.53 Crore, citing failure to obtain timely permissions for opening liquor vents in non-conforming municipal wards — areas not designated for liquor sales under zoning laws. This led to a significant financial impact on the Delhi government's earnings. Additionally, the Excise Department lost ₹890.15 Crore due to surrender of licences and the department's failure to re-tender liquor zones. The report also flagged an irregular waiver of ₹144



The CAG report was tabled by Chief Minister Rekha Gupta in the Assembly. It revealed Delhi incurred a loss of ₹2,026.91 Crore because of irregularities in the implementation of the now-scrapped excise policy in 2021-22. Photo: The Pioneer

Crone granted to licence holders, citing COVID-19 restrictions, a decision personally approved by Sisodia despite finance department objections. The department also failed to collect proper security deposits from zonal licences to the tune of ₹27 Crore. Overall, implementation issues of the new policy led to a loss of revenue of approximately ₹2,026.68 Crore.

The CAG report sparked fresh war of words between AAP and the BJP. While AAP stood firm in support of the discontinued new liquor policy, the BJP asserted that the report demonstrated how AAP had deceived and defrauded Delhi residents. The BJP has alleged that the CAG reports will reveal the

'black deeds' of the previous AAP government in the national capital. The CAG Audit has covered a period of four years from 2017-18 to 2020-21 to examine Regulation and Supply of Indian Made Foreign Liquor and Foreign Liquor in Delhi, in detail. Audit observed several discrepancies in the way Excise Department monitored and regulated the supply of Liquor in NCT of Delhi.

The liquor policy was an albatross around the neck of the previous AAP government and had led to several of its leaders, including then chief minister Arvind Kejriwal and deputy chief minister Manish Sisodia, landing behind bars. The corruption allegations

surrounding the policy are also seen as having played a key role in the AAP being defeated in this month's Assembly elections and the BJP forming a government in Delhi after a gap of 27 years. The report on the alleged liquor scam, a hot button issue in the run-up to the elections, claimed a loss of revenue to the tune of ₹941.53 Crore, saying timely permissions were not taken for opening the liquor vents in "non-conforming municipal wards". Non-conforming areas are areas which do not conform to land use norms for opening of liquor vents. "The excise department suffered a loss of approximately ₹890.15 Crore on account of licence fee from these zones owing to their surrender and failure of the

department in re-tendering," the report, tabled by the chief minister, added.

The CAG report also points to serious violations in policy implementation. It highlights the Delhi Excise Department's failure to enforce Rule 35 of the Delhi Excise Rules, 2010, which prohibits a single entity from holding multiple liquor licences across different categories such as wholesale, retail, and HCR (hotels, clubs, and restaurants). Sources indicate that this lapse benefited select individuals. An increase of wholesaler margin from 5 per cent to 12 per cent was justified as necessary to compensate for a quality checking system involving setting up government-approved labs at warehouses. However, no labs were set up. Thus, the profit margin of wholesale licences increased, while revenue went down, the report noted.

The AAP government awarded retail liquor licences without proper checks on solvency, financial statements, and criminal records, the report observed. Running a liquor zone required an initial investment of over ₹100 crore, yet no qualifying financial criteria was set. Thus licences were given to financially weak entities, with multiple bidders reporting minimal to zero income in the last three years. These measures suggest proxy ownership, raising questions about political favouritism and backdoor deals. The AAP government disregarded recommendations of its own Expert Committee while drafting the 2021-22 Excise Policy, with no justification recorded.

Continued on page 2

## Stalin accuses Centre fuelling language war



Tamil Nadu Chief Minister MK Stalin with his deputy Udayanithi Stalin and others at the opening of 'Kalaingar Centenary Boxing Academy' in Chennai. PTI

DMK president and Tamil Nadu Chief Minister MK Stalin on Tuesday accused the Centre of 'sowing the seeds of language war' by thrusting Hindi upon the State and said the domination of that language will not be allowed. Addressing media, Stalin said that DMK is ready for another language war.

Though the state was not against any language in particular and would not come in the way of anyone desiring to learn any language, it was determined not to allow any other language to dominate and destroy the mother tongue Tamil, he said. "This is the reason why we are adhering to the bilingual policy (of Tamil and English)," said Stalin in a letter addressed to his party workers.

Many states in India including the neighbouring states have realised the path laid down by Tamil Nadu on language policy and its firm stance, and they started to express

their concerns, he claimed. Assuring that the struggle against the domination of Hindi would continue until it was ended, Stalin said. "We are descendants of a movement with a principled army that sacrificed its life to protect Tamil."

The DMK has a history of defending the mother tongue from Hindi through numerous sacrifices since 1965. In 1971, at the anti-Hindi conference organised by the DMK students' wing in Coimbatore, he had stated that he was ready to make sacrifices. "Opposing dominance and protecting the mother tongue is a feeling ingrained in the blood of DMK members. That feeling will not subside until the end of my life," Stalin said.

Recalling his visit to Cuddalore on February 21 and 22, the Chief Minister said while addressing a parents-teachers conference, he had said that the state would not accept the National Education Policy (NEP) even if the Centre offered to give ₹10,000 crore funds to Tamil Nadu. At this, a little girl from Cuddalore, Nanmukhi, had said, "What if the Union Government does not provide funds? Then I will give it," the CM said and added that the girl sent her savings of ₹10,000.

Like her there were one crore young Nanmukhis in Tamil Nadu who were willing to defend their mother tongue, he said accusing the Union Government of sowing seeds of language war. "We are ready for it... We will not allow the domination of any other language," Stalin said. Meanwhile, the DMK members continued their agitation against the imposition of Hindi through the NEP. A few party cadres defaced the Hindi letters on the name board of the Ulundurpet railway station. Reacting to the DMK protest, BJP state chief K Annamalai sought to know from the Chief Minister why the opportunity to learn the third language, provided to students of CBSE and Matriculation schools, was being denied to government school students. "There is no ban on learning the third language. But if you want to learn, is Mr. Stalin saying that you should enroll your children in CBSE or Matriculation schools run by the DMK?" Annamalai asked in a post on the social media platform X.

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## Sajjan Kumar convicted for life



Congress leader Sajjan Kumar. File Photo: PTI

Former Congress MP Sajjan Kumar has been sentenced to life imprisonment in connection with 1984 anti-Sikh riots. Kumar was convicted in the murder of Jaswant Singh and his son Tarundeep Singh in November 1984 anti-Sikh riots in Delhi's Saraswati Vihar. This marks the second life sentence for Kumar, who is already serving time for his involvement in the Delhi Cantonment riots case. The three-time parliamentarian was found guilty of leading and inciting a mob that targeted Jaswant Singh and his family. Last week, the public prosecutor submitted that the death penalty should be imposed, citing Nirbhaya case and similar rulings.

"From the evidence on record, it has been established that the victims in the present case not only witnessed the brutal killings of their family members at the hands of the rioting mob which the Convict was a part of, but they were also witness to the burning and destruction of their dwelling house and looting of their belongings. The helplessness of the victims and the lack of any support whatsoever from the neighbours and also the police has also been established from their uncontroverted depositions. In these circumstances, I am of the considered opinion that this is a fit case where the Convict must also be awarded life imprisonment for the

offence punishable under Section 436 IPC r/w Section 149 IPC in addition to fine," special judge Kavari Baweja said in the 20 pages order. Pronouncing the order, the judge said his (Kumar) old age and illness weighed in favour of a lesser sentence instead of death penalty. The minimum punishment for murder is life imprisonment whereas the maximum is death. The judge said the offences committed by Kumar were undoubtedly brutal and reprehensible but underscored certain mitigating factors, including his age of 80 years and illnesses that "weigh in favour of imposing a lesser sentence, instead of death penalty."

The judge said, though the killings of two innocent persons in the present case is no less an offence, however, the above noted circumstances, in my opinion, do not make this a 'rarest of rare case' warranting imposition of death penalty for the offence punishable under Section 302 r/w Section 149 IPC. The offence of murder attracts a maximum of death penalty whereas the minimum punishment is life imprisonment. The court's verdict came amid intense protests by members of the Sikh community, who gathered outside the court demanding the death penalty for Kumar. Calling the 1984 riots one of the "darkest and most shameful" episodes in India's history, the protesters emphasised the need for justice and accountability. The riots had erupted following the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards on October 31, 1984, leading to widespread violence against Sikhs across the country. The Rouse Avenue Court had reserved its verdict on January 31 after hearing additional arguments from Public Prosecutor Manish Rawat.

The court on February 12 convicted Kumar for the offence and sought a report from Tihar Central Jail authorities on his psychiatric and psychological evaluation in view of a Supreme Court order asking for such a report in cases attracting capital punishment.

Continued on page 2

## Centre seeks time to deport undocumented Assam migrants

The Centre on Tuesday sought more time from Supreme Court on deportation of around 270 foreigners kept at detention centers in Assam. Appearing before Justices Abhay S Oka and Ujjal Bhuyan, Solicitor General Tushar Mehta said a decision on deporting the identified foreigners was likely by March 21 and the matter is under consideration at the "highest executive level".

## Crowds swell into night at Kumbh on Shivratri eve

PTI ■ MAHAKUMBH NAGAR

Pilgrims thronging river banks through the clock, vendors selling 'puja' ware and security staff everywhere to manage the crowds converging at confluence point — the Triveni Sangam is where the lines between day and night blur.

From morning till dusk and midnight till dawn, the cycle of spiritual bathing at the mega gathering of humanity in this holy city goes on without a break.

The religious festival, billed to be the largest gathering of people in the world, ends on Wednesday with the final



The Sangam area illuminated on the eve of Mahashivratri festival during the ongoing Maha Kumbh Mela 2025 in Prayagraj. PTI

Around 1.30 am on Tuesday, when much of the country was sleeping, the ghats facing the Sangam nose, where the Yamuna, Ganga and the mythical Saraswati meet, and near the spot were buzzing with life with a surge of humanity rushing in with just one purpose — 'Kumbh Snan'. The crowd swelled hour after hour. Pilgrims jostled with each other to reach the river bank, and those having taken the holy dip struggled to find a spot to change their clothes. The banks were literally choked with devotees, young and old, rural and urban, men and women.

Continued on page 2

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# CBSE approves norms for biannual Class 10 exams



Students discuss after appearing in the class 12th board exam conducted by the CBSE. File Photo

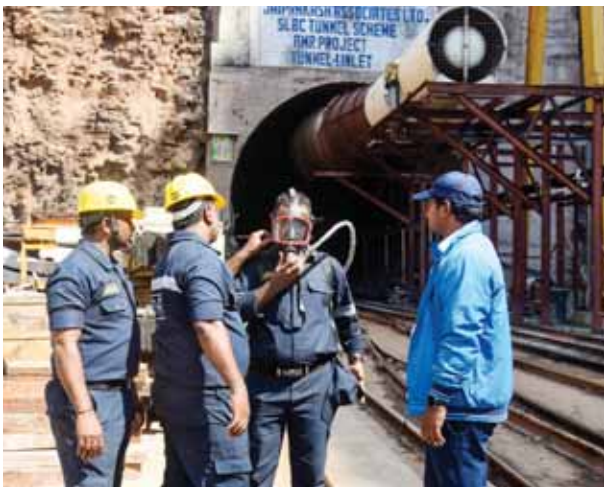
**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**  
The Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) on Tuesday approved draft norms for conducting Class-10 board exams twice a year from 2026, officials said. The draft norms will now be put in the public domain and the stakeholders can submit their feedback till March 9 following which the policy will be finalised, they said. As per the draft norms, the first phase of the exams will be conducted from February 17 to March 6, while the second phase will be conducted from May 5 to 20. "Both the examinations will be conducted on full syllabus and the candidates will be

allotted the same examination centres in the two editions. Exam fees will be enhanced and collected for both exams at the time of application filing," a senior board official said. "The first and second editions of the board exams will also act as supplementary exams, and no special exams will be conducted in any circumstances," the official added. The new National Education Policy (NEP) had recommended that to eliminate the "high stakes" aspect of the board exams, all students will be allowed to take the exams on up to two occasions during any given school year.

# Tunnel collapse: Water poses threat to rescuers' lives, says Minister

**PTI ■ NAGARKURNOOL**

As there is a continuous flow of silt and water in the partially collapsed SLBC tunnel where eight people have been trapped for over three days, experts warned that the lives of the rescue teams could also be in danger if they attempt to venture inside, Irrigation Minister Uttam Kumar Reddy said on Tuesday. Addressing media persons, Reddy cited experts, who described this as the most complex and difficult tunnel accident in the world or at least in India as there is only one entry or exit to the SLBC tunnel. He opined that the collapse might have taken place due to a slight tectonic shift and as some geological fault lines have given way. "There is one problem. The flow of slit and water into the tunnel at a very high speed continues. So there was one opinion expressed by some experts that the people going into the rescue, even their lives could be endangered. So, we are a responsible government, we are taking the best expert opinion, and we will take a final call on that (on how to go about it)," he said. The Minister noted that experts from 10 agencies such as Indian Army, the Marine Commando Force (MARCOS) of Navy, NDRF, SDRF, GSI, Rat Miners and Singareni Collieries Company Ltd are working round the clock to save the eight lives. He further said a unified command control has been set up which is constantly being monitored by



Rescue team at the Srisailem Left Bank Canal (SLBC) project site where a portion of the tunnel collapsed, in Nagarkurnool district. PTI

Special Chief Secretary Arvind Kumar. "People are relentlessly working in the tunnel. We are getting videos and pictures. They are being assessed by the experts. We will take a combined collective decision," he replied when asked what the current situation is. There was no contact with the trapped persons though oxygen is being pumped into the tunnel continuously. Reddy said the state government is dedicated to saving the lives of the trapped persons and has been using the best possible talent in India and anywhere in the world. Reacting to BRS' criticism that Chief Minister Revanth Reddy, who has visited Delhi 36 times, does not have the time to visit those trapped in the SLBC tunnel even after 72 hours, Uttam Reddy termed it as "disgraceful

politics". "Anybody who is criticising, please remember, there cannot be more disgraceful politics. It is shameful that somebody talks about it," he hit back. Recalling that eight people died during a fire accident at Srisailem Left Bank Power Plant and seven were killed at Kaleshwaram Project when BRS was in power, the minister said they never criticised the then government. Despite relentless efforts by several agencies, no breakthrough has been achieved so far in the rescue operations, as thick muck, tangled iron rods, and cement blocks continue to impede the efforts to extricate the trapped persons from the partially collapsed tunnel of the Srisailem Left Bank Canal (SLBC) project in since Saturday morning.

# SC questions Delhi's stand on Nitish Katara murder accused

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI**

The Supreme Court has questioned the Delhi government's submission that it would not release Sukhdev Yadav alias Pehalwan, serving a 20-year jail term without remission for murder of business executive Nitish Katara in 2002, despite the completion of his actual sentence. A bench of Justices Abhay S Oka and Ujjal Bhuyan directed the secretary of the Delhi government's home department to file an affidavit stating on oath that even after the completion 20 years of actual jail term, Yadav would not be released. "Our question is, is it your case that even after completion of 20 years of actual imprisonment, the state will not release the petitioner (Yadav)?" the bench asked the Delhi government

The counsel responded in the affirmative and said Yadav was sentenced to life imprisonment. The apex court noted the high court, in its verdict delivered on February 6, 2015, sentenced Yadav to "life imprisonment which shall be 20 years of actual imprisonment without consideration of remission" and fined him with Rs 10,000. On Monday, the bench was informed that Yadav would soon complete his 20 years of actual sentence. The bench asked the Delhi government's counsel if a state would read verdicts delivered by the courts this way. The home department secretary was therefore ordered to file the affidavit by February 28 by the bench, which would hear the matter on March 3. Yadav's plea challenged a November 2024 order of the Delhi High Court, which

dismissed his petition for releasing him on furlough for three weeks. On October 3, 2016, the Supreme Court awarded a 25-year jail term without the benefit of remission to Vikas Yadav and his cousin Vishal for their role in the sensational kidnapping and killing of Katara. Co-convict Sukhdev Yadav alias Pehalwan was handed down a 20-year jail term in the case. They were convicted and sentenced for kidnapping Katara from a marriage party on the intervening night of February 16-17, 2002 and then killing him for his alleged affair with Vikas' sister Bharti Yadav. Bharti was the daughter of Uttar Pradesh politician D P Yadav. The trial court observed Katara was murdered as Vishal and Vikas Yadav did not approve of his affair with Bharti as they were from different castes.

# Decision on Surjewala's plea for electoral rolls in three months: ECI to DHC

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI**

The Delhi High Court was on Tuesday informed by

the Election Commission of India that it would decide within three months a representation of Congress MP Randeep Singh

Surjewala seeking the electoral rolls for elections held in Haryana and Maharashtra between 2009 and 2024.

Justice Jyoti Singh recorded the submission of the Election Commission of India (ECI) counsel who said since the details related to 2009, it would not be possible to logistically take an immediate decision and sought three months. "Accordingly, this writ petition is disposed of without entering into the merits of the case by taking the stand of the ECI on record that the representation dated

December 29, 2024 will be decided as expeditiously as possible and not later than three months from today," the court said. Senior advocate Abhishek Singhvi, appearing for Surjewala, submitted the ECI hadn't decide the December 29, 2024 representation seeking supply of electoral rolls for the Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha elections conducted in Haryana and Maharashtra between 2009 and 2024.

# Crowds swell into night at Kumbh on Shivratri eve

**From page 1**

"Jai Ganga Maiyya, I had my 'snan' and it feels reinvigorating. This is my first time at any Kumbh Mela, I am glad I could be part of it," said a pilgrim from Jharkhand's Sahibganj, who took a dip along with his wife and son at around 2 am. As the crowds continued to grow, many just sitting down at and near the Triveni Sangam, police personnel in uniform walked near the banks instructing people to not put any bags on ground near the edges of the ghats, and not jostle for space. "Aage badhiye, aage badhiye" (move forward, move forward)," shouted a policeman on duty to people and told them not to push and shove, repeatedly blowing his whistle to manage the crowd. The rush kept increasing. Many got separated from their loved ones and friends either at the banks or at other parts of the Mela area. The 'Lost and Found' Centre at Sector 3, Akshay Vat Road was abuzz with activity even at 3 am. Ramesh Kaidan from Madhya

Pradesh had lost his wife waited at the centre anxiously. So did Munnill Thakur from Bihar's West Chandigarh district who looked out for his brother, sister-in-law and grandson. A flurry of announcements were made on loudspeakers in the Mela area while a digital screen at the centre displayed names (mostly with photos) of persons lost or found by authorities. The Triveni Marg connecting Naya Pul near Minto Park and the Maha Kumbh Mela area was an ocean of people, some going to the ghats and others getting back. Around 3.45 am, a group of 34 pilgrims — friends and family members — from Kangra in Himachal Pradesh were on their way out. And a huge batch of 100 devotees from Maharashtra, sporting matching saffron vests, was on its way for a dip straight from the Prayagraj station. Dhanraj Wasadekar, one of the pilgrims from Maharashtra, said he was attending Kumbh Mela for the first time. "We are all from different parts of Maharashtra, who converged at Mumbai and

then from there we took a train to reach Prayagraj," he told PTI while walking the Triveni Marg. The 45-day religious congregation, which began on January 13, culminates on February 26. Over 60 crore people have taken a holy dip in the Triveni Sangam since it started, according to the Uttar Pradesh government. Vendors selling 'shivling' rudraksha garlands, water containers to carry river water, and ceremonial threads could be seen doing business the whole night. "This place gets crowd of pilgrims throughout the day, the ghats are choked all night too. Sangam is always abuzz with life and constant movement of people," said Manisha, a ceremonial threads seller from Rajasthan. A food court just outside Maha Kumbh Mela area, and located along Triveni Marg, was open for business even close to 4 am as were many street-side eateries and stalls, feeding exhausted pilgrims and giving them the energy to carry on their journey, faith in their heart and a prayer on their lips.

# Centre seeks time to deport undocumented Assam migrants

**From page 1**

The top court on February 4 slammed the Assam government for keeping persons declared foreigners in detention centers indefinitely and not deporting them saying if it was waiting for "some muhurat". Observing Assam was suppressing facts, the court said once the detainees were identified as foreigners, they ought to be deported immediately. The top court expressed surprise at the State Government's explanation that it was not sending nationality verification forms to the Ministry of External Affairs as detainees' addresses in the foreign country were unknown. Calling it a "defective" affidavit, the top court on January 22 slammed the Assam government for not stipulating reasons for

detaining 270 foreigners at the Matia transit camp. The top court directed Assam State Legal Services Authority to conduct surprise visits at the camp to check on the facility's hygiene and food quality. The bench was hearing a plea concerning the aspect of deportation and facilities at the detention centres in Assam. While hearing the matter on May 16, 2024, the apex court said the Centre must take immediate steps for deporting 17 foreigners at the detention centre in Matia and asked to prioritise the deportation of those who had spent more than two years in the camp. The plea further sought a direction to the Assam Government to not detain any person declared a foreigner by the tribunal until it could show proof of a possible deportation in near future.

# Bogie of passenger train derails in Haryana



Passengers leave from the site after a bogie of a passenger train, headed from Kurukshetra to Delhi, derailed at Nilokheri. PTI

**PTI ■ CHANDIGARH**  
The bogie of a passenger train derailed at Nilokheri in Haryana's Karnal district on Tuesday though all the passengers were reported safe, officials said. The passenger train was headed from Kurukshetra to Delhi when the incident took

place, a Government Railway Police (GRP) official said over phone from Karnal, adding that no report of injury to passengers has been received. "When the train travelled barely 100 metres after halting at the Nilokheri railway station, a wheel of the fourth bogie from the rear came off the tracks. The train was stopped immediately,"

the GRP official said. When asked what could be the reason behind the incident, the official said, "It could be a technical issue. The technical team of the Railways will be able to tell the exact cause after a probe." Rail traffic on the affected line has been impacted by the incident, which would be restored soon, he added.

# Maharashtra considering deploying security in Karnataka-bound buses

**PTI ■ MUMBAI**

Maharashtra Transport Minister Pratap Sarnaik on Tuesday said they were mulling to deploy security marshals or police personnel in the state transport buses going to neighbouring Karnataka, in wake of an attack on its staff. Maharashtra Minister of State for Home Yogesh Kadam said it is even the Karnataka government's responsibility to provide security to passengers and if they don't do it, then the (Maharashtra) state government will. The state government ordered the suspension of Maharashtra State Road Transport Corporation (MSRTC) buses to Karnataka on Saturday after an attack on a vehicle of the undertaking and its driver in Chitradurga

on Friday night allegedly by pro-Kannada activists. On the same day, a conductor of the state-owned transport corporation bus of Karnataka was allegedly assaulted in Belagavi, bordering Maharashtra, for not replying to a girl in Marathi. Both the incidents have since heightened tension in the border areas of the two states. Belagavi has a substantial Marathi population and a section among them often demands that this border district of Karnataka be merged with Maharashtra, which is opposed by pro-Kannada activists. "Marathi is our pride and we need to look after the security of our passengers," Sarnaik told PTI Videos. He also stressed that passengers should not face difficulties due to the

suspension of bus services by both the states. Senior officials of the transport department were talking to their Karnataka counterparts to resolve the issue, the minister said. "As transport minister, I have to think about the security of our passengers. If there are some anti-social elements, then we need to think about deploying security marshals or police personnel in our state-run buses which go to Karnataka," Sarnaik said. "Marathi is our pride and we need to look after the security of our passengers, and the issue will be discussed in the state cabinet meeting too," he said. The minister said Maharashtra has its "pride" and will not tolerate if people of the neighbouring state bully "our people".

