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

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## ONCE IN A MYRIAD YEARS



**66.21 CRORE KUMBH DIPS**  
DEVOTEES TAKE A HOLY DIP AT SANGAM ON THE OCCASION OF MAHA SHIVRATRI DURING THE MAHA KUMBH MELA 2025 IN PRAYAGRAJ  
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MLAs Sanjay Saraogi, Jibesh Kumar, Sunil Kumar, Raju Kumar Singh, Krishna Kumar Mantu, Vijay Kumar Mandal and Moti Lal Prasad during their swearing-in ceremony as Cabinet Ministers, in Patna

## BJP seeks its pound of flesh in Bihar

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Centre replies to SC on convicted MPs

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI**

The Centre has opposed in the Supreme Court (SC) a plea seeking life ban on convicted politicians, saying imposing such a disqualification was solely within the domain of the Parliament. In an affidavit, the Centre said the prayer in a plea, seeking the same, amounted to re-writing of the statute or directing the Parliament to frame a law in a particular manner which was wholly beyond the powers of judicial review. "The question whether a life-time ban would be appropriate or not is a question that is solely within the domain of the Parliament," the affidavit said.

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

## Amit Shah challenges MK Stalin

**KUMAR CHELLAPAN ■ CHENNAI**

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

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

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

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

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

**Continued on page 2**

## Kedarnath temple to open on May 2

**PTI ■ RUDRAPRAYAG**

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Kejriwal plots lateral entry

**STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI**

The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) on Wednesday named Rajya Sabha member Sanjeev Arora as its candidate for the Ludhiana West Assembly bypoll, triggering strong speculations that the seat has been vacated for the entry of AAP chief Arvind Kejriwal in Rajya Sabha. Hours after the nomination announcement, the AAP dismissed the speculations, saying the 56-year-old former Delhi chief minister would not make his way to Rajya Sabha.

The announcement was made by AAP national general secretary Sandeep Pathak in a post on X. Arora will have to resign from the Rajya Sabha if he wins the bypoll, the date for which is yet to be announced.

Arora, meanwhile, posted on X: "Humbled and grateful to the leadership @AamAdmiParty for reposing faith in me to contest the Ludhiana West by-elections. As someone deeply connected to my hometown, I look forward to serving my people with dedication and sincerity."

After the loss of Delhi polls, it was believed that Kejriwal would make his Rajya Sabha entry via Arora's vacant seat. The speculations around Kejriwal began following Punjab Congress leader Partap Singh Bajwa's allegations. "Kejriwal wants to enter power through Punjab, and some Rajya Sabha members will have to sacrifice and make way for him," he said.

Punjab is currently the best bet for Kejriwal after his party lost power in Delhi after a decade. Since vacating the government bungalow after resigning as chief minister last year, he has been living in Delhi at another Punjab MP Ashok Mittal's house.

Insiders say Kejriwal had met Arora in New Delhi on Tuesday and asked him to contest Ludhiana West by-elections while assuring him a key role and responsibility in the state government. If Arora contests and wins the by-election, he will have to vacate his Rajya Sabha seat. Insiders say that he could be inducted into the Bhagwant Mann Cabinet as a minister. This potential vacancy in the Upper House has fueled rumours about Kejriwal possibly replacing him. However, a final decision is likely to be made only after Arora's election as an MLA.

The AAP will need to make one of them MPs resign for Kejriwal's entry. However, the AAP cannot win back the Rajya Sabha seat if a Delhi Rajya Sabha MP resigns, because the party do not have majority here.

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AAP leader Arvind Kejriwal with Punjab CM Bhagwant Mann

## Trump offers Gold Card Centre braces for deaddiction

**PTI ■ WASHINGTON**

President Donald Trump said that he plans to offer a "gold card" visa with a path to citizenship for \$5 million, replacing a 35-year-old visa for investors.

"They'll be wealthy and they'll be successful, and they'll be spending a lot of money and paying a lot of taxes and employing a lot of people, and we think it's going to be extremely successful," Trump said in the Oval Office.

Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick said the "Trump Gold Card" would replace EB-5 visas in two weeks. EB-5s were created by Congress in 1990 to generate foreign investment and are available to people who spend about \$1 million on a company that employs at least 10 people.

Lutnick said the gold card — actually a green card, or permanent legal residency — would raise the price of admission for investors and do away with fraud and "nonsense" that he said characterise the EB-5 program. Like other green cards, it would include a path to citizenship.

About 8,000 people obtained investor visas in the 12-month period ending September 30, 2022, according to the Homeland Security Department's most recent Yearbook of Immigration Statistics. The Congressional Research Service reported in 2021 that EB-5 visas pose risks of fraud, including verification that funds were obtained legally. Investors' visas are common around the world. Henley and Partners, an advisory firm, says more than 100 countries around the world offer "golden visas" to wealthy individuals.

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President Donald Trump's proposed "Gold Card" would replace EB-5 visas in the coming two weeks, the commerce secretary said

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**

A first-of-its-kind centre in the country to help children and youth fight internet and technology addiction will be set up at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), Delhi.

The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) recently approved the proposal to set up the Centre for Advanced Research on Addictive Behaviours (CAR-AB) related to excessive and problematic use of technology.

"Excessive and problematic use of technology has been recognised as a major public health problem," said Yatan Pal Singh Balhara, Faculty in-charge of the Behavioral Addictions Clinic (BAC) at AIIMS, Delhi who is leading this project.

The Economic Survey of India (2024-25) has linked the increase in mental health issues in children and adolescents to overuse of the internet and highlighted the urgent need for school and family-level interventions to keep children and adolescents away from the internet to improve their mental well-being, Dr Balhara said.

"This is a first-of-its-kind centre in the country that has been mandated to develop evidence-based intervention targeted at excessive and problematic use of technology, especially among the children and the youth," Dr Balhara said.

The centre would comprehensively address various addictive behaviours, he said. The interventions would be aimed at prevention, screening, early detection and intervention for internet and technology-related addictions among children and youth.

Also, resources would be developed for education and health sector workers to strengthen their capacity for the prevention and management of these problems. The interventions would also help reduce stress, depression, anxiety and addiction associated with the use of the internet and technology, Dr Balhara stated.

Also, the centre aims to develop an AI-based predictive model to detect vulnerability to excessive and problematic use of technology among the youth. The project is estimated to have an outlay of ₹14 crore, Dr Balhara said.

The CAR-AB, related to excessive and problematic use of technology, would partner with school and college students, parents, teachers and faculty from the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and other medical colleges to create a national network targeted at addressing the internet and technology related addictions, he said.



File photo: PTI



# Traveller raped in Pune bus depot

■ MUMBAI

In a disturbing incident, a 26-year-old woman was raped by a notorious history-sheeter inside an empty bus parked at the State Transport (ST) depot at Swargate in Pune in the small hours of hours of Wednesday. The accused - who had led the victim woman inside an empty bus on the false pretext that the bus she wanted to take had on another platform of the sprawling bus depot - fled the scene, after perpetrating sexual assault on her. After registering a complaint lodged by the victim woman, the police identified the accused history sheeter as one Datta Gade, a known criminal with cases of theft and chain snatching registered against him. "We have launched a manhunt for the accused," a senior police officer said. The incident took place at

around 5.30 am at the Swargate complex - which houses two bus depots run by the Maharashtra State Road Transport Corporation (MSRTC) and Pune Mahanagar Parivahan Mahamandal Ltd (PMPML). The victim woman was waiting for a Paithan-bound bus at one of the platforms when the accused approached her and told her the bus had arrived at another platform. The woman trusted him and accompanied him to an empty bus parked at a deserted spot on the Swargate bus depot premises. According to the complaint lodged by the victim woman with the police, it was still dark when she boarded the bus. The accused quietly followed her inside the bus, forced himself on her and raped her. He fled the scene immediately afterwards. Confirming the development,

Deputy Commissioner of Police Smartana Patil said: "We have formed teams to track down the absconding accused". Coming down heavily on the police and the BJP-led MahaYuti government for the brazen incident of rape that took place at the bustling Swargate bus depot, Baramati MP and NCP (SP) working president Supriya Sule said: "There is a police post near the Swargate bus stand. The police personnel maintain regular patrol at this bus depot... Still, the accused dared to commit such a heinous crime shows that criminals have no fear of the law". "After this incident, we have been forced to raise a question whether there is any safe place for women in the state. Serious crimes are happening here and there every day in Pune," Supriya said

Flagging the issue of women's safety in the state, Maharashtra Congress chief Harshavardhan Sapkal charged that the Swargate rape incident had established that there was breakdown in law and order in the state. "The incident has once again raised serious concerns about women's safety in the state. The Home Minister is preoccupied with shielding corrupt officers while the security of women in the state remains compromised," Sapkal said. "Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis, who speaks on all matters, has chosen to remain silent. Thirteen years ago, a rape on board a private bus in Delhi had sparked massive public outrage and widespread protests. The Pune incident is equally serious. But, the state government's apathy is making women feel unsafe in the state," Sapkal said,

# Systra did not raise any complaint contract was termination: MMRDA

■ MUMBAI

Though still on the back-foot over allegations of bribery made by Systra MVA Consulting (India) Pvt Ltd involving Mumbai metro projects and the Bombay High Court's ruling setting aside its order terminating the services of the company, the State-run MMRDA has clarified that the company has not raised any complaint regarding its allegations of bribery. In a statement issued within hours after the high court set aside its notice terminating services of the Indian subsidiary of France-based multinational Systra for three metro-lines in the city region, the state-run Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority (MMRDA) said that the

company has not raised any complaint until after the suspension and termination notices were served. "Systra has claimed that the issues began in August 2023, yet it never submitted any formal representation to MMRDA, the Urban Development Department, the Chief Secretary's Office, or the Chief Minister's Office until after the suspension and termination notices were served," the MMRDA said in a statement issued late on Tuesday night. The MMRDA -- which is the nodal agency for execution of metro rail projects in the MMR comprising the twin districts of Mumbai City and Mumbai Suburban and neighbouring districts of Palghar, Thane and Raigad -- also accused Systra of

"misrepresenting" facts. "Systra misrepresented certain facts to the representatives of the French government only after receiving the suspension and termination notices from MMRDA. This clearly indicates that the allegations are an afterthought aimed at deflecting attention from their own contractual breaches," the MMRDA stated. "The so-called representation by Systra is unsigned, and as per the Government of Maharashtra's policy, such an unsigned document can only be treated as a 'mere printout of wild allegations.'" The French Embassy merely forwarded this printout without endorsing its veracity or merit," the MMRDA said. On its part, MMRDA's claim --

"the court set aside the notice dated January 3, 2025, while allowing MMRDA the discretion to decide on service continuation after a fair hearing. This reinforces MMRDA's procedural integrity and its rightful discretion in the matter" has come into question in view of the observations made by the Bombay High Court in its ruling on Tuesday. While junking the MMRDA's January 3, 2025 order, a HC bench of chief Justice Alok Aradhe and Justice Arif Doctor had observed on Tuesday: "We find the action of MMRDA in discontinuation of the terms of the contract which was extended up to December 26 without assigning any reason is arbitrary, unfair and unreasonable."

