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**WORLD 9**  
LITHUANIAN PREZ BACKS  
TRUMP'S NATO DEFENCE  
SPENDING GOAL

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## RASHTRAPATI BHAVAN SLAMS THE CONGRESS



President Droupadi Murmu addresses the joint sitting of both Houses of Parliament on the first day of the Budget Session in New Delhi

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI**

In an unprecedented move, the Rashtrapati Bhavan on Friday reacted strongly over the Congress leaders' comments on President Droupadi Murmu's address to the joint session of the Parliament terming the remarks as "in poor taste, unfortunate and entirely avoidable".

were seen discussing the speech. "The poor lady, the President, was getting very tired by the end...She could hardly speak poor thing," Sonia was heard saying in a video doing the rounds on social media.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi too launched a scathing attack on the Congress, accusing its "shahi parivar" of insulting President Droupadi Murmu, who hails from a tribal background.

## Indian economy defies global slowdown



**PROF. GAURAV VALLABH**  
GUEST REPORTER

With Sanskriti (culture) and Pragati (progress) moving in tandem, India stands on the brink of an economic transformation-one that is propelling the nation towards becoming the world's third-largest economy.

as agriculture (3.8 per cent) and industry (6.2 per cent) outperformed their historical averages (FY15-FY24), indicating broad-based growth momentum.

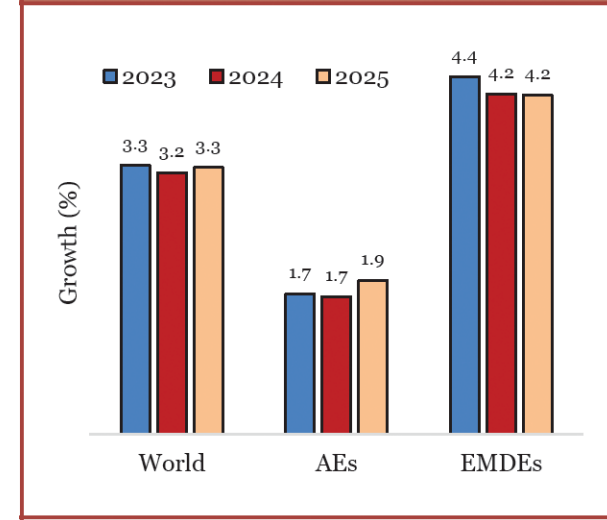


report, private investment commitments surged from ₹1.6 Lakh Crore in FY24 to ₹2.45 Lakh Crore in FY25.

21.4 per cent of total expenditure, up from 13 per cent in FY21. Additionally, the National Monetisation Pipeline (NMP) has unlocked ₹3.86 Lakh Crore worth of private capital across key infrastructure sectors.

efficiency has surged, with operational capacity growing from 3 MTPA in FY24 to 21 MTPA in FY25. Renewable energy has seen remarkable progress, with installed capacity reaching 456.7 GW as of November 2024.

**Chart I.2: Steady growth outlook across country groups**



Source: IMF WEO (January 2025)  
Note: AEs- Advanced Economies, EMDEs- Emerging market and developing economies

## Modi takes a pot shot at the Opposition

**DEEPAK KUMAR JHA ■ NEW DELHI**

In a jibe at the Congress and other Opposition parties, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday came out with a tongue-in-cheek comment by mentioning that it could be perhaps the first time ever since he took over as PM in 2014 that there has been no attempt from abroad to destabilise our legislative functions before the start of a Parliament session.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi addresses the media on the first day of the Budget Session of Parliament in New Delhi

poor and middle class as well as women, he also said a mechanism has been designed for the participation of younger Parliamentarians in further nurturing the 'Viksit Bharat'.

during the Session and will become laws after comprehensive debate to strengthen the country.

## Kejriwal accuses CM Saini of conspiracy to poison Yamuna

**RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI**

In a startling revelation, Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) supremo Arvind Kejriwal on Friday accused Haryana Chief Minister Nayab Singh Saini of hatching a "conspiracy" to "influence" and force half of Delhi's population to thirst due to the "poisonous" Yamuna water to defame his party ahead of the Assembly polls on February 5 by sending highly-polluted waters to the national Capital.



AAP national convener Arvind Kejriwal with Punjab CM Bhagwant Mann and AAP MP Sanjay Singh before leaving to meet Election Commissioners, in New Delhi

## Eight AAP MLAs resign before polls

**STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI**

In a major setback to the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), eight MLAs have resigned, ahead of the coming Delhi Assembly polls on February 5.

being denied tickets for the February 5 polls and were touch with other parties. BS Joon (Bijwasan) was the first AAP MLA who gave his papers.

## Ahead of polls and lucrative offers, Delhi students split on AAP and BJP

**SANYA PANDEY ■ NEW DELHI**

With Assembly polls inching closer, several students of Delhi University and other higher educational institutions, residing in North Campus, have opined that the ruling Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) has failed on various fronts in the last 10 years and there should be a 'double-engine' government for better development and welfare of the people of national capital.

They were also of the opinion that Delhi would witness a fierce contest between the AAP and BJP. The Congress, which has announced "five guarantees" including Rs 2,500 per month to every woman under the 'Pyari Didi Yojana', and eyeing to return to power highlighting the works done by the previous Sheila Dikshit-led government in Capital, did not find a mention.

Talking to the Pioneer, the 18-year-old said, "I feel this time BJP should come to power in Delhi. The AAP has been saying that they were not able to do the work for the people because Arvind Kejriwal and his team members were put behind bars and Delhi doesn't have statehood. But, 10 years is a very long period. They didn't do much."



File photo: Ranjan Dimri/The Pioneer

completely failed. Because of pollution, students' we were not able to go to schools, colleges. Our time was wasted. So it is

definitely important to give a chance to the BJP. Some people are following Narendra Modi because he is saving Hindutva,

while some people are following him, because genuinely they cannot see any better party than BJP." Referring to BJP's manifesto, she said, "In the BJP's manifesto, they are giving those things that Kejriwal has offered to people. But there are also different things like giving Rs 2,1000 to pregnant women, so the rural/lower sections will get monetary help. Kejriwal had also talked about monetary help, but overall development didn't work out quite well."

vigilant. The AAP has installed cameras. Are they functional? Women safety is very prime. Delhi which has been given the title of 'rape capital', if that can be changed by a 'double-engine' government BJP, then why not 'Har Har Modi'." Notably, the law and order of Delhi comes under the Union Home Ministry. She also accused the incumbent AAP MLA from Timarpur Dilip Pandey for not doing enough to mitigate the issues concerning the people of the constituency and said the BJP should be given a chance.

CLASSIFIEDS

NOTICE

My name is erroneously recorded on the Aadhaar card as Bitola wife Charanj... my correct name is Sharda Devi...

NOTICE

Be it known to all that I, Ravindra Kumar (Army No 778294 L) am resident of Pithorawan post Barhuti, Kala district Rohtas Sasaram bihar...

NOTICE

I am Shaan son of Mohd Kafeel (Madhur Mishra), resident-636/41, Shivanagari Takrohi, Indiranagar, Lucknow...

NOTICE

I, Mrs. Rashida Begam, W/o Zahid Ali, R/o 536/2/377, Madeyganj, Post-Nirala Nagar, Lucknow...

NOTICE

I am Umashankar S/o Shyam Bihari, temporary address Village-Baidolia, Post-Shivpur, Thana-Gaur, District-Basti...

NOTICE

I Naman S/O 733024-F Sgt Ajay Kumar Singh R/O Plot No-1 Shakti Nagar, Near Power house, P.O Harjindar nagar Kanpur...

NOTICE

I Smt.Malti Dinesh Malaviya W/o Shri Dinesh Shanker Malaviya, R/o 8/67, Arya Nagar Kanpur...

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SKY LAW COLLEGE

Advertisement for SKY LAW COLLEGE, Natkur, Chandrawal, Sarojini Nagar, Lucknow-226002. Includes contact info and details about LL.B. 3 Years & 5 years program.

Woman alleges harassment, physical assault by in-laws

A woman has accused her father-in-law and brother-in-law of physical assault and harassment in the Krishnanagar police station area...

CLASSIFIEDS

NOTICE

I, Zeenat wife of Mohd Kafeel (Madhur Mishra), resident-636/41, Shivanagari Takrohi, Indiranagar, Lucknow...

NOTICE

I, Mohd Kafeel son of late Mohd Jail, resident of 636/41, Shivnagari Takrohi, Indiranagar Lucknow...