# Sajjan Kumar convicted for life

**From page 1**

Nothing "adverse was reported about Kumar's behaviour" and his conduct was "satisfactory" according to a jail report, the court added. "The 'satisfactory' conduct of the convict as per the report of the jail authorities, the ailments from which he is reportedly suffering, the fact that the convict has roots in the society and the possibility of his reformation and rehabilitation are material considerations which, in my opinion, tilt the scales in favour of sentence for life imprisonment instead of death penalty," the order said. Referring to the jail report, the judge observed Kumar was unable to carry out his daily routine properly owing to poor health. The judge noted the psychiatric and psychological evaluation report of the convict, which revealed that he was under the treatment of the Department of Medicine, Urology and

Neurology at Safdarjung Hospital and was prescribed anti depressive and sleep medicines. The judge went on to add that the case at hand was part of the same incident and could be seen in continuity of the incident for which the Kumar was sentenced to life imprisonment by the Delhi High Court on December 17, 2018. He was then found guilty of having caused the death of five persons during a similar incident of rioting post the assassination of former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. "Though the killings of two innocent persons in the present case is no less an offence, however, the above noted circumstances, in my opinion, do not make this a 'rarest of rare case' warranting imposition of death penalty," the court said. The judge therefore awarded life imprisonment to Kumar for being part of the mob which set afire the house of the

victims and "brutally killed" the two victims aside from looting their belongings. Referring to the jail report, the judge observed Kumar was unable to carry out his daily routine properly owing to poor health. The judge noted the psychiatric and psychological evaluation report of the convict, which revealed that he was under the treatment of the Department of Medicine, Urology and Neurology at Safdarjung Hospital and was prescribed anti depressive and sleep medicines. Kumar otherwise did not show any signs and symptoms of mental illness or requiring any psychiatric intervention at present, the judge noted. The judge fined Rs 2.4 lakh. All the sentences were ordered by the court to run concurrently. Reacting to the verdict, Delhi Sikh Gurudwara Management Committee (DSGMC) general secretary Jagdip Singh Kahlon said they are not happy with

the punishment awarded to Sajjan Kumar. "We are upset that someone like Sajjan Kumar was not given the death penalty. I believe if he had been given a death sentence, it would have been better, and we would have felt satisfied...After 41 years, even if he got life imprisonment, justice has prevailed. I respect the verdict of the court," Kahlon said. The 1984 anti-Sikh riots were triggered by the assassination of the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi on October 31, 1984, by her Sikh bodyguards, Beant Singh and Satwant Singh. The assassination occurred in the wake of Operation Blue Star, a military operation that year in June, which was undertaken to remove Sikh militants, including Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, who were holed up in the Golden Temple, a holy shrine for Sikhs in Punjab's Amritsar. According to a report of Nanavati Commission,

constituted to probe the violence and its aftermath, there were 587 FIRs filed in Delhi in relation to the riots that saw killings of 2733 people. Of the total, about 240 FIRs were closed by police as "untraced" and 250 cases resulted in acquittal. Only 28 cases of 587 FIRs resulted in convictions, in which about 400 persons were convicted. About 50 were convicted for murder, including Kumar. Kumar, an influential Congress leader and an MP at the time, was accused in a case over the killings of five persons in Delhi's Palam Colony on November 1 and 2 in 1984. He was awarded life imprisonment by the Delhi High Court in the case and his appeal challenging the punishment is pending before the Supreme Court. Two other appeals are pending before Delhi high court and the Supreme Court against Kumar's acquittal and life imprisonment in two other cases respectively.

# AAP WIPED DELHI'S MONEY: CAG

**From page 1**

The policy further permitted a single applicant to operate up to 54 liquor vends, (previous limit was two), paving the way for monopolies and cartelisation. Earlier, government corporations operated 377 retail vends, while 262 were run by private individuals. The new policy created 32 retail zones with 849 vends, but licenses were given to only 22 private entities - reducing transparency and fairness. The CAG also noted that the Excise Department allowed L1 licenses to set their own Ex-Distillery Price (EDP) for high-priced liquor, leading to price manipulation. The report also highlighted that the AAP's Excise Department approved liquor vends in nonconforming (residential/mixed land use) areas without mandatory approval from MCD or DDA. - Inspection teams falsely declared 4 vends in Zone 23

as being in commercial areas, in some cases applicants themselves admitted that the vends were in residential/mixed land use areas, yet licenses were issued. Due to these violations, all four illegal liquor vends were sealed by MCD in early 2022. This proves that due process was bypassed. The report also pointed out key exemptions and relaxations with significant revenue impact were granted without Cabinet approval or consulting the LG, violating legal procedures. According to CAG, violating L1 licenses has put public at risk. The Excise Department issued licenses even when quality test reports were missing or non-compliant with Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) norms. Some test reports submitted by licensees were from labs not accredited by the National Accreditation Board for Testing and Calibration Laboratories

(NABL), violating FSSAI guidelines. "In 51 per cent of foreign liquor test cases, reports were either older than one year, missing, or had no date - indicating QC negligence. Reports on harmful substances like heavy metals, methyl alcohol etc were absent or ignored, raising serious safety concerns," it said. The CAG stated that Excise Intelligence Bureau (EIB) failed to take proactive action against smuggling, especially of country liquor which made up 65 per cent of seized stock. They merely recorded seizures instead of taking proactive action. "It was observed that licenses were issued without ensuring solvency, submission of audited financial statements, submission of data regarding sales and wholesale price declared in other states and across the year, verification of criminal antecedents from the competent authority etc as required under the Rules," it added.

# Delhi LG addresses new Assembly, presents BJP's 10-point agenda

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Amid pandemonium, Delhi's Lieutenant Governor (LG) Vinai Kumar Saxena addressed the first session of the newly constituted eighth Legislative Assembly of Delhi on Monday, outlining the BJP-led government's 10-point agenda.

He also reaffirmed the administration's commitment to providing financial support to underprivileged women, including ₹2,500 per month, ₹21,000 for pregnant women, six nutrition kits, and LPG cylinders at a subsidised rate of ₹500, along with free cylinders during Diwali and Holi. Saxena said the new Delhi government will adopt the 'Viksit Delhi Sankalp Patra' as a guiding document to fulfil the promises made to the people.

The 'Vikshit Delhi Sankalp Patra' was the BJP's manifesto for the recently concluded Delhi Assembly poll. Its assurances included providing ₹2,500 per month to eligible women in the city. The 10-point agenda include corrup-

tion free efficient administration, empowerment of women, welfare of the poor, improvement in health facilities, excellent education system, world class road transport, clean and pollution free Delhi, revival of Yamuna river, clean water and regularisation of unauthorised colonies and affordable housing.

Addressing the first session of the newly elected Assembly, Saxena reaffirmed that the BJP-led administration would focus on development and follow the Viksit Delhi Sankalp Patra, the party's manifesto, as its governing framework.

"In the next five years, my government will give extensive emphasis to the 10 key areas. My government will adopt the Viksit Delhi' resolution as a policy document and will move forward in the direction of fulfilling the promises made to the common people as well as meeting their expectations. This policy document will be the top priority of the present government. In this regard, all the department heads have been instructed to prepare a



Delhi LG VK Saxena addresses the first session of eighth Legislative Assembly

100-day action plan and prepare a development plan," LG said. Continuous political clashes and blame games over the past decade had hindered Delhi's

progress, the LG claimed and added that the new government would work in coordination with the Centre and other states to ensure effective governance. "Prime Minister

Narendra Modi's basic mantra 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas, Sabka Prayas and Sabka Samman' will determine the direction of my government, Saxena said.

The LG's speech also mentioned all promises made by the BJP led Delhi government during the elections. He said his government has decided to implement 'Ayushman Bharat

Yojana' in Delhi in its first cabinet meeting itself. Under this, free treatment up to ₹5 Lakh will be provided by the Central Government, and additional free treatment up to ₹5 Lakh will be provided by my Government. In this way, it will be ensured that every beneficiary can get free treatment up to ₹10 Lakh.

Saxena also reiterated promises of providing subsidised LPG cylinders, financial assistance for pregnant women, and free OPD and diagnostic services. Additionally, he announced plans to increase pensions for the elderly and widows.

The government has prepared a 100-day action plan that focuses on improving roads, sewers, water supply, and drainage systems. Emphasising the need for change, he said that perpetuating poverty and maintaining the status quo cannot be a matter of state policy. He assured that the government would work for the development of all sections of society, including the lower, middle, and upper classes.

Highlighting the commitment to economic growth and job creation, Saxena criticised the previous administration for relying on advertising campaigns to mask its failures. Instead, he asserted that the current government would prioritise tangible results and delivery.

Saxena said that in the first cabinet meeting itself, his Government has decided to table the reports of the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India in the Assembly, which will pave the way for knowing and removing the administrative shortcomings of the previous Government.

In the coming few months, the first priority of my Government will be to fix the problems of roads, drains, sewer lines, health facilities and drinking water. Along with this, my Government will make the weak and corrupt Government system, which was hidden behind the illusion of advertisements, corruption-free and strong and smooth with immediate effect," he said.

# CAG finds Delhi liquor wholesalers ignored quality test compliance

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) report - 'Performance Audit Report on Regulation and Supply of Liquor in Delhi' - revealed that several liquor wholesalers failed to submit mandatory quality test verifying compliance with the Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) norms while reports of water quality, harmful ingredients, heavy metals, methyl alcohol, microbiological were not submitted for various brands. The report was tabled in the Delhi Assembly on Tuesday. The report on the previous AAP government's 2021-22 excise policy also pointed out that in 51 per cent of foreign liquor test cases, reports were either older than one year, missing, or had no date. Ensuring that the liquor sup-



Delhi Minister Kapil Mishra holds CAG report

plied in Delhi conforms to prescribed quality standards is the responsibility of the excise department, the report said, adding that rules make it mandatory for the wholesalers to submit various test reports at the time of issue of licenses. "Audit observed a number

of instances where test reports were not compliant with BIS Specifications and the Excise Department issued licenses despite major shortcomings. Important test reports of water quality, harmful ingredients, heavy metals, methyl alcohol, microbiological tests reports

etc, were not submitted for various brands," it stated. The report, flagged that some test reports submitted by licensees were from such labs which were not accredited by the National Accreditation Board for Testing and Calibration Laboratories (NABL), violating FSSAI guidelines. According to the CAG report, deficient test certificates were also noticed during scrutiny of test checked reports.

In the report, the CAG of India said that there is an urgent need that the excise department should proactively monitor the quality of alcohol and frame stringent quality standards and ensure compliance of the same. The alleged irregularities in the formulation and implementation of the policy had snowballed into a political punching bag used by the BJP after Lt Governor V K Saxena recommended a CBI probe in July 2022.

# AAP, BJP clash over liquor policy

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) report presented in the Delhi Assembly on Tuesday sparked a fresh war of words between Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) and the BJP. While AAP stood firm in support of the discontinued new liquor policy, the BJP asserted that the report demonstrated how AAP had deceived and defrauded Delhi residents. The BJP has alleged that the CAG reports will reveal the 'black deeds' of the previous AAP government in the national capital.

Addressing a press conference, Delhi BJP President Virendra Sachdeva, MP Manoj Tiwari, and Praveen Khandelwal welcomed the presentation of the CAG report in the Delhi Assembly, alleging that AAP chief Arvind Kejriwal acted as a "middleman for the liquor lobby" while senior AAP leader and Leader of Opposition in Delhi Assembly Atishi defended the previous AAP government's now-scrapped excise policy, citing a CAG report to claim that the old policy was marred by corruption and smuggling.

The Delhi BJP chief said the report has exposed the "loot, corruption, and deception" of the previous AAP government over the past decade. He alleged the Kejriwal administration had been deliberately withholding the report to conceal financial irregularities. But with its release, the truth is now out in the open,



AAP leader Atishi addresses press conference in New Delhi

Sachdeva said. "The public of Delhi was waiting for the CAG report to know how Arvind Kejriwal and Manish Sisodia were involved in corruption under the excise policy," he stated.

Sachdeva alleged that mismanagement led to additional losses, including ₹941.53 Crore due to the non-opening of liquor shops in non-conforming wards, ₹890 Crore from the failure to re-tender surrendered licenses, ₹144 Crore waived for zonal licensees under the pretext of COVID-19 relief, and Rs 27 Crore lost due to improper security deposit collection.

A performance audit report by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India on the regulation and supply of liquor in the national capital has showed lapses in the functioning of the excise department and its policy, leading to revenue losses exceeding ₹2,026.91 Crore. The CAG

report was tabled during the first session of the newly-elected Delhi Assembly on Tuesday. Earlier Atishi accused the BJP-appointed lieutenant governor (LG), the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), and the Enforcement Directorate (ED) of obstructing the implementation of the new liquor policy, causing an annual revenue loss of ₹8,900 Crore to Delhi.

Atishi said seven out of the eight chapters in the CAG report highlight the shortcomings of the old excise policy, while only one focuses on the new policy. "The AAP government always raised concerns about corruption in the old excise policy, which facilitated illegal liquor smuggling. The report shows that liquor shop owners engaged in corrupt practices, inflating prices and causing heavy losses to Delhi's exchequer," the former chief minister said.

# Report reveals financial irregularities in Delhi's excise system

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

A Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) report has flagged financial irregularities in the Excise Supply Chain Information Management System (ESCIMS), stating that an undue benefit of ₹24.23 Crore was given to the implementing agency.

Presented in the newly elected Delhi Assembly on Monday, the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) report - 'Performance Audit Report on Regulation and Supply of Liquor in Delhi' - revealed that payments were made for liquor bottles that were not authenticated through barcode scanning at the Point of Sale (POS). According to the report, the implementing agency (IA) got the benefit during the period from December 2013 to November 2022. In February 2010, the Delhi Cabinet decided that barcoding would be introduced for all liquor sold in the city to curb smuggling and ensure traceability. The ESCIMS project, implemented through an IA selected via a bidding process, covered "barcoding of all liquor, inventory management and payment solution for all stakeholders (Excise Department, wholesale licensees and retail outlets) in its scope," the report stated. As per the contract, the IA was entitled to payments only for barcodes authenticated at POS during sales. However, the audit found that between December 2013 and November 2022, barcode authentication amounted to ₹65.88 Crore, whereas the actual payment liability created was ₹90.11 Crore.

"The difference amounting to ₹24.23 Crore (excluding service tax or GST) was considered for payment, for bottles considered as sold through stock-take-sold exercise, ie, without actual authentication at POS," the report highlighted.

# Delhi excise policy created monopoly risks

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The 2021-22 Delhi excise policy created risks of monopolies and brand pushing by an "exclusive arrangement" between a few wholesalers and manufacturers, allowing the distributors to dominate the liquor supply chain with just three of them controlling over 71 per cent of total liquor supply chain in the city. The report, tabled in the Delhi assembly on Tuesday, pointed out

that out of 367 registered IMFL brands, 25 brands accounted for nearly 70 per cent of total liquor sales in Delhi.

"The policy mandated an exclusive arrangement between a manufacturer and wholesalers, which led to the entire supply of all brands of a particular manufacturer being controlled by only one wholesaler.

"This becomes particularly relevant considering the fact that although 367 IMFL brands were

registered in Delhi, very few popular brands formed the bulk of sale volume," the report said. The CAG report, one of 14 on the previous Aam Aadmi Party government's performance to be tabled by the new Rekha Gupta-led dispensation, said that top 10 brands accounted for the sale of 46.46 per cent of liquor sold in Delhi whereas top 25 brands accounted for 69.50 per cent of the liquor sold.

"Of these 25 top selling brands, Brindco and Mahadev Liquor exclusively supplied seven brands each, followed by Indospirit which exclusively supplied six brands. Further, of the 367 brands of IMFL supplied by 13 wholesale licensees, the highest number of brands were exclusively supplied by Indospirit (76 brands), followed by Mahadev Liquors (71 brands) and Brindco (45 brands). These three wholesalers also accounted for 71.70 per cent of volume of Liquor sold in Delhi," it stated.

# AAP MLAs suspended for disruption during Assembly session

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The second day of the three-day Assembly session began with chaos, as within minutes of commencement, several AAP MLAs got suspended for three days by Speaker Vijender Gupta for disruption and sloganeering during the Lieutenant Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena's address in the House.

The protest, which disrupted the session, led to the immediate expulsion of the AAP MLAs. Speaker Gupta directed the marshals to remove the protesting MLAs from the room, saying, "fatat safai kijiye" (quickly clean up).

The proposal for their suspension was moved by Delhi Public Works Department (PWD) Minister Parvesh Verma and passed through a voice vote in the House. The suspended MLAs will not be allowed to participate in the assembly pro-

ceedings on February 27 and 28. As the House proceedings began on Tuesday, Atishi along with other AAP legislators protested against the removal of B R Ambedkar's portrait from the chief minister's office. The AAP MLAs accused the BJP-led government of disrespecting Ambedkar and raised slogans against the move.

Speaker Vijender Gupta expressed disappointment over the disruptions, saying, "When the Assembly session began, we hoped that both the ruling party and the opposition would work together for development, as today's discussion was very important."

With the AAP having 22 MLAs in the Delhi Assembly, all but Okhla MLA Amantullah Khan have been suspended. Khan



Leader of Opposition in the Delhi Assembly Atishi with other AAP MLAs stages a protest

was absent from the House. Following their suspension, the 21 MLAs staged a protest inside the Assembly complex, holding Ambedkar's portraits and chant-

ing slogans such as "Babasaheb ka ye apmaan nahi sahega Hindustan (India will not tolerate this insult to Babasaheb)" and "Jai Bhim."

"The BJP has shown its true colours by removing Babasaheb Ambedkar's portrait. Does it believe (PM Narendra) Modi can replace Babasaheb?" Atishi posed at a press conference.

AAP also alleged that Ambedkar's portraits had been removed from both the chief minister's office at the Delhi Secretariat and the Assembly premises. Speaker Gupta has adjourned the Assembly session until 11 am on February 27. Earlier addressing a press conference Atishi said that the ruling BJP had showed its true face to the entire country on Monday by allegedly removing the photographs of Baba Saheb Ambedkar and Bhagat Singh from the Chief Minister's office. "BJP showed its true face to the entire country yesterday. BJP

replaced Babasaheb Ambedkar's photo with PM Modi's photo in the Delhi CM office. I want to ask them if they think that PM Modi ji is bigger than BR Ambedkar ji.

It is the same BJP whose senior leader and Home Minister Amit Shah disrespected him (BR Ambedkar) in the Parliament," she said.

Commenting on the AAP MLAs' suspension, Delhi minister Ravinder Indraj Singh said, "This is not a protest. These AAP leaders are scared. They are trying to create unrest in the assembly instead of resigning. They are trying to hide something."

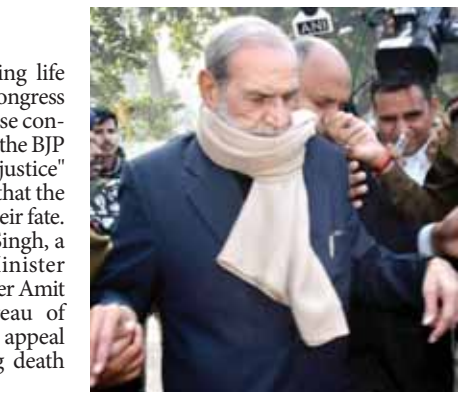
Singh's Cabinet colleague Ashish Sood alleged that AAP was attempting to divert attention from corruption during its term

# BJP welcomes life sentence for Sajjan Kumar

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

With a special court awarding life imprisonment to former Congress MP Sajjan Kumar in a murder case connected to the 1984 anti-Sikh riots, the BJP on Tuesday said the "wheels of justice" have started moving, and hoped that the other accused would also meet their fate. BJP national spokesperson R P Singh, a Sikh leader, urged Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah to ask the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) to file an appeal before the higher court seeking death penalty for Kumar.

A special court on Tuesday awarded life imprisonment to former Sajjan Kumar. Special judge Kaveri Baweja pronounced the judgement for the murders of Jaswant Singh and his son Tarundeep Singh on



Congress leader Sajjan Kumar

November 1, 1984. "While the entire country was expecting a death penalty for Sajjan Kumar, he was

awarded life imprisonment only. It was not an ordinary case of murder, it was a genocide of Sikhs carried out at the behest of his leader Rajiv Gandhi," Singh said in a video message.

"I urge Modi ji and Amit Shah that they direct the CBI to file an appeal in the higher court seeking death penalty for Sajjan Kumar," he added.

Commenting on the development, BJP IT department head Amit Malviya wrote on X, "Former Congress MP Sajjan Kumar, a close aide of Rajiv Gandhi and later Sonia Gandhi, has been sentenced to life imprisonment for his role in the 1984 Sikh genocide."

"The wheels of justice have started moving. Several other senior Congress leaders, including one who was in the race to become Congress president, will soon meet their fate. The long arm of the law

will catch up," he added.

Newly appointed Delhi Minister Manjinder Singh Sirsa, another Sikh leader of the BJP, expressed satisfaction with the verdict and said Kumar could be punished for his involvement in the case after 35 years due to a special investigation team (SIT) set up by Prime Minister Modi.

"We are relieved now that action is being taken in this case after 35 years. Sajjan Kumar has been awarded life imprisonment in the case. We believe that similar action will be taken against Jagdish Tytler and Kamal Nath in the coming days," he told reporters.

"The accused (Sajjan Kumar) could be punished after 35 years just because of the SIT set up by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. My community thanks the government and Modi ji (for this)," Sirsa added.

# Verbal clashes erupt in MCD House over tax waiver proposals

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Chaos erupted in the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) House on Tuesday as councillors from the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) and BJP engaged in verbal clashes and raised slogans over two key proposals - a house tax waiver and the regularisation of 12,000 contractual municipal workers.

Despite the chaos, MCD Mayor Mahesh Kumar later claimed in a press conference that both proposals had been successfully passed, asserting that the required number of councillors from their

side were present to meet the quorum.

However, the Leader of Opposition strongly contested this, arguing that proper procedures were not followed and, hence, the proposals could not be considered officially approved. Meanwhile, a top official said that the issue was under examination. The commotion began when the AAP-led MCD attempted to introduce the proposals and the deputy commissioner did not appear, leading to a standoff. The AAP demanded that the session proceed with the additional commissioner in charge, trig-

gering a heated argument. Members from both parties began displaying banners and raising slogans. AAP councillors chanted "Gundaagardi nahin chalegi" (thuggery will not be tolerated) and "Jai Bhim," while BJP supporters countered with slogans like "Arvind Kejriwal, Sharm Karo" and "Mayor, Sharm Karo."

The two key proposals on the table included a house tax waiver, under which homeowners who clear their 2024-25 house tax dues would have their previous pending taxes waived.

# India-China relationship entering 'phase of recovery': Chinese envoy

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

India-China ties are entering the "phase of recovery" and the relationship between the two nations is "one of the most important" bilateral engagement globally, Chinese ambassador Xu Feihong said on Tuesday.