# Badlapur case: Court keeps in abeyance findings indicting cops for encounter

■ MUMBAI

In a partial relief to five policemen indicted for the custodial death of an accused in Badlapur school sexual assault case, a sessions court has "kept in abeyance" findings of a magistrate's inquiry report questioning the legitimacy of the alleged encounter. Additional sessions judge D R Deshpande, in the order on February 21, however, said the probe being carried out by the state Crime Investigation Department (CID) into the custodial death shall proceed as it was being done independent of the magistrate's report. The accused, Akshay Shinde, was arrested in August 2024 for allegedly sexually assaulting two minor girls inside the toilet of a school in Badlapur area of Maharashtra's Thane district. He was an attendant at the school. On September 23 last year, Shinde was killed in the alleged police shootout while being taken from Talaja prison in Navi Mumbai for questioning in connection with a case lodged against him by his wife. Police claimed he snatched the gun of one of the cops in the police van, opened fire, and was killed in retaliatory firing. He was shot at by senior police inspector Sanjay Shinde. Assistant police inspector Nilesh More, the two constables and a police driver were also present in the van at the time of the shootout. The magistrate had in his report indicted senior PI Sanjay Shinde of the Thane Crime Branch, assistant PI Nilesh More, head constables Abhijeet More and Harish Tawade and constable Satish Khatal. He held them responsible for the death of the accused while in custody, and raised doubts on their claims of opening fire at him in self-defence. The report said the policemen, despite being in a position to control the situation, failed to do so and the use of such force was not justified. It also said there was substance in the allegations made by parents of the accused that it was a fake

encounter. The court in its order said pending final hearing of the policemen's revision application, findings of the magistrate's inquiry report regarding two paragraphs "need to be kept in abeyance". "The effect and operation of the findings of the magistrate, particularly the concluding paragraphs 81 and 82, is kept in abeyance till the next day," the court said. Paragraph 81 questioned whether the use of force was justified and emphasised the policemen were in a position where they could have easily handled the situation. Paragraph 82 said there were grounds of suspicion against the policemen, and the allegations made by parents of the deceased accused that it was a fake encounter find substance if forensic reports are considered. The five policemen were escorting the accused from the Talaja prison to Kalyan for questioning and they claimed that he grabbed a pistol of one of the security personnel and opened fire. The police then shot him in retaliation. As per law, a magisterial inquiry is initiated in cases where an accused dies in police or judicial custody. The five police personnel earlier this month filed a revision application before the Thane sessions court against the findings made in the magistrate's inquiry report. The policemen in their application claimed the magistrate overstepped his

jurisdiction in holding them responsible for the death of the accused. The application said the magistrate's inquiry is only to ascertain the cause of death in cases of custodial deaths and to not indict anyone. They sought quashing of the "unwarranted" findings of the magistrate and to stay the effect and operation of the same. Special public prosecutor Ajay Misar submitted to the court that the state CID was investigating the matter independent of the magistrate inquiry. The magistrate's report also made certain suggestions as to how such incidents could be avoided in future. "These five police persons were present at the time of the encounter. There are a number of grounds that raise suspicion over the alleged encounter. Therefore, these five police persons are responsible for the death," the report had said. The sessions court said the accused's family also must be given a reasonable and elaborate opportunity to be heard or oppose the revision application. The court, however, clarified that while it has kept the inquiry report findings in abeyance, the investigation being carried out by the CID shall continue. It directed the police officials to implead the accused's parents as respondents in their application and issued notice to them. The court posted the matter for further hearing on March 5.

# SC appoints ex-apex court judge to head panel on SCBA reforms



■ NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court has appointed its former judge L Nageswara Rao as the head of a committee on electoral reforms in the apex court bar association. A bench of Justices Surya Kant and K V Viswanathan said Justice Rao had agreed to chair the committee, which would also suggest the eligibility criteria for candidates contesting election of executive committee of the Supreme Court Bar Association (SCBA). "In continuation of the deliberations held previously and the orders passed from time to time, Justice L Nageswara Rao, former judge of this court, has graciously agreed to chair the committee to recommend norms/guidelines/parameters for the reformation and suitable amendments in the bye-laws regulating election of the executive committee of the Supreme Court Bar Association," the bench said in an order on February 24. The bench added, "The proposed reforms may inter alia include the eligibility conditions for contesting the

elections. The committee shall comprise some senior advocates/experienced advocates (from both, advocates-on-record and non-advocates-on-record category), who have never been interested in contesting the elections as office bearers of the Supreme Court Bar Association." The top court has granted two weeks to the members of the bar to suggest member names directly to the retired judge for the committee. "...We leave it to the entire discretion of Justice L Nageswara Rao to pick the names from that list. Justice L Nageswara Rao is at liberty to constitute his own team, in case the members of the bar do not provide any names," it added. The panel headed by the former judge was granted the liberty to invite suggestions either from the members of the bar or other stakeholders. The matter would be heard on April 7. The top court previously sought suggestions on the committee's chair from senior advocate Vikas Singh, who is a former president of the SCBA, and the incumbent senior advocate Kapil Sibal

# Telangana maqndates teaching Telugu in schools

■ HYDERABAD

The Telangana government has issued orders for teaching Telugu as a compulsory subject for students of 1st to 10th classes in CBSE, ICSE, IB and other boards affiliated schools in the state from the 2025-26 academic year. The state government had brought in the Telangana (Compulsory Teaching and Learning of Telugu in Schools) Act in 2018 to make teaching Telugu compulsory in government Zilla Parishad, mandal parishad, aided schools as well as CBSE, ICSE,

IB and other Board affiliated schools. However, the (BRS) previous government did not implement the act in a full-fledged manner due to various reasons, said an official release issued here on Tuesday. The present (Congress) government took steps for its implementation in the schools in the state and the government held a meeting with managements for this purpose and conveyed the decision to teach Telugu for 9th and 10th classes in CBSE, ICSE and other boards from the coming academic year, the release added.

Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy on Tuesday decided to use the 'Simple Telugu' Text Book 'Vennela' for conducting exams, making it easier for students of classes 9th and 10th of CBSE and other boards, it said. The 'Simple Telugu' textbook would be useful for students whose mother tongue is not Telugu and those who belong to other states, it said. The government ordered that Telugu be taught compulsorily from the 2025-26 academic year for Classes 1 to 10 in schools under CBSE, ICSE, IB and other boards, the release added.

# Amit Shah challenges MK Stalin

From page 1

Interestingly, the home minister chose Shivratri and Coimbatore to make this announcement, which in all probability would be remembered as the Siva Ratri declaration. Meanwhile, BJP's Tamil Nadu chief K Annamalai challenged Stalin to show at least a single sentence in the NEP 2020 making Hindi compulsory in the state. A home ministry official said that Governor R N Ravi is fully aware of the DMK's

stance on this issue. "As a professional intelligence expert, Ravi, a former IPS officer, has a vast network of contacts across the State and Stalin is under scrutiny," he disclosed. Stalin's close acolyte and DMK's ideologue K Thirunavakkarassu had pointed out that the demand for Dravidian nation was very much alive. "It is there in the constitution of the DMK though it has been put on backburner for the time being," Thirunavakkarassar had said.

Such countries include the United States, United Kingdom, Spain, Greece, Malta, Australia, Canada and Italy. Trump made no mention of the requirements for job creation. And, while the number of EB-5 visas is capped, Trump mused that the federal government could sell 10 million "gold cards" to reduce the deficit. He said it "could be great, maybe it will be fantastic."

# Trump offers Gold Card

From page 1

"It's somewhat like a green card, but at a higher level of sophistication, it's a road to citizenship for people, and essentially people of wealth or people of great talent, where people of wealth pay for those people of talent to get in, meaning companies will pay for people to get in and to have long, long term status in the country," he said. Congress determines qualifications for citizenship, but Trump said "gold cards" would not require congressional approval.