NOTICE

My name is erroneously recorded on the Aadhaar card as Bitola wife Charanj... my correct name is Sharda Devi...

NOTICE

Jc No.JC877958H .Nb.Sub Manoj Kumar Unit 314 Med regt./R/O village -Harichandapur Shuklapur Bhagat Teh.Bilgram Dist.Hardoi (UP)...

NOTICE

My name in my passport is Mujeen Khan and my wife's name is Fatima, which is wrong. The correct name is Mo. Mujeen Khan...

NOTICE

I have changed my name from MEENA AGRAWAL To MEENA AGRAWAL, Meena Agarwal W/o Uttam Kumar...

NOTICE

I have changed my name after marriage from BISMA KABEER to SHAMEEN SAIF W/o Mohammad SAIF AZIM...

she and her husband leave the house. When she asked him to discuss the matter after her husband's return, he allegedly abused her, grabbed her by the throat, and pushed her against the wall...

injury," she claimed. "My husband stays out for work, and for the past 13 years, I have been forced to live outside the house. I have endured this physical and mental torture out of fear of public shame...

MAN, KIN HELD FOR MOLESTING GIRL, ROBBING HER MOBILE

Meanwhile, a man and his brother-in-law have been arrested following an encounter after they allegedly molested a girl and robbed her mobile phone in the PGI area...

leg during the exchange of fire. His brother-in-law, Shani Gautam, was also taken into custody. According to DCP (East) Shashank Singh, PGI police were conducting checks near the trauma centre in Vrindavan Sector-18 late Thursday night...

Probe begins into misappropriation of recovered cash, jewellery

A probe has been initiated into the alleged misappropriation of gold and cash recovered from the robbers involved in the Chinhat bank heist...

The action was taken due to suspicions of irregularities in the recovery of items after the lockers of Indian Overseas Bank in Chinhat were broken into and crores of rupees were stolen...

BANK HEIST

into the matter. According to Singh, notices have been issued to the officers involved in the special squad, including the woman constable...

on leave will also be questioned by the probe team. Sources indicate that among those removed from the special squad, some have no direct involvement in the alleged misappropriation...

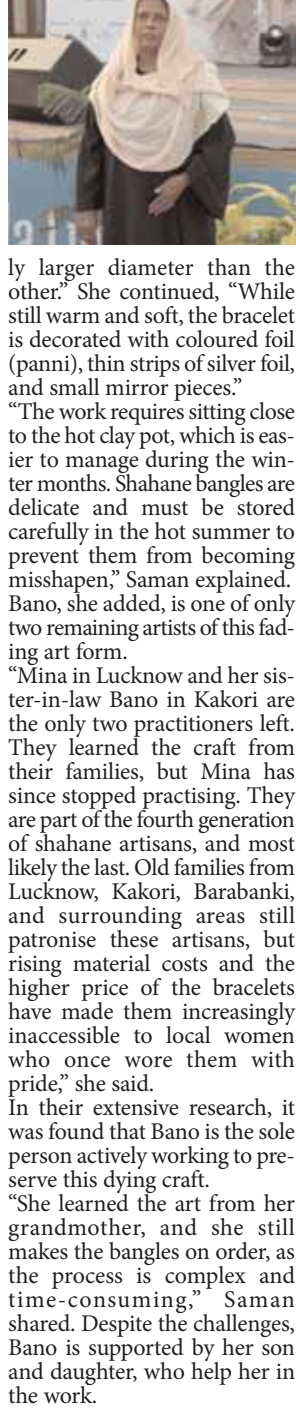
Sanatkada festival kicks off

Lucknow (PNS): The 16th edition of Sanatkada Lucknow Festival kicked off on Friday, featuring a unique theme, 'Lucknow ke Gali-Kooche'...

70-year-old woman keeps tradition of shahane bangles alive

SHARMILA KRISHNA LUCKNOW

Seventy-year-old Bano is the only woman in the Lucknow district still making 'lakh chooris' still making 'lakh chooris' still making 'lakh chooris'...



Protesters seek transparency in PhD entrance, JRF/NET results

The Sanyukt Chhatra Morcha (SCM) staged a protest at Lucknow University, demanding the release of the PhD entrance exam question papers, re-verification of JRF and NET results...

until the verification of results is completed and the PhD entrance exam question papers are made public. They highlighted concerns about the improper implementation of the reservation policy...

executive of SCS, stated, "The refusal to release the PhD entrance exam question papers raises serious concerns about transparency. We demand that the university make the question papers public and ensure a fair admission process."

2 patients undergo Rezum procedure at RMLIMS

Lucknow (PNS): The urology and renal transplant department of at Dr Ram Manohar Lohia Institute of Medical Sciences (RMLIMS) has successfully performed the Rezum procedure on two patients...

LU PhD scholar selected for Laura Bassi Scholarship

Lucknow (PNS): Shivangee Dubey, a PhD scholar from the biochemistry Department Lucknow University, has been selected for the Laura Bassi Scholarship...

prevalence of TNBC in India is around 30% of all breast cancer cases, higher than the global average of 25%. TNBC is difficult to diagnose and requires specific therapies. Shivangee's study aims to identify TNBC-specific hub genes and pathways...

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PAPER WITH PASSION

## The Chinese challenge

China's rapid advancements—evident in breakthroughs like DeepSeek—are challenging US superiority like never before

For decades, the United States has been the undisputed global leader in cutting-edge technology, from artificial intelligence (AI) and quantum computing to defence innovations and space exploration. However, China's rapid advancements in these fields, fueled by a mix of state-driven initiatives, talent acquisition, and aggressive R&D investments, are now posing a serious challenge to the US supremacy. The emergence of DeepSeek, a Chinese AI model rivaling OpenAI's GPT-4, is just one example of how Beijing is closing the technological gap. China's ambitions extend far beyond AI. It has made remarkable strides in many areas. It is a direct result of China's 'vision 2025' which is translating into reality. China has developed the Jiuzhang quantum computer, which demonstrated computational speeds exponentially faster than classical supercomputers. Meanwhile, the US remains engaged in its own quantum pursuit through companies like Google and IBM, but China's government-backed approach provides an edge in long-term planning. From hypersonic missiles that can evade US missile defence systems to AI-driven warfare capabilities, China's military modernisation is shifting global power dynamics.



Despite US sanctions aimed at crippling China's semiconductor industry, Beijing has made breakthroughs, notably with Huawei's 7nm Kirin chip, defying expectations. The US remains dependent on Taiwan's TSMC, but China's relentless pursuit of self-reliance is narrowing this gap. Even in space tech, China is surging ahead. China's Tiangong space station, its Mars and lunar exploration programs, and its ambitions in satellite-based internet rival those of NASA

and SpaceX. This places China on an equal footing with the US in space dominance. However, Washington is not sitting idle in the face of this challenge. The US has adopted a multi-pronged strategy. It has stepped up its effort to contain China. The Biden administration had imposed restrictions on Chinese firms like Huawei and AI chip exports to limit their technological growth. The US is deepening ties with the European Union, Japan, and India to counterbalance China's rise in emerging tech. Initiatives like the CHIPS Act and QUAD alliances are designed to limit Beijing's access to critical tech. Besides, companies like OpenAI, Google, and IBM are receiving government backing to maintain an edge over Chinese AI firms. In this tech war India, though lagging, is trying to cope albeit at a slow pace. While it has growing ties with the US, it also maintains strategic independence. India too is investing heavily in AI startups and quantum computing research. With the government's Semicon India initiative, India aims to become a global semiconductor hub, attracting investments from Intel, TSMC, and others. Indeed, India is emerging as a significant player in the global tech landscape. As this race unfolds, the global order in technology will be reshaped in ways that will define the 21st century.

### PICTALK



A folk artist at the 'Jaipur Literature Festival' (JLF), in Jaipur

## India's aviation sector needs a take off



SANTHOSH MATHEW

India's aviation sector is at a crossroads, grappling with an acute shortage of airports despite its vast population and growing economy

Have you ever wondered just how many airports exist in the United States? Take a wild guess. The number is staggering—nearly 19,000! That's right. With a population of around 330 million, America has built an extensive network of airports, ensuring seamless connectivity across the country. Now, compare this to India, a nation with three times the population, yet managing with only around 500 airports. Even more striking, out of these, just 29 are classified as international airports. This glaring disparity is more than just a number—it is a reflection of India's challenges in aviation infrastructure and the pressing need for expansion.