In an address at an event, Xu also said that the recent Special Representatives (SR) dialogue and the talks under "Foreign Secretary-Vice Minister" mechanism between the two sides produced common understandings on the boundary question and created an opportunity to reboot the ties.

New Delhi and Beijing are in the process of normalising bilateral ties following an understanding last year to end the face-off on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in

eastern Ladakh. National Security Advisor Ajit Doval and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi held the 23rd Special Representative dialogue in Beijing on December 18.

Weeks later, Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri travelled to the Chinese capital and held talks with his Chinese counterpart Sun Weidong under the framework of "Foreign Secretary-Vice Minister" mechanism.

"The 23rd Special Representatives meeting on China-India boundary question and Vice Foreign Minister-Foreign Secretary dialogue were successfully held in Beijing, and reached a series of common understandings on the boundary question and practical cooperation," Xu said.

"This creates an important opportunity for the reboot of China-India relations and

provides a broader platform for exchanges and cooperation between the youth of our two countries," he said.

The ambassador, speaking at the third China-India Youth Dialogue, however did not elaborate on specific outcomes of the talks.

"The China-India relationship is one of the most important bilateral relationships in the world. A sound and stable China-India relationship meets the expectations of the two peoples and the international community," he said.

Xu said both sides should implement the important consensus reached by the leaders of the two countries, mutually respect each other's core interests and view each other's development as an opportunity besides encouraging exchanges and

visits in various fields. The ambassador added: "China-India relations are entering the phase of recovery. We will celebrate the 75th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations this year."

India and China completed the disengagement process late last year after firming up a pact for withdrawal of troops from Depsang and Demchok, the last two friction points in eastern Ladakh.

Two days after finalisation of the pact, Prime Minister Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping held talks in Kazan on October 23.

In the meeting, the two sides decided to revive the various dialogue mechanisms. India has been maintaining that its ties with China cannot be normal unless there is peace in the border areas.

# Land-for-jobs 'scam': Delhi court summons Lalu, family members

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

A Delhi court on Tuesday summoned former rail minister Lalu Prasad and some of his family members, including his wife, two sons and two daughters, in connection with the land-for-jobs 'scam'.

Special Judge Vishal Gogne summoned the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) supreme wife and former Bihar chief minister Rabri Devi, two sons — ex-Bihar deputy chief minister Tejashwi Prasad Yadav and former state minister Tej Pratap Yadav — and daughters Misha Bharti, a member of Parliament, and Hema Yadav, in connection with the case.

The accused have been directed to appear before the court on March 11.

The judge said the allegations and material cited in the chargesheet with respect to the role of Lalu Prasad Yadav, "with the active participation

of his aides Bhola Yadav and RK Mahajan, the transfer of parcels of land in favour of Lalu Prasad's family members — Rabri Devi, Hema Yadav and Tej Pratap Yadav — and the appointment of candidates, who were also arrayed as accused, upon the recommendation of railway officials, also named as accused in the chargesheet, form cogent prima-facie indication of the role of all 76 accused persons in the allegations crystallised in the concluding chargesheet."

"In view of the above allegations and the sanction for prosecution of Lalu Prasad Yadav, Bhola Yadav, RK Mahajan and the railway officials having been granted, the cognisance of the offences in question is taken by the court. The court finds sufficient grounds to summon all the accused," the judge said.

He further noted that "substantial time" was taken

by the CBI in investigating the allegations, and about two years were "consumed" in filing of the multiple chargesheets and supplementary chargesheets, and directed the central probe agency to ensure that the service of the summons be effected expeditiously and by utilising adequate man power.

The case is related to Group D appointments made in the West Central Zone of the Indian Railways based in Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh, during Lalu Prasad's tenure as the rail minister between 2004 and 2009 in return for land parcels gifted or transferred by the recruits in the name of the RJD supreme's family or associates, officials said.

A case was registered on May 18, 2022, against Lalu Prasad and others, including his wife, two daughters, unidentified public officials and private persons.

# Kharge slams government over 'declining' scholarships for SCs, STs

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge on Tuesday alleged that the government has "snatched" the scholarships of the youth of SC, ST, OBC and minority communities, and claimed that its slogan of "Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas" mocks the aspirations of the weaker sections. Kharge asked how will jobs for the youth be increased until the students of weaker sections of the country get opportunities and their skills are encouraged.

"Narendra Modi ji, Your government has snatched the scholarships of the youth of SC, ST, OBC and Minority categories in the country," Kharge said in a post in Hindi on X.

# Army's DGMO reviews security dynamics on visit to Manipur

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Indian Army's Director General Military Operations (DGMO) Lt Gen Rajiv Ghai carried out a comprehensive review of the security dynamics in Manipur as well as the situation along the Indo-Myanmar border during a two-day visit to the strife-torn state. Lt Gen Ghai met Governor Ajay Kumar Bhatta and several top officials including the state security advisor, the chief secretary and the director general of police, the Army said.

The DGMO's visit highlighted the collaborative approach between the military and state officials to implement strategic initiatives aimed at promoting stability and the welfare of the people of Manipur, it said in a readout of Lt Gen Ghai's visit to the state on February 24 and 25. Days after the resignation of Manipur Chief Minister N Biren Singh on February 9, the state was brought under President's Rule.

The Army said the DGMO visited Manipur to gain a comprehensive understanding of the situation along the Indo-Myanmar Border (IMB) and



File photo

insights into the status of ongoing border infrastructure developments in the state. Manipur's two ethnic groups — the Meitei community and the Kukis — have been locked in a deadly conflict since May, 2023, that killed over 200 people and displaced thousands.

There have been mounting concerns in New Delhi over security implications arising out of fighting between Myanmar's military and rebel forces in areas close to the country's border with India.

"The DGMO focused on the operational preparedness of the Indian Army, carried out an assessment of the security situation along the IMB, and the current security dynamics in the state, including fringe areas," it said in the readout.

"He also emphasised on a 'whole of government approach' during interactions with key stakeholders," it said. The discussions centred around the normalisation of prevailing security situation in the state, particularly the need to enhance border management and strengthen security infrastructure along the IMB, it said.

Myanmar is one of India's strategic neighbours and it shares a 1,640 km-long border with a number of northeastern states including militancy-hit Nagaland and Manipur.

In view of the violence and instability in border areas of Myanmar, Union Home Minister Amit Shah in January last year announced a plan to fence the border.

# Railways to run more than 350 trains from Prayagraj on Mahashivratri: Ministry

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Elaborate plans have been put in place for the safe return of pilgrims who have gathered at Prayagraj Maha Kumbh from various parts of the country for the final Amrit Snan on Mahashivratri, the Railway Ministry said on Tuesday.

"As the final Amrit Snan of Maha Kumbh 2025 is scheduled for February 26, a large number of pilgrims from various states, including Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, West Bengal have gathered in Prayagraj to bathe at the Sangam, the confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna, and Saraswati rivers," a press statement from the Ministry said. A total of 350 trains have been planned to run for the safe and comfortable return of pilgrims. According to the Ministry, for the past two days, Sunday and Monday, there were a high number of passengers at stations in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Jharkhand etc who travelled to Prayagraj for final Amrit Snan.

"After the Amrit Snan, a large number of people are expected to return to their hometowns, which will likely lead to a heavy crowd at railway stations," the Ministry said. It added, "Keeping this in mind, North Central Railway, North Eastern Railway, and Northern Railway have made extensive preparations, and all officials and staff have been directed to remain vigilant at their workstations." The Ministry is expecting a huge rush of pilgrims similar to Mouni Amavasya day for which over 360 trains were run, transporting more than 20 lakh people to their destinations.

"Similarly, special arrangements have been made to run additional trains after the Maha Shivaratri Snan, and extra rakes have been stationed near Prayagraj for use as needed," the Ministry said. The press note said that the entire railway operation is being closely monitored by Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw and the Chairman and CEO of the Railway Board, Satish Kumar along with other senior railway officials.

# India will always advocate 'zero tolerance' for terrorism: Jaishankar

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

There is a clear and urgent need for a new multilateral system that reflects contemporary global realities as past few years "exposed" the "stark inadequacies" of the existing structures, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar has said.

In a virtual address at the 58th Session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, he also asserted that India will always advocate "zero tolerance" for terrorism and call out any effort to normalise it.

Delving into geo-political turmoil in various geographies, Jaishankar said the world continues to grapple with conflicts and it is growing more fractured, uncertain, and unstable in the face of emerging challenges.

"There is a clear and urgent need for a multilateral system that reflects contemporary global realities, one that is better equipped to respond to modern challenges, and, in essence, one that is fit for purpose," he said.

"The past few years have exposed the stark inadequacies of existing multilateral



File photo

structures. When the world needed them the most, they were found wanting," he said. Jaishankar said India has always played an active role in the global promotion and protection of human rights. "Our approach has been centered on building capacity and strengthening human resources and infrastructure in alignment with the priorities of our partners — always upholding the principles of fiscal responsibility, transparency, and sustainability," he said. The Jaishankar said India's development partnerships with countries across the world reflects this commitment.

"At the same time, we have been firm and uncompromising in combating terrorism. India will always advocate zero tolerance for terrorism and call out any effort to normalize it," he said. "We do not merely speak of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam — the world as one family; we live by it. And today, more than ever, this perspective is urgently needed," he said. "The world continues to grapple with conflicts and crises, growing more fractured, uncertain, and unstable in the face of emerging challenges, even as it struggles to recover from the recent ones," he added.

# Trust opposes SC over Centre's stand on Halal certification

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Jamiat Ulama-I-Hind Halal Trust has opposed in the Supreme Court on the Centre's submission over halal certification of non-meat products such as iron bars and cement, calling it "vexatious and scandalous". In a rejoinder filed in the top court, the Muslim certification body said the concept of halal was considered a basic requirement of "behaviour and lifestyle", which included eating habits and consumption in general of a very large community. It said halal certification related to the religious belief and practice of a large section of Indian citizenry and was protected under Articles 25 and 26 of the Constitution. While Article 25 deals with freedom of conscience and free profession, practice and propagation of religion, Article 26 prescribes freedom to manage religious affairs.

On January 20, the Centre raised the issue of halal certification of non-meat products such as iron bars and cement, asking why non-believers should be made to pay a higher cost for halal-certified products. Denying any such certification, the trust said, "It is submitted, in clear terms, that the petitioner (trust) has not issued any halal certification to iron bars or cement." The trust further argued the choice of food, components used in preparing it, was the right of an individual or group of people protected by Articles 25 and 26 of the Constitution. "The state,

whether it is Central government or state government, cannot take away this liberty of an individual as to what material somebody is eating," it said. It was a matter of an individual's right to be informed about the component used in edible products whether vegetarian or a non-vegetarian food, the trust said. "For instance, Tulsi water, or lipstick or biscuits with or without chocolate, packaged water bottles are projected to be as ridiculous expansion of halal certifications. The said criticism of ridicule is baseless and due to ignorance of fact in general public," the rejoinder added. The trust said halal certification was also related to international trade and commerce. "As far as the allegation that certifying agencies charging the total collection in few lakh crores is concerned, this allegation again has been reported very widely, the source of which is the baseless oral instruction of the Central Government," it said. The Centre, the rejoinder said, was aware of the financial statements of the trust as it was filed with the Income Tax and GST authorities. The matter related to the pleas challenging a notification prohibiting the manufacturing, storage, sale and distribution of food products with halal certification within Uttar Pradesh, except for items produced for export. The matter would come up in the week commencing March 24.

# Cong slams Centre over US 'F-16 maintenance plan' for Pakistan

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

In the wake of US President Donald Trump reportedly allocating USD 397 million for Pakistan's F-16 fleet maintenance, the Congress on Tuesday questioned the Modi government's diplomatic strategy and called for a reassessment of India's foreign policy priorities to safeguard national interests.

Congress media and publicity department head Pawan Khera said the recent decision by President Trump to allocate USD 397 million for Pakistan's F-16 fleet maintenance raises critical questions about the Modi government's diplomatic efficacy. This move, reminiscent of the 2022 Biden administration's USD 450 million package for the same purpose, highlights a pattern of US military support to Pakistan, he said in a post on X.

Such actions potentially

compromise India's security interests, especially given the historical use of F-16s by Pakistan against India, Khera said. During the UPA years (2004-2014), India and the United States significantly deepened their strategic and defence cooperation across multiple domains, including military modernisation, technology transfer, nuclear energy, and counter-terrorism, he pointed out. The robust diplomatic and strategic initiatives taken during the UPA years deepened India-US relations, strengthening India's defense capabilities and global influence, Khera asserted. Historically, the Congress has championed a balanced and proactive foreign policy, fostering non-alignment along with strategic autonomy, he said. "Furthermore, recent defense negotiations have raised concerns. The proposal to acquire F-35 fighter jets from

the US has been met with criticism due to high costs and operational challenges. Elon Musk, for instance, has labelled the F-35 as 'junk', questioning its efficacy. "Additionally, Russia has offered to produce its advanced Su-57 jets in India, presenting a potentially more viable alternative," the Congress leader said. In light of these developments, it is imperative to question the Modi government's diplomatic strategy, Khera said. Is there a comprehensive plan to address the implications of US military aid to Pakistan, he asked. How the Government intends to ensure that India's security concerns are not sidelined in the pursuit of high-value defence procurements, Khera further asked. A reassessment of our foreign policy priorities, drawing from the Congress party's legacy of strategic foresight, is essential to safeguard national

interests, Khera asserted. In another post, Khera also posed five questions to the Modi government on reciprocal tariffs by the US. How the government plans to protect the interests of domestic farmers, who make up 45.76 per cent of the workforce, in light of potential increased imports from the US, he asked. "Will the government now consider changes in domestic policy, particularly the legalisation of MSP, to provide basic income support to Indian farmers? What assurances will the Indian government secure to prevent India from becoming a dumping ground for cheap US agricultural imports?" Khera said. How does the government plan to safeguard the MSME sector, whose production will be severely impacted by costly exports and increased competition from foreign products, Khera further asked.

# Centre extends concessions, incentives for Kashmir Valley employees for three years

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Centre has extended the package of concession and incentives for its employees working in the Kashmir Valley by three years, according to a personnel ministry order. The Valley comprises 10 districts — Anantnag, Baramulla, Budgam, Kupwara, Pulwama, Srinagar, Kulgam, Shopian, Ganderbal and Bandipora. It has been decided by the competent authority to extend the package of concessions/incentives to Central government employees working in the Kashmir Valley for a further period of three years with effect from August 1, 2024, the order issued by the ministry on Monday said. The package of incentives is uniformly applicable to all ministries, departments and public sector undertakings under the government of India, and they should

ensure strict adherence to the rates prescribed in the package, it said. The employees posted in the Valley have an option to move their families to a selected place of their choice in India at government expense, and transport allowance for the families is allowed as admissible in permanent transfer inclusive of the composite transfer grant at the rate of 80 per cent of last month's basic pay, the order said. Those employees who do not wish to move their families to a selected place of residence are paid per diem allowance of ₹141 per day for each day of attendance to compensate for any additional expense in transportation to and from office etc., it said. Department arrangements will be made for stay, security and transportation to the place of work for the employees, it said.

# 'Changed circumstances' may see better implementation of plans for Yamuna: SC

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Tuesday observed that there might be better implementation of plans, such as cleaning of Yamuna river, in view of the "changed circumstances". The observation by a bench of Justices BR Gavai and Augustine George Masih assumes significance in the wake of the BJP unseating the Aam Aadmi Party government in Delhi in the recently-concluded assembly elections. The top court is hearing a suo motu case titled 'Remediation of polluted rivers' in which it

is dealing with the issue of contamination of Yamuna river. "I think with the changed circumstances now, there may be better implementation of plans," Justice Gavai said during the hearing. Senior advocate Meenakshi Arora, who's assisting the apex court as an amicus curiae, said earlier that the National Green Tribunal (NGT) was monitoring the issue concerning Yamuna river through a committee. She said after the top court took suo motu cognisance of the matter in January 2021, the tribunal disbanded the



File photo

committee. The bench observed that it appeared there were some other petitions concerning pollution in Yamuna river, which were pending before another bench of the apex court. It asked additional solicitor

general Aishwarya Bhati, who appeared for the Centre, to find out from the authorities as to whether there were any other petitions pending with regard to the same issue. The bench posted the matter for hearing after the Holi vacation.

The amicus said the NGT had passed several orders, giving directions from time to time regarding various compliances to be met with regard to Yamuna river. She said the monitoring committee constituted by the tribunal was supervising what was being done between Haryana and Delhi regarding the setting up of sewage treatment plants and common effluent treatment plants. "Should we send it back to the NGT," the bench asked. The amicus suggested this might be better monitored by the NGT. The bench observed that all

these matters can be consolidated. "You take instructions if the NGT can monitor it or we can get it monitored through a CEC (central empowered committee), if you all agree on that," the bench said. On January 13, 2021, the apex court took cognisance of contamination of rivers by sewage effluent and observed that pollution-free water forms a basic right under the Constitutional framework and a welfare state is "bound" to ensure the same. The top court had said it would first take up the issue of contamination of Yamuna river.

CO-OP. PUBLIC NOTICE

ROSEMARY APARTMENT CO-OPERATIVE GROUP HOUSING SOCIETY LTD.(EARLIER KNOWN AS SHEEL CO-OP. GROUP HOUSING SOCIETY LTD.) Regd. Office: H.No.WZ-551A, Top Floor, Sri Nagar, Shakur Basti, Rani Bagh, Delhi-110034

The general public is hereby informed that in terms of the High Court of Delhi order dated 11.08.2016 in Writ petition no. 6896/2012 the names of 67 members and (8 vacancies), the details of which are given below are being forwarded to the office of the Registrar, Co-operative Societies, Government of NCT of Delhi, Old Court's Building, Parliament Street, New Delhi-110001 by the Managing Committee of Rosemary Apartment Co-operative Group Housing Society Limited (Regn. No. 1174 (GH), Regd. Office: H.No. WZ-551A, Top Floor, Sri Nagar, Shakur Basti, Rani Bagh, Delhi-110034 for approval of all such membership of the members who have complied with the requirement as per DCS Act, 2003 & Rules, 2007 and to forward their names to Delhi Development Authority (DDA) for possession of land to the society for construction of flats for its members through Co-operative Movement as per provisions of DCS Act/Rules & DDA norms/guidelines thereof:

Table with 6 columns: S.No., Date of Enrollment, M.No., Name of Members, Father/Husband Name, Address. Lists 67 members and 8 vacancies with their respective details.

Initially, in the year 1983-84, 65 members have applied for registration of the society in the name and style of "Sheel CGHS Ltd." Later on in the year 2001 name of the society has been changed to Rosemary Apartment CGHS Ltd. and same was approved by the competent authority vide letter no. F.47/1174/coop/GH/S/1874 dated 17.01.2001.

Before the approval of freeze list, a total of 30 enrollments occurred, and 12 members resigned, leading to the approval of 75 members by the competent authority (95 - 12 resigned)-8 (rejected). Consequently, the freeze strength of the society was approved and fixed at 75 members, as confirmed by the RCS office in its letter no. F.47/1174/Coop/GH/S/1504 dated 28.09.2000.

Currently, the society has a strength of 67 members, having 8 vacancies created due to resignations. After approval of freeze strength, 135 members applied for registration, resulting in the current strength of 67 members. Overall, the society has processed a total of 230 applications since its inception. Out of these, 163 members have been removed from the membership register due to rejections or resignations, in accordance with the provisions of the DCS Act and Rules under intimation to the office of the Registrar, Co-operative Societies, Govt. of NCT of Delhi. The details of outgoing members are provided below:

Table with 6 columns: S.No., Dt. Enrollment, M.No., Name of Members, Father/Husband Name, Address of Member, Date of M.C. Resolution Approving Resignation. Lists 163 outgoing members with their details and resignation dates.

Objections are invited from the general public, Member/ members of society and all concerned, if any, to be filed before the President/ Secretary of Rosemary Apartment Co-operative Group Housing Society Limited (Earlier name Sheel CGHS Ltd.) at H.No. WZ-551A, Top Floor, Sri Nagar, Shakur Basti, Rani Bagh, Delhi-110034 or before the Office of the Registrar, Co-operative Societies, Govt. of NCT of Delhi, Old Court's Building, Parliament Street, New Delhi-110001 within 5 days of publication of this notice, failing which no objection shall be entertained thereafter in any manner whatsoever and after expiry of 05 days, the society shall be free to proceed further as per provisions of DCS Act & Rules.

(Sanjay Kumar Sharma)-President - For Rosemary Apartment Co-op. G/H Society Ltd.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

## Liberty is sacrosanct

The Supreme Court's directive affirming bail as the norm and emphasising liberty is a welcome step

The Supreme Court in a recent ruling and observation made a very pertinent precedence that could have far-reaching implications in the functioning of the democracy. The Supreme Court in the case of Kailash Kumar vs State of Himachal Pradesh wherein it set aside a High Court order cancelling the bail of an accused has rooted for individual's liberty. This ruling underscore the judiciary's commitment to protect personal liberty and ensuring that courts do not meddle with individual's right to freedom. Liberty is a cornerstone of the Indian Constitution, protected under Article 21, which states that no person shall be deprived of life or personal liberty except according to the procedure established by law. Bail, in this context, serves as a safeguard against arbitrary detention and ensures that an accused remains free unless proven guilty. The Supreme Court has consistently held that bail should be the norm and jail the exception, especially when the accused does not pose a threat to the legal process. The Supreme Court, while overturning the High Court's decision, made critical observations regarding the protection of personal liberty.

The Supreme Court's ruling aligns with a broader judicial philosophy that bail is a right and should not be treated as a privilege granted at the discretion of the courts. The idea is that pre-trial detention should not be punitive but rather a measure to ensure the accused's presence at trial. In numerous judgements, the Court has clarified that unless there is compelling evidence of misconduct, denying bail would violate an individual's fundamental rights. However, courts must balance the rights of the accused with the interests of justice and the safety of society. The Supreme Court's reaffirmation that bail is a fundamental right serves as a significant reminder to lower courts to uphold personal liberty. The judiciary must ensure that bail decisions are guided by legal principles rather than subjective interpretations of the accused's culpability. This observation is likely to have far-reaching implications and may pave the way for several undertrials, especially political activist who are languishing in the jails. For instance as of February 2025, several individuals accused in connection with the 2020 Delhi riots continue to await bail, leading to prolonged incarceration without trial. Notable among them are activists Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam, as well as a politician Tahir Hussain. Despite multiple bail applications, courts have consistently denied them relief. As of October 2024, Khalid had spent over four years in jail without trial, highlighting concerns about prolonged pre-trial detention. The prolonged detention of these individuals has sparked debates about the use of stringent laws like the UAPA and the rights of undertrials in India. These cases exemplify the challenges within the Indian judicial system regarding prolonged pre-trial detention and the balance between ensuring justice and upholding individual rights.

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### PICTALK



A sadhu performs a yogasana at a Ganga ghat, in Varanasi

## The growing threat of radicalisation of Central Asia



NISHAKANT OJHA

The rise of extremist ideologies among Central Asian youth has become a critical security concern, exacerbated by economic hardship and geopolitical conflicts

In recent years, the increasing attraction of Central Asian youth to extremist and Takfiri groups has become a significant security concern for regional governments and international experts. The ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict has only intensified these concerns, with reports indicating that young migrant workers are being recruited for extremist activities, a pattern reminiscent of the recruitment seen during the conflicts in Syria and Iraq. The emergence of the Turan Battalion, a group of Turkic-speaking Central Asians fighting alongside Ukrainian forces against Russia, highlights the pressing need to address radicalisation among young people. At the same time, extremist propaganda spread by figures such as Idas Sadeghovich has contributed to the rising tide of radicalism, further complicating the region's security landscape.