# Kejriwal plots lateral entry

From page 1

In Punjab, the party has 93 MLAs and seven MPs and can easily regain a seat from there. AAP currently holds 10 Rajya Sabha seats - three from Delhi and seven from Punjab. The tenure of Delhi's Rajya Sabha seats are until 2030 while Punjab's Rajya Sabha seats are valid until 2028, making it the most viable route to the Upper House. Currently, Sanjay Singh and Narain Dass Gupta are the Rajya Sabha members from Delhi from the AAP. Swati Maliwal, who has turned critical of Kejriwal and the AAP in the last few months, is also representing the AAP in the Rajya Sabha. While it is the first term for Maliwal, Singh and Gupta have been the party's RS choice in the last term as well. AAP has seven members in the Rajya Sabha from Punjab - Sanjeev Arora, Sandeep Pathak, Raghav Chadha, former cricketer Harbhajan Singh, Ashok Mittal, environmentalist Balbir Singh Seechewal and industrialist Vikramjit Singh. The Election Commission is yet to announce the dates of the Ludhiana West bypoll. It is expected to be held in

November along with the Bihar Assembly elections. Soon after the AAP announcement, BJP IT cell head Amit Malviya also weighed in on Sanjiv Arora's candidature, asking whether this move was intended at "clearing the path for Arvind Kejriwal, who just lost his own seat in New Delhi, to get nominated to the Rajya Sabha from Punjab?" "Wouldn't it be better if someone from Punjab represented the state instead of Kejriwal?" Malviya asked in a post on X. Malviya further asked whether the AAP had promised Arora a ministerial berth once he won the bypoll and vacated his seat. "This kind of transactional politics must be condemned. The people of Ludhiana must defeat Sanjeev Arora so that he cannot offer his seat to Arvind Kejriwal without losing his own," he added. AAP spokesperson Priyanka Kakkar dismissed the buzz of Kejriwal's possible entry to the Parliament. "Arvind Kejriwal is not going to Rajya Sabha," she said She said that as far as the AAP supremo is concerned, earlier there were reports of him becoming the Punjab CM, now it is of him contesting from Rajya Sabha. "Both of these are absolutely

wrong. Arvind Kejriwal is the national convener of AAP. I agree that his demand is very high, but he is not limited to any one seat," Kakkar added. BJP national spokesperson Jaiveer Shergill also questioned the AAP's move to field Arora for the Ludhiana West bypoll. He posed three questions as to why this decision was made. "Kejriwal wants to enter Rajya Sabha? Kejriwal wants Govt accommodation in Delhi? Kejriwal having major power FOMO after losing elections? Shergill asked whether AAP asked Arora to vacate the seat in order to make "3P" power, perks & privileges' greedy Kejriwal happy?" Arora, who was elected to the Rajya Sabha from Punjab in 2022 for a six-year term ending in 2028, would have to resign from Parliament to contest the state elections. If he steps down, his vacant Rajya Sabha seat could potentially be allocated to Kejriwal. The Ludhiana West Assembly seat had fallen vacant following the mysterious death of AAP MLA Gurpreet Bassi Gogi on January 10. As per rules, the bypoll to elect new MLA from vacant seat has to be held within six months.

admitted that he made a mistake by making controversial comments on the YouTube show, for which he is being criticised," he said. The social media influencer also admitted that he made a mistake by using specific words in his comments during the show, the official



# Centre replies to SC on convicted MPs

From page 1

"The disqualifications made under the impugned sections are limited by time as a matter of parliamentary policy and it would not be appropriate to substitute the petitioner's understanding of the issue and impose a lifetime ban," it said. The Centre said as a matter of judicial review, the court could declare the provisions to be unconstitutional, however, the relief sought by the petitioner effectively sought to read "life-long" instead of "six years" in all sub-sections of Section 8 of the Act. It said lifetime disqualification was the maximum that could be imposed under the provisions

and such a discretion was "certainly within the power of Parliament". "However, it is one thing to say that a power exists and another to say that it must necessarily be exercised in every case," the Centre argued. The affidavit said the impugned laws were "constitutionally sound" and "did not suffer from the vice of excess delegation" aside from being intra vires the powers of Parliament. While imposing any penalty, it said, Parliament considers the principles of proportionality and reasonability as for instance, the entirety of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023, or penal law provide for imprisonment or fines up to

certain limits and the rationale behind it was that the punitive measures would co-relate with the gravity of offence. There were numerous penal laws that prescribe imposing restrictions on the exercise of rights and freedoms, which in most cases are time-specific, it said. The Centre said the petition failed to make the crucial distinction between basis of disqualification and effects of disqualification. "It is true that the basis of disqualification is conviction for an offence and that this basis remains unchanged so long as the conviction stands. The effect of such conviction lasts for a fixed period of time. As stated above, there is nothing inherently

unconstitutional in limiting the effect of penalties by time," it said. The affidavit said the petitioner's reliance on Articles 102 and 191 of the Constitution was totally misplaced. Articles 102 and 191 of the Constitution deals with disqualifications for membership of either house of parliament, legislative assembly or legislative council. The Centre said Clause (e) of Articles 102 and 191 were enabling provisions that confer on Parliament the power to make laws governing disqualification and it was in exercise of this power that the 1951 Act was enacted. "The Constitution has left the

field open to Parliament to enact such further law governing disqualifications as it deems fit. Parliament has power both to determine the grounds for disqualification and the duration of disqualification," it said. The Centre said the grounds for disqualification in the articles included holding of an office of profit, unsoundness of mind, insolvency and not being a citizen of India. "It is submitted that these are not permanent disqualifications," it added. The apex court on February 10 sought responses of the Centre and the Election Commission on the challenge to constitutional validity of Sections 8 and 9 of Representation of People Act.



# Congress demands PAC to probe CAG report on excise policy

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Delhi Congress on Wednesday called for the formation of the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) soon, so that the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) report on the previous Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) government's excise policy can be investigated, and demanded that the scope of the probe be widened to include the alleged involvement of BJP leaders in the matter.

The Opposition party also demanded that the remaining 13 CAG reports on the AAP government's performance be tabled as well and discussed in the public domain. The CAG report on the 2021-22 liquor excise policy was tabled by the new Chief Minister Rekha Gupta on the second day of the first session of the newly elected Delhi Assembly on Tuesday.

Addressing a press conference at the Congress 24, Akbar Road headquarters, Delhi Congress chief Devender Yadav said the party had given a written complaint to investigating agencies on the liquor excise policy and had

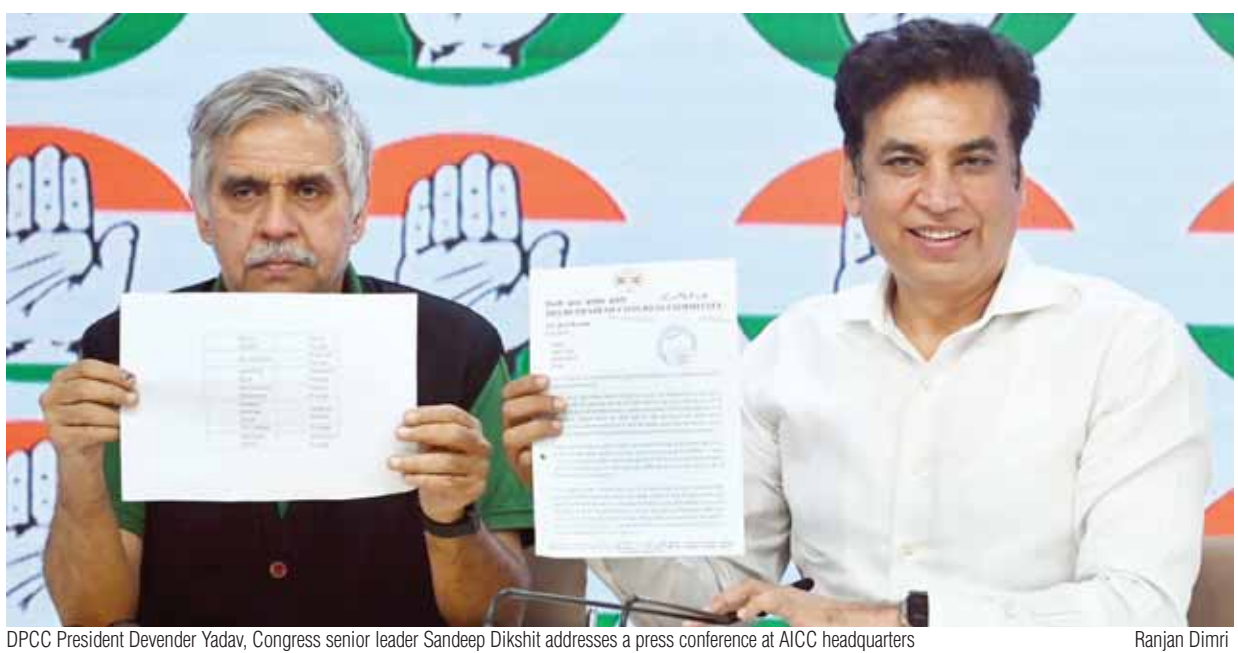
included "evidence" of BJP's "involvement" in the matter. He also asked why all 14 CAG reports were not presented in the House on Tuesday. The Delhi Assembly session has been extended till March 3.

"We want the CAG report to be investigated by the Public Accounts Committee (PAC). In such a situation, PAC should be formed as soon as possible, so that this report can be investigated and those who were involved in the loot should be punished," Yadav said.

Although the PAC is chaired by an Opposition leader, in Delhi, the government has been leading it, therefore these reports should also be brought for public discussion, Yadav said.

Yadav alleged there are some important questions related to the role of some big BJP leaders and the then Lieutenant Governor, which were ignored in the CAG report.

"Why and who took the decision to change three excise directors within one year? New brands of liquor were promoted in Delhi. This should be investigated. The then governor had given permis-



DPCC President Devender Yadav, Congress senior leader Sandeep Dikshit addresses a press conference at AICC headquarters. Ranjan Dimri

son to implement the liquor policy of the Kejriwal government. Why has no investigation been done on this till date?" Yadav asked.

There is a need to investigate how

licenses were given to open liquor shops in violation of the master plan, he further said. Yadav further claimed that without the permission of the municipal corporation, liquor shops

cannot be opened, and added that the BJP was ruling the MCD at the time. But the BJP allowed the Delhi government to open liquor shops even in non-conforming areas, he

alleged. "The CAG report can be described in three words - loot, jhooth (lies) and phoot (division)," Yadav said. "The CAG report has revealed that the money of the people of Delhi was

looted. The AAP government kept saying that we are increasing the government's revenue, but the truth is ₹2002 Crore was looted," Yadav claimed. Advice of an expert committee was also ignored, he added.