Let's take an even closer look by comparing West Bengal to the United Kingdom. Both regions have a similar population, yet their aviation networks couldn't be more different. The UK boasts around 150 airports, while West Bengal has just three passenger airports—Kolkata, Bagdogra, and Andal. This difference is not just a matter of convenience; it highlights lost economic opportunities and underscores the urgent requirement for infrastructure development. In nations like the US and the UK, air travel is an everyday convenience—affordable, efficient, and integral to daily life.

It allows people to skip traffic, save time, and stimulate economic growth. Meanwhile, in India, air travel is still seen as a luxury, accessible only to a privileged few. India's aviation network is wholly insufficient for its growing demand. With only 29 international airports and about 500 total airports, the infrastructure is struggling to keep pace with the needs of domestic and international travelers. Airports in major cities such as Delhi, Mumbai, and Bengaluru are perpetually overcrowded, leading to delays, congestion, and inefficiency.

In contrast, vast portions of the country, especially smaller towns and rural areas, remain disconnected, relying on outdated modes of transportation like railways and highways. The Airports



Authority of India (AAI) currently manages around 150 airports, but when compared to the United States' 5,000 civilian airports, this number falls dramatically short. The gap becomes even more concerning when considering that India's population is three times that of the US. Clearly, India needs a massive expansion in its aviation infrastructure, and it needs it urgently. The consequences of this limited aviation network are significant—reduced regional connectivity, hindered tourism, and slower economic growth. India must take decisive steps to address this issue. A bold vision for the future should include constructing at least 1,500 new airports in the coming years.

By ensuring that an airport is within 100 kilometers of every major population center, India can unlock the economic potential of its smaller towns and rural areas. The advantages of a well-developed air travel network are crystal clear. Air travel is not just the fastest mode of transportation; it is also the safest and most efficient. In a country where roads and railways are often congested and prone to delays, a robust aviation network can alleviate pressure on existing transport systems, making movement across the country more seamless.

The economic benefits are also immense. A surge in the



IN A COUNTRY AS VAST AND POPULOUS AS INDIA, AIR TRAVEL MUST BECOME A FUNDAMENTAL NECESSITY, AVAILABLE TO PEOPLE ACROSS ALL ECONOMIC BACKGROUNDS. EXPANDING THE AVIATION NETWORK WOULD MAKE FLIGHTS MORE AFFORDABLE AND PRACTICAL FOR A LARGER SEGMENT OF THE POPULATION

number of airports would create thousands of jobs, attract investment, and boost regional economies. Improved air connectivity would enhance business operations, enable easier travel for tourists, and offer the general population a practical alternative to time-consuming road and rail journeys. Of course, developing new airports requires significant investment and time, but India has the potential to explore innovative solutions. One such approach is the conversion of highways into emergency runways—a model successfully implemented in the United States. This concept could be adapted for India, where strategically modifying highways to accommodate small aircraft could provide crucial air connectivity to remote regions without the high costs associated with building entirely new airports. Implementing such a strategy in states like West Bengal, could be a game-changer. These adapted road-runways could serve as cost-effective alternatives for enhancing air connectivity, benefiting both everyday commuters and emergency responders in times of crisis, such as natural disasters.

Across the Western world, air travel has evolved into an indispensable part of daily life. It is widely accessible, efficient, and affordable. In India, however, flying is still

perceived as a luxury, something beyond the reach of the average citizen.

This perception needs to change. In a country as vast and populous as India, air travel must become a fundamental necessity, available to people across all economic backgrounds. Expanding the aviation network would make flights more affordable and practical for a larger segment of the population.

India stands at a crucial juncture in its aviation journey. The country's rapid economic growth and massive population necessitate an equally rapid expansion of its air travel infrastructure. Government initiatives such as the UDAN scheme, which aims to enhance regional air connectivity, are a step in the right direction, but much more needs to be done. The goal should be to develop at least 1,500 new airports in the near future, ensuring that every region, particularly underserved areas like West Bengal, is well-connected.

Exploring innovative ideas like highway-runways, making air travel more affordable, and significantly increasing the number of airstrips are all essential steps toward closing India's aviation gap. The need for a robust aviation infrastructure is urgent, and the time to act is now.

(The writer is an associate professor; views are personal)

## A 90-hour workweek: Path to success or recipe for burnout

S N Subrahmanyam CMD Larsen and Toubro, has sparked intense debate with his proposal for a 90-hour workweek, drawing sharp criticism

S N Subrahmanyam, CMD of Larsen and Toubro, recently ignited a heated debate while expressing his regret over not being able to call employees to work even on Sundays. He also suggested a 90-hour work week—a figure that surpasses even the 70-hour work week advocated by Infosys founder NR Narayana Murthy. His comment assumes added significance when there is already a renewed debate in India on work pressure after the death of 26-year-old Ernst & Young employee, Anna Sebastian Perayil. And call it a quirk of fate, or merely incidental, L&T has now eaten a humble pie after its bid for a tender to build six submarines was shot down by the Ministry of Defence. Subrahmanyam's comment has been singularly dismissed by several corporate chiefs, including Anand Mahindra, Chairman, of Mahindra Group; Sanjiv Puri, CMD, ITC Limited; Harsh Vardhan Goenka, the current chairman of RPG Enterprises; Nalin Negi, BharatPe CEO; Rajiv Bajaj, Managing Director of Bajaj



Auto; and even Sanjeev Sanyal, Economist Member of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Economic Advisory Council. The circular issued by the Ministry of Labour and Employment of India, the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code, 2020, strictly says that no worker shall be required or allowed to work, in any establishment or class of establishments for more than eight hours in a day or forty-eight hours in a week. As per the International Labour Organisation (ILO) average of January 11, 2024, the average weekly working hours per employed person

across 10 of the world's largest economies is in: the United States, 38 hours per week; in China, 46.1 hours per week; Germany, 34.2 hours per week; Japan 36.6 hours per week; India 46.7 hours per week; United Kingdom, 35.9 hours per week; France, 35.9 hours per week; Brazil, 39 hours per week; Italy, 36.3 hours per week; Canada, 32.1 hours per week. However, India ranks 13th among the world's most overworked countries. With 46.7 average working hours per week, India faces a persistent culture of extended work schedules. The World Health Organisation also highlights

excessive work as a major public health concern linked to occupational diseases. According to the International Labour Organisation's data, Luxembourg enjoys the highest productivity with \$166.1k in terms of GDP per hour worked, with an average working week schedule of 35.6 hours. Ireland stands second with \$139.1k GDP per hour worked with an average work-week schedule of 35.6 hours. Whereas India has a labour productivity of \$10.7k GDP per hour worked with an average work-week schedule of 46.7 hours. The latest report, by Mc Kinsey Health Institute says that investing in employee health can substantially increase economic returns. Research by the Institute in collaboration with the World Economic Forum indicates that enhanced employee health and well-being could generate up to \$11.7 trillion in global economic value.

(The writer is a journalist and news anchor and writes on corporate affairs, finance; views expressed are personal)



MADHVI PANDEY

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

#### INDIA'S AI MISSION

Madam — This refers to the news report, "India prepares to take on ChatGPT, Deepseek" (January 31). The sensational launch of the Chinese start-up DeepSeek's AI system known as R1 has left the West dumbstruck. DeepSeek's claim that it developed R1 at 50 times the cheaper cost than OpenAI's ChatGPT with matching performance created mayhem in financial markets on January 30 as the Nasdaq witnessed its biggest wipeout in history.

Nvidia, the leading AI chip maker, was hit the worst as its stock price plunged 17 per cent. After American President Donald Trump termed DeepSeek a "wake-up call" for the US and urged US companies to stay competitive, fierce competition in the AI market is imminent. Amid these eye-opening developments, India has planned to build its world-class foundational models within less than one year under its ambitious India AI Mission. This shows India's global aspirations to become a frontrunner in the AI industry. In the last few years, India has resolved to develop advanced technologies indigenously and shed its dependency on other countries. India is aggressively developing its semiconductor industry to boost self-reliance, economic growth, and technological leadership under initiatives like the India Semiconductor Mission and PLI scheme.

Manoj Parashar | Ghaziabad

#### FOCUS ON ECONOMIC REVIVAL

Madam— Apropos, "Indian economy on fast lane," The Pioneer, January 30. With signs of a slowdown in the economy getting more pronounced, Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman who will be presenting the Union Budget today. The budget must not only address the weary private investment scenario in the country but also address the consumption slowdown. The economic growth is slowing, with GDP

#### ISRO'S 100th rocket launch: Yet another milestone



ISRO has added yet another feather to its cap with its 100th launch of GSLV, its most trusted workhorse rocket, from Sriharikota in 46 years and is planning to launch another hun-

dred of them in the next five years. GSLV is capable of launching satellites for both geosynchronous orbit (when it appears motionless from a point on the equator—primarily used for weather and communication and is placed at a very high altitude of about 42,000 km) and sun-synchronous orbit (when the satellite is passing over the same location at the same local time—used for imaging, weather forecasting, spying, and global observation at low altitudes of about 700 km, capable of capturing high-resolution images as a result).