The radicalisation of Central Asian youth stems from a combination of social, economic and political factors that make them vulnerable to extremist narratives. Economic hardship is one of the most significant drivers, particularly in countries like Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, where persistent poverty, high unemployment, and limited socio-economic opportunities push young people toward alternative ideologies. Over three decades of independence, Kyrgyzstan has experienced multiple coups, widespread corruption, and growing dissatisfaction with the secular governance model.

Many young people, disillusioned with their governments, seek a sense of purpose and community in extremist ideologies that not only provide identity but often come with financial incentives. Migration also plays a critical role in this radicalisation process. Millions of Central Asians migrate to Russia for work, where they frequently face exploitation, legal difficulties and social alienation. The absence of integration programs and social support leaves them vulnerable to extremist recruiters who exploit their grievances and isolation. These recruiters present extremist ideology as a means of empowerment and justice, a dangerous proposition that finds traction



among individuals struggling to navigate foreign environments with little institutional support. Religious education, or the lack thereof, is another crucial factor in the rise of extremism. In countries like Tajikistan, where Islamic teachings are heavily restricted and even prohibited for individuals under 18, a significant knowledge vacuum has emerged.

This vacuum is quickly filled by extremist propaganda, often disseminated via social media. Many young Tajik migrant workers in Russia rely on online content to shape their religious understanding, unknowingly consuming distorted interpretations of Islam that align with extremist beliefs. This unchecked exposure to radical ideologies fuels the rapid spread of extremist sentiment within vulnerable communities. Kazakhstan presents a unique case where extremist ideologies have infiltrated even the highest levels of power.

Salafi groups, for instance, gained traction with backing from influential figures such as General Kairat Satybaldy, making the fight against radicalisation more challenging. The entrenchment of these ideologies within powerful circles emboldens extremist sympathisers and complicates government efforts to dismantle radical networks. The rise of social media has dramatically accelerated the spread of extremist propa-



THIS UNCHECKED EXPOSURE TO RADICAL IDEOLOGIES FUELS THE RAPID SPREAD OF EXTREMIST SENTIMENT WITHIN VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES. KAZAKHSTAN PRESENTS A UNIQUE CASE WHERE EXTREMIST IDEOLOGIES HAVE INFILTRATED EVEN THE HIGHEST LEVELS OF POWER

ganda. Extremist groups have mastered the use of digital platforms to reach and recruit young people, leveraging engaging content that is often more accessible and persuasive than state-backed religious teachings. Many of these online materials promise a sense of belonging, purpose, and spiritual rewards, making the path to radicalisation dangerously appealing. Experts emphasise that without a strong digital counter-narrative, governments and moderate religious leaders will continue to struggle in preventing the indoctrination of young minds.

The psychological manipulation employed by extremist groups goes beyond simple recruitment, leading some individuals to commit acts of violence, including suicide attacks. The belief that martyrdom ensures a direct path to heaven is a powerful motivator, and extremist groups exploit feelings of injustice, social exclusion, and spiritual ignorance to persuade young people to sacrifice themselves for a perceived greater cause. By manipulating these vulnerabilities, these groups create a mindset in which violence is not only justified but seen as a divine mission.

Governments in Central Asia have responded to this growing threat with various strategies, though with mixed success. Initial measures included mass arrests and harsh prison sentences, particularly in

Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. However, this approach has often backfired, as prisons have become breeding grounds for further radicalisation. Inmates exposed to extremist ideologies behind bars frequently emerge more radicalised than before, exacerbating the problem rather than solving it. Recognising the limitations of purely repressive measures, some governments have turned to religious reforms as a more effective means of combating extremism. Uzbekistan, for example, has eased restrictions on religious practices, allowing the call to prayer from loudspeakers and providing greater freedom for Islamic education. These initiatives have had a noticeable impact, significantly reducing extremist recruitment within the country by offering legitimate avenues for religious expression. Education is widely regarded as one of the most effective tools in preventing radicalisation. Experts stress the importance of integrating religious education into school curricula to provide young people with a correct understanding of Islamic principles. Only through a holistic and sustained effort can Central Asian nations protect their youth from extremist influences and work toward a more stable and peaceful future.

(The writer is expert in national security, radicalization, and counterterrorism; views are personal)

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

#### RIGHT IS NOT ALWAYS RIGHT

Madam — The editorial, 'Right is Raising' (24-2-25), presents a balanced fact. The fact is that the Right will collapse due to its own weight and internal contradictions but will manage to overcome the setback for some time. The great economic depression of 1930s, which was saved by applying Keynes theory of equipping the mass with more purchase power. The worst recession in 2008, which marked the collapse of the capitalist order, had to be restored by huge spending of people's money to save the insolvent institutions. The countries are still in the recovery process. But the division Right creates in the society with its unquenching thirst for more and more profits and the avaricious attitude will reach its unbearable stage, compelling the victims to raise their voices for justice and their justified place in the society. This trend is already gaining momentum. The victims are on an active search for an alternate. In some countries, like Sri Lanka, the victims could identify the Left as the right alternate. The process of bringing in a new alternative is too difficult but is still going on. In India, the BJP is given power purely because of the nonavailability of such an alternate national party and not because of the party's communal or far-right policies, as reflected in the last election that denied the party an absolute power. It is inevitable that when the Right reaches its peak it forces the majority to accept Left to be the right choice.

A G Rajmohan | Anantapur

#### KOHLI HITS 51ST CENTURY

Madam — Kohli came out sensational and passed out in the acid test to prove that he is 'King Kohli' for his brilliant tonne against Pakistan in the Champions Trophy at Dubai. What the experience can deliver during the personal crisis for oneself was Kohli's class act when he hit his 51st ODI tonne with 7 fours to his credit in his century and paved the way for Team India's win. One can observe that this is the innings rated much higher in character because this calls for great perseverance to

#### BSNL turns profitable after 17 years



In its remarkable comeback, the state-run telecom BSNL has posted a Rs 262 crore profit in the quarter ending December 2024. This is the first profitable quarter since 2007. The company's renewed focus on profitability and its future growth strategy have ultimately led it to profit for the first time in the last 17 years. In a cutthroat competition with private players like Airtel and Jio, the revival of chronically ailing BSNL was not

an easy task. But the government kept its trust in its capabilities and announced a Rs 89,047-crore revival package in 2023. Finance and market gurus termed it a waste of taxpayer money and raised doubts on the wisdom of the government. But the company's efforts on network expansion, cost optimisation and customer-centric service enhancements have now borne fruit. BSNL has successfully reduced its finance costs and overall expenditure, leading to a decline in losses by over Rs 1,800 crore compared to the previous year. The government should be given credit for this achievement of BSNL, which not only allocated spectrum but also granted funds for strengthening network infrastructure.

Manoj Parashar | Ujjain

stay at the wicket with the will to kill to succeed in his important comeback game. When at the time skipper Rohit Sharma and Shubman Gill were dismissed, it is Virat's a kind of vengeful vigour and Shreyas Iyer's sensible batting put team India on top to cross Pakistan's target of 242 by six wickets victory. Pakistan's leg spinner Abrar Ahmed was spectacular when he gave the timely breakthrough but Kohli was completely defensive by not scoring a single boundary against the spinners. He showed his shrewd way to play them with a clear focus that he must prove a 'king is always a king' by his historic tonne to help the Indian flag fly high in the stadium.

A P Thiruvadi | Chennai

#### MELONI EXPOSES GLOBAL HYPOCRISY

Madam — The battle of ideologies has always been a part of the global political stage. But when those who preach neutrality themselves fall into the trap of bias, questions are bound to arise. Italy's Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni recently made a striking remark on this hypocrisy. She

accurately pointed out — "When I, Trump, and Modi engage in discussions, it is labeled a threat to democracy. But when leftist leaders unite, it is considered a symbol of progress!" This statement is not just an opinion; it exposes the harsh reality of global politics. Why this double standard? Does democracy only mean the acceptance of a single ideology? Do leaders with differing views not have the right to dialogue and cooperation? If democracy belongs to everyone, then why this discriminatory wall? In today's multipolar world, it is essential to give all perspectives an equal platform. Leaders like Modi, Trump, and Meloni represent the mandates of their respective nations. Ironically, those who claim their dialogue is a threat to democracy are the same people who applaud the alliances of their own ideological counterparts. It is time to recognise this hypocrisy. Democracy is not just for one group — it is for all.

R K Jain | Barwani

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

## Caught in the middle: The great generational balancing act

Our generation's greatest contribution might be our ability to bridge opposing worldviews. We're creating a new paradigm of family dynamics, blending the two

Remember when we trembled at the sound of our father clearing his throat? When "because I said so" was an unassailable argument, and questioning authority was as foreign as the smartphones that would one day rule our lives? We, the Generation X, find ourselves in an extraordinary position today - delicately balanced between reverential traditions and revolutionary change, between "yes, papa" and "ok, dude." Our generation has witnessed perhaps the most dramatic transformation in human history. We are the last ones who know what it feels like to run home to catch a TV show, to memorise phone numbers, to write letters that took weeks to reach their destination. We're also the first to navigate the brave new world of social media, digital parenting and a workplace that transforms faster than we can update our LinkedIn profiles. The contrast is stark. We grew up in homes where children were to be seen, not heard. Today, we raise children who not only want to be heard but expect to be consulted on family decisions,



from dinner choices to vacation plans. We find ourselves caught in an amusing dance - instinctively reaching for the authoritarian patterns we inherited, then quickly pivoting to accommodate the more egalitarian expectations of modern parenting. This balancing act becomes even more complex as we care for our aging parents while raising our children. Our parents, products of an era where respect was non-negotiable and tradition was sacrosanct, often struggle to understand why their grandchildren question everything, from religious practices to gender roles. We become translators of sorts, explaining to our parents why their grandchildren need mental health days, while simultaneously trying to teach our children why touching their grandmother's

feet isn't just an empty ritual. The technological revolution has added another layer to this generational sandwich. While we pride ourselves on mastering email and Facebook, our children roll their eyes at our confused attempts to understand TikTok algorithms or cryptocurrency. Meanwhile, we spend weekends teaching our parents how to make video calls or use digital payment apps. We are the bridge generation, fluent in both analog and digital, traditional and modern, hierarchy and equality.

Our generation has had to rewrite the rulebook of life multiple times. The career advice we received - "join a good company and stay loyal" - seems quaint in an age where our children talk about side hustles and personal branding. The values we were taught - sacrifice, stability, saving for tomorrow - clash with the modern emphasis on self-care, work-life balance, and living in the moment. Perhaps the most challenging aspect is managing the emotional landscape. We were raised to believe that mental health issues were character

flaws, that anxiety was just weakness, and that depression could be cured by "going out for a walk." Now, we find ourselves unlearning these notions, supporting our children's therapy journeys, while also gently helping our parents understand that their grandchild's panic attacks are not just "attention-seeking behaviour."

The irony isn't lost on us. The same generation that was told "log kya kahenge" (what will people say) now has to defend their children's right to be themselves, regardless of what people say. We who learned to suppress our emotions now have to validate our children's feelings while managing our parents' disapproval of this "oversensitive" approach. Yet, there's a unique strength in being this sandwich generation. We understand both worlds intimately. We can appreciate our parents' wisdom while embracing our children's progressive ideas. We can see how tradition provides roots while change enables growth.

(The author is a Dubai-based columnist and children's writing coach. She has published six books. Views are personal)



ASHA IYER KUMAR



## FIRST COLUMN

## SHIVARATRI: THE NIGHT OF SHIVA AND SHAKTI

On this sacred night, one can ignite the power of Shiv and Shakti within



ASHWANI GURURAJ

Shivratri is the night of Shiv and Shakti, the night of merger, the night of completeness - Understanding this is a sadhana... which can span lifetimes or be accomplished in a moment just, a beautiful journey bestowing myriad siddhis en route... Shiv is an experience. This experience begins at the feet of the Guru and unfolds as per the capacity of the sadhak. Ravan composed the Shiv Tandav Stotram to describe it. Adi Shankaracharya said 'na paapam, na punyam, na saukham, na daukham...' to describe what it's not. These were the Shiv sadhaks of finest quality, a rare phenomenon. What they described was their experience of Shiv; Shiv however is beyond description, for what is limitless cannot be bound in words and meanings. So no amount of reading and writing can grant you the experience, to get that experience you need to tread the path of sadhana, under a Guru.

The first experience of Shiv is the Shakti of Guru. As you walk the path shown by Guru, something that you want manifests in your life. It could be health, relationship, job etc. That becomes your experience of the Shiv tatva - that which has manifested the un-manifested. There are as many examples of such manifestations at Dhyana Ashram in present times as there are narratives from the past of sadhaks who were able to get the boon they desired.

That 'boon' or manifested desire, however, is only an aspect of Shiv. 90 per cent of the people were satisfied with the experience and their focus shifted from Shiv to that 'thing' that they wanted. So the experience of Shiv for them gets limited to that. A thousand names of Shiv, stem from here. Those who don't let their focus shift, move further into the dimension of Shiv. Next, the subtler siddhis of yog start manifesting - clairvoyance, clairaudience, premonition, extrasensory perceptions etc. Many take this to be the ultimate and end their experience here. They immerse themselves in the siddhis and powers so acquired and forget that this too is just an aspect.



The finer sadhaks progress ahead where they start interacting with the energies that run creation, aiding and assisting them in the process of Creation. Mentioned above are just some siddhis, the domain of Shiv however is endless. The key to accessing it is vairagya (detachment). The moment one gets attached to any aspect of Shiv or Siddhi that it bestows, the upward progression stops. Vairagya is possible only when one has the gyan of reality and gyan is possible only when one can sit in dhyana. Dhyana happens only when one has accumulated good karmas, which are acquired from seva or service. Seva is the first step. It is through seva that one increases the size of their container or the experience of Shiv that one can hold.

This Shivratri, embark on the journey to increasing the size of your container... to experience Shiv. Shiv is real, not a myth. Shiv is all-encompassing. All are accepted in the abode of Shiv - bhoot, pret, pisach, yaksh, kinnar, naag, dev, danav and humans. You don't have to be of a special caste to experience the various dimensions of Shiv. Shivratri is the night of Shiv and Shakti, the night of merger, the night of completeness. Guru, on the night of Shivratri, awakens the power of Shiv and Shakti in each and everyone who follows the path shown, without exceptions. In my journey of 25 years,

I have yet to come across a sadhak who under Guru Sanidhya has not experienced Shiv. The seva and sadhana performed on this night grant one the experiences and siddhis of many lifetimes, in just one night. It is a 100 per cent science, not a religion. Try and test it for yourself.

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

## Women pioneering change in Indian higher education



SUJATHA KSHIRSAGAR

Women academic leaders and entrepreneurs are not only shaping institutions but also fueling India's socio-economic growth with their grit and determination

Women are leading from the front today - in academics or education, media, healthcare, armed forces and many other fields. The country is witnessing a pivotal shift in how women leaders were perceived before. Indian higher education landscape is also being driven by a strong women-led force, laying the foundation of the nation's progress, unlocking opportunities for socio-economic growth, self-reliance and an improved quality of life. Needless to say, education is essential for women's empowerment in the journey to Viksit Bharat. Educated women drive change, uplift families, strengthen communities and fuel national progress, creating a lasting impact for future generations.

## The current scenario and notable mentions

Indian higher education remains male-dominated when it comes to leadership, even as women are playing a significant role, data suggests. In 2021, women headed just 9.55 per cent of Indian higher educational institutions, whereas men headed 89.57 per cent. This makes more inclusive representation of females in academic leadership extremely important. If we compare India with the international landscape, it still has a huge gap to fill. Internationally, 25 per cent of leadership positions in the top 200 universities globally are occupied by women.

The good news is that the picture is drastically changing, especially over the last few years. Even in the past, the country has seen visionary women leaders like Savitribai Phule, a pioneering social reformer who, alongside her husband Jyotirao Phule, established India's first school for girls in 1848, championing women's education and social justice.

Other notable and pragmatic women leaders who are marking a significant shift in higher education include Ms Rashmi Mittal, Pro-Chancellor, of Lovely Professional University, and Dr Uma Bhardwaj, Vice-Chancellor, of Noida International University. Other honourable mentions include Dr Madhu Chitkara, Pro-Chancellor at Chitkara University and a Higher Education entrepreneur with a vast experience 42 years, who has built a successful university from scratch; Dr Ananya Mukherjee, Vice-Chancellor of Shiv Nadar University, Delhi-NCR, recognised as an Institution of Eminence.

Apart from that, women leaders in business and entrepreneurial space have also inspired aspiring Indian youth. Notable mentions include Kiran Mazumdar Shaw and Indra Nooyi. Women leaders are transforming Indian higher education through inclusive environments and innovation. More women in leadership positions increase diversity and bring new perspectives to academia. Through their efforts, they are paving the way for future generations to have a more progressive and equitable educational landscape in India.

## The Challenges Faced by Women Leaders in Academia

The challenges for women leaders include social stereotypes at one end and the barriers of an institution at the other. Several women are even still facing serious prejudices against them regarding their potential as leaders, especially in traditional fields. Women lack opportunities to get mentors and network for their professional advancement.

The chief issues for women leaders world-



APART FROM THAT, WOMEN LEADERS IN BUSINESS AND ENTREPRENEURIAL SPACE HAVE ALSO INSPIRED ASPIRING INDIAN YOUTH. NOTABLE MENTIONS INCLUDE KIRAN MAZUMDAR SHAW AND INDRA NOOYI. WOMEN LEADERS ARE TRANSFORMING INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION THROUGH INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENTS AND INNOVATION

wide relate to work-life balance and insufficient presence in senior leadership positions. India has taken a holistic approach to orient and train women faculty across the country through the University Grants Commission (UGC). These initiatives are designed to prepare women for leadership roles, equipping them with the right skills and knowledge. Other countries have programs that focus on leadership training and inclusivity to break barriers for women in academia. Some countries have witnessed an impressive increase in the number of women represented in academia, but the world still has a long way to go, including India.

**Women as Educators and Leaders** Empowerment in education is not merely a question of access; it involves equipping women with the role of teachers, leaders, and models. An increased number of women in schools and colleges has acted as a motivating force for girls to achieve excellence in academics. Diverse viewpoints among women in higher education leadership institutions create an inclusive and innovative atmosphere.

Female professors have formed the backbone for progressive educational policy and research quality. Many critical departments and significant research initiatives now have women running them, evidence of their burgeoning influence in university life.

Programmes and fellowships dedicated to providing opportunities for girls and women, especially in these STEM fields, have helped a culture of creativity and excellence flourish within these disciplines. At present, there are some of India's most high-profile universities and institutions, with women at the helm, spearheading the trend of making education more accessible and equitable. Women leaders are

playing an important role in academics.

For instance, women-led institutions, like competitive exam coaching institutions, have been responsible for guiding thousands of students in shaping their aspirations. Thus, it is clear that women leaders can bring transformational change in education and can be great change managers.

## Women as Catalysts or Agents of Change

Women are educators and agents of change. They are innovators who are good leaders in filling knowledge gaps, fostering inclusivity, and empowering communities. Their contribution to a forceful, solution-focused, and responsive workforce is particularly indispensable for the simple reason that it is tantamount to ensuring not only economic prosperity but also social justice.

The most deep-seated effect of women in education has been in adult literacy and skill development. Women educators have led the process of increasing rural and marginalised communities' literacy rates, greatly improving their socio-economic conditions. Female entrepreneurs also are revolutionising education delivery by coming up with innovative solutions for diverse learners across India.

EdTech platforms of female founders have promoted flexible models, digital classroom applications, and AI-based analytics with their introduction; thereby, performance from students at high-quality education gets scaled up because access to more is also made easily feasible. Social development and the tech revolution are mutually supporting each other here.

## The Future of Women's Leadership in Higher Education

Increasing the number of women

leaders in higher education is not only about gender equality; it is a strategic imperative for India's progress.

Women leaders in higher education institutions bring diverse perspectives and transformative decision-making into academic administration, which drives innovation and excellence. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has recognised the importance of women's participation in academia and thus proposed reforms, to ensure gender inclusivity. Through the incorporation of leadership training under the framework of higher education and initiating mentorship opportunities, India can usher in an optimum pipeline of women academic leaders. Furthermore, the vision of Viksit Bharat and Atmanirbhar Bharat is in line with the very need to absorb India's demographic dividend. Education is at the heart of this vision, and empowering women as educators and leaders would be crucial in realising India's aspiration to become Vishwaguru—that is, a global leader in innovation and knowledge.

## Conclusion

Women leaders are undeniably shaping the future of Indian higher education. Despite all existing challenges, their excellence is bringing innumerable positive transformations within the present academia, which will lead to a more inclusive, progressive, and innovative educational landscape. The overall transformation of Indian education and the socio-economic liberalization of India can be achieved by removing all barriers to leadership, implementing supportive policies, and championing women's participation in higher education.

(The writer is President at Career Launcher; views are personal)

ciency, security, and inclusivity. Stakeholder feedback highlights the need to refine transportation, expand digital inclusion, enhance crowd management, and address environmental concerns. The success of the Mela hinges not only on preserving spiritual traditions but also on integrating modern infrastructure, technology, and inclusive governance. More than a massive gathering, the Maha Kumbh exemplifies how government initiatives can transform spiritual events into safer, more efficient, and enriching experiences. As it unfolds, it remains a dynamic confluence of tradition, technology and transformation.

(The author is a professor of Sociology at IIT Kanpur. Views expressed are personal)

## Maha Kumbh 2025: A grand confluence of tradition, technology and transformation

IIT Kanpur research highlights how government initiatives are shaping the Mela—blending ancient traditions with modern infrastructure to enhance accessibility and efficiency

The Maha Kumbh Mela in Prayagraj draws millions of pilgrims worldwide to the sacred confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati rivers. As this grand spiritual event unfolds, an ongoing IIT Kanpur study provides real-time insights into stakeholder experiences. This research examines how government initiatives shape pilgrim experiences, blending ancient traditions with modern technology.

For devotees, the Mela remains a deeply spiritual journey, with bathing in the Triveni Sangam seen as a path to salvation. While age-old rituals and processions inspire awe, an extensive logistical network operates behind the scenes to manage massive crowds. A key focus of the study is



PRADIP SWARNAKAR

transportation. With pilgrims arriving from across India and abroad, the government's commitment to improving accessibility is evident. Nearly 40 per cent of attendees rely on public transportation, primarily trains and buses. Despite expanded shuttle services and improved parking facilities, feedback is mixed. While most find transportation satisfactory,

some report overcrowding and delays during peak hours. A hallmark of Maha Kumbh 2025 is its technological integration, earning it the title "Digital Maha Kumbh." Mobile apps, e-wallets, and real-time crowd monitoring enhance the experience for pilgrims and organisers. Many appreciate online registration, virtual darshan booking, and real-time updates on crowd density, transport, and amenities.

These tools streamline accessibility, particularly for international visitors and those from remote areas. However, bridging the digital divide remains a challenge. While tech-savvy pilgrims adapt easily, older attendees and those from rural regions often struggle with digital platforms.