The Delhi Congress chief claimed it is the result of the divisions between the AAP and the BJP that the CAG report is not being discussed in the Assembly. Putting forward the Congress' demands, Yadav said the scope of investigation into "the liquor scam" should be widened and there should be an investigation on the written complaint given by the Congress against the BJP. "There should be a public forum discussion on the lies being told on the liquor scam."

Congress leader Sandeep Dikshit, also addressing the press conference, said the CAG report revealed that the objective of the liquor policy was changed repeatedly.

"Earlier, it included 77 entities but it was reduced to 14. These 14 organisations are interconnected. Some come from parts of the country where politicians and their family members maintain

relations with the AAP government," he said. Details of this liquor policy were discussed eight-nine months before the policy was made, Dikshit pointed out.

"Many officials were saying that the matter got discussed because the policy was made due to the relations between the government and liquor contractors and their own interests. There should be a separate investigation in this matter," Dikshit said.

According to a CAG report tabled in the assembly on Tuesday by new Chief Minister Rekha Gupta, the Delhi government suffered cumulative losses of over ₹2,000 Crore due to the 2021-2022 excise policy for reasons ranging from weak policy framework to deficient implementation. The report, one of 14 on the previous AAP government's performance, was tabled by Gupta. The 208-page report includes annexures flagging violations in the process of issuing licences, and recommendations of an expert panel formed to suggest changes that were ignored by then deputy chief minister and excise minister Manish Sisodia.

## Satish Upadhyay accuses AAP of disrespecting freedom fighters



BJP MLA Satish Upadhyay. Pioneer Photo

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

BJP MLA from Malviya Nagar, Satish Upadhyay on Wednesday accused the AAP of disrespecting freedom fighters. This comes after a day the AAP accused the BJP

of removing portraits of BR Ambedkar and Shaheed Bhagat Singh from the Chief Minister's office. Upadhyay visited Shaheed Bhagat Singh Park in Malviya Nagar and criticised the Aam Aadmi Party over neglecting a damaged statue of the freedom



Statue of Shaheed Bhagat Singh in Malviya Nagar. Pioneer Photo

fighter installed at the park. The BJP has denied the allegations and shared pictures on social media to refute the charges. Sharing pictures of the sorry state of statue of Shaheed Bhagat Singh, Upadhyay said the statue has holes at many

places and the left palm is also missing. "AAP MLA Somnath Bharti was here, but he did not care about the statue of Bhagat Singh," the BJP leader said. He said the AAP does not care about the legacy of Bhagat Singh, but uses it for vote

bank politics. "If they (AAP) were so concerned, the condition of the park would have been different," Upadhyay said. He stated that the statue of Shaheed Bhagat Singh in this park has been broken for the past three years. Upadhyay alleged that for the last 10 years, the AAP's Somnath Bharti was the MLA from this area, but he showed no concern for the damaged statue of Bhagat Singh.

Upadhyay claimed that the AAP only engages in showmanship and that if they truly cared about Shaheed Bhagat Singh, the condition of this park would have been very different.

He directed the concerned authorities to repair the statue at the earliest.

Upadhyay also emphasised that Shaheed Bhagat Singh is highly revered and respected, and while others may engage in politics, the BJP believes in action and work.

## AAP protests 'removal' of Ambedkar, Bhagat Singh's portraits from CM's office

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) on Wednesday said it would continue with its protest against the 'removal' of Bhimrao Ambedkar and Bhagat Singh's portraits from the Chief Minister's office after the BJP came to power in Delhi.

In a joint press conference with AAP MLA Sanjiv Jha, his party colleague Kuldeep Kumar claimed his party's MLAs were suspended from the assembly for raising the "Jai Bheem" slogan. "The BJP MLAs were chanting 'Modi-Modi' but it was AAP MLAs who were suspended from the House for raising 'Jai Bheem' slogan," he said. Jha said the "removal" of the portraits from the chief minister's office will not be tolerated and AAP will continue to protest against it. He demanded that the portraits of



AAP MLA Sanjiv Jha, his party colleague Kuldeep Kumar addresses a press conference. Pioneer Photo

Ambedkar and Bhagat Singh be displayed as it was done when AAP was in power. "The BJP replaced Babasaheb Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar's portrait in the Chief Minister's and ministers' offices with those of PM Modi's, hurt-

ing crores of Babasaheb Ambedkar's followers," he said. Jha condemned the ruling party for not only expelling AAP MLAs for a day but also passing a resolution to suspend them for three days.

## Rekha Gupta to propose Bisht's name for Deputy Speaker in Delhi Assembly

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi Chief Minister Rekha Gupta will propose the name of BJP MLA Mohan Singh Bisht for the post of deputy speaker of the Delhi Assembly on February 27, the third day of the session, with no other contenders in the fray for the post. Delhi Assembly Speaker Vijender Gupta extended the Delhi Assembly session till March 3, with the discussions on Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) reports to continue throughout the rest of the session.

According to the list of business provided by the Delhi Assembly Speaker's office, two separate motions will be moved to elect Bisht to the post. The proceedings of the House are expected to be run smooth as all the AAP MLAs have been suspended for the three days for disrupting the Lieutenant



BJP leader Mohan Singh Bisht takes oath as an MLA during the first day of the Delhi Legislative Assembly session. Pioneer Photo

Governor's address on Tuesday. The first motion will be moved by Chief Minister Gupta and seconded by Environment Minister Manjinder Singh Sirsa while the second motion will

be proposed by MLA Anil Kumar Sharma and backed by Gajender Singh Yadav. Bisht, a six-time MLA and veteran BJP leader, won the Mustafabad assembly seat in

the February 5 Delhi polls. He defeated AAP's Adeel Ahmad Khan by over 17,000 votes. Before this, he represented Karawal Nagar in the Delhi Assembly multiple times, first winning the seat in 1988 and serving it until 2015. Bisht won the seat again in 2020.

Apart from the election of deputy speaker, the third day of the session will also see discussions under Rule 280, allowing members to raise matters with the Chair's permission.

Additionally, the Assembly will continue debating the CAG report on the regulation and supply of liquor in Delhi, which CM Gupta had laid before the House on February 25.

The CAG report highlighted that the Delhi Government incurred a massive loss of Rs 2,002 Crore because of issues in making and implementing the now-scrapped excise policy in 2021-22.

## Delhi BJP seeks cancellation of 'illegally' conducted MCD proceedings

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi BJP president Virendra Sachdeva has submitted the video recording of the illegally conducted meeting of the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) House held on February 25, 2025, chaired by Mayor Mahesh Khichi, to the Delhi Municipal Corporation Commissioner Ashwani Kumar, and demanded that the proceedings of this meeting be cancelled and declared illegal.

Sachdeva stated that the House meeting on February 25 was scheduled for 2 pm, but in order to pass his party's illegal agenda, Mayor Khichi arrived in the House at 1:59 pm and as clearly seen in the video, started the proceedings at exactly 2 pm without even completing the constitutional quorum.

At that time, the Municipal Commissioner too was not present on his seat, and the "AAP" councilors began pressuring the Additional Commissioner present to sit in the Commissioner's chair, but she refused.



Delhi BJP president Virendra Sachdeva. Pioneer Photo

The Mayor then pressured Leader of the House Mukesh Goyal to present the agenda. The video clearly shows that at this stage, BJP councilors also started entering the House and raised objections.

Despite that, Mayor Mahesh Khichi, without even the Leader of the House Mukesh Goyal

reading the agenda, said "passed, passed, passed" three to four times and then left the House. When no agenda was even read, the question arises - what exactly was passed? This makes it clear that whatever is being claimed is completely illegal. The BJP President stated that this entire illegal proceeding lasted

less than three minutes. Therefore, the Municipal Commissioner should cancel and declare the proceedings of the Delhi Municipal Corporation House meeting held on February 25, 2025, null and void.

Chaos erupted in the MCD House on Tuesday as councillors from AAP and BJP engaged in verbal clashes over regularisation of around 12,000 contractual municipal workers, house tax waiver and the absence of MCD Commissioner during the proceedings.

The monthly House meeting unfolded in its characteristic pandemonium, but this time with an unusual twist - unlike previous sessions that suffered delays, Tuesday's meeting commenced precisely at 2 pm. However, many councillors were yet to take their seats, and notably absent was MCD Commissioner Ashwani Kumar, whose presence is traditionally required next to the Mayor for the House session to commence.

## Delhi airport's T2 to close for four-five months

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi International Airport Limited (DIAL), which runs the Indra Gandhi International Airport, announced on Wednesday that Terminal 2 (T2) would be shut down for four to five months starting from April, and one of the runways will also be closed for up gradation during this period.

The Indra Gandhi International Airport (IGIA) in the national capital has three terminals - T1, T2 and T3 - and the total annual passenger handling capacity is around 109 Million.

DIAL CEO Vihed Kumar Jaipuria said the works at T1 is expected to be completed by March 15 and will be open for flights after getting requisite approvals.

T2 is expected to be shut down temporarily in April for four to five months, he said and added that the capacity of around 15 million at T2 will be moved to T1. T2 also has a capacity of around 15 million which will be moved to T1 while it is temporarily shut down. T1 has an



Delhi Airport. Pioneer Photo

annual passengers capacity of 40 Million. With increasing traffic, the airport operator will also be converting a T3 section for international flights. Currently, this section is used for domestic operations.

"Average international load is

around 67,000 to 68,000 per day. If you multiply that with 365, it comes to close to 24 Million. The rated capacity for the international terminal T3 is 20 Million. In fact, we are sweating the asset to the tune of 20 per cent. "So, we have come out with the proposal to convert Pier C (sec-

tion of the airport), which is currently domestic, into international at T3. The international capacity will become 32 Million. This will take care (of the capacity) for the next four to five years as per the airlines' projections," he said. At present, T1 has an annual passengers capacity of 40 Million, T2

has 15 Million and the remaining is at T3. Jaipuria said T3 has been designed for international capacity of 34 Million and now 45 Million passengers are handled there.