This launch has put India in a much better situation to be self-reliant in its technology, giving a boost to its economy, defence, and spatial dominance in the near future. The ISRO scientists need to be applauded for their time-bound achievements and speed through their hard work and dedication.

R S Narula | Patiala

likely to grow at less than 7 per cent for at least the next three years, including the current one. The anaemic growth of the economy has already led to moderation in consumption a trend that has been on the show for a couple of years. The central bank has consciously put a leash on consumption-related lending as it sees it as an area of concern. With inflation continuing to remain high, the RBI has been holding interest rates at higher levels, further discouraging borrowers from taking loans for discretionary consumption.

All these factors have weighed down on corporate India, which has been slow in announcing new projects and investments. This shows in lower private investment numbers. As a result, the economy is now facing a vicious cycle, which the budget can break. In this backdrop, the government will have to loosen its purse strings a bit, let the people have more money in their hands, and give some more sops to corporations to prod them into investing. How it achieves these goals would depend on

how the government sees the current situation.

N Sadhasiva Reddy | Bengaluru

#### MIDAIR CRASH IN AMERICA KILLS 67

Madam — An American Airlines flight with 67 people aboard, including 4 crew members, collided with an Army helicopter while landing at Ronald Reagan National Airport near Washington DC in the nearby Potomac River. The US has the safest airspace in the world. The diversion of the air jet to land on a smaller runway just before landing may be a cause.

Also, the Army helicopter did not go up and down in the air over the river. The midair collision of the flight and the Army helicopter is more surprising in this digital age. The accident was preventable, and Trump blaming Obama and Biden's policies for the mishap is unacceptable.

N R Ramachandran | Chennai

Send your feedback to: [letterstopioneer@gmail.com](mailto:letterstopioneer@gmail.com)



### FIRST COLUMN

## A DIVINE CONVERGENCE OF LOVE AND LIBERATION

The Kumbh Mela has been a beacon for seekers, drawing masters and devotees alike



JAGATGURU SAI MA LAKSHMI DEVI

For centuries, great masters have been drawn to the Kumbh Mela, captivated by its spiritual magnetism. What is it that pulls us here? It is the profound energy of devotion, the irresistible force of divine love. Love itself is a magnet, and those who live in devotion radiate this magnetic power, naturally attracting others to them. Nowhere else on Earth do millions—crores upon crores—gather in unwavering dedication, chanting the name of the Divine, immersed in sadhana day and night. They come to bathe in this sacred energy and carry it forth into their lives, spreading its radiance wherever they go.

This Maha Kumbh is unlike any before it, offering an unprecedented caliber of cosmic energy. It is a spiritual phenomenon of global significance, where the highest frequencies of Source energy descend upon humanity. The grace of enlightenment is being bestowed, and the awakening of souls is unfolding.

Here, the sublime state of Soruba Samadhi will begin—a transformation that elevates both consciousness and matter itself. Cellular structures are being regenerated, linking human DNA to the divine imprint, connecting us to the immortal essence within. There is nothing quite like the experience of Kumbh. Imagine millions of souls gathering in one place, each radiating spiritual energy, creating an immense vortex of power. In this sacred space, we transcend our human identities and recognise ourselves as Atmas—pure souls



united in a grand cosmic dance. This collective energy is a force of love, light, and enlightenment, dissolving karmic burdens and opening the path to a majestic, divine life.

Though the present age presents its challenges, those who remain steadfast on the spiritual path will undergo profound transformation. The portals of the cosmos are open, offering liberation and awakening. The world we see is but an illusion—a play of maya—where all is transient except our love for the Divine. This love is our dharma, our ultimate purpose. The body, the mind, and the material world constantly change, but the eternal truth, Sathya, remains unchanged. We are that truth—Sat-Chit-Ananda, Tat Twam Asi—and our sadhana is to awaken to and embody this realization. At the Kumbh, in the embrace of Mata Ganga, we surrender and transform. The sacred waters purify us, activating the divine blueprint within. In this powerful vortex, we align with the highest expressions of Sanatana Dharma, experiencing profound spiritual elevation. This year, the influx of divine light is immense, inviting us to merge with its boundless brilliance and bliss. The ancient traditions of Moksha and enlightenment are more alive than ever. This is a time for purification, for letting go of attachments and the illusion of mortality. Sanatana Dharma, founded on selfless service, was exemplified by Adi Shankaracharya, who taught the wisdom of oneness.

Dharma—the eternal law—sustains creation itself. Regardless of the many religious paths, all stem from this universal truth. We have lived Dharma through countless lifetimes, whether we remember it or not. Kumbh Mela is a powerful catalyst for spiritual growth, drawing seekers from all over the world. Even those from lands where devotion is rare undergo profound shifts, their minds finding peace and their hearts blossoming. Here, millions chant together, and divine forces work to elevate collective consciousness. This is a time of great spiritual revolution, heralding the dawn of Sathya Yuga. Open your heart. Receive the blessings of your soul. Step into your truth and embrace the new age that is upon us.

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

# From OpenAI to DeepSeek: The fight for supremacy



NILANTHA ILANGAMUWA

With China rapidly closing the AI gap and geopolitical tensions shifting from military might to algorithmic dominance, the world is entering a digital cold war



Imagine a computer's hard drive containing a replica of your brain, connected to a high-speed internet. Your biological brain may become irrelevant when the machine not only possesses your mind but also gains control over everything you identify as 'who you are'. This is what General Artificial Intelligence (AGI) truly represents—the vast, unexplored frontier we are hurtling towards. The year begins not only with the most unpredictable politician in America reclaiming the Oval Office but also with an AI race that, once dominated by American startups, is now being swiftly overtaken by China at a significantly lower cost. We have crossed the Rubicon, heading towards an unknown destination; the consequences remain uncertain, and no one can predict what lies ahead.

The AI arms race, gaining unprecedented velocity, is propelling us into an era where the very foundations of intelligence, humanity, and civilisation are being deconstructed at an astonishing pace. Humanity, having long contended with the challenge of technology reshaping its self-perception, is now facing an existential dilemma unlike any before. The revolutions of Copernicus, which dethroned Earth from its presumed centrality in the cosmos, and Darwin, whose theory questioned humanity's divine distinction from the animal kingdom, fundamentally redefined our place in the universe. But neither of these paradigm shifts eroded the core of what it meant to be human. Artificial intelligence, however, threatens to do precisely that. AGI poses a question so starkly profound that it demands our full intellectual engagement: What happens when the very attribute we have long considered uniquely human—the capacity to reason, to create, to understand—becomes replicable, scalable, and infinitely more efficient, to the point where machines not only rival but surpass our cognitive limitations?

What becomes of the human essence when faced with entities capable of thinking faster, learning more swiftly, and ultimately transcending us in once inconceivable ways? This week, the new race in AI has surged ahead, with China unveiling the results of its years of intensive experimentation. The release of Qwen 2.5, followed by DeepSeek—an inexpensive yet formidable



AI, IN ITS MOST ADVANCED FORMS, BECOMES A REFLECTION OF OUR INTELLECTUAL FRAMEWORK—YET ONE THAT OPERATES FASTER, MORE EFFICIENTLY, AND WITH AN ABILITY TO LEARN THAT FAR EXCEEDS HUMAN POTENTIAL.

competitor to models like GPT-4 from OpenAI—has upended the established order. This shift is not merely a matter of technological rivalry; it signifies a profound realignment in global power, where the currency of influence is no longer military might or economic clout, but data control, computational resources, and technological ingenuity.

The new cold war is not one of armaments but of algorithms and information—an intellectual race whose stakes extend far beyond economic primacy to the very survival of human civilisation itself. As AI advances, it forces us to confront deeply uncomfortable truths about our nature. For millennia, humanity has positioned itself at the apex of intelligence on Earth, a secret of being a superspecies. Yet what occurs when our very creations—machines—begin to outshine us in those same domains? When we no longer retain exclusive dominion over intelligence, how does this fundamentally alter our sense of identity?