Some report difficulties using smartphones or accessing the internet, highlighting the need for alternative engagement methods. Feedback underscores the importance of inclusive communication strategies blending digital and traditional approaches.

Security and crowd management are also key concerns. Managing millions of attendees in Kumbh Mela is a massive undertaking. The government has deployed extensive security personnel, CCTV surveillance, and designated safe zones, including lifeguard-staffed bathing areas. Nearly 93 per cent of respondents feel secure within the Mela's vast grounds, affirming these measures' effectiveness. However, congestion near ghats causes anxiety among some pilgrims,



emphasizing the need for refined crowd management as the event progresses. Health and sanitation remain top priorities. Overall, 81 per cent of respondents find sanitation facilities adequate, reflecting high satisfaction with cleanliness. Temporary medical camps and mobile health units ensure pilgrims' wellbeing, yet restroom overcrowding persists during peak

hours. Despite thousands of cleaning staff and waste management facilities, additional measures are needed to maintain hygiene during busy periods. These findings highlight commendable efforts while emphasising the need for continued improvements.

Inclusivity is also a focus, with the government enhancing accessibility for differently-abled individuals and senior citizens. Dedicated pathways, toilets, and designated spaces reflect a commitment to inclusive participation. The widely appreciated 'Lost and Found' services further ease concerns, helping separated families navigate the crowd more efficiently. Environmental impact remains a major concern. The government has introduced eco-friendly initiatives, includ-

ing waste segregation, solar-powered lighting and over 25,000 trash bins to reduce the ecological footprint.

Despite these efforts, concerns persist over plastic use and non-biodegradable waste. While 62 per cent of respondents recognise sustainability progress, stronger awareness campaigns and stricter enforcement of eco-friendly practices are needed.

The ongoing study suggests green initiatives must be reinforced through greater public education on waste management and sustainability. As the IIT Kanpur study continues to document stakeholder experiences, the Maha Kumbh Mela 2025 is a testament to the evolving nature of large-scale spiritual events. Government initiatives have improved effi-

ciency, security, and inclusivity. Stakeholder feedback highlights the need to refine transportation, expand digital inclusion, enhance crowd management, and address environmental concerns.

The success of the Mela hinges not only on preserving spiritual traditions but also on integrating modern infrastructure, technology, and inclusive governance. More than a massive gathering, the Maha Kumbh exemplifies how government initiatives can transform spiritual events into safer, more efficient, and enriching experiences. As it unfolds, it remains a dynamic confluence of tradition, technology and transformation.

(The author is a professor of Sociology at IIT Kanpur. Views expressed are personal)

# French firm accuses MMRDA officials of graft

PTI ■ MUMBAI

French firm Systra which provides consultancy services to metro projects has accused officials of the Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority (MMRDA) of corruption, even as the Bombay High Court on Tuesday quashed MMRDA's notice terminating the contract of its Indian subsidiary. On November 12, 2024, the French Embassy wrote a letter to Rupinder Singh, Resident Commissioner of Maharashtra in Delhi, requesting the government to study the issue "in depth" and "resolve the situation", while citing Systra's complaint to the embassy about "severe harassment and challenges being faced while working as a general consultant on projects with MMRDA." While senior officials of MMRDA, the planning and development agency of the state government, were not available for commenting on the issue, Shiv Sena (UBT) leader Aadiya Thackeray demanded that Chief Minister Devendra Fadnis order an

inquiry. The multinational engineering firm accused MMRDA officials of seeking "undue favours", as well as delaying payments, pressuring the firm to inflate orders to contractors, stalling approvals for key staff, and imposing arbitrary penalties. On Tuesday, a bench of Chief Justice Alok Aradhe and Justice Arif Doctor of the high court noted that the MMRDA did not give reasons while discontinuing the services of Systra MVA Consulting (India) Private Ltd on January 3, 2025. As per Systra's complaint that the Embassy sent to the Maharashtra government, "major harassment began in August 2023 after the change of some senior MMRDA officials, who summoned the company and asked for undue favours in the form of monetary benefits on the pretext that MMRDA is demanding it." Systra "politely informed" them that it would not comply, the letter said. Systra is working as a general consultant for various metro projects executed by MMRDA in Mumbai's metropolitan region including Metro

Lines 5, 6, 7A, 9, 10, and 12, in addition to providing detailed design consultancy services for Metro Lines 2A and 7, Mandale Depot, Kashi Depot, and branding guidelines for all Metro Lines of MMRDA. The MMRDA issued a notice of suspension of payments in January 2024, alleging various deficiencies related to old issues that had already been resolved concerning general consultancy services for Metro Lines 5, 6, 7A, and 9, the letter said. "Furthermore, Systra has been put under pressure to recommend an inflated variation order for one of the major contractors working on Line 9 of the project. Since we are not complying with this, we believe MMRDA is continuing the suspension of payments for General Consultancy Services for Lines 5, 9, and 7A (civil) projects," the letter alleged. MMRDA had "stopped making payments," with the pending payments accumulating to ₹30 Crore, the complaint said, alleging pressure to certify payments for petty contractors appointed directly by MMRDA. Despite repeated attempts, the

MMRDA spokesperson did not provide any comment on the issue. As per the petition filed by Systra MVA Consulting (India) Private Limited in the Bombay High Court challenging the termination of its contract, it was appointed a general consultant for design, assistance in procurement, construction, management and supervision of three routes of Mumbai Metro - Thane-Bhiwandi-Kalyan, Andheri-CSIA and Mira Bhayander - in 2021. While the initial contract was to expire on November 2024, it was extended till December 2026. But on January 3, 2025, the MMRDA issued the company a notice, stating it had decided to discontinue its services. The firm then moved the HC. "We find that the action of the MMRDA in discontinuation of the terms of the contract, which was extended up to December 2026, without assigning any reasons, is arbitrary, unfair and unreasonable," the HC said in the order on Tuesday. "The general conditions of the

contract cannot be read to mean that the MMRDA has a license to act unfairly, arbitrarily or unreasonably in the contractual field without assigning reasons," the court said, asking the MMRDA to take a fresh decision after hearing the company. Sena (UBT) leader and former minister Aadiya Thackeray targeted Deputy Chief Minister Eknath Shinde - who heads the rival Shiv Sena - over the issue. The MMRDA comes under Shinde's Urban Development department. "The mind the regime scams are coming out. We have been raising many since 2022 mid. While India and France get closer diplomatically, the @MMRDAOfficial run by Eknath Shinde's Urban Development department, rubbishes concerns of corruption raised by the French consultant," he said. "I urge @CMOMaharashtra to launch an open, free and fair inquiry into this issue. Find out the source of corruption- which character close to corrupt mantri indulged in this?" Thackeray added.



Police investigate the crime scene after a 23-year-old man allegedly killed five people, including four of his close family members in Thiruvananthapuram PTI

# Kerala youth slaughters family, lover

PTI ■ THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

Most horrific scenes unfolded as police entered the crime scenes in three locations in and around Venjaramoodu in Thiruvananthapuram district, where a 23-year-old man allegedly killed five people - his brother, grandmother, paternal uncle, aunt, and a young woman said to be his lover, on Monday. The body of Farsana, a post-graduate student at a college in Kollam and reportedly the girlfriend of Afan, the accused in the Venjaramoodu mass murder case, was found sitting on a chair, with a pool of blood on the floor beneath her head. According to visuals from the crime scene, she had a massive injury on her forehead, reportedly caused by a heavy hammer blow, and she may have been killed by that single blow, without even having time to slump down from the chair. He appeared to have struck her several more times with the hammer, as her face was disfigured. A beautiful photograph of Afan can be seen in the background, placed on the table beside where Farsana's body was found, with several blood droplets splattered on it. Police officials said what they witnessed was one of the most brutal assaults Kerala has seen in recent years. Afan, who always had a very close bond with his younger brother Afsan (13), allegedly

struck him multiple times on the head with a hammer, killing his beloved brother on the spot, police said. Afan's paternal uncle Latheef was the most cruelly attacked. According to the police, Afan allegedly struck Latheef on the head with a hammer more than 20 times, literally shattering his skull. Latheef's body was found on a chair in the drawing room. Latheef's wife, Sajitha, who was in the kitchen preparing tea for Afan, was allegedly attacked from behind with multiple blows from a hammer. Her body was found lying near the kitchen, police said. "It was difficult to identify the victims as they were all covered in blood. When we lifted Latheef, someone's fingers went inside his head through a huge hole at the back of his skull," a neighbour, recounting the horrifying scenes at the murder site said. Afan's murderous streak displayed psychotic patterns as he scattered several ₹500 notes around the body of his younger brother, Afsan, after hammering him to death. Afan had taken Afsan home, telling him that he had brought Kuzhimanthi, an Arabian meat-rice dish, for him. Their mother, Shemi (55), who was pulled to the floor and attacked with a hammer, is undergoing treatment at a medical college hospital. Although the police have not officially revealed the sequence of events, sources within the force suspect that

Afan began his killing spree with his paternal grandmother, Salma Beevi (88), at her house in Pangode near Venjaramoodu. Police sources believe that Afan took a hammer with him when he went to Salma Beevi's house. He killed her and then proceeded to the house of Latheef and Sajitha in Chullalam. They suspect that after murdering Latheef and Sajitha, the accused took his brother Afsan home from school. Police sources also believe that he had earlier picked up Farsana and dropped her at his home. He then allegedly attacked his mother first, followed by his brother and his girlfriend. Before heading to the police station, Afan left the LPG valve open, intending to cause an explosion if anyone entered the house at night, police said. Locals who saw Afan between the murders told the police that he appeared unfazed and showed no signs of distress. After committing all these murders, Afan calmly walked to the police station and informed officers that he had assaulted six people in three locations, adding that they would all be dead by now. Investigating officials say that Afan was a drug abuser and have obtained evidence to support this. However, the specific drug he used and whether he was under its influence during the massacres are yet to be confirmed.

# Akhilesh slams Centre on stock markets collapse

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ LUCKNOW

Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav on Tuesday launched a scathing attack on the BJP-led Centre over the continuous decline in Indian stock markets, claiming investments of the middle class had been wiped out. The Kannauj MP also accused the government of "misleading people" while failing to protect domestic investors. Yadav said in a post on X, "The ongoing decline in the Indian stock markets has devoured the investments of the middle class. The 'double-engine' governments, which are in a race to invite investors from across the world, should first ensure the safety of their own investors before hosting 'deceptive events' to reassure others." Due to the continuous poor performance of the Nifty over the past few months, reports have emerged that the Indian

stock markets have become the third weakest among emerging markets after Thailand and the Philippines this year, he said in Hindi. "On one hand, 80 Crore people are forced to survive on government ration and, on the other, those who invested their savings in stocks have been left bankrupt. Even in such dire conditions, the BJP government continues to mislead and manipulate people with false claims. This economic fraud must stop," the former Uttar Pradesh chief minister said. "Investors are saying today: No more BJP!" Yadav added. Yadav's comments come amid concerns over the performance of the Indian stock markets, which have seen fluctuations in recent months. The Sensex tanked 1.14 per cent to settle at 74,454.41 points on Monday while the Nifty fell 1.06 per cent to 22,553.35 points.

# BJP expels 58 leaders in Haryana

STAFF REPORTER ■ GURUGRAM

Days before Municipal Elections, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) late night on Monday expelled 58 leaders for "anti-party activities" for six years. The expelled leaders belong to the Gurugram and Manesar Municipal Corporations and Pataudi Municipal Committee. A few of these leaders are contesting as independents in MC elections after they were denied the party's ticket for elections. BJP District President Kamal Yadav issued a letter on Monday which stated, "After discussing with the State President Haryana Mohan Lal Kaushik ji, the following BJP workers who are contesting elections against the party and are involved in anti-party activities, are expelled from the BJP for six years and their primary membership is terminated with immediate effect." Most of the outgoing councillors of the BJP were upset after they were denied the party's ticket for elections. Many of them have come into the fray as indepen-

dents and have contested. "The candidates contesting as rebels are calling themselves party candidates. We received complaints related to the matter. People should not be fooled by them. Such people are spreading confusion. The one who contests elections on the party symbol is the party candidate," Kamal Yadav, BJP district president said. The list, released by the BJP, featured names including former mayor Vimal Yadav his wife and former councillor Rimple Yadav, former deputy mayor Parminder Kataria, Avnish Raghav Khandas, (district secretary), Rakesh Yadav Fazilpur, Praveen Mohan Lal Kaushik ji, the following BJP workers who are contesting elections against the party and are involved in anti-party activities, are expelled from the BJP for six years and their primary membership is terminated with immediate effect. Other names in the list were Sahab Ram (Lilu Sarpanch), Inderjeet Yadav, Rakesh Yadav,

Rahul Yadav, Sandeep Mehlawat, Navin Dahiya, Dinesh Dahiya, Deepak Kataria, Lakshpat Kataria, Mahavi Yadav, Ajay Nambardar, Gagandeep Kilhod, Ruchi Kilhod, Shreyas Jain, Pramod Yadav, Sachin Tanwar, Binu Chahar Mahila Morcha, Prem Gairathi, Mangal Singh Gwal Pahari, Ashok Pehlwan, Meenakshi, Riku, Kunal Yadav, Deepak Yadav, Pankaj Yadav, Sajjan Yadav, Barkha Sharma, Deepak Sharma, Mahesh Kumar, Jyotsna Bajaj, Bhagat Kataria. Similarly from Manesar Municipal Corporation (MMC) Raghav Saini, Snehlata, Narendra Chauhan, Ajit Yadav divisional secretary, Jaipal Yadav, district executive, Ajit Prajapati, Vikram Prajapati, Jasbir Dhankhad, Praveen Yadav Manesar, disaster manager state executive, Hari Singh Nakhola SC Morcha former president, Pinky Nakhola, Praveen Naurangpur, vice president Manesar division, Dayaram chairman, SC Morcha district Vice President and Sunil Dochaniya District Executive Member from Pataudi.

# Gurugram police finds bullet-ridden bodies in hotel room

STAFF REPORTER ■ GURUGRAM

In a shocking incident, the Gurugram police found bullet-ridden bodies of a man and woman in a hotel room located on the Delhi-Jaipur Expressway on Tuesday, police said. However, police preliminary investigation suggests that it could be a case of suicide. The victims were identified as Komal (21), a resident of Shikohpur village in Gurugram, and Nikhil (23), a resident of Lokri village in the Pataudi area. Police received information about the bodies lying in a room of Hotel Haveli, Manesar and immediately rushed to the spot. The bodies were sent to post-mortem after they were discovered in the hotel room. Police said on Tuesday, an Emergency Response Vehicle (ERV) of the Gurugram police received information that Komal on Monday had gone to give an exam but did not return home till night. The girl was later located in Hotel Haveli. Upon information, the ERV police team reached the spot, where the girl's family members were also present. The ERV team immediately informed the police team of police station Manesar about the incident. Meanwhile, the hotel staff said that one boy and one girl were staying in room number 303 on the second floor. The ERV team and police station team, along with the hotel staff and the girl's family, found the girl and a boy lying dead on the bed inside a locked room number 303 of the hotel. "They both had one bullet wound on their chest, and one country-made pistol 315 bore was also found in the room. The police team called the police teams of scene-of-crime, FSL, dog-squad, fingerprint to the spot and got the spot inspected," Sandeep Kumar, spokesperson of the Gurugram police said.

# Nitish Kumar's son Nishant remains tight-lipped on his political career

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ PATNA

Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar's son Nishant on Tuesday hoped that the JD(U), headed by his father, would improve its performance in the Assembly polls due later this year, as compared with 2020, when it lost the status of senior NDA partner in the state. In his most candid conversation with the press so far, the reclusive 47-year-old urged the people to vote for the party and asked the cadre to pull up its socks, while keeping cards close to the chest on speculations about his own entry into politics. He was mobbed by journalists at the memorial of his mother Manju Sinha, where he had come with his father to pay tributes on her birth anniversary. The normally reticent Nishant broke into a wide grin when asked about the use of the word "laadla" (dear) for his father by Prime Minister Narendra Modi the day before. "Of course, he would say so. Both of them are alliance partners," said the CM's son,



File Photo

unfazed by the contention of many opposition leaders here that the PM had belittled the JD(U) supremacy by using a colloquial expression normally reserved for children. "I want to appeal to the people of the state, especially the youth, to vote in greater numbers for the party this time. In 2020, the JD(U) got only 43 seats, still development work continued under my father. To ensure that progress continues with the same speed, the tally should improve," he added. Notably,

memories of the assembly polls of 2020 have been like a proverbial sore thumb for the JD(U) which saw its tally crash in the 243-strong assembly, for which the blame was pinned on the revolt of Chirag Paswan, the then LJP president. Paswan had fielded candidates, many of them BJP rebels, in all seats contested by the JD(U). While the BJP tried to mend fences by insisting that Kumar continue as CM despite his party winning fewer seats, relations between the two alliance part-

ners continued to sour, culminating in the JD(U) supreme's exit from the NDA in 2022. Kumar thereafter went on to forge a nationwide "opposition unity", vowing to dislodge the BJP from power, which resulted in the formation of the INDIA bloc, but did yet another volte-face last year just ahead of the Lok Sabha elections when he returned to the NDA. Short of a majority in the Lok Sabha, the BJP is now dependent on JD(U) and Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu's TDP to survive in power and Nishant hoped his father "would be declared the chief ministerial candidate by the NDA" and continue to occupy the top post after the elections. He also, "I would urge members of our party that they fan out and apprise the people of the efforts made by my father in the last 19 years." He also laughed off the suggestion of Tej Pratap Yadav, the elder son of RJD supreme Lalu Prasad, that he join the opposition party, saying, "It is for the people to decide who should be on which side."

# TMC leader removed from local body over fake identity

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

Lovely Khatun, a Bangladeshi woman who had infiltrated into Indian territory, before faking her identity to eventually become an elected representative from the Trinamool Congress in Malda district of North Bengal, has been stripped off her post, district administration has reported. The Sub-divisional Officer of Chanchal has removed Khatun from her post and for the time being deputy Pradhan will discharge her responsibilities, officials said. The incident further bolsters BJP's infiltration claim and changing demographic pattern of the State, party leaders said. Lovely Khatun alias Nasia Sheikh who was elected as the Panchayat Pradhan - considered hugely powerful position in Bengal's grassroots level of Rashidabad gram panchayat in Harishchandrapur block of Malda district in 2023 rural elections slipped into India some eight years back, sources said adding once in India she quickly faked her name and that of her parents and joined the TMC.

She managed Indian documents within months thanks to a group of local party men, insiders said. She not only managed Indian Aadhar, and voter cards but also secured an OBC certificate to file her nomination. "Her oratory and other skills got into the closest coterie of the district leadership wherefrom she managed to get a party ticket," a block level party leader requesting anonymity said. Even as Lovely witnessed a meteoric rise both politically and financially Rehana Sultana a contesting candidate who had lost out to the Khatun filed a petition in the Calcutta High Court questioning her credentials. Sources said Rehana was the official nominee of the TMC but lost to Lovely's manipulating skills. According to Rehana, "The election was rigged out and out, signatures were forged and shewas allowed to obtain the winning certificate with the help of some TMC leaders and a section of the district administration. This is why I was forced to move the Court." What made the matter significant that despite repeated summons Khatun managed to avoid appearance in the High

Court. A local CPI(M) leader said, "She is not the only one. At least two hundred other infiltrators who had come to India between 2015 and 2023 are still moving around with fake identity cards. Let alone the locals even the political workers like others would not raise the issue lest we are murdered. The administration is just looking the other way." Curiously however TMC sources said that Khatun had initially won on a Congress ticket backed by the Left and soon after winning the elections she joined the TMC. Referring to the Tuesday's development BJP State leader Jagannath Sarkar said that "Lovely Khatun's case only goes on to bolster the BJP's infiltration claims. She is not the only one. There are thousands of similar people who have infiltrated India and have been living here obtaining fake documents. They are changing the demographic pattern of the region and the Government is sitting idle. My question is whether after her removal the Government will act and identify the people that helped her in getting fake documents and Indian citizenship."

# Earthquake rocks Kolkata

PNS ■ KOLKATA

The Kolkata on Tuesday morning woke up to a reasonable jolt after an earthquake measuring 5.1 hit southern Bengal and adjoining areas at about 6.10 am, IMD sources said. Though the epicenter of the quake was more than 300 km away and about 91 km beneath the bed of Bay of Bengal its tremors were felt in large parts of Odisha and southern Bengal, sources said. Tremors triggered panic in Kolkata though there were no reports of immediate damage in the city and its surrounding areas. "I felt a tremor and watched the ceiling fan sway, and was off balanced a bit. My head was reeling and initially I thought it could be because of migraine. But then I got alerts of an earthquake from my

friends," Basanti a homemaker from Tollygunge said. Kolkata traditionally falls under seismic zone three and has been gradually progressing towards seismic zone four on account of huge drawing of subsoil water and unplanned urbanisation, Jadavpur University professor said. A fault passes beneath and through Kolkata but that was not the cause of the earthquake, sources said. There are four seismic zones with zone five being the most and zone two the least active. Around 11 per cent of the country falls in zone five, 18 per cent in zone four, 30 per cent in zone three, and the remaining in zone two. While zone five marks maximum susceptibility being in zone four too is of concern. Zone three and zone two are relatively of moderate rate in terms of tremors.

# Kumbh Mela area turned to no vehicle zone

PTI ■ PRAYAGRAJ

The Maha Kumbh mela area will be a no-vehicle zone from 4 pm on Tuesday, with the entire Prayagraj following suit from 6 pm onwards in view of the massive influx of devotees for the last special bathing date coinciding with Mahashivratri on February 26. Authorities have imposed these restrictions to ensure smooth crowd movement. However, vehicles carrying essentials will be exempted, according to an official statement. The administration has urged all visitors to comply with the guidelines and cooperate with officials, according to the statement issued by the Mela Police. "Devotees should bathe only at the nearest designated ghats based on their entry points. Those arriving from the Dakshini Jhansi route should

use Arail Ghat, while those from the Uttari Jhansi route should head to Harishchandra Ghat and Old GT Ghat. Pande Kshetra entrants have been directed to Bharadwaj Ghat, Nagavasu Ghat, Mori Ghat, Kali Ghat, Ram Ghat, and Hanuman Ghat. Devotees coming through the Arail sector should use Arail Ghat for bathing," it stated. "Essential services, including the transport of milk, vegetables, medicines, fuel, and emergency vehicles, will not be restricted. Government personnel such as doctors, police officers, and administrative staff will also have free movement," it added. February 26 marks both the concluding snan of the Maha Kumbh mela and the festival of Mahashivratri. In view of this, devotees are advised to bathe at their nearest ghats and offer prayers at

local Shiva temples to prevent overcrowding at major pilgrimage sites, the statement read. "To control the massive gathering, pontoon bridges will be managed based on crowd density. Officials have urged devotees to avoid unnecessary movement and return to their destinations promptly after completing rituals," it stated. The mela police administration has appealed to all visitors to follow these instructions and help maintain order during the grand religious event. Being held after 12 years, this Maha Kumbh mela started on January 13 and culminates on February 26. The mega fair has recorded a footfall of over 63 Crore pilgrims and visitors, according to the Uttar Pradesh government.