"T2 to be shut for four to five months. During this period, one of our runways is going to be non-operational because ILS (Instrument Landing System) upgrade will be happening. We want to do it before the winter season," he said.

To address this, a proposal has been made to convert Pier C, currently used for domestic flights, into an international section at T3. This expansion will increase the terminal's international handling capacity to 32 Million passengers, which is expected to meet demand for the next four to five years.

With the upgrade, the runway will be CAT III B compliant, which means flights can operate at low visibility conditions. During the winter season, the airport generally experiences visibility issues due to fog.

## Two arrested for fake mobile tower installation offers

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Two members of a gang have been arrested for allegedly defrauding people by making them pay hefty registration fees on the pretext of installing mobile towers on their properties, police said on Wednesday.

A police officer said the scammers - Sarfaraz (36) and Munna Singh (37) - operated fake websites and ran deceptive online advertisements to make the victims believe that they were dealing with genuine telecom companies.

Police said that Sarfaraz, a graduate from a university in Bihar, was a skilled freelance website developer before turning to cyber fraud.

The other accused, Munna Singh, a BCA, previously worked in IT companies in Noida and Gurugram but later took to scamming people online. Deputy Commissioner of Police (Outnorth) Nidhin Valsan said investigators linked

at least six cases to this gang, with the Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre (i4C) looking into possible nationwide connections.

"The fraudsters ran a sophisticated racket by creating fake websites and running deceptive advertisements online. The victims, believing that they were dealing with telecom companies, were asked to pay registration fees. Once the payment was made, all communication ceased," the officer said.

The scam came to light after a resident of Delhi's Pooth Khurd complained to police that some people contacted him over the phone to install a mobile tower on his property. According to the complaint, the victim paid Rs 1.85 Lakh as registration fee and other charges and then realised that he had been scammed, the DCP said.

A team of police officials tasked with cracking the case tracked the accused through mobile numbers linked

## Mobile snatcher escapes police custody, rearrested

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

A 26-year-old man accused of mobile snatching escaped from police custody while undergoing treatment at a government hospital, but was nabbed from Delhi, as he was trying to flee to his native place in Bihar, police said on Wednesday. Shyam Kumar and Sameer Ali were initially arrested from Noida Sector 15-A on Monday night.

According to police, a team of officials checking vehicles on Monday night signalled Shyam Kumar and Sameer Ali, riding a bike, to stop. Instead, they sped up the two-wheeler and tried to flee but in vain as the bike skidded on the road, an official said. Shyam Kumar opened fire and the police team retaliated in self-defence, injuring the accused in his leg, the official said, adding he was taken to the district hospital in Noida Sector 39 for treatment.



# CBI names Abhishek Banerjee in job scam chargesheet

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
NEW DELHI

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

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

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



TMC leader Abhishek Banerjee

Pioneer photo

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

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

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

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

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

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
NEW DELHI

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

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

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



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

PTI

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

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

# CBSE allows schools to set up branches under new rule



Representative photograph of a classroom

Pioneer photo

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
NEW DELHI

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

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

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

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

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
NEW DELHI

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

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

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

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

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

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

# GainBitcoin scam: CBI seizes cryptocurrencies worth ₹23.94 Crore

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
NEW DELHI

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

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

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

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



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

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ BHOPAL

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

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

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



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

ters strong and capable," Murmu said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# Punjab Government alleges CBSE dropped Punjabi from Class 10 exam

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ CHANDIGARH/NEW DELHI

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

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

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

which the policy will be finalised.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ HYDERABAD/NEW DELHI

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

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

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

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

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ BAREILLY (UP)

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

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

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

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

# Two days to complete rescue: Telangana Minister

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NAGARKURNOOL (TELANGANA)

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

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

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



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

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

The minister said the rescue

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

Dewatering in the collapsed tunnel will go on and the

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

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

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

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

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

STAFF REPORTER ■ GURUGRAM

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

road (SPR) so that people get immediate relief.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# 'Iranian warships on goodwill, training visit to Mumbai'

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ MUMBAI

Two Iranian warships are currently on a goodwill and training visit to Mumbai, in a step towards enhanced cooperation in the maritime domain and strengthening mutual friendship, the Indian Navy said on Wednesday.

On Tuesday, the Mission Commander and the Commanding Officers of the two ships, IRIS Boushehr and IRIS Lavan, called on Rear Admiral Vidyadhar Harke, Chief Staff Officer (Operations) at Headquarters Western Naval

Command. Their discussions focused on mutual interests and the training curricula of both navies.

The flotilla, carrying nearly 220 officer cadets, is on a training mission in the Indian Ocean. The ships were accorded a warm welcome by the Indian Navy with band in attendance. The deployment is led by Captain Mohammad Saberi as Mission Commander, with Senior Captain Seyed Ali Madani commanding the Lavan and Commander Hamed Bahramani commanding the Boushehr, the Indian Navy said. "The Iranian Navy's training

flotilla, comprising IRIS Boushehr and IRIS Lavan, is on a goodwill and training visit to Mumbai from February 25 to 28, 2025," it said.

Several activities have been planned to strengthen Navy-to-Navy interactions, including sports and training visits to the Naval Dockyard for officer cadets. Reflecting the strong diplomatic ties between the two countries, the Indian Navy recently undertook medical evacuation of a trainee officer from the IRIS Boushehr at sea. At around 3 am on February 20, a request for medical assistance was received and swiftly

acted upon by the Indian Navy and the Indian Coast Guard. The officer cadet was evacuated from IRIS Boushehr, admitted to INHS Asvini, provided prompt medical care, and discharged to the Iranian ship upon its arrival at the port on Tuesday, the Navy said.

Over the years, cooperation between India and Iran has grown in various defence-related fields. The visit by the Iranian ships further strengthens mutual friendship and is a significant step towards enhanced Navy-to-Navy cooperation in the maritime domain, the Navy said.

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

PTI ■ MAHAKUMBH NAGAR

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

'Mrityu Kumbh' and the BJP hitting back.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fire Officer Pramod Sharma noted.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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





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PAPER WITH PASSION

## Disparities rising

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

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

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

### PICTALK



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

PTI

# Allahbadia's remarks: Digital decency under fire

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



RAJDEEP PATHAK

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

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

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

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



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

### The Historical Context of Drama

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

Historically, India has also had a vibrant tradition of live performance and satire in the form of 'Bahurupias', a community of street performers

who entertained audiences through mimicry, storytelling, and political satire. Unlike today's digital comedians, 'Bahurupias' adhered to ethical storytelling, ensuring their humour remained socially constructive rather than destructive.

Offending sensibilities in their era could lead to stringent punishments, yet they managed to craft thought-provoking and respectful humour. The 'Bahurupiyas', named after Sanskrit "bahu" (many) and "roop" (form), are traditional impressionists known for their ability to assume multiple identities depicting their art that required deep cultural understanding. Dhirubhai Thakar, the renowned Gujarati literary historian, highlighted the significance of folk traditions like Bahurupias, stating, "The Bahurupia tradition is a testament to how humour, when wielded responsibly, can be both entertaining and enlightening."

### Setting Norms

In the face of rising controversial digital content, a structured ethical framework is essential to balance creative freedom with social responsibility. Indian knowledge systems have long emphasised a two-fold approach—one for creators and another for consumers, much like Master Abhinavagupta's—(an illustrious Spiritual Master who injected new meaning into the Shaiva Philosophy, which 1,000 years later became more popularly known as Kashmir

Shaivism)—the distinction between 'Nata' (performer) and 'Rasika' (audience). Digital creators should be trained in ethical communication, while audiences must develop discernment. Social media influencers, given their reach, need structured value-based training, akin to traditional performers, with a self-regulatory body overseeing content. Strengthening community guidelines on platforms like YouTube and Instagram to align with Indian cultural and legal norms can curb harmful content. Additionally, inspired by 'Natyashastra's' role in guiding performers, public awareness campaigns can foster responsible digital consumption beyond punitive measures. In On Liberty (1859), John Stuart Mill emphasises the ethical boundaries of personal freedom, asserting that individual liberty must be limited when it infringes upon others. He says, "The liberty of the individual must be thus far limited; he must not make himself a nuisance to other people."

The Ranveer Allahbadia controversy is not an isolated incident but a reflection of a larger societal issue—the gradual erosion of ethical entertainment. The challenge lies not just in regulating social media but in fostering a culture of conscious content creation and consumption.

(The writer is Programme Executive, Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti; views are personal)



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

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### STALIN DEFIES CENTRE ON LANGUAGE

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

T T Sakaria | Delhi

### VC APPOINTMENT RULES CRITICISED

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

## Judiciary: The beacon of hope



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

and declared that bail should be the rule and jail the exception. The Supreme Court is right in deciding that bail should be treated as a right and not as a privilege. If an accused is cooperative in the investigation and trial, he should not be detained unnecessarily.

Pre-trial detention should be used rarely and not commonly. In the recent past, the Supreme Court gave relief to AAP leaders Kejriwal and Sisodia and freed them before the Delhi assembly elections so that all parties have a level playing field. The editorial is right in emphasising that pre-trial detention should not be prolonged. In the atmosphere of despair, intrigue, and revenge, the judiciary is the only beacon of hope and protector of individual liberty.

Vinay Kr Malhotra | Ambala Cantt

excesses. Opposition rules state governments have genuine fears as every voice of dissent is being muted by systematic destruction of federal structure as envisaged in our great constitution.

Academics hold so much importance for the future of the country. If it is also muddled with political appointments who would definitely give priority to their high command orders over academic excellence, then we are really running short of time for reversing this trend. Opposition needs to unite and take a collective stand against these draft guidelines and make sure that these guidelines don't turn into law.