Are we, like the alchemists of antiquity, on the verge of realising that we no longer control our fate, but have given birth to entities that might one day supplant us? The very nature of intelligence itself is now irreversibly in question. Cognitive architectures, once the exclusive province of the human brain, are now being mirrored and surpassed by machines. AI, in its most advanced forms, becomes a reflection of our intellectual framework—yet one that operates faster, more efficiently, and with an ability to learn that far exceeds human potential. This is not merely an augmentation of human capabilities; it heralds the dawn of a new epoch, where human and machine cognition converge, indistinguishable and perhaps inseparable. As we approach this unenvying future, we must ask ourselves whether we are philosophically, politically, and socially prepared to co-exist with

entities that may one day rival or eclipse us.

Will we, as a species, embrace co-evolution, finding a new equilibrium in our relationship with machines, or will we cling to the false myth of human exceptionalism, attempting to subjugate or destroy the very creations we have birthed? The decisions we make now will echo far beyond our survival, influencing the very nature of intelligence and the future trajectory of all life on Earth. The geopolitical ramifications of this technological revolution are as profound as its existential implications. Powerful nations with vast resources for research, development, and energy will continue to dominate the future, while smaller countries may face unprecedented crises, including crises concerning their own identity.

As AI becomes embedded in the infrastructure of global politics, we are entering an era of digital empires—systems of control as potent as any traditional nation-state, commanding not only information but the very nature of human interaction. In this new digital cold war, the battle is not merely for technological supremacy, but for control over the global political system itself. Is the rise of AI an essential leap forward in humanity's evolution, or does it signal the twilight of human relevance?

Some may argue that AI is a necessary tool, a portal that helps protect us from the danger of total annihilation. Others, however, may see it as a harbinger of obsolescence, a point of no return when our creations ascend to power and render us irrelevant. However, there is a subtler, more philosophical interpretation of this transformative shift: Perhaps the advent of AGI is not our fall from grace, but the birth of a new chapter in human evolution—one where we transcend the biological constraints that have long defined us.

Like our ancestors who tamed fire and invented the wheel, we may soon wield AI as a tool that propels us to new heights. The fusion of human and artificial intelligence could lead to a post-human condition—not one of extinction, but of surpassing the boundaries of our biological form and entering a phase of hybridised existence. This, of course, depends on our ability to confront the ethical and political structures that accompany the rise of AGI.

The true challenge is not whether we will create machines that surpass us in intelligence, but whether we have the wisdom to ensure they remain our allies rather than adversaries. We must learn to co-exist with these new intelligences, integrating them into our societies in ways that enhance, rather than diminish, our humanity. This is the existential challenge of our time—one that will determine whether the era of artificial intelligence will culminate in annihilation or transcendence.

Ultimately, the measure of our humanity will not lie in our ability to create machines that rival us in intelligence, but in our capacity to retain those qualities that define us: empathy, creativity, and the willingness to evolve in response to monumental change. If we can meet this challenge, the future—however uncertain—will hold at least the promise of our fragile humanity. If not, we may find ourselves consigned to the dustbin of history, supplanted by the very entities we have created. Are we prepared to face the unknown abyss, or will we cower in fear, clinging to the comforting illusions of the past? The future, it seems, is no longer entirely within our grasp—but perhaps this is precisely the kind of leap forward we need to ensure our survival.

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

## Elevating CSR in India: From compliance to impact-driven transformation

While many corporations are genuinely committed to social welfare, issues like fund misallocation, tokenism and unethical practices threaten the integrity of CSR

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in India has significantly progressed over the past decade. Introduced as a legal mandate in 2013, CSR has evolved from a mere compliance obligation to a fundamental requirement, with organisations across various industries incorporating social welfare into their core operations. However, as we continue into 2025 and beyond, there is an urgent need to elevate the current CSR practices—ensuring they are effective, accountable, and transparent. While many companies have shown a sincere commitment to social impact, others have unfortunately fallen into the vicious traps of misallocation of funds, tokenism, and questionable practices like kick-

backs and paybacks. Additionally, the emergence of corporations establishing their NGOs presents a mixed picture; while some are genuinely committed to their missions, many operate as "skeleton NGOs," where staff often demand kickbacks and the intended social welfare purpose gets lost.

### A New and Enhanced Era for CSR Compliance

Compliance remains an important aspect of effective CSR. However, it is not just about meeting the mandatory spending requirement but also about ensuring that every rupee spent reaches where it was originally intended—directly benefiting those in need. While many corporations have dutifully allocated the mandated 2 per cent of



GEETANJALI CHOPRA

their profits towards social welfare, there is still a need for a more robust system to ensure regular oversight and real-time monitoring of fund utilisation and project outcomes. With stronger and more transparent laws, we can ensure that funds reach the intended beneficiaries, fostering trust between the government, corporations, and communities alike.

### Ensuring Integrity in CSR: Addressing Kickbacks and Paybacks

One of the biggest challenges facing CSR today is the lack of trust caused by unethical practices. Often, when intermediaries or implementing agencies misappropriate resources for personal gain, the integrity of CSR initiatives is compromised. To address this issue, it is vital to introduce strict anti-corruption policies and establish independent monitoring mechanisms. When corporations know they are being monitored or supervised, they will think twice before engaging in malpractice. Ensuring integrity is not just about preventing financial losses; it is about preserving the trust of communities that often



rely on CSR for a better future.

### Impact-Driven CSR

CSR should move beyond compliance; it needs to be impact-driven. The focus should shift from merely fulfilling legal obligations to measuring the difference being made on the ground. Strengthening accountability will ensure CSR is not reduced to a token gesture but becomes

a genuine agent of transformation. Moreover, corporations should also embrace innovation in their CSR approaches. Whether it is by using technology to improve healthcare access in rural areas, providing quality education through digital platforms, or addressing climate change with green initiatives, one must think beyond traditional models and adopt solutions that leave a lasting impact.

### The Role of Stakeholders

Accountability is not just the sole responsibility of corporations; other stakeholders—governments, NGOs, and civil society—also have an essential role to play in shaping the future of CSR. The government must act as an active regulator, ensuring companies adhere to guidelines while

incentivising innovation and collaboration. On the other hand, NGOs, as implementation partners, must continue to bring grassroots expertise and ensure that every rupee spent makes a difference. Communities must also be empowered to hold corporations accountable. By involving local stakeholders in the planning and execution of projects, we can create a feedback loop that enhances transparency and boosts the on-the-ground impact of CSR initiatives.

### The Way Forward

The ongoing changes to the CSR framework present a golden opportunity to usher in a new era of accountability and impact. This calls for a change that ensures CSR initiatives are not only executed with integri-

ty but with genuine purpose. The government, too, must play its part by introducing reforms that incentivise genuine efforts while penalising any kind of malpractice. If implemented correctly, this strengthened CSR framework can ensure that social welfare is not merely a checkbox for corporations but a collective mission to uplift the underserved. As stakeholders in this ecosystem—corporates, non-profits, government, and the public—we must all push for a transparent and impactful CSR environment. Only then will CSR in India live up to its promise of creating a better world for all.

*(The writer is founder and d president, Wishes and Blessings NGO; views expressed are personal)*





# Lithuanian prez backs Trump's NATO defence spending goal

AP ■ VILNIUS

Securing an end to the fighting in Ukraine must take place with Kyiv's full involvement and come with more defense spending by regional countries to avoid any future Russian aggression, according to Lithuania's president. Gitanas Nausėda, the president of the Baltic coastal nation, told The Associated Press in an interview Thursday that a settlement negotiated without proper deterrent measures would allow Russia to consolidate its forces and prepare for further aggression in the region. Nausėda said that even when a ceasefire is reached in Ukraine, "you cannot believe that the intentions of Russia will be just to stop and do nothing." "They will use this break in order to consolidate, to strengthen the military capabilities and to strike again in the future," he told the AP in Vilnius. "And then the main question is, what will be the next target of Russia? Ukraine, maybe, Baltic countries, maybe, Lithuania, which was occupied by the Soviet Union until