# Mohammed Salim re-elected CPI(M) state secretary



Mohammed Salim File Photo

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ KOLKATA

Mohammed Salim was unanimously re-elected as the state secretary of the CPI(M)'s West Bengal unit on Tuesday, a party leader said. An 80-member state commit-

tee was elected unanimously at the party's 27th conference, which was underway in Dankuni in Hooghly district, he said. Among the 80 members, 14 are women, he added. Salim was re-elected the state secretary of the CPI(M) for a second consecutive term, the leader said. There are 11 fresh faces among those elected to the state committee, he said. The CPI(M)'s four-day state conference will conclude on Thursday. Salim had on Monday said that the conference was deliberating on the present-day challenges in the state's politics, people's problems, unemployment and issues concerning the education sector.



# Morocco says it dismantled Islamic State cell that was planning attacks

**PTI ■ SALE (MOROCCO)**  
Moroccan authorities this month arrested a dozen people they said were planning attacks on behalf of the Islamic State in the Sahel, a region south of the Sahara Desert, officials said on Monday. The discovery of the terrorist cell and what authorities called an "imminent dangerous terrorist plot" reflect the expanding ambitions of extremist groups in the region. Authorities did not provide details of the suspects' motives or their plot, beyond saying they planned to set off bombs remotely. They released photographs and videos showing officers raiding terrorist cells throughout the country. The images showed weapons stockpiles found during police raids, Islamic State flags drawn on walls, and thousands of dollars of cash. "Morocco remains a major target in the agenda of all terrorist organisations operating in the Sahel," Habboub

Cherkaoui, the head of Morocco's Central Bureau of Judicial Investigations, said at a news conference. Militant groups have been expanding their presence in the Sahel, capitalising on instability in countries including Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. Since French troops began withdrawing almost two years ago, the Islamic State in the Sahel has launched deadly campaigns and taken control of lucrative transit routes. Groups like Islamic State in the Sahel have found support in impoverished communities that feel neglected by their governments. Their growth has destabilised and in several cases contributed to the overthrow of elected leaders. It has alarmed neighbouring states — including in North Africa and coastal west Africa — and worried western powers concerned about militant groups using their regional bases to orchestrate violence elsewhere. Authorities said the Morocco-

based cell called itself "the Lions of the Caliphate in the Maghreb" and took direction from Islamic State in the Sahel commanders. More than a year of tracking done by Morocco's General Directorate for Territorial Surveillance showed Islamic State in the Sahel commanders worked to recruit, arm and direct sympathisers to carry out attacks in Morocco. The weapons found include materials to make explosives including nail bombs, dynamite and gas cylinders as well as knives, rifles and hand guns whose serial numbers had been scratched off. Investigators said the 12 men arrested ranged from 18 to 40 years old and were apprehended in nine different cities, including Casablanca, Fez and Tangier. The majority were unmarried and had not finished high school. They have not yet been charged under Morocco's anti-terrorism laws. Based on materials gathered in raids last week, authorities

were able to locate a cache of weapons in the desert near Morocco's border with Algeria, including firearms and ammunition wrapped in newspapers printed in Mali in late January. Authorities said the suspects arrested this month had maintained ties to Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, a militant leader born in the Morocco-controlled Western Sahara who was killed by French forces in 2021. In the years since, they took direction from the Libyan commander Abderrahmane Sahraoui, who oversees the group's operations outside the Sahel. Episodes of violence would be particularly damaging in Morocco, where the economy relies heavily on tourism. More than 17 million people visited the North African Kingdom last year and the tourism industry makes up more than 7 per cent of its GDP. Morocco is the only in North Africa not to have experienced a major terrorist attack

for more than a decade. But its security services regularly underscore that the threat remains and claim attacks are regularly foiled when terrorist cells are dismantled. They have in recent years claimed to have dismantled 40 such cells, including one as recently as January. Cherkaoui said the operation revealed that Islamic State in the Sahel aimed to expand and establish operations in Morocco or recruit Moroccans to fight abroad, including most recently in Somalia. He said the groups "do not hide their desire to target Morocco through propaganda platforms" and said Morocco's aggressive counterterrorism posture made it a target. Morocco has worked to present itself as a regional leader in combatting violent extremism, forging deeper ties with new governments throughout the Sahel, including Mali, with which it signed a joint military cooperation agreement last month.

# Bangladesh interim govt's key adviser resigns

## Likely to lead new pol party

**PTI ■ DHAKA**  
Bangladesh interim government's Information Adviser and one of the key leaders of the students' movement, Nahid Islam, Tuesday resigned from the cabinet, ahead of the launch of a new political party by the July uprising activists. "Given the current situation in the country, the rise of a new political force is necessary. I have resigned from the advisory council to remain on the streets to consolidate the mass uprising," Islam said in a media briefing after submitting his resignation letter to Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus. One of the key coordinators of the July uprising that toppled the Awami League regime led by Sheikh Hasina, Nahid said his role on the street appeared more important than staying in government. He said he wanted to work for people's aspirations for a demo-

cratic change and thus resigned as an adviser, effectively a minister with two portfolios of Information & Broadcasting and Post and Telecommunications. Anti-Discrimination Student Movement led a mass uprising that toppled longtime prime minister Sheikh Hasina's government on August 5 last year. Three days later, Yunus took charge of the interim government. Islam was one of the three representatives of the Movement, who were inducted into the council of advisers. He resigned as the platform and its ally Jatiya Nagorik Committee or "national citizens committee", also led by students, earlier this month said they were set to form a new political party on Friday but did not announce its name. Islam is likely to join the new political party as its top leader. His resignation came amid criticisms from former prime minister Khaleda Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and several groups against forming a party with

their representatives staying in state power. Hasina's Awami League virtually remained silent on the development while most of her colleagues in the party and government were in jail and on the run on charges like crimes against humanity during the July-August Uprising last year. A UN fact-finding report earlier this month said the past regime wanted to ruthlessly crush the protesters, but the retaliatory violence continued even after its ouster while an estimated 1400 people were killed between July 15 and August 15. Two other comrades, Mahfuz Alam and Asif Mahmud, however, remained as advisers. Islam said, "The student advisers in the government will remain active in implementing the promises of justice and reform to which the government has committed." Yunus, earlier, said he encouraged the student movement-led party since they were ready to shed their blood for the country.



US President Donald Trump speaks during a meeting with France's President Emmanuel Macron in the Oval Office of the White House in Washington, on Monday

# Syria's national dialogue conference begins

## Battered country seeks to rebuild

**PTI ■ DAMASCUS**  
Syria's new rulers kicked off a long-awaited national dialogue conference on Tuesday as a "rare historical opportunity" to rebuild the country after the fall of former President Bashar Assad and nearly 14 years of civil war. About 600 people from across Syria were invited to the gathering in Damascus, hosted by the new authorities led by the Islamist former insurgent group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham or HTS. The group led the offensive that ousted Assad in December. "Just as Syria has liberated itself by itself, it is appropriate for it to build itself by itself," interim President Ahmad al-Sharaa told the conference. "What we are experiencing today is an exceptional and rare historical opportunity in which we must use every moment to serve the interests of our people and our nation and honor the sacrifices of its children," he said. Syria's new rulers have promised an inclusive political transition. They will be closely watched by Syrians and the international community, including countries weighing whether to lift sanctions imposed during Assad's authoritarian rule. Syria faces major challenges, from rebuilding an economy and war-wrecked infrastructure to setting up a new constitution and justice mechanisms for those accused of war crimes. Although incidents of revenge and collective punishment have been far less widespread than expected, many in Syria's minority communities — including Kurds, Christians, Druze and members of Assad's

Alawite sect — are concerned for their future and not convinced by promises of inclusive governance. HTS was formerly affiliated with al-Qaeda, although it broke ties, and al-Sharaa has since preached coexistence. The organisers of the Damascus conference said all of Syria's communities were invited. Women and members of minority religious communities were among the attendees. The gathering is meant to come up with nonbinding recommendations on the country's interim rules before drafting a new constitution and forming a new government. Syria's new leaders also face the challenge of transforming former insurgent factions into a single national army they say should control all of the country's territory. Some armed groups — mainly the US-backed, Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, which holds sway in northeastern Syria — have refused to disarm and dissolve their units. SDF figures weren't invited to the conference, although the organisers said the Kurdish community would be represented. A group of mostly Kurdish political parties said in a statement on Tuesday that the conference did "not reflect the reality of the Syrian components" and warned that it would be "meaningless, worthless and ineffective and will not contribute to finding real solutions to the crisis that the country is suffering from".

Along with the internal frictions, Syria's new authorities face external threats. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Sunday that Israel won't allow Syria's new army or HTS to "enter the area south of Damascus". He said that Israel aimed to protect Syria's Druze, a religious minority who live in southern Syria and in Israel's Golan Heights. After Assad's fall, Israeli forces moved into territory in southern Syria adjacent to the Israeli-annexed Golan Heights and have made clear they plan to stay indefinitely. Syria's new rulers haven't directly responded to Netanyahu's warning, but al-Sharaa told the Damascus conference that Syria must "firmly confront anyone who wants to tamper with our security and unity". Interim Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shibani said that Syria's new authorities "will not accept any violation of our sovereignty or the independence of our national decisions". He also touted the government's efforts to rebuild diplomatic ties with Arab and Western countries, and push for lifting sanctions. Also on Tuesday, hundreds of demonstrators gathered in the Druze heartland of Sweida and the southern city of Daraa to protest against Netanyahu's comments. Nour Alameddine, a university student, displayed a sign: "Syria is not for sale, Syria is united". "Sweida is part of Syria. We do not want it to be under Israeli occupation," she said. After Assad's fall, "we want to be part of a united Syria".

# Pakistan SC to hear Imran Khan's pleas on Feb 28

**PTI ■ ISLAMABAD**  
Pakistan's Supreme Court will take up on Friday petitions filed by jailed former prime minister Imran Khan seeking a judicial probe into the May 9 violence and alleged rigging of last year's general elections, according to media reports on Tuesday. A five-member constitutional bench of the apex court led by Justice Aminuddin Khan will conduct the hearing. The Express Tribune newspaper reported. Khan's petition for the May 9 investigation was filed in December last year. On May 9, 2023, violent protests erupted after Khan's arrest by paramilitary Rangers

**POLL RIGGING, MAY 9 VIOLENCE**  
from the premises of the Islamabad High Court. His party workers vandalised a dozen military installations, including the Jinnah House (Lahore Corps Commander house) and the ISI building in Faisalabad. The PTI leadership alleges that May 9 was planned by its opponents. Khan had said he was implicated in the cases related to the violence as a result of a "well-orchestrated plan" to "harass" him for political reasons. In March 2024, Khan filed a

petition in the Supreme Court requesting the formation of a judicial commission to "inquire, audit and examine" the manner and process of the February 8 general elections held in the country, Geo News reported. Khan's PTI claims it had won the general elections held on February 8, 2024, but was robbed of its mandate through massive rigging, an allegation rejected by the government and the election officials. Khan has been jailed since August 2023 after he was arrested in several cases and convicted for some of them. He is currently lodged in the high-security Adiala jail in Rawalpindi.

# China holds live-fire exercises in Gulf of Tonkin after Vietnam marks its territorial claims

**Bangkok (PTI):** Chinese authorities said they began live-fire exercises in the Gulf of Tonkin on Monday, only days after Vietnam announced a new line marking what it considers its territory in the body of water between the countries. China's Maritime Safety Administration said the exercises would be focused on the Beibu Gulf area, closer to the Chinese side of the Gulf of Tonkin, and would run through Thursday evening. It gave no further details, but the drills follow an announcement last week by Vietnam establishing a baseline used to calculate the width of its territorial waters in the Gulf of Tonkin. State-run Vietnam News reported that the baseline was in compliance with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea and would provide "a robust legal basis for safeguarding and exercising Vietnam's sovereignty, sovereign rights and jurisdiction." Vietnam has not publicly responded to the Chinese drills. China and Vietnam have long had a maritime agreement governing the Gulf of Tonkin, but have been locked in competing claims in the nearby

South China Sea over the Spratly and Paracel Islands and maritime areas. China has been growing aggressive in pursuing those claims, and in October assaulted 10 Vietnamese fishermen near the Paracel Islands, three of whom suffered broken limbs. China claims almost the entire South China Sea as its own, though it has not publicly released exact coordinates of its claim other than a map with 10 dashed lines broadly demarcating what it calls its territory. In addition to Vietnam, China's claims overlap with those of the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan, while Indonesia has also figured in violent confrontations with the Chinese coast guard and fishing fleets in the waters around the Natuna Islands. Tensions have been particularly high with the Philippines, with regular confrontations between the two countries. Most recently, a Chinese navy helicopter flew within 10 feet (3 meters) of a Philippine patrol plane last week over the South China Sea, near the hotly disputed Scarborough Shoal off the northwestern Philippines.

# Starmmer commits to raise UK defence spending to 2.5% of GDP by 2027

**PTI ■ LONDON**  
Prime Minister Keir Starmer committed to raise UK defence spending to 2.5% of gross domestic product by 2027, saying Tuesday that Europe is in a new and insecure era. The UK spends 2.3% of gross domestic product on defence, and the government had previously set a 2.5% target, without setting a date. Starmer told lawmakers that the increase amounts to an additional 13.4 billion pounds (\$17 billion) a year. He said the goal is for defence spending to rise to 3% of GDP by 2035. The announcement comes as European countries scramble to bolster their collective defense as US President Donald Trump transforms American foreign policy, seemingly sidelining Europe as he looks to quickly end the war in Ukraine. Trump has long questioned the value of NATO and complained that the US provides security to European countries that don't pull their weight. Starmer is due to meet with Trump at the White House on Thursday. The prime minister has offered to send British troops to Ukraine as part of a force to safeguard a ceasefire, but says an American "backstop" will be needed to ensure a lasting peace. Trump hasn't committed to providing security guarantees for Ukraine.

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**PUBLIC NOTICE**  
It is to inform to the public at large that Mrs. Seema Devi who is purchasing the Property bearing No. B-212, Land area measuring 50 Sq. yards, Kharsa No.176/4, Situated at Village Ghonda Gurjan Khadar, in the abadi of Mandir Wali Gali, North Ghonda, Ilaga Shahdara, Delhi-53 from Mrs. Savitri who became owner vide Notarized GPA dated 27.09.2001, Notarized ATS dated 27.09.2001 & Notarized WILL dated 27.09.2001 executed by Mr. Netra Pal Giri and same to be financed & mortgaged by Aditya Birla Housing Finance Ltd. So, to comply the requirements of BANK/NBFC, we give this public notice that if any Person having any type of claim (right/title/interest/creating mortgage over the said property, may inform in writing, at the address mentioned below, about his objections, within 15 days from today, failing which it shall be presumed that the said property is free from all type of Encumbrances, lien etc. Lucem Legal LLP B-93B, Second Floor, Opp. SBI Bank Sector 2, Noida, UP-201301 Contact No: 1726-4268379

**PUBLIC NOTICE**  
**INFORMATION**  
We wish to inform you all that Executive committee members were elected on dated 15 December 2024 of RWA, Sector-116, Noida. The list of Executive members are as below:-  
a. Sh. Brahmopal Chaudhary- President  
b. Dr.VN Mishra- V. President & Treasurer  
c. Sh. TS Chaudhary- Vice president  
d. Adv. Preeti Mishra- Vice President  
e. Sh. Vikram Baisoya- Gen. Secretary  
f. Sh. Sunil Chaudhary- V. Treasurer  
g. Smt. Sherry Grover- Dy Gen Secretary  
h. Sh. Deepak Dhama- Member  
i. Sh. Ashok Kumar- Member  
j. Sh. Rajkumar Sharma- Member  
k. Sh. Kapil Baisoya- Member  
Incense anybody has any grievances, the same may plz report at RWA sector 116 office within 15 days.

**PUBLIC NOTICE**  
General public is hereby informed that, We, M/S Yatah Enterprises Private Limited having its registered office at 602, Prominence by Sanghat, I.P.L. S.P. Ring Road, Near Vaishnodevi Zundal, Gandhinagar, Gujarat - 382421 are filing application in L&DO for mutation of the Plot of land bearing no. 5, in Block No. 148, known as 26 Ferozshah Road, New Delhi - 110001 in the name of M/S Yatah Enterprises Private Limited, on the grounds of registered Sale Deed dated 9<sup>th</sup> January 2025. If there are any objections / claims from the general public on this application, the same shall be communicated to L&DO with supporting documents through registered post or by visiting L&DO at Nirman Bhawan, New Delhi or through an email at ldo@nic.in, within 30 days of publication of this notice.  
**Name: Gurdeep Chauhan (Advocate)**  
**Address: Law Intellect, B-20, Basement Floor, East of Kailash, New Delhi - 110065**  
**Contact No.: +91-8595468935**

**PUBLIC NOTICE**  
To be known to all that Sh. Devi Prasad Misra & Sh. Debasish Misra R/o of DDA SFS Flat No. 61-A in Block-H, Saket, New Delhi - 110017 have lost/misplaced the original 5th and Final Demand Letter/Allotment-cum-Demand Letter; NOC for Water & Electricity; Handing Possession and Site Possession for the said premises. An FIR in this regard has been lodged with Police Station, Crime Branch, Delhi Police with FIR No. 251453/2025 dated 24/02/2025. Any person(s) in possession of the said documents bearing F.No. R (197)78/HBR/SFS/PI may please contact at the above address within 15 days from the date of publication of this notice. Person(s) claiming interest may personally inform/write to Deputy Director, SFS Housing, Vikas Sadan, INA, New Delhi - 110023.

**PUBLIC NOTICE**  
Notice is hereby given to the General Public that Mr. Lakhan Singh S/o Mr. Ganga Sahay is the owner of Residential Property No. D-364, (land area measuring 100 Sq. Yards., out of Kharsa No. 562, Situated in the area of village Ghonda Gurjan Khadar, in the Abadi of Gali no. 20, Gauri Extension, P.O. Bhajanpura, Ilaga, Shahdara, Delhi-110053, by virtue of Regd. GPA dated 15.12.2023, as Doc. No. 2506, executed by Mrs. Parwati, same to be financed by SMF-G India Credit Company Limited (Formerly Fullerton India Credit Company Limited). General public hereby informed that if anybody has any change/interest in the said property or any kind of dispute kindly inform the undersigned in writing on the below mentioned address within 07 days of the present. **Rahul Raj Pathak, Advocate** SC Associates (Law Firm) FF-18, Lotus Pond Plaza, Vaishali Khind, Indraprastha, Gurgaon, Haryana. Contact No: 91254446306

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**PUBLIC NOTICE**  
I, Ashwani Sharma, son of Late Sh. Dinesh Kumar, resident of 578, Sector-15, Part-1, Gurugram do hereby solemnly affirm and declare as under:  
1. That I am contesting the election of Member from Ward No. 13 of the Municipal Corporation Gurugram as a candidate set up as Independent.  
2. That I hereby declare that, at the time of filing of the nomination form, a criminal case bearing FIR. No. 0288/2017, registered at Police Station Civil Lines, Sector-15, Part-2, Opp. Galaxy, Gurugram under Section 279, 336, 337 & 338 of the Indian Penal Code 1860 is under trial adjudication against me before the Hon'ble Court of Ms. Anshuman, Judicial Magistrate, 1 Class, Gurugram, vide case No. H R G R 030261232017 (Ch11895).

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

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**CHANGE OF NAME**  
I, Thankam, Mother of No.14850508X Hav Shatharaj C S R/o- Vill- Nadama, Post-Eroor (South), Teh- Kanayanoor, Dist- Ernakulam, Kerala- 682306, have changed my name from Thankam to C S Thankam, vide affidavit dated 25/02/2025 before Notary Public Delhi. **PD(1582)C**

**LOST & FOUND**  
I, Aditya Dasta S/o Sh. Ramsukh Dasta have lost original Allotment Letter of Flat No.A-301, Gayatri CGHS Ltd, Plot No.09, Sector-9, Dwarka, New Delhi, finder please contact: 9654150164. **PD(1584)C**

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**New Okhla Industrial Development Authority**  
Administrative Building, Sector-6, NOIDA-201301 (U.P.)  
Website : www.noidaauthorityonline.in  
**E-TENDER NOTICE**  
E-Tenders are invited from eligible contractors/firm for the following jobs against which bids can be uploaded and same shall be opened/downloaded as per schedule mentioned. The details and conditions of all tenders are available on Noida Authority's official website : [www.noidaauthorityonline.in](http://www.noidaauthorityonline.in) & <https://etender.up.nic.in>. Please ensure to see these websites for any changes/amendments & corrigendum etc.  
**A) Tender Work:**

Sl. No.	Jobs No.	Name of Work	Tender Amount (Rs. in Lacs)
1.	18/GM(NTC)/ Sr. Manager (E&M) III/ 2024-25	Comprehensive Annual Maintenance of HVAC for Ist, IInd & IIIrd Floor Command Control Center Building near mahamaya flyover, Sector-94, Noida.	36.83

# India imported 49 Billion Euro worth of Russian oil in 2024

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**  
India, the world's third largest oil consuming and importing nation, bought crude oil worth 49 Billion Euros from Russia in the third year of Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, a global think tank said. India, which has traditionally sourced its oil from the Middle East, began importing a large volume of oil from Russia soon after the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This is primarily because Russian oil was available at a significant discount to other international benchmarks due to western sanctions and some European countries shunning purchases. This led to India's imports of Russian oil seeing a dramatic rise, growing from less than one per cent of its total crude oil imports to a staggering 40 per cent in a short period. "Russia's stronghold over new markets has solidified

in the third year of the invasion. The three biggest buyers, China (EUR 78 Billion), India (EUR 49 Billion) and Turkey (EUR 34 Billion) were responsible for 74 per cent of Russia's total revenues from fossil fuels in the third year of the invasion," Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air said in its latest report (CREA). The value of India's import saw an eight per cent year-on-year increase, it said. Russia's total global fossil fuel earnings in the third year of the invasion reached 242 Billion Euro and have totalled 847 Billion Euro since the invasion of Ukraine. Some of the refineries in India turned Russian crude oil into fuels like petrol and diesel that were exported to Europe and other G7 countries. "In the third year of the invasion, G7+ countries imported EUR 18 Billion of oil products from six

refineries in India and Turkey that process Russian crude. An estimated EUR nine Billion of this was refined from Russian crude," the CREA report said. In the first three quarters of 2024, as refineries in India and Turkey increased their consumption of Russian crude, the volume of Russian crude used to create products for G7+ countries jumped by an estimated 10 per cent. Concurrently, this also contributed to a rise in the price of Russian oil, boosting the value of the crude used for these exports by an estimated 25 per cent, it said. The EU is the biggest importer of oil products from India's and Turkey's refineries. On average, 13 per cent of these refineries' total production is targeted towards exports for the bloc in the third year of the invasion. The top-five importers within the EU were the Netherlands (3.3 Billion

Euro), France (1.4 Billion Euro), Romania (1.2 Billion Euro), Spain (1.1 Billion Euro), and Italy (949 Million Euro). The single-biggest buyer was Australia, whose imports from these refineries totalled 3.38 Billion Euro in the third year of the invasion. In the third year of the invasion, 23 per cent of the oil transhipped in EU waters was destined for China, 11 per cent for India, 10 per cent for South Korea, and two per cent for Turkey, with the remainder distributed among other markets. "CREA's data shows that from February to September 2024, 331 shipments arriving in India's Sikka port (in Gujarat) averaged USD 90.8 per barrel," it said. In this period, 65 per cent of the tankers were subject to the cap. "Applying the price cap to cost, insurance and freight (CIF) price would have cut Russia's crude export revenues by 34 per cent —

about 5.8 Billion in 2024," it said. When Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, it triggered a series of sanctions from the US, the European Union, and other western nations, aimed at crippling Russia's economy. One of the main sanctions was on Russian oil exports, which significantly impacted Russia's ability to sell oil to European markets. As a result, Russia began offering crude oil at heavily discounted prices in an attempt to find new buyers for its oil. India, with its large energy needs and an economy sensitive to oil price fluctuations, found this offer too attractive to ignore. The price discount on Russian oil, sometimes as much as USD 18-20 per barrel lower than the market price of other oil, allowed India to procure oil at a much cheaper rate. The discounts have, however, shrunk in recent times to less than USD 3 a barrel.