Deepak Sharma | Panchkula

### ENSURE WOMEN SAFETY

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

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

Shreyanshi Jain | Ujjain

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

## A legacy of visionary education and unyielding innovation

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

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

The Platinum Jubilee celebrations underscored both the rich legacy and forward-thinking vision of BIT Mesra. Dignitaries, including President Droupadi Murmu, attended the event, where discussions highlighted the



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

academic community at the forefront of scientific development. Moreover, a vast and active alumni network reinforces the strength of its academic foundation and continues to drive advancements across various industries. Beyond classroom learning, BIT Mesra emphasises inquiry, critical thinking, and the practical application of knowledge to solve real-world challenges. Commemorative symbols such as the silver medal, stamp and envelope released during the Jubilee serve as tangible reminders of the institute's role in molding innovative minds prepared

to meet future demands. Creating and sustaining such an institution is a collaborative effort. Leadership, faculty, students, and alumni all contribute to a culture that values excellence, innovation, and independent thought. As industries and technologies evolve, BIT Mesra's role expands from merely imparting education to equipping individuals to navigate change, lead advancements and contribute meaningfully to society.

Fostering interdisciplinary research, nurturing entrepreneurship and promoting inclusive education are essential strategies for ensuring its continued relevance. With seventy years of legacy behind it, BIT Mesra remains both a guardian of its proud traditions and a dynamic force for future progress. Its ongoing mission is to build on its storied past while relentlessly pushing the boundaries of knowledge, research, and education in an ever-changing world.

(The writer is a staffer with the Pioneer; views are personal)



SAKSHI PRIYA





## FIRST COLUMN

### OUR REAL WEALTH: RELATIONSHIPS

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



RAJYOGI BRAHMKUMAR NIKUNJ JI

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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



DIENSH SOOD

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



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

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

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

### Bridging the Skills Gap

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



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

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

### The Changing Nature of Work

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

For example, cyber security is experiencing an unprecedented demand, with 3.5 million positions currently unfilled across technology, telecom, and manufacturing. These roles require technical expertise, strategic thinking, and leadership capabilities. Similarly, industries such as 5G equipment manufacturing, climate technology, and renewable energy are booming. Professionals with hybrid skill sets—combining technical knowledge with business acumen—are increasingly sought after.

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

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

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

### Closing the Gap Through Collaboration

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

### The Role of Technology in Job Creation

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

### The Power of Continuous Learning

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

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

### The Growing Value of Soft Skills

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

### The Future: Adaptability is Key

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

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

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

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

Four-month-old Angel Singh is a post-term baby. Having been born after a ten-month pregnancy, many of her family members were afraid she would be weak and sickly. But Pinky always knew her child would be healthy despite being born a month after what is considered a normal nine-month pregnancy period. Angel's weight and other health indicators at birth proved her mother right. Much of Pinky's confidence stemmed from the fact that she was regular with her antenatal checkups (ANC). She also focussed on a nutritious diet of leafy greens which she sourced from her small vegetable patch at the back of her house in Uttar Pradesh's Samsa Tarhar village in Bahraich, the second

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

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



SWAPNA MAJUMDAR

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

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



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

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

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

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

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



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

PTI ■ KYIV

Ukraine and the US have reached an agreement on a framework for a broad economic deal that would include access to Ukraine's rare earth minerals, three senior Ukrainian officials said on Tuesday.

The officials, who were familiar with the matter, spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly. One of them said that Kyiv hopes that signing the agreement will ensure the continued flow of US military support that Ukraine urgently needs. The agreement could be signed as early as Friday and

plans are being drawn up for Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to travel to Washington to meet President Donald Trump, according to one of the Ukrainian officials.

Another official said the agreement would provide an opportunity for Zelenskyy and Trump to discuss continued military aid to Ukraine, which is why Kyiv is eager to finalise the deal.

Trump, speaking to reporters in the Oval Office, said he'd heard that Zelenskyy was coming and added that "it's okay with me, if he'd like to, and he would like to sign it together with me".

Trump called it a big deal that

could be worth a trillion dollars. "It could be whatever, but it's rare earths and other things."

According to one Ukrainian official, some technical details are still to be determined. However, the draft does not include a contentious Trump administration proposal to give the US USD 500 billion worth of profits from Ukraine's rare earth minerals as compensation for its wartime assistance to Kyiv.

Instead, the US and Ukraine would have joint ownership of a fund, and Ukraine would in the future contribute 50 per cent of future proceeds from state-owned resources, including minerals, oil, and gas.

One official said the deal had better terms of investments and another one said that Kyiv secured favourable amendments and viewed the outcome as "positive".

The deal does not, however, include security guarantees. One official said that this would be something the two presidents would discuss when they meet.

The progress in negotiating the deal comes after Trump and Zelenskyy traded sharp rhetoric last week about their differences over the matter.

Zelenskyy said he balked at signing off on a deal that US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent pushed during a visit to Kyiv earlier this month, and

the Ukrainian leader objected again days later during a meeting in Munich with Vice President JD Vance because the American proposal did not include security guarantees.

Trump then called Volodymyr Zelenskyy "a dictator without elections" and claimed his support among voters was near rock-bottom.

But the two sides made significant progress during a three-day visit to Ukraine last week by retired Lt. Gen. Keith Kellogg, Trump's special envoy to Ukraine and Russia.

The idea was initially proposed last fall by Zelenskyy as part of his plan to strengthen Kyiv's hand in future negotiations with Moscow.

# Hamas to turn over bodies of four Israeli hostages

Hundreds of prisoners to be released in exchange

PTI ■ CAIRO

Hamas will return the bodies of four dead Israeli hostages on Thursday in exchange for Israel's release of hundreds of Palestinian prisoners, the group said, just days before the first phase of the ceasefire between the warring parties was to expire.

Israel has delayed the release of some 600 Palestinian prisoners since Saturday to protest what it says is the cruel treatment of hostages during their release by Hamas. The militant group has said the delay is a "serious violation" of their ceasefire and that talks on a second phase are not possible until the Palestinians are freed.

Hamas spokesman Abdul Latif al-Qanun told The Associated Press on Wednesday that Hamas would hand over the bodies of four Israelis the next day.

In exchange, Israel would release the Palestinian prisoners, as well as an unspecified number of women and minors detained since the militant group's October 7, 2023 attack on Israel that sparked the conflict.

An Israeli official confirmed

that the bodies of four hostages were expected to be turned over but provided no further details. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to talk to the media.

Israel and Hamas had already said on Tuesday that an agreement had been reached to return the bodies of the hostages, but no date had been announced.

Hamas has released hostages, and the bodies of four dead hostages, in large public ceremonies during which the Israelis were paraded and forced to wave to large crowds. Israel, along with the Red Cross and UN officials, have said the ceremonies were humiliating to the hostages, and Israel last weekend delayed the scheduled prisoner release in protest.

The deadlock over the exchange had threatened to collapse the ceasefire when the current six-week first phase of the deal expires this weekend. The latest agreement would complete both sides' obligations of the first phase of the ceasefire — during which Hamas is returning 33 hostages, including eight bodies — in exchange for nearly 2,000 Palestinian

prisoners.

It also could clear the way for an expected visit this week by the White House's Mideast envoy, Steve Witkoff, to the region.

Witkoff has said he wants the sides to move into negotiations on the second phase, during which all remaining hostages held by Hamas are to be released and an end to the war is to be negotiated. The Phase 2 talks were supposed to begin weeks ago, but never did.

The ceasefire, brokered by the United States, Egypt and Qatar, ended 15 months of heavy fighting that erupted after Hamas' October 7, 2023, attack that killed some 1,200 people in Israel and took about 250 people hostage.

Israel's military offensive has killed over 48,000 Palestinians, according to Palestinian health officials, displaced an estimated 90 per cent of Gaza's population and decimated the territory's infrastructure and health system.

The Hamas-run Health Ministry does not differentiate between civilian and militant deaths, but it says that over half of the dead have been women and children.

# Pope being treated for double pneumonia

PTI ■ ROME

Pope Francis was sitting upright and receiving therapy for double pneumonia Wednesday, the Vatican said, as Argentines and Romans alike gathered in the Eternal City to pray for his recovery. Francis remained in critical condition.

The Vatican said that it hoped to have information later in the day about the results of a CT scan taken Tuesday evening to check on the status of the complex lung infection that has kept him hospitalised since Feb. 14.



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

The Vatican said the pope had a peaceful night and was up, sitting in his armchair on Wednesday receiving therapy. Doctors have said he isn't out of danger, but hasn't had any further respiratory crises since Saturday.

The dean of the College of Cardinals, meanwhile, was designated to lead the Vatican's prayer vigil in St. Peter's Square on Wednesday night, thrusting a key figure in a future possible conclave into the spotlight.

On Tuesday night, the faithful from Francis' homeland gathered in the Argentine church of Rome for a special Mass presided over by Cardinal Baldassarre Reina, the pope's vicar for Rome.

The rector of the church, the Rev. Fernando Laguna, said that he hoped the pope could feel the embrace of the community's prayer from the Gemelli hospital where he is recovering.

"I can't go to Gemelli, because for him to recover he must be isolated," he said. "I know that I hug him and that he hugs me when I pray. And now I would like to embrace the pope."

Sister Nilda Trejo said that she knew Francis' health has always been delicate, with problems breathing and speaking loudly, and that's why she always prayed for him.

"We knew that he often found it difficult," she said. "In fact, you see that at the beginning of Mass, the microphone always has to be turned up because he has a bit of trouble. But he always spoke to the people. To the heart of the people."

Across town, Romans and others gathered in St. Peter's Square for the nightly Rosary prayer, presided over by Filipino Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle, who runs the Vatican's office responsible for the church in the developing world.

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

PTI ■ ROME

A US air base in Italy went on lockdown Wednesday for several hours over an unspecified incident. There were no injuries.

Naval Air Station Sigonella was locked down "due to an ongoing situation," according to initial posts on the base's official Facebook page.