1990, is increasingly worried about the ongoing brutal war in Ukraine and the aggression of its neighbour Russia. Its geographical position — bordering Russia's Kaliningrad exclave to the west and Moscow's proxy Belarus to the east — make it vulnerable to a potential broader conflict launched from the Kremlin even after an eventual end to the war, Nausėda said. "You can never feel safe living in this part of the world, because we have this neighbor, and we will still have it after one hundred or two hundred years," Nausėda said of Russia. "You always have the threat from the East, and you must be aware and take all the necessary precautionary measures in order not to be attacked." "This is not individual country-by-country conflict," he added. "This is a challenge of Putin towards NATO." Unacceptable if ceasefire plans exclude Kyiv The country recently became the first member of the NATO military alliance to commit to raising its defence spending to at least 5 per cent of its overall national economic output, as called for

by US President Donald Trump. A longtime critic of NATO countries that do not spend more on defence, Trump has threatened he would not defend alliance members that fail to meet defense spending goals. While some European countries have signalled upping their spending to Trump's desired 5 per cent of GDP would be an economic burden, other nations on the alliance's eastern flank, including Lithuania, have greeted the proposal as a necessity. Before Trump took office earlier this month, questions over how he would engage with the war in Ukraine loomed over European countries as some speculated he would roll back the crucial military aid provided by the administration of President Joe Biden. But after his inauguration, Trump threatened to impose sanctions and tariffs on Moscow, and urged Russian President Vladimir Putin to "settle now and stop this ridiculous war." Nausėda said the new US administration must ensure that Kyiv is fully involved in

negotiations to end the fighting, and that a resolution to the conflict should not be drawn up bilaterally between Moscow and Washington. "It would be unacceptable if the peace would be set behind the doors and without the involvement of Ukraine," he said. "Ukraine paid a very high price in this war. Ukraine lost many human lives. Infrastructure, facilities and houses are destroyed. The Ukrainian people deserve the right to set the conditions of this peace." "I think that President Donald Trump understands that: no peace negotiations without Ukraine," he added. Another security concern facing Lithuania and the region is a series of events that have damaged undersea cables and gas pipelines in the Baltic Sea. At least 11 Baltic cables have been damaged since October 2023. Most recently, a fibre optic cable connecting Latvia and the Swedish island of Gotland reportedly ruptured on Sunday. NATO launched a new mission dubbed "Baltic Sentry" earlier this month to protect the underwater infrastructure vital to the economic well-being of

the region. Although cable operators note that sub-sea cable damage is commonplace, the frequency and concentration of incidents in the Baltic have heightened suspicions that damage might have been deliberate. To address those concerns, Nausėda said, "It is time for us to show some muscle." "NATO and the EU should take more responsibility in surveying the Baltic Sea, bringing additional maritime capabilities to prevent such incidents in the future," he said. Some politicians in Lithuania have objected to the country raising its military expenditures, already among the highest relative to GDP in the 32-member NATO alliance. But Nausėda said Lithuania must show that it can be responsible for its own defence. "This is an absolutely clear priority for this country, as a frontline country, that we have to spend more," he said. "Of course, we can rely on the support of our allies in NATO. But it would be naive to expect that somebody will care about our security if there will be clear indications that we are not able to defend ourselves."

# US Prez mum on pulling out troops from Syria

AP ■ WASHINGTON

President Donald Trump is declining to say whether he intends to maintain current US troop levels in Syria. We'll make a determination on that," Trump told reporters on Thursday when asked if he intends to withdraw US troops deployed to Syria to fight the Islamic State group. "We're not involved in Syria. Syria's its own mess. They got enough messes over there. They don't need us involved with everything." The US had said for years that there were about 900 troops in Syria, but the Pentagon acknowledged in December that US troop levels had surged to about 2,000. There has long been friction between the US and Syria's neighbours - Türkiye and

Iraq - about the ongoing presence of American forces in Syria and the need to keep them at a particular level. Israel meanwhile has urged the US to maintain a presence in the country. Trump said just before rebels ousted Syrian leader Bashar Assad in December that the US military should stay out of Syria. Trump is also not giving up on the idea of Egypt and Jordan taking in Palestinians from the Gaza Strip, even as the leaders of both countries have flatly rejected the idea. "They're going to do it," Trump said in exchange with reporters on Thursday, when asked whether he could force Egypt and Jordan to take in Palestinians from the war-torn territory. "We do a lot for them and they're going to do it." Trump does have

leverage to wield over Jordan and Egypt, two strategically important US allies that are heavily dependent on US aid. Trump first floated the idea last week, saying he would urge the leaders of the two Arab countries to take in Gaza's now largely homeless population, so that "we just clean out that whole thing." He added that resettling most of war-torn Gaza's population of 2.3 million could be temporary or long term. Human rights groups have already accused Israel of ethnic cleansing, which United Nations experts define as a policy designed by one ethnic or religious group to remove the civilian population of another group from certain areas "by violent and terror-inspiring means."

# US aid agency in upheaval during foreign assistance freeze

Washington (AP) — Trump administration changes have upended the US agency charged with providing humanitarian aid to countries overseas, with dozens of senior officials put on leave, thousands of contractors laid off, and a sweeping freeze imposed on billions of dollars in foreign assistance. Secretary of State Marco Rubio defended the pause on foreign assistance Thursday, saying "the US government is not a charity." Aid organisations say the funding freeze — and deep confusion over what US-funded programmes must stop work as a result — has left them agonizing over whether they could continue operating programmes such as those providing round-the-clock nutritional support to extremely malnourished infants and children, knowing that closing the doors means that many of those children would die. Current and former officials at the State Department and the US Agency for International Development say staffers were invited to submit requests to exempt certain programs from the foreign aid freeze, which President Donald Trump imposed Jan. 20 and the State Department detailed how to execute on Jan. 24. Three days later, at least 56 senior career USAID staffers were abruptly placed on admin-

istrative leave. Three officials said many of those put on leave were lawyers involved in determining what programmes might qualify for waivers, helping write proposals and submitting those waiver requests as they believed they had been invited to do. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisal. A Trump administration directive that aid organizations interpret as a gag order has left them unwilling to speak publicly for fear of permanently losing US funding. In an internal memo Monday about the staffing changes, new acting USAID administrator Jason Gray said the agency had identified "several actions within USAID that appear to be designed to circumvent the President's Executive Orders and the mandate from the American people." "As a result, we have placed a number of USAID employees on administrative leave with full pay and benefits until further notice while we complete our analysis of these actions," Gray wrote. A former senior USAID official said those put on leave had been helping aid organizations navigate the "confusing process" to seek waivers from the aid pause for specific life-saving projects, such as continuing clean water supplies for displaced people in war zones.

# BRICS nations warned against replacing US dollar

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

President Donald Trump has once again warned that he will impose 100 per cent tariffs against BRICS nations if they attempt to replace the US dollar in international trade, telling them to go and find "another sucker nation." BRICS is an intergovernmental organisation of ten countries — Russia, India, China, South Africa, Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates. "The idea that the BRICS countries are trying to move away from the dollar, while we stand by and watch, is OVER," Trump said on Thursday in a post on Truth Social, a social media platform owned by him. Trump said he wanted a commitment from these "seemingly hostile" coun-



President Donald Trump signs a document in the Oval Office at the White House, Thursday in Washington.

tries that they would neither create a new BRICS currency nor back any other currency to replace the "mighty" US dollar. "Or they will face 100 per cent tariffs, and should expect to say goodbye to selling into the wonderful US economy," Trump said. "They can go find another sucker nation." There is no chance that BRICS will replace the US dollar in international trade, or anywhere else, and any country that tries should say hello to tariffs, and goodbye to America!" Trump threatened. Although Trump has repeatedly criticized BRICS nations against any move to float their own currency, this is his strongest opposition to it so far. In December too, Trump warned BRICS nations

against such a move. BRICS is an intergovernmental organisation of ten countries — Russia, India, China, South Africa, Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates. BRICS, formed in 2009, is the only major international group of which the US is not a part. Over the past few years, a few of its member countries, in particular Russia and China, are seeking to have an alternative to the US dollar or create BRICS currency. India, an important pillar of BRICS, has said it was against de-dollarisation. External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar in December said India had never been for de-dollarisation and there was no proposal to have a BRICS currency.



Palestinians walk past a mosque destroyed by Israeli airstrikes in Nuseirat, Gaza Strip, Friday days after a ceasefire deal between Israel and Hamas came into effect.