## Centre urge companies to set up skill centres in-house

**PTI ■ KOLKATA**  
The Centre has urged the corporate sector to set up skill centres in-house so that the employability of graduating youth is improved and the overall hiring scenario is boosted, an official said on Tuesday. Ministry of Corporate Affairs Secretary Deepthi Gaur Mukherjee said that there is a need to upscale the numbers of skilled youth in society. Under the Prime Minister Internship Scheme (PMIS) launched in 2024, the target is to provide skills to 1.25 lakh youth in the pilot phase and one crore over the next five years. Speaking at an event organised by CII here, Mukherjee said, "The response from companies is very encouraging and there is a need to upscale the numbers. The companies should set

up skill cells in-house so that the quantum of the employable workforce increases." The internship programme under PMIS has been made a part of corporate social responsibility (CSR) with the view to provide flexibility. "This internship programme is a part of CSR and not a normal HR function. This will provide flexibility to the programme. Under the scheme, the industry will benefit from getting employable workforce which will contribute to the society," she said. Mukherjee said that 50 per cent of the population in India is below the age of 28 years. "This is a huge demographic dividend. If the youth of the country are not skilled, the demographic dividend will turn into a demographic nightmare," the official said. She said the internship

programme will help the youth learn teamwork and improve communication skills. "The entire government scheme on internship is a three-way partnership between industry, government and the youth", Mukherjee said. Ambuja Neotia Group chairman Harshvardhan Neotia said the industry is facing an issue of employability of youth who are graduating. The internship programme provides a wonderful tool to boost employability and job creation, he said. Renowned corporate houses like ITC, Emami, Reliance and HDFC Bank are participating in the programme. Under PMIS, individuals, aged between 21 and 24 years, are given 12-month internship opportunities in the country's top 500 companies.

## Enable MSMEs to grow through right policy, ADB to MP government

**PTI ■ BHOPAL**  
Madhya Pradesh must look to frame policies for MSMEs to enable them to grow into large companies, which can compete globally, a senior official of the Asian Development Bank said on Tuesday. Speaking at the Madhya Pradesh Global Investors Summit (MP GIS) 2025, Asian Development Bank (ADB) Deputy Country Director Aarti Mehra complimented the state for its achievements in tackling poverty and stand out performance in agriculture, specially in organic farming. "It (Madhya Pradesh) has also done really well in tackling poverty. It is among the fast improving states of the country. Multidimensional poverty (in the state) has declined between 2015 and 2021 at a dramatic rate of 15.9

per cent and that's really commendable when you compare it to the national average of 9.9 per cent," she said. On the MSME sector, Mehra noted that MP has enacted a number of policies to deal with challenges faced by these micro enterprises, including access to finance. "While every policy that supports MSMEs is fantastic, the state must keep its eye on getting these infants to grow into giants," she said. Pointing to a trend witnessed in a number of states in India, she said MSMEs continue to be MSMEs even 10 years after inception. "Given where the state (MP) is now, and having the benefit of the experience of other states, I would urge that policies be made to actually incentivise these MSMEs to grow into giants by connecting them to supply

chains by providing good access to financing and by good regulation," Mehra said. She cited examples from other states such as Rajasthan, where in 2015 THE MSME policy was tweaked resulting in the size of MSMEs in the state growing larger. There are many benefits of growing MSMEs into big corporations, she said. "They can benefit from economies of scale and most importantly, larger companies pay employees more. They are more resilient to economic downturns, and they are just more able to compete in the global landscape," Mehra said. The senior ADB official also highlighted that the multilateral lending body has been associated with MP since 1999 and it has worked across all sectors ranging from transport to urban governance and education.

## Rupee plummets 47 paise to end at 87.19 against US dollar

**PTI ■ MUMBAI**  
The rupee fell sharply by 47 paise to settle at 87.19 against the US Dollar on Tuesday due to month-end Dollar demand by importers amid uncertainty over US trade tariffs. Elevated greenback against major crosses and sustained FII outflows also contributed to the decline in the domestic unit, forex traders said. At the interbank foreign exchange, the Rupee opened weak at 86.83 and kept losing ground through the day before settling at 87.19, lower by 47 paise over its previous close. The local unit had settled at 86.72 on Monday. Currency markets will remain closed on Wednesday for Mahashivratri. "The rupee fell sharply against the US dollar amid uncertainty over US trade tariffs and demand from importers towards the end of the month.

Covering of short positions due to the expiry of the futures contract, too, weighed on the rupee. "We expect the rupee to trade negative on the back of overall weakness in the domestic markets and persistent FII outflows. Any recovery in the US Dollar may also weigh on the Rupee. However, any intervention by the RBI and weakness in crude oil prices may support the Rupee at lower levels," Anuj Choudhary, Research Analyst at Mirae Asset Sharekhan, said. Meanwhile, at the domestic equity markets, Sensex climbed 147.71 points to settle at 74,602.12 to end a five-session losing run. However, Nifty continued the downward streak, falling 5.80 points to 22,547.55. The Dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, rose 0.04 per cent to 106.64.

## SEBI warns public against buying properties of HBN Dairies

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**  
Markets regulator SEBI has cautioned public against buying and dealing with any property belonging to HBN Dairies and Allied Limited. The cautionary statement comes after SEBI discovered that some individuals or entities are interfering with the auction process by spreading false rumours, pretending to be SEBI officials, and trespassing on HBN properties. These actions are not only misleading potential buyers but also obstructing SEBI's e-auction process, the regulator noted. In response, SEBI in a notice issued last week, cautioned public against 'buying/dealing with any properties wherein HBN, its directors or any of its associates, subsidiaries, sister companies have any interest, rights directly or indirectly'.

The regulator also said no person is allowed to take illegal possession of or interfere with the assets of HBN, its directors, or its related entities, including subsidiaries, associates, and sister companies. Any such unauthorised actions will result in legal consequences under applicable laws. Further, SEBI emphasised that as per Supreme Court orders, it has full authority to sell the assets of HBN, its directors, and its related companies, including properties where HBN has any direct or indirect interest. A Supreme Court order in May 2024 granted SEBI the authority to sell the assets of HBN with the involvement of a liquidator. A subsequent order in October 2024 further permitted SEBI to sell and dispose of assets and properties of HBN's sister

companies, which are currently in liquidation. Following the orders, the regulator in January stated that it will auction 26 properties of HBN Dairies and Allied Ltd for a reserve price of ₹83 Crore on February 27. Before this, the regulator had in August last year auctioned eight properties of HBN. The moves are part of the markets watchdog's effort to recover money raised by HBN through illicit collective investment schemes. The SEBI initiated the process for the sale of the assets after HBN and its directors — Harmender Singh Sran, Amandeep Singh Sran, Manjeet Kaur Sran and Jasbeer Kaur — failed to refund investors' money. The assets of HBN and its directors were attached by SEBI under recovery proceedings initiated via a prohibitory order in September 2017.

## Kerala launches direct selling monitoring mechanism

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI**  
The Kerala government has launched the Direct Selling Monitoring Mechanism (DSMM), a major initiative aimed at strengthening the direct selling industry with a transparent and consumer-friendly ecosystem. Applauding this move, the Indian Direct Selling Association (IDSA) hailed it as a game-changer for the sector's growth and regulation. Under the leadership of Chief Minister Shri Pinarayi Vijayan and Minister Shri G R Anil, the initiative introduces clear guidelines for over 1.5 Lakh direct sellers in the state. Speaking at the launch event in Thiruvananthapuram on February 19, 2025, IDSA CEO Council Member, Mr Samir K Modi, highlighted Kerala's transformative step in strengthening its, 522 Crore direct selling market. He praised the launch of an online portal to enhance transparency and compliance.

## VFS Global launch India developed AI-powered chatbot for UK visa customers

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ DUBAI/NEW DELHI**  
VFS Global, a global leader in visa and consular services, has launched an innovative AI-powered chatbot to provide enhanced customer support for UK visa applicants across 141 countries. Developed by VFS Global's AI Centres in India, the UAE, and Germany, this cutting-edge solution leverages Generative AI technology to deliver human-like, conversational support to applicants seeking information about their UK visa applications. The AI-powered chatbot is designed to cater to diverse audiences by effectively responding to both voice and text inputs. This ensures that travellers from around the world can easily access the assistance they need in a manner that feels both natural and intuitive. Jen Vidler, Deputy Director, Cross Cutting Service Operations, Visa, Status and Information Services, Customer Services Group, UK Visas and Immigration, said, "The rollout of VFS Global's AI-powered chatbot demonstrates our continued commitment to ensuring our visa services are accessible, efficient and meet the needs of all customers. Providing instant access to accurate

information about the visa application process will ensure we continue to offer the best service to our customers." Zubin Karkaria, Founder & Chief Executive Officer, VFS Global, added, "Technology and innovation have always been the cornerstones of our operations at VFS Global, and we are pleased to launch this AI-powered information solution which will significantly enhance the visa application experience for our customers travelling to the UK from across the globe. We are developing a range of AI and digital technology driven products to drive the next transformation in visa and consular services for our Client Governments and customers. We remain deeply committed to the responsible development of AI in accordance with the policies and requirements of our client governments." Powered by advanced Generative AI, the chatbot provides responses that mimic human conversation, fostering a more engaging user experience. The chatbot is fine-tuned to deliver accurate, country-specific details tailored to the needs of UK visa applicants. The system identifies and masks any Personally Identifiable Information (PII), ensuring that no sensitive data is stored or shared.

## Sensex bounces back after five-day slump, Nifty ends marginally lower



Stock Exchange building, Mumbai

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ MUMBAI**  
Benchmark BSE Sensex recovered 147 points in a range-bound trade on Tuesday, ending its five-day slide on the back of buying in financial and FMCG shares. The 30-share BSE benchmark Sensex climbed 147.71 points or 0.20 per cent to settle at 74,602.12 with 17 of its constituents ending higher and 13 lower. During the day, it rallied 330.67 points or 0.44 per cent to 74,785.08.

The broader Nifty of NSE, however, fell for the sixth day slipping by 5.80 points or 0.03 per cent to finish at 22,547.55 due to fag-end selling in pharma, metal and IT shares. Weak Asian and US markets along with foreign fund outflows made investors risk-averse, analysts said. Among Sensex shares, Mahindra and Mahindra, Bharti Airtel, Bajaj Finance, Zomato, Nestle, Bajaj Finserv, Maruti and Titan were the biggest gainers. Sun Pharma, Power Grid,

Tata Consultancy Services, Tech Mahindra, Asian Paints and Tata Motors were among the laggards. In the last five trading sessions, the BSE barometer lost 1,542.45 points or two per cent. Foreign institutional investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth ₹6,286.70 Crore on Monday, while DIIs bought equities worth ₹5,185.65 Crore, according to exchange data. In Asian markets, Seoul, Tokyo, Shanghai and Hong Kong settled lower. Equity markets in Europe were trading mostly higher. US markets ended mostly in the negative territory on Monday. "Benchmark indices ended mixed in a lacklustre trading session as weak Asian cues further cautioned investors. Investors continued to stay risk averse as global uncertainty coupled with strong FII selling kept the mood sluggish ahead of expiry this week," Prashanth Tapse, Senior VP (Research), Mehta Equities Ltd, said. Global oil benchmark Brent crude dipped 0.13 per cent to USD 74.68 a barrel. "The domestic market experienced a range-bound trading session in anticipation of key economic data releases this week, alongside the monthly expiry.

## Aravam tech solutions unveils triptronic application



(Left to Right) co founders of Triptronic Sahil Mendiratta, Sorabh Kothari and Ankush Mendiratta founder

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI**  
Aravam Tech Solutions Private Limited has launched Triptronic, a next-gen app designed to address the growing demand for efficient, sustainable, and tech-driven transportation solutions for businesses. The launch event, held on today at The Metropolitan Hotel in New Delhi, showcased how Triptronic blends real-time updates, advanced technology, and electric vehicles to offer a comprehensive solution tailored to corporate travel needs. To meet growing demand, Triptronic starting its operations across India. As more employees return to offices and businesses rely on organised transport, the need for better corporate mobility solutions is increasing. The company also aims to expand

internationally to the UAE and Southeast Asia, helping businesses access cost-effective and sustainable transport. India's ride-hailing market is worth USD 13.4 Billion, but with only seven per cent penetration-compared to 40 per cent in China and 28 per cent in the US there is huge growth potential. By entering new markets, Triptronic expects to triple its revenue and serve more corporate clients. Triptronic is built around three core apps the Employee App, which enables employees to book, track, and pay for rides, receive real-time updates, and provide feedback, the Driver App, which helps drivers manage routes, assignments, and eco-friendly travel options and the Supervisor App, which allows businesses to monitor employee travel in real-time, track vehicles, manage expenses, and optimise routes for better efficiency.

## DJGF signature 2025 debuts as premier jewellery showcase

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI**  
Informa Markets in India has launched the first edition of Delhi Jewellery and Gem Fair (DJGF) Signature 2025 at Bharat Mandapam at Pragati Maidan. Timed ahead of the Akshaya Tritiya buying season, the exclusive three-day event brings together

over 120 premium exhibitors, 150 hosted buyers, and more than 8,000 trade visitors across one Lakh square feet of exhibition space. DJGF Signature 2025 serves as a platform for wholesalers and retailers to explore elite jewellery collections, strengthen brand positioning and engage with key stakeholders.

## Blue Star plans for gradual expansion at manufacturing facilities for ACs

**PTI ■ CHENNAI**  
Air conditioners and commercial refrigeration system maker Blue Star Ltd has planned to take up gradual expansion of its manufacturing facilities to 1.8 million units as it aims to garner a market share of 14.3 per cent in the room air conditioner segment by FY26, a top official said on Tuesday. The company currently has a production capacity of about 1.4 million room air

conditioners. "With India set to add approximately 450 million middle-class consumers by 2030, the market for room ACs is at its inflection point and is poised to grow exponentially over the next few years. Positive trends such as the expansion of the housing sector, increased adoption of renewable energy, and growth in the rural economy are also expected to shape the industry's future," Blue Star Ltd Managing Director B

Thiagarajan said. He was here to unveil 150 models of room air conditioners including 'flagship premium' range in view of the forthcoming summer season. "We continue to make significant investments in R and D, manufacturing as well as supply chain to enhance competencies and capabilities to effectively leverage the growing demand. We are confident that our extensive range of room ACs, covering all consumer segments and price points, will enable us to

grow at a faster pace than the market," he added. The company has a cutting-edge manufacturing unit in neighbouring Sri City in Andhra Pradesh which commenced commercial production in January 2023. Besides, the company operates two dedicated plants in Himachal Pradesh for manufacturing room air conditioners. These facilities are equipped with advanced automation technologies, including state-of-the-art assembly lines and

material handling systems, along with comprehensive initiatives focused on Internet of Things integration and digitalisation. "With these plants, Blue Star's production capacity is currently around 1.4 Million room ACs, with plans for gradual expansion to 1.8 Million units in near future," the company said. The comprehensive range of air conditioners launched were in the 3-star and 5-star categories and are available in various cooling capacities

from ₹28,990 onwards. Nearly 40 models of smart Wi-fi air conditioners have unique features including 'customised sleep' where a customer can preset the temperature, fan speed, cool mode and switch on or off every hour for 12 hours ensuring uninterrupted sleep. The air conditioners also come with Voice Command technology in which customers can operate using Amazon Alexa or Google Home using English or Hindi voice commands.

# Australia vs South Africa match abandoned due to rain

PTI ■ RAWALPINDI

The Champions Trophy (CT) match between Australia and South Africa was abandoned here on Tuesday due to persistent rain, forcing the two Group B heavyweights to share a point each.

The weather did not allow even the toss to be completed. With the conditions not getting any better, the match officials called off the game a little more than three hours after the scheduled start time.

The cut-off time for the game was 7.32 pm but the officials made the call much earlier with no weather improvement in sight. After the no result, South Africa and Australia shared one point each and it means that Wednesday's contest between England and Afghanistan has turned into a virtual knockout with the loser becoming the third team to be eliminated from



the ICC event. Tournament hosts Pakistan and Bangladesh were knocked out of the event on Monday after suffering two successive defeats. Both Australia and South Africa had won their opening game against England and Afghanistan respectively. Interestingly, it was Australia's fourth abandoned game in their last eight outings in the Champions Trophy. They next play Afghanistan in Lahore on February 28 while the Proteas face England in Karachi the following day. The semifinalists have already been decided in Group A with India and New Zealand progressing after two wins in as many games. Rain is predicted in Rawalpindi as well as Lahore and the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) will be hoping it doesn't play spoilsport in the coming days. Pakistan is hosting an ICC event for the first time in 29 years. With the host nation already out of the semifinal race, the PCB already faces a challenge in keeping the local fans interested in the tournament.

# SC bars Karnataka police from taking steps against Lakshya Sen

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Tuesday barred Karnataka Police from taking any coercive steps against badminton player Lakshya Sen, his family members, and coach over allegations of forging birth certificates.

A bench of Justices Sudhanshu Dhulia and K Vinod Chandran issued notice to the Karnataka government and the complainant M G Nagaraj who alleged birth certificates of Sen and his brother Chirag Sen were forged.

The top court was hearing a plea challenging February 19 order of the Karnataka High Court which rejected the petitions filed by Sen, his family members, and his coach U Vimal Kumar. The high court ruled there was prima facie evidence warranting an investigation into the case.

The case stems from a private complaint filed by Nagaraj, who alleged Sen's parents



Dhirendra and Nirmala Sen, along with his brother, coach, and an employee of the Karnataka Badminton Association, were involved in falsifying the birth records. According to the complaint, the accused allegedly manipulated the birth certificates of the Sen brothers, reducing their age by approximately two-and-a-half years. The alleged forgery was intended to allow them to participate in age-

restricted badminton tournaments and avail government benefits. Nagaraj supported his claims with documents obtained under RTI Act and requested the court to summon original records from the Sports Authority of India (SAI) and the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports in New Delhi. Based on this evidence, the court directed the High Grounds police station to conduct an investigation.

Following the court's directive, the police registered an FIR under Sections 420 (cheating), 468 (forgery), and 471 (using forged documents as genuine) of IPC. However, the petitioners moved the Karnataka High Court in 2022, securing an interim order that stalled the investigation. The petitioners argued that the complaint and subsequent FIR were baseless, motivated, and intended to harass them. They alleged Nagaraj was acting out of personal vendetta, claiming his daughter had applied to join the Prakash Padukone Badminton Academy in 2020 but was not selected after the evaluation process. Kumar, a coach at the academy, was named in the complaint. The high court, while dismissing the petitions, observed that the petitioners' counsel did not present arguments despite being given sufficient opportunities and refused more time.

# Ready to lead KKR if captaincy comes my way: Venkatesh Iyer

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

All-rounder Venkatesh Iyer says he is prepared to lead Kolkata Knight Riders (KKR) if given the opportunity in the IPL 2025 despite having no captaincy experience at any levels in competitive cricket. The reigning champions, who will take on Royal Challengers Bengaluru in the opening game this season at the Eden Gardens, are yet to announce their captain.

Shreyas Iyer had led them to the title win in IPL 2024, but he was acquired by Punjab Kings in the mega auction and later named him as their skipper.

"Definitely, I'm ready. Again, I've always said this: captaincy is just a tag. I believe in leadership. That is a bigger role to play, being a leader," Venkatesh told ESPNcricinfo.

"There's no ambiguity surrounding this. I'll definitely do it, if it comes my way. There is no reason not to do it," he added.

Iyer said the captain needs to



"set an example" by being a "good role model".

"You don't necessarily need the tag of a captain to be a leader in your dressing room. You need to set examples. You need to be a good role model, both on and off the field, which I am doing right now in Madhya Pradesh. I'm not the captain of the MP team, but my opinions are respected and I really love to be in an atmosphere where every individual — new or experienced, Rs 20 lakh, Rs 20 crore, whatever — you just

# Praggnanadhaa favourite to win Prague Masters

PTI ■ PRAGUE

Fresh off his nail-biting victory at the Tata Steel Masters, Grandmaster R Praggnanandhaa will start as the hot favorite to win the Prague Masters, which gets underway here on Wednesday.

It was a gruelling first-place finish at the Tata Steel Masters, where Praggnanandhaa overcame world champion D Gukesh in a nerve-wracking tiebreak battle and the Indian will now look to carry that momentum forward in this tournament.

Grandmaster Aravindh Chithambaram makes his debut in elite chess, thanks to his consistent rise in both performance and rating throughout last year. Having elevated himself to 2730 points in live ratings, Aravindh is knocking on the door of the top 20 in the world rankings and is currently ranked fifth in the country, behind Gukesh, Arjun

Praggnanandhaa, and five-time world champion Viswanathan Anand. The field, as usual, is an interesting mix. Chinese Grandmaster Wei Yi starts as the top seed, with Praggnanandhaa in second place based on ratings released on February 1. Le Quang Liem of Vietnam is seeded third, ahead of Vincent Keymer of Germany, while Aravindh is seeded fourth in the 10-player, 9-round all-play-all event.

Dutch Grandmaster Anish Giri could draw attention here, thanks to his vast theoretical preparation, which might prove useful. The best Czech player, David Navara, along with Nguyen Thai Dai Van, Sam Shankland of the United States, and young talent Edil Gurezi, complete the lineup.

For Praggnanandhaa, it would be a great opportunity as the Indian has the ability to outplay any opponent, giving him a distinct advantage over the others in the fray.

# IPL: Matthew Mott appointed Delhi Capitals assistant coach

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Former England white-ball coach Matthew Mott was on Tuesday appointed assistant coach of IPL franchise Delhi Capitals for the upcoming season.

The 51-year-old Mott will assist former India cricketer Hemang Badani, who was named head coach in October last year. The Australian joins director of cricket Venugopal Rao and bowling coach Munaf Patel in the Delhi Capitals' support staff.

Mott, following an extremely successful stint with the Australian women's cricket team — he guided them to two T20 World Cups, one ODI World Cup and four Ashes series wins — over seven years, became the England men's team white-ball coach in 2022.

The former first-class cricketer, with more than 3,500 runs under his belt in 66 games, stepped down as England coach in July last



year after guiding them to the T20 World Cup title in Australia in 2022. Mott had also served as assistant coach of Kolkata Knight Riders during the first two seasons of IPL. Delhi Capitals, who are still looking for their maiden IPL title, have made major changes to their coaching staff ahead of the new season. They brought in former India player Badani

# I have not seen a better player than Kohli: Ponting

PTI ■ DUBAI

Former Australian skipper Ricky Ponting said he has not seen a "better player" than Virat Kohli in ODIs, and backed the Indian batting star to go past legendary Sachin Tendulkar as the highest run-getter in the 50-over format.