The posts suggested that whatever happened occurred at a gate for the base. It urged service members to "avoid traveling on highway SP105 between Marinai Housing Complex" and a part of the base.

The posts didn't elaborate on what happened. After several hours, a new post described the alert ending at around 11:25 a.m. (10:25 GMT) and traffic

again being allowed on the base.

"We are grateful to our Navy Security Force personnel for their quick response," the post added.

US Navy Lt. Andrea Perez, a spokesperson at the base, told The Associated Press there were "no injuries" from the incident and further details would be released later

Wednesday. NAS Sigonella is outside of Catania on the island of Sicily. It's on a base for the Italian Air Force.

NAS Sigonella hosts US Navy P-8 Poseidon reconnaissance aircraft, as well as MQ-4C Triton drones. There's also a US Space Force personnel based there who work on identifying possible missile threats in the region.

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

PTI ■ SINGAPORE

Five Indian-origin men were sentenced to jail terms between two and three years and caning for being part of a riot that led to the death of a former bouncer at a Singapore hotel.

Sridharan Elangovan was given 36 months in jail and six strokes of the cane; Manojkumar Velayanatham was given 30 months in jail and four strokes; Sashikumar Pakirsamy was given 24 months in jail and two strokes; Puthenvilla Keith Peter was given 26 months' jail and three strokes; and Raja Rishi was given 30 months' jail and four strokes.

Each of them pleaded guilty to a charge of rioting at Singapore's Concorde Hotel and Shopping Mall in 2023, a Channel News report said.

Sridharan, 30, Manojkumar, 32, and Sashikumar, 34, were members of a secret society group.

Another man, Asvain Pachan Pillai Sukumaran, 30, was earlier handed a murder charge after he allegedly killed former bouncer Mohammad Isrrat Mohd Ismail, 29. The Indian-origin man's case is pending.

Six other men, between 25 and 33 years old, were named in court documents as co-accused who took part in the riot.

Isrrat and his friend

Muhammad Shahrulnizam Osman, 30, were former bouncers at Club Rumours and members of another secret society.

On August 19, 2023, a group of about 10 people, including several of the accused, were drinking at Club Rumours at Concorde Hotel and Shopping Mall when Isrrat and Shahrulnizam, who wanted to pass Isrrat's wedding invitation card to club staff, sat near the entrance of the club opposite to the accused persons.

At about 6 a.m., as the club was closing, Isrrat and the accused had a verbal exchange during which the former bouncer was stabbed multiple times.

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

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

French President Emmanuel Macron travelled to Washington seeking to convince US President Donald Trump to stand by Europe's side in his talks with Russia about ending the war in Ukraine.

As Macron left the White House, he called the meeting a "turning point" — yet Trump made no promises.

Macron was the first European leader to visit Trump since his reelection, aiming to capitalise on their friendship to urge Trump not to "be weak" in dealing with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Trump's recent statements that echo Putin's narrative and plans to have direct negotiations with Moscow have left European allies and Ukrainian officials worried.

Following Monday's meeting, Macron praised Trump's move towards Putin in an interview on Fox News, saying it may lead to a truce between Russia and Ukraine in the coming weeks.

"But my message was to say be careful because we need something substantial for Ukraine," Macron said.

"We want peace swiftly, but we don't want an agreement that is weak," Macron said earlier in a joint news conference with

Trump. Any deal with Russia, Macron insisted, must be able to be "assessed, checked and verified". Asked at the news conference by an Associated Press reporter what makes Trump believe he can trust Putin in negotiations about Ukraine, Trump answered, "I may be wrong, but I believe he wants to make a deal."

Macron is known for his bold diplomatic moves.

In February last year, he was the first European leader to publicly consider sending Western troops to Ukraine.

In December, as he welcomed Trump to Paris to celebrate the reopening of the Notre Dame Cathedral, he hastily arranged

a three-way meeting at the Elysee Palace with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

And last week, he called an emergency meeting of key EU leaders and British Prime Minister Keir Starmer — who is scheduled to meet with Trump Thursday — to insist Europeans have a say in talks to end the war in Ukraine.

Macron, who came into office in 2017, is one of the few leaders who got to know Trump during his first term.

"We call each other several times a week," Macron told the French online news channel HugoDecrypte, according to excerpts released on Tuesday.

# Thousands offer prayers at Nepal's Pashupatinath Temple

PTI ■ KATHMANDU

Thousands of devotees from across Nepal and neighbouring India thronged the revered Pashupatinath Temple since early morning to offer prayers on Maha Shivratri on Wednesday.

People queued up at the Pashupatinath Temple at the bank of Bagmati River in Kathmandu since late Tuesday to have darshan of the Shiva Linga.

Authorities have made special arrangements to accommodate the influx of devotees at Pashupatinath, said Milan Kumar Thapa, the member secretary of the Pashupati Area Development Trust (PADT).

The local administration has banned the sale and consumption of marijuana, hemp, alcohol, meat and fish during the festival.

Those violating this rule face legal action.

The temple opened at 2.15 am and devotees were allowed to enter the shrine from all four gates to have darshan of the Shiva Linga.

More than one million devotees from Nepal and India are estimated to arrive at the Pashupatinath Temple on Wednesday.

The authorities have deployed 4,000 security personnel and 10,000 volunteers for the safety of the devotees and the smooth conduction of prayer at the temple.

The main shrine and the temple premises have been eloquently decorated with flowers, colourful lights, paper flags and banners, creating a stunning night-time ambience.

To streamline temple visits, officials have arranged eight queues inside and four outside the temple.

Authorities have designated different routes to manage the crowd effectively.

Devotees can enter through various points such as Mitrapark, Gaushala, and Pingalasthan, with systematic queues ensuring smooth movement.

Additionally, planners have prepared a separate lane via Tilganga Ram Temple if needed. The Maha Shivaratri Main Celebration Committee has been formed under the chairmanship of Minister for Tourism and Culture Badri Prasad Pandey to offer free meals, drinking water, and medicines to the devotees on the occasion in coordination with different organisations.

About one lakh 50 thousand devotees have already offered prayers till 9.30 am on Wednesday, said Rewati Raman Adhikari, a senior official at the Pashupati Development Trust.

She said the number will cross one million by Thursday morning.

Around 3,500 Sadhus, including about 700 Naga Babas, have arrived at the temple from India, Adhikari said.

The official said the Naga Sadhus will be offered free meals, water, sanitation facilities, accommodation, and medicines.

Adhikari said the Sadhus would be given cash incentives depending on their ranks, a maximum of NRs 15,000, as Dakshina before they leave on Thursday. Maha Shivaratri is observed through fasting, offering prayers,

performing rituals, visiting Shiva temples, and commemorating the night dedicated to Maheshwar or Mahadev, the Lord of the Lords. Maha Shivaratri also symbolises illuminating the darkness of ignorance with the light of knowledge thereby removing ignorance and suffering. It is believed that offering prayers at Shiva Linga, which symbolises the Supreme Being, brings happiness, joy, overall well-being, and finally salvation to the devotee.

People consider Falgun Krishna Chaturdashi as per the Hindu calendar, an auspicious day when Lord Shiva grants mercy to the poor and distressed, as Maha Shivratri.

During the Maha Shivaratri, the devotees purify themselves, visit Shiva temples, and offer Lord

Shiva milk, sweets, Dhatura flowers, and Bel leaves.

They believe that observing a fast and staying awake all night in devotion grants spiritual fulfilment and liberation from the cycle of birth and death. Many people light bonfires and sing sacred chants and hymns while preparing offerings.

Traditional music and dance performances are organised at the Gaurighat, Mrigasthali and Kirateshwar ashrams around the temple on the occasion.

Pashupatinath attracts devotees from Nepal, India, and other South Asian countries on this grand occasion.

Lord Shiva is worshipped not only by the Hindus but also by Buddhists and Kiratis. Some worship Lord Shiva in the form of Bhairava.

# Toll in Sudan military plane crash rises to 46

PTI ■ CAIRO

The death toll from a Sudanese military plane crash in the city of Omdurman increased to at least 46 people, officials said Wednesday.

The Khartoum Media Office said the crash also injured 10 others. The Antonov aircraft crashed Tuesday while taking off from the Wadi Sayidna air base north of Omdurman, the military said in a statement.

Omdurman is the sister city of the capital, Khartoum.

The military said that armed forces personnel and civilians were killed in the crash. It didn't say what caused the crash. The ministry said that the aircraft crashed over a civilian

house in the Karrari district in Omdurman, suggesting that there were people dead on the ground.

Sudan has been in a state of civil war since 2023 when tensions between the military and a notorious paramilitary group, the Rapid Support Forces, exploded into open warfare.

The fighting has wrecked urban areas and has been marked by atrocities, including mass rape and ethnically motivated killings, that amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity, especially in the western region of Darfur, according to the United Nations and international rights groups.



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

PTI ■ MALE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# 18 dead in bus crash in eastern Thailand



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

PTI ■ BANGKOK

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# Iran accelerates production of near weapons-grade uranium

PTI ■ VIENNA

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The report also said that Grossi held telephone discussions with

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PTI ■ DHAKA

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

story about its contracts with the Israeli military.

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

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

The AP's report was shared and

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

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

"The demands are clear," said Mohamed, who works with a group of Microsoft workers called No Azure for Apartheid.

"Satya Nadella and Microsoft executives need to answer to their workers by dropping contracts with the Israeli military."

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

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

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

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

The announcement comes as the

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## THE PIONEER CLASSIFIEDS

### CHANGE OF NAME

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

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

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

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

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

**PD(1590)C I, Suresh, S/O. Shri Hira Lal,** R/O. J-282, Jahangirpuri, Delhi -110033, That, I, Have Changed My Name from Suresh Kumar To Suresh, For All Purposes.