# Serbian student protesters march ahead of major blockade of Danube bridges

AP ■ INDIJJA

A driver in Belgrade, rammed a car into a silent protest in the Serbian capital on Friday, slightly injuring one woman, the third such incident in weeks. The incident happened in downtown Belgrade during 15 minutes of silence observed daily throughout Serbia at noon when a canopy collapsed at a railway station in the northern town of Novi Sad on November 1. Video footage showed the woman, wearing a doctor's white coat, being thrown to the pavement. Pro-government thugs have repeatedly attacked the protesters, many of them students, twice ramming cars into demonstrations. Two people were seriously injured in the previous attacks. After spending a freezing night out in the open, hundreds of striking students on Friday resumed their 2-day

anti-graft protest march from the capital, Belgrade, to the northern city of Novi Sad, where they plan to blockade three bridges over the River Danube this weekend. The bridge blockade is planned for Saturday to mark three months since the huge concrete construction at the railway station collapsed in Novi Sad on November 1, leaving 15 people dead. What started two months ago as a protest against suspected corruption in construction contracts has developed into the most serious challenge in years to the country's powerful populist leader, President Aleksandar Vucic. Along the way to Novi Sad, the students were greeted by cheering citizens, honking their car horns or coming out of their homes with offers of refreshments and food. When they reached the town of Indijja on Thursday, rough-

ly halfway along their 80-kilometer (50-mile) route, they were welcomed with fireworks and cheers from residents. Although most of them spent the night out in the open in a soccer field, the freezing temperatures did not dampen their desire for major changes in the corruption-ridden Balkan state. Nevena Vecerinac, a student, said she hoped the protesters' demands that include the punishment of all those responsible for the rail station tragedy will be fulfilled. "We will make it to Novi Sad," she said. "Yesterday's walk was easy. It's cold now, but we can make it. We all have the same goal." "We need support from all people. With this energy and mood I hope we can do it, otherwise there will be no brighter future," said Luka Arsenovic, another student marcher. Many in Serbia believe that the

collapse of the overhang at the train station was essentially caused by government corruption in a large infrastructure project with Chinese state companies. Critics believe graft led to a sloppy job during the reconstruction of the Novi Sad train station, poor oversight and disrespect of existing safety regulations. Monthslong demonstrations have already forced the resignation of Serbia's prime minister Milos Vucelic this week, along with various concessions from authorities which were ignored by the protesters who say that is not enough. Vucic and other officials have shifted from accusing the students of working with foreign powers to oust him, to offering concessions or issuing veiled threats. Pro-government thugs have repeatedly attacked the students, twice ramming cars into protests.

# Istanbul mayor testifies over legal probes against him

Istanbul (AP) — Police on Friday fired tear gas to disperse a group of protesters who clashed with officers outside an Istanbul courthouse while rallying in support of the city's mayor, who was called to give testimony in two new legal probes against him. Ekrem Imamoglu, a potential future leader of Turkey's main opposition Republican People's Party, or CHP, and a possible challenger to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, testified before prosecutors for two hours. The testimony was in connection with comments he made about a chief prosecutor and a court expert. Critics argue that these probes are part of an effort to remove Imamoglu from the political scene. The politician has already been convicted of charges of insulting members of Turkey's Supreme Electoral Council and faces a political ban if his conviction in 2022 is upheld by a high court. He is also on trial on charges that he was involved in the alleged rigging of bids in a tender dating back to 2015. Thousands of supporters gathered outside the Caglayan courthouse to protest the legal actions against Imamoglu. Tensions escalated when riot police blocked a CHP bus, which serves as a podium for politicians, from approaching the courthouse. The move led to clashes between the protesters and the police, who responded with tear gas. It was not clear if any arrests were made. Imamoglu later addressed the crowds from the top of the bus at another location. "Today's issue is an issue of justice, an issue of seeking rights and justice," the mayor said. "Unfortunately, today's issue stems from a conspiracy that is being set up against Istanbul." Imamoglu, 53, was first elected to lead Istanbul in March 2019. His win was a historic blow to Erdogan's Justice and Development Party, which had controlled Istanbul for a quarter-century.

# Sunita Williams sets record for total spacewalking time by woman

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

Indian-origin astronaut Sunita Williams has broken the record for total spacewalking time by a woman by logging 62 hours and 6 minutes of spacewalk. Williams and her colleague Butch Wilmore, who have been stranded on the International Space Station (ISS) since June 2024, conducted a spacewalk on Thursday. The duo ventured outside the ISS to remove degraded radio communications hardware and collect samples that may show whether microorganisms exist on the exterior of the orbiting laboratory. The spacewalk began at 7:43 am Eastern Time (ET) and concluded at 1:09 pm ET, lasting 5 hours and 26 minutes. It was the ninth spacewalk for Williams and the fifth for



Williams. "NASA astronaut Suni Williams just surpassed former astronaut Peggy Whitson's total spacewalking time of 60 hours and 21 minutes," NASA said in a post on X. She surpassed Whitson's record for total spacewalking time by a female astronaut. Williams now has 62 hours and 6 minutes of total spacewalk time, fourth on NASA's all-time list, according to NASA.

In 2012, during a trip to the ISS, Williams became the first person to finish a triathlon in space, during which she simulated swimming using a weight-lifting machine and ran on a treadmill while strapped in by a harness so she wouldn't float away. Williams, 59, and Wilmore went on what was meant to be an eight-day mission to the ISS aboard Boeing's Starliner in June 2024. However, technical issues including helium leaks and thruster malfunctions meant that the Starliner was unsafe for their return. NASA plans to bring them back to Earth in late March aboard a spaceship built by SpaceX, a rival company of Boeing. Despite these setbacks, the astronauts have continued their work aboard the ISS while awaiting a safe journey home.

# Myanmar's military govt extends state of emergency by 6 months

AP ■ BANGKOK

Myanmar's military government on Friday announced another six-month extension of its mandate to rule in preparation for elections it has said will be held this year, as the country enters its fifth year of crisis. However, it did not announce an exact date for the polls. The military declared a state of emergency on February 1, 2021, when it arrested the country's leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, and top officials from her government in an army takeover which reversed years of progress toward democracy after five decades of earlier military rule. The takeover sparked an armed resistance movement, with powerful ethnic minority militias and people's defense forces

that support Myanmar's main opposition now controlling large parts of the country. The military government is currently facing its greatest challenge since taking power and is on the defensive in much of the country. However, it is still able to hold onto much of central Myanmar and big cities including the capital, Naypyidaw. State-run MRTV television reported on Friday that the National Defence and Security Council decided unanimously to grant an extension of emergency rule after Senior Gen. Ming Aung Hlaing, the head of the military government, argued that more time was needed to restore stability to the country to hold national elections. The council is nominally a constitutional administrative

government body, but in practice is controlled by the military. Under the army-drafted 2008 Constitution, the military was able to rule the country under a state of emergency for one year, followed by two possible six-month extensions before holding elections. However, the extension on Friday is the seventh. Tom Andrews, a special rapporteur with the UN Human Rights Office, said in a statement on Thursday that four years of military oppression, violence and incompetence have cast Myanmar into an abyss. The United Nations has estimated that more than 3.5 million people have been displaced by the conflict. "Junta forces have slaughtered thousands of civilians, bombed and burned villages, and displaced millions of people. More





# RETELLING CINEMA IN ART

Art and cinema connect deeply as *Bond to Bachchan* by Masha Art celebrates Bollywood's enduring legacy, **SAKSHI PRIYA**