Kohli made an exceptional unbeaten 100, his 51st in ODIs, to guide India to a six-wicket win over Pakistan in a Champions Trophy match here on Sunday.

"I don't think I've ever seen a better 50-over player than Virat Kohli. Now that he's gone past me (in run-maker's list) and only two (batters) ahead of him, I'm sure he would want to give himself the best chance to be remembered as the all-time leading run scorer in the game," Ponting told ICC Review.

During the course of that



hundred, Kohli went past the 14000-run mark in one-dayers, joining former Sri Lankan captain Kumar Sangakkara and Tendulkar in a rare club.

Kohli (14085 runs) is still 4,341 runs behind Tendulkar (18426) and at 36, the champion batter has limited time in his hand to overhaul the latter's mark.

But Ponting did not see it as an impossible task for Kohli. "Obviously physical-wise, he's

never going to write him off (to overtake Tendulkar)," he added.

Ponting said a match against Pakistan often brought the best in Kohli, and termed him as a big match player.

"Yeah, 2022 (T20 WC) and now, he stood up against the team that he would probably steel himself the most to play against. When Pakistan had batted first on a tricky wicket, it needed someone at the top of the order to play a match-winning innings like that.

"Once again, it was Kohli to get the job done. He's been a champion player for a long, long time. And particularly in the white-ball formats, where he's been an unbelievably good 50-over player," said the Aussie.

Ponting said Kohli's hundred was the difference between India and Pakistan on that night. "You look at the two

scorecards, it's one, Virat making a 100, and lots of Pakistan starts without anyone going on and making a big score.

"I've said forever, in any format of the game, a 50 never wins you or your team anything. You have to get big scores. And so the individual big scores weren't there, but the big partnerships weren't there either," Ponting noted.

The Tasmanian said senior batters Babar Azam and Mohammed Rizwan were not able to serve Pakistan in a desired manner.

"They haven't been able to give their best back to their team. Those two guys had to stand up," Ponting said.

"They had to make big runs, and they haven't been able to do it in the first couple of games, and that might be the reason why Pakistan don't make it through to the semi-finals."

# India have huge advantage playing at same ground, says Cummins

PTI ■ SYDNEY

Injured Australia captain Pat Cummins believes India have a "huge advantage" to be based in Dubai for the ongoing Champions Trophy (CT) while other sides criss-cross Pakistan for their group games in the tournament being held under a 'hybrid model'.

Rohit Sharma's men are playing all their matches in Dubai and even the final will be held there if the team goes the distance. This was done after India refused to travel to Pakistan, the original hosts of the event, citing security concerns.

"I think it's good in that the tournament can go on, but obviously it does give them (India) a huge advantage



playing on the same ground. They already look very strong and they've got that obvious benefit of playing all their games there," Cummins told 'Yahoo Australia'.

India have won both their games, against Bangladesh and Pakistan, comfortably so far and are through to the semifinal on March 4, to be held in Dubai.

Their last group match is on Sunday against New Zealand, a team that has so far played in Pakistan, also winning both its games against the home side and Bangladesh. Cummins is watching the tournament from the sidelines owing to an ankle injury and is targeting a return to competitive cricket with the IPL next month. The break also coincided with the birth of his daughter.

# Boxing Federation of India internal wars revealed amid IOA crackdown

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Stripped of its administrative powers by Indian Olympic Association (IOA) for allegedly failing to conduct elections on time, accusations and counter-accusations are flying thick and fast within the Boxing Federation of India (BFI) on what is to be blamed for the mess that has been in the making for several months.

Abuse of power, financial misconduct, and the never-ending turf wars are now coming to light as officials jostle to escape blame for the shocking turn of events.

The Indian Olympic Association (IOA) formed a five-member ad-hoc committee on Monday to oversee the sport's affairs, citing the federation's failure to conduct elections on time.

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

The sport's fortunes have been on the decline for a while now but the internal tug of war had so far been under wraps. With the IOA's crackdown, it is now out in the open.

**Allegations of financial misconduct**

On December 28, the BFI received a complaint, a copy of which is in PTI's possession, accusing key officials, including Secretary General Hemanta Kalita and Treasurer Digvijay Singh, of "unauthorised fund



withdrawals, fraudulent billing, and abuse of power". They were also accused of tender process violations and it was claimed that contracts for the Multinational Training Camp in Rohtak and the Guwahati Talent Hunt were awarded without following the proper procedure.

It was also alleged that non-boxing individuals were appointed as Technical Officials (NTOs) and there was unauthorised withdrawal of foreign currency and misuse of federation funds for personal expenses, among others.

During the Executive Council meeting on January 12 attended by both the secretary and treasurer, it was decided that an inquiry will be conducted.

To avoid conflict of interest, former Delhi High Court

judge, Sudhir Kumar Jain was appointed by the BFI to lead the investigation on January 21. Since then Jain has conducted several sittings.

However, Digvijay wrote to BFI head Ajay Singh this week, objecting to the "unilateral appointment of a one-man inquiry committee" instead of referring the matter to the federation's internal

Disciplinary and Dispute Committee.

The complaints made in December specifically highlighted misappropriation of funds and protocol violations by the finance committee. It is to be noted that Digvijay also heads the BFI finance committee, which includes Meren Paul, a member of the Disciplinary

and Dispute Committee. In a letter dated February 3, the federation stated that a Special General Body Meeting (SGM) was scheduled for Tuesday, and assured the ministry that the election will be conducted by mid-March.

However, the meeting was not held.

"The National Games were going on and World Boxing is in the final stages to get recognition from the IOC and the president is closely involved in this, hence it was decided that the meeting will be held in March," a BFI official familiar with the development said.

**Opposition to IOA's ad-hoc committee**

Meanwhile, IOA Treasurer and Dispute and Affiliation Committee member Sahdev Yadav on Monday strongly opposed the appointment of

an ad-hoc committee to oversee the BFI. He criticised the decision as "arbitrary and without due authority," stating that no procedural steps were followed before making such a move.

In a letter to IOA President PT Usha, Yadav wrote, "The issuance of this office order creates an impression that the decision has been taken by the IOA, whereas, in reality, it is your personal decision."

He further stressed that National Sports Federations (NSFs) are autonomous bodies and that the IOA does not have the authority to interfere in their internal governance. However, there have been past precedents of IOA stepping in to manage a sport's affairs if the federation fails to conduct elections on time.

# England, Afghanistan dream of semifinal berth

PTI ■ LAHORE

A battered England will hope to keep their Champions Trophy (CT) hopes alive when they face a dangerous Afghanistan in a crucial group B match here on Wednesday.

A defeat here would severely dent both the teams' dreams of a semifinal berth in the tournament, as South Africa and Australia have already notched up two points.

The days of England's white ball supremacy are far behind now, as the former world champions' cranking unit even failed to defend a 350-plus total against Australia in their tournament opener.

While England may take some comfort in posting a massive total, the reality is that it came against an Australian side missing their premier pacers — Pat Cummins, Mitchell Starc, and Josh Hazlewood.

The English bowlers then failed to stop an Australian line-up that did not have lead batters such as injured Mitchell Marsh and now-retired Marcus Stoinis.

So, England will need to show massive improvement against Afghanistan on both those counts.

Afghanistan's three-pronged spin attack, consisting Rashid Khan, Noor Ahmad and Mohammad Nabi, has the potential to trouble even the best, and England batters' recent outings



against slow bowlers are not confidence inspiring either.

England also suffered a setback as all-rounder Brydon Carse has been ruled out of the tournament with a toe injury. He has been replaced by leg-spinner Rehan Ahmed in an effort to strengthen their spin department.

This move will also provide Adil Rashid with proper backing, as, until

now, Liam Livingstone had been performing that role with his mixed bag of off-spin, leg-spin, and seam-up deliveries.

But England's real problem lies in the patchy form of opener Phil Salt and Harry Brook in the middle-order.

Salt's only hundred in the format was in 2022 and since then the Welshman has not really converted his starts, often getting out after a

quick 30 or 40.

Brook also offers a similar tale. The Yorkshire man looked in prime form during the home ODIs against Australia last year, hammering a hundred and two fifties in a three-match series.

However, Brook has been riddled with self-doubts against spinners since the tour to India, and fell to Aussie leg-spinner Adam Zampa in

the last match.

Now, the 26-year-old will have to negate three high-quality tweakers against Afghanistan.

The Afghans, on the other hand, have their own problems to tackle. They are coming off a 107-run shellacking by South Africa in their tournament opener.

They had reached the semifinals of the T20 World Cup 2024 with almost the same set of players but the ODI format demands much more consistency in performance and execution of strategies.

Afghanistan have the required talent but they need to find a way to channelise that consistently to challenge England, even in their most vulnerable state.

**Teams (from):**  
**Afghanistan:** Hashmatullah Shahidi (c), Ibrahim Zadran, Rahmanullah Gurbaz, Sediqqullah Atal, Rahmat Shah, Ikram Alikhil, Gulbadin Naib, Azmatullah Omarzai, Mohammad Nabi, Rashid Khan, Nangyal Kharoti, Noor Ahmad, Fazalhaq Farooqi, Farid Malik, Naseed Zadran. Reserves: Darwish Rasooli, Bilal Sami.  
**England:** Jos Buttler (c), Jofra Archer, Gus Atkinson, Tom Banton, Harry Brook, Rehan Ahmed, Ben Duckett, Jamie Overton, Jamie Smith, Liam Livingstone, Adil Rashid, Joe Root, Saqib Mahmood, Phil Salt, Mark Wood.



## UP Warriorz face Mumbai Indians

PTI ■ BENGALURU

Rejuvenated by their thrilling super-over win over RCB, UP Warriorz will look to continue their momentum when they take on an upbeat Mumbai Indians in the Women's Premier League here on Wednesday.

The Warriorz pulled off a stunning victory against defending champions Royal Challengers Bengaluru on Monday, with Sophie Ecclestone delivering a match-winning performance with both bat and ball.

However, they will need more from their batters to avoid finding themselves in a tight spot once again.

While Chinelle Henry led them to victory against Delhi Capitals, Ecclestone took center stage in their latest triumph. Though openers Kiran Navgire and Shweta Sehrawat have shown promise, they have not been able to capitalise on their starts.

Opener Vrinda Dinesh and skipper Deepti Sharma will have to give stability in the middle-order.

Despite a rocky start to the season, the Warriorz have bounced back from consecutive losses, registering two remarkable wins.

However, their batting — especially the openers and middle-order — has struggled to maintain consistency.

Australian all-rounder Tahlia McGrath is another match-winner in the Warriorz lineup, with her explosive power-hitting.

But she is yet to light up the tournament and against MI, the Warriorz will need McGrath to fire along with the rest of the batting unit to avoid falling into a vulnerable position once again.

"We are backing our young

Indian players to step up and perform under pressure. We want to provide them with opportunities," said Jon Lewis, the Warriorz head coach, on Monday.

On the middle-order batting, Lewis added: "It would be nice to get a few more runs, rotate the strike better, and be more consistent. If we can do that, we will be competitive across all conditions and against every team."

For Mumbai Indians, Nat Sciver-Brunt has been the standout performer. The inaugural edition champions are a formidable side, with India captain Harmanpreet Kaur also in fine form, having scored a fifty in their last match against RCB.

Mumbai's batting is a force to be reckoned with, with destructive batters like Hayley Matthews and Amelia Kerr in their ranks but both haven't really fired so far. Opener Yastika Bhatia too is in need of a substantial score.

They also have a rising star in 16-year-old G Kamalini, who brings balance to the team, while Amanjot Kaur's all-round performance that sealed their win against RCB is a good sign for MI.

Their bowling attack is spearheaded by the exceptional Shabnim Ismail and Sciver-Brunt, who are capable of dismantling any batting lineup.

**Teams (From):** Mumbai Indians: Harmanpreet Kaur (c), Yastika Bhatia (wk), Nadine de Klerk, Sanskriti Gupta, Saika Ishaque, Shabnim Ismail, Jintimani Kalita, G Kamalini, Amandeep Kaur, Amanjot Kaur, Sathyamoorthy Keerthana, Amelia Kerr, Akshita Maheshwari, Hayley Matthews, Sajeewan Sajana, Nat Sciver-Brunt, Parunika Sisodia, Chloe Tryon.

## Amla labelled Gill as 'next big thing' in international cricket

PTI ■ NAVI MUMBAI

South Africa batting great Hashim Amla on Tuesday labelled India opener Shubman Gill, who has had an "exceptional" start to ODIs, as the "next big thing" in international cricket along with Rishabh Pant and Ryan Rickelton.

The 25-year-old Gill, named India's vice-captain for the Champions Trophy, retook the No. 1 spot in ODI rankings for batters on the opening day of the tournament after his ascent to the top for the first time in 2023.

Gill began with a match-winning century against Bangladesh and struck a vital 46 against Pakistan to steer India to two wins in as many games in Dubai.

"For India, you have got Shubham Gill; Rishabh Pant has been around for a while. For South Africa, we have Ryan Rickelton who has done really well off late," Amla, who is playing for South Africa Masters in the International Masters League, told PTI Videos in an exclusive interaction.

"Every country has about 2-3 cricketers who are going to come through and I think that's pretty normal, that you see that every five years some youngster poke in the head through international cricket, and possibly be the next best, big thing," he added.

Talking further about Gill, Amla said, "He is a brilliant player, the way he started in one-day cricket, he has been exceptional. He has been a huge part of India's success at top of the order."

"To have him and Rohit (Sharma) at the top, it's a very potent and dangerous opening partnership, and then they have got Virat (Kohli) at No 3."

Amla said playing the tri-series in Pakistan ahead of Champions Trophy would



hold South Africa in good stead, especially against spin. "South African batters are well-equipped. They've had enough practice with the tour to Pakistan just before the Champions Trophy. They've also, by and large, had great success," he said.

"You've got Heinrich Klaasen, who's been very successful against spinners. He's in the middle order. You've got David Miller, who's been an excellent finisher and (there is) Aiden Markram as well. That middle order has been vital for South Africa's success.

"At the top, (Temba) Bavuma is a good player of spin and Rickelton has been very accomplished against spin over the last one and a half years," he added.

Amla said both India and South Africa have got a "great chance" to win the Champions Trophy title.

"India have obviously a very good chance, they have a fantastic team over the (last) 15-odd years," he said.

"South Africa have (a) great chance (too), they have fantastic batting and bowling and whole unit looks very well balanced, they have a excellent chance to make it to top four and then hopefully win it."

With South Africa making finals of the T20 World Cup last year and the World Test Championship final against Australia, Amla said the

Proteas did their best against whichever opponents they faced.

"South Africa getting into the (WTC) final has been a great achievement. Lots of people have said the different teams you (could) have played against, but that's the group that South Africa were put in," he said.

"For them to excel and win as many games as they have to get into a final, they did their part and they did their best and they are in the finals."

"It is going to be a really good final, with Australia being a very competitive team. But in a Test match, you (may) just need one or two players to stand up and yes, South Africa could be champions," he said.

Amla said he has no intention of returning to Test cricket but expressed that competitions such as the IML should be a regular affair.

"It's enjoyable, (there are) these elements of uncertainty that we haven't trained and (were) not involved in cricket for the rest of the year, or batting in nets, or playing matches, and that type of excitement, to just see how it all goes," he said.

"The amount of excitement that has been built around some of the great ex-players, it can only bode well, and who doesn't want to see a (Brian) Lara (or a) (Jacques) Kallis bat? It should be an annual event," he added.

## Atherton, Hussain praise Virat Kohli

PTI ■ LONDON

In awe of Virat Kohli's formidable ODI statistics, former England captains Michael Atherton and Nasser Hussain believe that the Indian mainstay is probably the best batsman in the history of the format.

Kohli played a master-class innings of unbeaten 100, his 51st century in ODIs, to steer India to a comfortable six-wicket win over arch-rivals Pakistan in a Champions Trophy match here on Sunday.

"Virat Kohli in a run-chase in 50-over cricket, there's been nobody better in the history of the game, really, 51 century is an unbelievable number," said the 56-year-old Atherton, who captained England in 54 Test matches, on 'Sky Sports Cricket Podcast'.

En route his century in his 299th 50-over appearance, Kohli became the fastest batter to reach 14,000 ODI runs, joining the elite group of Sachin Tendulkar (18,426 in



452 innings) and Kumar Sangakkara (14,234 in 380 innings).

"I mean, he's got 51 and he passed 14,000 runs, which only Tendulkar and Sangakkara have got past that mark in one-day cricket," Atherton continued.

"And he got them in 60-odd innings quicker than Sachin, and I think about 90-odd innings quicker than Kumar. So, I mean, ODI is probably his best. You know, he's been a great all-format player, clearly, but you'd probably say that ODI is his absolute best format."

Echoing similar sentiments, Hussain, who led England between 1999 to 2003, remarked, "He's been an incredible player. Yeah, and you'd have to say probably the best player in ODIs of all time, really, with those stats you mentioned."

"You'd have Tendulkar in the same conversation. Kumar, you'd have AB de Villiers. They've been some great ones, but he's right at the top of the tree."

## Pakistan will struggle to beat India's B team, says Gavaskar

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Pakistan's cricket team continued to invite scathing criticism a day after being knocked out of the Champions Trophy (CT) with the great Sunil Gavaskar saying that it would struggle to beat even a second-string Indian team.

India, the 2023 ODI World Cup finalists, defeated defending champions Pakistan by six wickets in the Champions Trophy in Dubai on Sunday, continuing their dominance over the arch-rivals.

"I think a B team (from India) certainly (can give Pakistan a run for their money). C team, I am not too sure. But a B team will be very, very hard to beat for Pakistan in their current form," Gavaskar said on 'Sports Today'.

Pakistan, hosting an ICC tournament for the first time since 1996, were knocked out of the Champions Trophy after New Zealand beat Bangladesh in another Group A match. Pakistan are still winless in the event.

Since winning the Champions Trophy in 2017, Pakistan's cricketing fortunes have declined, with the team finishing fifth in the last two ODI World Cups.

"I think it's surprising this lack of bench strength. Pakistan always had natural talent. Natural in the sense that they may not have always been technically correct, but they had an instinctive understanding of bat and ball," Gavaskar said.

"Look at Inzamam-ul-Haq, for example. If you look at his stance, you wouldn't recommend that to a young batter, but he had great temperament. With that kind of temperament, he made up



for any technical shortcomings."

Gavaskar also noted that despite the Pakistan Super League (PSL) and domestic white-ball tournaments, Pakistan has struggled to produce quality players.

"How has India produced so many young stars in white-ball cricket? It's because of the IPL," said the former India skipper. "Players from there have gone

believes the contest has become "one-sided" and the cricket does not live up to the hype.

"Well, it was completely one-sided," Atherton said on Sky Sports Podcast.

"It looked very predictable from a long way out. An underpowered Pakistan batting line-up, as it was in that first game, actually, against New Zealand. There just seemed to lack a bit of energy and dynamism in the batting," India and Pakistan only meet in ICC events, and their clashes are often built up as blockbuster encounters.

"There's a bit of an issue for that contest, isn't it? Because it's a highly anticipated contest for all kinds of reasons. Partly, you know, just because of the scarcity value. They only play each other in ICC events on neutral territory for obvious reasons," he said.

## Vidarbha to stake claim for Ranji Trophy title against Kerala

PTI ■ NAGPUR

Former winners Vidarbha will rely on their red-hot form to stake claim for a title that they last won over five years ago, while first-time finalists Kerala will be driven by grit when the two contrasting teams clash in the summit showdown for the 90th Ranji Trophy, starting here on Wednesday.

It has been nothing short of a stellar run for the Akshay Wadkar-led Vidarbha side this season, winning eight of their nine matches so far and drawing one which makes them the side to beat.

Vidarbha emerged from their group stage with six victories in seven matches and won

each of the knockouts by heavy margins — by 198 runs against Tamil Nadu in the quarterfinal and by 80 runs against defending champions Mumbai in the semifinal.

The winners of 2017-18 and 2018-19 edition, Vidarbha are making their fourth appearance in the final after losing in the final last year to Mumbai, displaying unmatched consistency in red-ball cricket. They had also pulled in the final of the Vijay Hazare Trophy this season.

Yash Rathod has been at the forefront of their batting with 933 runs in nine matches at 58.13 with five tons and three fifties — the third highest overall this season.

Not only from behind the



stumps as wicketkeeper-captain, Wadkar has had a successful run with the bat, scoring 674 runs in nine matches at 48.14 with two centuries and as many fifties.

Veteran Karun Nair is not far behind with 642 runs in eight matches at 45.85, including three centuries and a fifty, while Danish Malewar (557 runs, 1x100s, 5x50s) and Dhruv Shorey (446 runs, 1x100s, 2x50s) have also pulled in their weight.

If the 24-year-old southpaw Rathod has been a revelation in batting for Vidarbha, the bowling charts have been dominated by another youngster in 22-year-old Harsh Dubey. Dubey has claimed 66 wickets

in nine matches with seven five-fors and is on the cusp of creating history for most wickets in a Ranji Trophy season, which currently belongs to Bihar's Ashutosh Aman when he took 68 wickets in eight matches of the 2018-19 season.

On the other hand, making their maiden appearance in the Ranji Trophy final, it hasn't been just luck that has favoured the Sachin Baby-led side from down south. Kerala rode on their luck in

the knockout games to edge out Jammu and Kashmir by one run in the quarterfinal and Gujarat by two runs to make the final after advancing in the two contests on the basis of first-innings lead.

But even that took a lot of hard work. Kerala had to grind out with the bat on the final day of the quarterfinal against J&K to force a draw.

Salman Nizar (607 runs in eight matches at 86.71, 2x100s, 3x50s) and Mohammed Azharuddeen (601 runs in nine matches at 75.12, 1x100s and 4x50s), the two batting mainstays for the side, held their nerves to frustrate J and K in Pune and ensure their team's qualification in one of the

most exciting finishes this season.

Azharuddeen's monumental 177 off 341 balls in the semifinal against Gujarat on their home turf will go down in Kerala's Ranji history as one of the finest knocks played by any player from the state which has never been so close to winning the toughest red-ball competition in India.

With 38 wickets, Jalaj Saxena has been Kerala's most successful bowler and he will find strong support from former Vidarbha player Aditya Sarwate, who has grabbed 30 wickets to provide adequate support to the veteran spinner.

**Teams (from):** Vidarbha: Akshay Wadkar (c&wk), Atharva Taide, Aman Mokhadde, Yash Rathod, Harsh Dubey, Akshay Karnewar, Yash Kadam, Akshay Wakhare, Aditya Thakare, Darshan Nalkande, Nachiket Bhute, Siddhesh Wath (wk), Yash Thakur, Danish Malewar, Parth Rekhade, Karun Nair, Dhruv Shorey.

Kerala: Sachin Baby (c), Rohan Kunnungal, Salman Nizar, Mohammed Azharuddeen (wk), Akshay Chandran, Jalaj Saxena, Shoun Roger, Aditya Sarwate, Basil Thampi, MD Nidheesh, Nedumankuzhy Basil, Sreehari S Nair, Sharafuddeen NM, Anand Krishnan, Varun Nayanar, Eden Apple Tom, Ahammed Imran.