**PD(1591)C**

**PUBLIC NOTICE**

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

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

**Karnail Singh, (Advocate)**  
Unit No. FF-2, First Floor, Mahakwini Metro Tower Sec-4, Vasant Vihar, U.P. Mob. 9810963551

**PUBLIC NOTICE**

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

**Karnail Singh, (Advocate)**  
K-8, LGF Jangpura Extn. New Delhi-110036  
Contact No. 9811163363

**PUBLIC NOTICE**

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

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

**PUBLIC NOTICE**

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

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

**PUBLIC NOTICE**

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

1. That I am contesting the election of Member from Ward No. 13 of the Municipal Corporation Gurugram as a candidate set up as Independent.

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

# NCLT asks RCAP lenders to complete all procedural issues

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

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

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

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

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

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

# Centre, Paytm partner for startup mentorship

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

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

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

# CBI FIR against Godrej Properties in Chandigarh project

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

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

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

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

# IndiGo leases three Boeing 787-9s

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

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

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

# 88 per cent parents seek action on minors faking age

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

# India's proposed FTA with UK explained

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



# Praggnanandhaa set to battle David Navara in Prague Masters

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



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

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

# Inter Miami beats Sporting KC, 3-1

**PTI ■ FORT LAUDERDALE (USA)**

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



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

minute on Tuesday. Suárez and veteran Sergio Busquets each played 81 minutes. Miami coach Javier Mascherano said he talked to his veterans about managing their minutes throughout the season to keep them healthy. That made room for contributions from younger players like the 26-year-old Allende. "We will try this season to push them as much as we can because we believe in them," Mascherano said of Miami's young players. "Obviously, I love to work with the old guys, or the big men, but I know that the young players can give us much." Kansas City had plenty of chances with 10 shots and four on goal. Dejan Joveljic appeared to make it 1-1 in the 40th minute, but he was ruled offside. Rodríguez entered in the 58th minute and scored from outside the box five minutes later. Kansas City, still trying to find its footing after significant offseason turnover, remains winless in 2025. The FIFA Club World Cup trophy was on display at Chase Stadium ahead of the tournament's start in June. The tournament, which will feature Inter Miami and European powers Real Madrid and Manchester City, among others, will take place in 11 U.S. Cities in an expanded format with 32 teams. "It's a privilege to have the trophy here," said World Cup chief tournament officer Manolo Zubiria, "and for Inter Miami to be the first club that has it here in the U.S. ... A lot of excitement building up. The clubs are ready. We're ready." Inter Miami will open the monthlong tournament on June 14 against Al Ahly of Egypt at Hard Rock Stadium, the 65,000-seat home of the NFL's Miami Dolphins.

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



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

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



# Mbappé to miss match against Real Sociedad

**PTI ■ MADRID**

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

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

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

**PTI ■ MADRID**

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



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

# Prince William welcomes England football coach

**PTI ■ LONDON**

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

Tuchel was later seen attending a match involving Premier League team Crystal Palace, which was hosting Aston Villa in England's top division. The prince is a passionate Villa fan. Tuchel, a German, was hired in October as England's latest foreign-born coach and officially started work in the role on Jan. 1. He has attended many Premier League games to check out players who could make his squad for upcoming World Cup qualifying games. Tuchel's first matches in charge will be the qualifiers against Albania on March 21 and Latvia three days later. His contract with England runs through to the World Cup finals in the United States, Canada and Mexico in the summer of 2026.

# Lewis Hamilton starts F1 preseason testing for Ferrari

**PTI ■ SAKHIR (BAHRAIN)**

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



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

# Rublev loses in first round in Dubai Championships

**PTI ■ DUBAI**

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



happy it happened today." The ninth-ranked Rublev had won the Dubai title in 2022. On Saturday, he beat Jack Draper to win the Qatar Open. Also Tuesday, top-seeded Daniil Medvedev beat Jan-Lennard Struff 6-4, 7-6 (4) and will next face Giovanni Mpetshi Perricard. Second-seeded Alex de Minaur lost to 2014 U.S. Open champion Marin Cilic 6-2, 3-6, 6-3. Nuno Borges eliminated eighth-seeded Arthur Fils 6-2, 6-1. Other winners Tuesday included fifth-seeded Ugo Humbert, Matteo Berrettini, Felix Auger-Aliassime and qualifier Christopher O'Connell.

# Chelsea thrashes Southampton 4-0 in Premier League

**PTI ■ LONDON**

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

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



laugh the way he does," the coach said. "We are completely happy with him. It is normal to go through a moment where you struggle to score but it doesn't matter. Just continue and you are going to score many goals." Chelsea climbed to fourth place in

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

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



# Indian team should win Champions Trophy: Lalchand Rajput

PTI ■ SHARJAH

For Lalchand Rajput, it was a plunge into an unknown territory when he was appointed manager of a young Indian team for the inaugural T20 World Cup in 2007. No one gave them a chance, but they still triumphed. Nearly 18 years later, the 63-year-old former player is backing an Indian team full of world beaters to not just win another prestigious ICC event, but do so convincingly. "This Indian team looks ruthless. They try to dominate and win every game. They don't want to give the opponents a chance to come back into the game. That is the attitude. And the way they are playing, I think they should win the Champions Trophy convincingly," Rajput said. Rajput is currently the head coach of UAE cricket team, and watched Virat Kohli score his 51st ODI century in the six-wicket win over Pakistan in Dubai on Sunday, and he now expects skipper Rohit Sharma to smash his way to a big hundred. "So Virat got a 100. All boxes are ticked. Now it's only up to Rohit to get a big 100," Rajput quipped, adding that the "Indian team have a clear instinct that that will just finish their opponents." "We have always seen that India



play better when the platform is big." But the veteran coach had a word of caution as well for the team, which registered comfortable victories against Pakistan and Bangladesh and will next play New Zealand in their last group game on Sunday. "See, in cricket, you cannot take it

lightly. Every game is important, because if you take one or few overs lightly, that can change the game as well. So we have got to be at our best every time. We don't want to relax at any moment," he remarked. "Both the games India has won comfortably. But in cricket, we can't say anything, we have to take one

game at a time. We don't have to take New Zealand lightly. New Zealand is a better team (than Pakistan and Bangladesh), they have also won both the games and their morale is also high," he pointed out. On Kohli's superlative performance, the former India player said: "I think Virat played a fantastic

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



## Committee formed to revise norms for assistance to NSFs

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The sports ministry has constituted a six-member committee to revise the norms for providing financial assistance to National Sports Federations (NSFs) keeping in mind the "emerging challenges" facing India and the country's bid to host the 2036 Olympics. The committee would be headed by joint secretary (sports) Kunal, and includes executive director (Teams) Ritu Pathik, Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS) CEO N S Johal, former TOPS CEO commodore (Retd) PK Garg, and president of Indian Weightlifting Federation (IWF) Sahdev Yadav.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India's first and only male boxer to have won an Olympic medal, Vijender Singh has called for "fresh and fair" elections in the crisis-ridden Boxing Federation of India (BFI) and said that he would not hesitate to be among the candidates if "given a responsibility". The 39-year-old, whose 2008 Beijing Olympics bronze marked the beginning of arguably the best phase of Indian boxing before things went downhill little over a decade later, is currently playing his trade in the professional circuit. However, he hasn't competed since 2022.

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

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

In a post on his X account, the star boxer said for Indian boxers to do well, it is imperative that they train abroad. "For that, we need to conduct fresh and fair elections ASAP to build a strong federation. I will be more than happy to contribute my experience if given any responsibility by our government. @PMOIndia @mansukhmandviya," posted

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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

Kohli (36) currently has 82 international centuries across all formats, with his latest coming in India's commanding six-wicket victory over Pakistan in the Champions Trophy in Dubai. But before this, Kohli had struggled for runs at home.

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



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

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

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

"It is nice to watch the way he is playing cricket," he said. Former South Africa opener Herschelle Gibbs, who is the brand ambassador of the ICBT20, echoed Jaffer's views, stating that Kohli has a lot of

cricket left in him.

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

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

"Shubman is a special talent, he is technically correct and bit more talented," he said. "India are obviously the favourites, they look very strong. But South Africa are also in a good space, obviously I understand their history when it comes to big tournaments but hopefully they can rectify that and we can see South Africa and India in final. But India looks formidable."

## Subhman Gill consolidates top spot in ICC ODI rankings

PTI ■ DUBAI

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

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

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

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

## ICC clears bowling action of Matthew Kuhnemann

PTI ■ MELBOURNE

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

# Champions Trophy: Pakistan to play for pride against Bangladesh

PTI ■ RAWALPINDI

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

With the tournament offering very little margin for error, Pakistan crumbled to suffer heavy defeats to New Zealand and arch-rivals India, which left them on the brink of elimination before the Kiwis confirmed it with their win over Bangladesh. Disgruntled fans are now calling for sweeping changes in the country's cricket structure starting from the very top of the pyramid, days after the first global tournament in Pakistan in 29 years got underway.

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

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

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

Poor shot selection, substandard fielding, and untimely injuries have only deepened Pakistan's woes. The loss of game-changing opener Fakhar Zaman to injury



left a huge void at the top, and his replacement, Imam-ul-Haq, failed to make an impact. Meanwhile, star batter Babar Azam and captain Mohammad Rizwan have also fallen short of

expectations, offering little resistance when it mattered the most. Pakistan has historically relied on its formidable pace attack to win matches, but frontline quicks

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

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

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

With chaos at the top, Pakistan's struggles on the pitch seem inevitable. On the spin-friendly tracks of Dubai and Karachi, Pakistan bafflingly named only one specialist spinner in Abrar Ahmed, leaving their bowling

unit toothless. Like Pakistan, last edition's semifinalists Bangladesh have also been knocked out of the tournament after successive defeats to India and New Zealand.

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

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

Bangladesh's inability to capitalise on key moments, particularly their sloppy fielding, has cost them dearly. Dropped catches in both matches have only added to their woes. However, up against an off-colour Pakistan, Bangladesh could sense

an opportunity to finish their campaign on a high and salvage some pride.

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

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