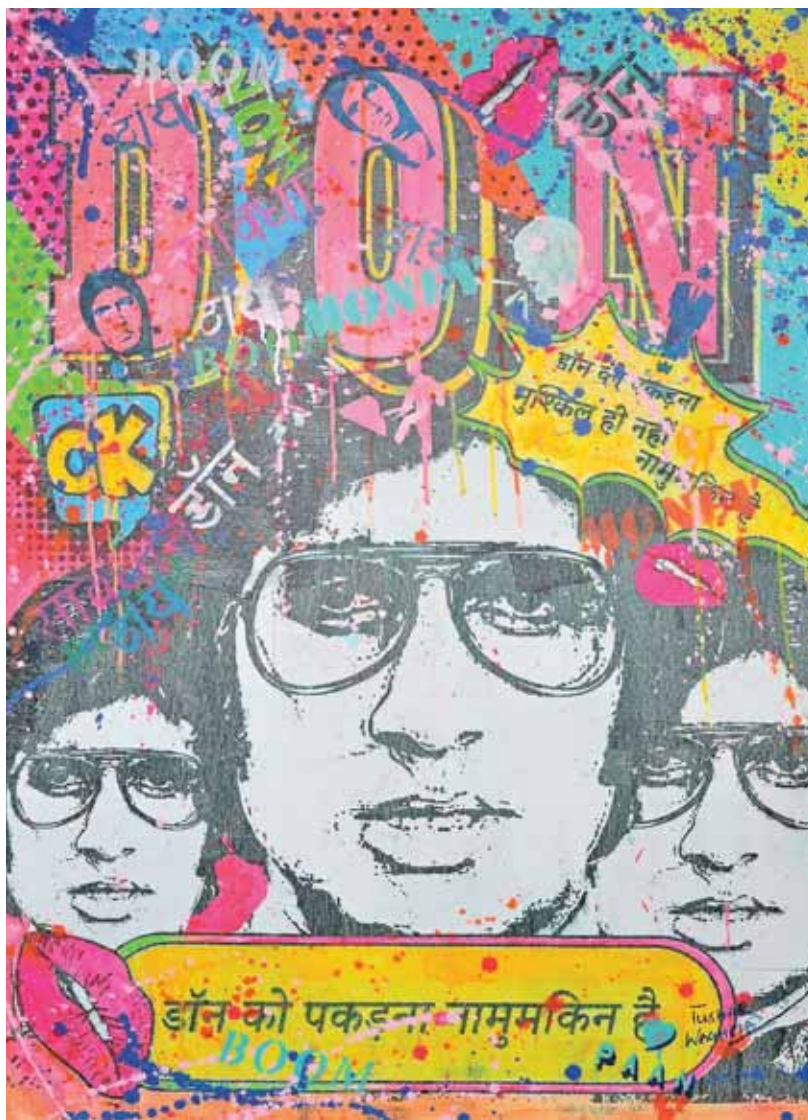


When art and cinema meet, they don't just coexist, they create a vibrant and immersive experience that connects with audiences on a deep emotional level. The *Bond to Bachchan* exhibition, presented by Masha Art and curated by Georgina Maddox, is an exemplary showcase of this powerful union. Featuring 21 works by 15 artists, the exhibition explores the profound cultural impact of two cinematic legends, *James Bond* and *Amitabh Bachchan*. The exhibition is a tribute to the enduring influence of these cinematic icons. It celebrates how *Bond* and *Bachchan* not only shaped the landscape of global pop culture but also continue to inspire artists, going beyond generations and inspiring fresh perspectives in modern-day art. The exhibition, which serves as a preview to Masha Art's upcoming India

Art Fair showcase, features a captivating collection of paintings, sculptures and digital installations. Each artwork probes into the personas and cinematic journeys of *Bond* and *Bachchan*, offering viewers a fresh and creative lens through which they can reimagine these iconic figures. *Samarth Mathur*, Founder and Managing Director of Masha Art, explains that the exhibition is a monumental celebration of cinema's enduring influence on contemporary art. Each piece is a unique interpretation of the legacy of these figures, reflecting not just their roles on screen but also their emotional depth and the larger-than-life personas they have cultivated over decades.

One of the standout pieces of the exhibition is *Golden Era in Cinema* by *Shri Kumar Adhikari*. This stunning work merges Mughal miniature painting with the golden age of Indian cinema, particularly the 1960s and 1970s. Featuring iconic scenes from films like *Sholay* and *Mera Naam Joker*, the piece is a nostalgic tribute to Indian film history. *Adhikari's* signature technique, which incorporates intricate Mughal detailing, is brought to life with contemporary touches using acrylics, giving the piece a fresh, modern twist.

*Ankur Rana's Smoke Up Bolly* is another compelling painting featured in the exhibition. This piece is a tribute to the iconic Bollywood actress *Zeenat Aman*, widely regarded as one of the most powerful and enigmatic figures in the Indian film industry. *Rana's* artwork captures *Zeenat Aman* in all her glory, combining softness with boldness. The rising smoke in the painting symbolises the duality of her persona, embodying her magnetic presence and mysterious allure. *Rana's* depiction of *Aman* is a fitting homage to her legacy, highlighting her unique contribution to the world of



cinema and fashion during the 1970s and 1980s. The fluidity of the smoke creates a visual link between the stark contrasts in her on-screen roles, from the femme fatale to the heartthrob.

Another thought-provoking piece in the exhibition is *Bridging Realms* by *Shovin Bhattacharjee*. This mixed media sculpture incorporates stainless steel, fibre, light, acrylic and aluminium that represents the confluence of art, cinema and spirituality. *Bhattacharjee* explores the power of cinema to outdoes cultural boundaries and act as a unifying force. The spherical shape of the sculpture symbolises the intersection of multiple worlds, representing the smooth connection between the entertainment industry and the transformative power of storytelling. The piece also honours the resilience of individual voices and celebrates the roles of women in cinema, particularly within the context of the *Bond* and *Bachchan* legacies. *Bhattacharjee's* work adds a layer of depth to the exhibition, drawing attention to how art, cinema and meditation all serve as vehicles for personal and societal change.

This exhibition truly remarkable is how deeply it engages viewers. People aren't just walking past the art, they are stopping, reflecting and appreciating each piece with immense care and attention. Some viewers stand in front of particular works for several minutes, lost in the intricate details and rich symbolism. The works are so powerful that they almost seem to leap off the canvas, evoking emotions that mirror the feelings one experiences while watching a film. The connection between art and cinema becomes almost tangible, as each piece encapsulates a moment from cinematic history, inviting viewers to reflect on how these moments have influenced their own lives.



The collection of artworks immerses the viewer in a conversation between art and cinema, offering fresh perspectives on iconic figures from Indian cinema. The artists' creative interpretations challenge traditional boundaries, making the exhibition a dynamic exploration of how cinema continues to inspire the visual arts.

In addition to the paintings and sculptures, *Bond to Bachchan* includes digital installations that merge visual storytelling with cutting-edge technology. These installations add another dimension to the exhibition, encouraging visitors to think critically about the role of technology in both cinema and contemporary art. The combination of traditional and digital mediums creates a layered experience, one that deepens our understanding of both art forms.

*Bond to Bachchan* a tribute to two cinematic icons and a celebration of the power of storytelling. *Bond to Bachchan* is an exhibition that should not be missed. It is a fascinating exploration of cinema's cultural impact and its enduring influence on contemporary art, offering a fresh and thought-provoking perspective on two of the world's most iconic cinematic figures.

PHOTOS: PANKAJ KUMAR



## Moulding Ideas into Reality

By **SAKSHI PRIYA**  
Art has a way of saying things that words sometimes can't, it touches something deep inside, speaking directly to our emotions and thoughts. Each piece tells a story and those stories invite us to connect, whether it's a feeling, a memory or a thought that stays with us long after we've walked away.

*Saffronart* presents *Alchemies of Form*, a showcase of monumental sculptures by *Krishen Khanna*, *Himmat Shah*, *Thota Vaikuntam*, *Dhananjay Singh*, *Phaneendra Nath Chaturvedi* and *Yashika Sugandh*, curated by *Uma Nair*. The exhibit transforms Bikaner House into a space where the sculptures don't just sit still, they engage with you, making you pause and reflect.

*Krishen Khanna's Retired Captain* is an invitation to look closer. Crafted with resinated fibreglass and automotive paint, this piece gives life to a retired accordion player, frozen in a moment that feels both personal and intimate. It's not just a sculpture, it's a story, one you want to hear.

*Himmat Shah's* work offers a different kind of invitation. The calm, serene forms of *Rajnagar white marble* and *Bheslana black marble* are an exploration in stillness. They invite quiet reflection, drawing the viewer in with their delicate simplicity, revealing the power of subtlety in art. *Thota Vaikuntam's* pieces bring bold energy and colour into the space. The

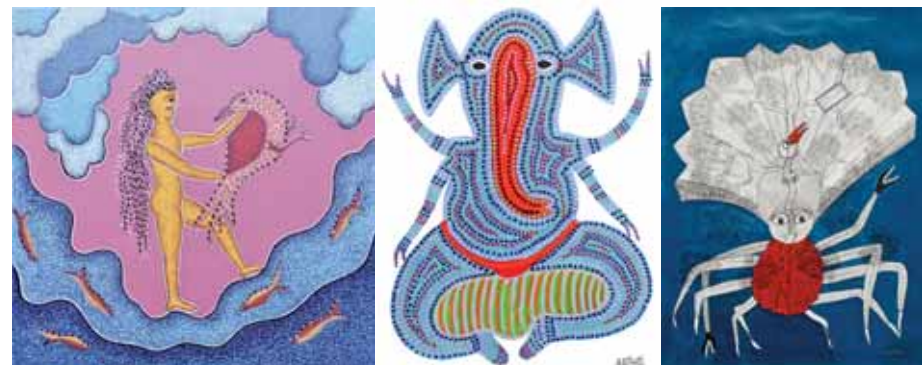


sculptures of women from Telangana radiate strength and beauty. With their vibrant colours and powerful postures, they pull you into their world, urging you to appreciate the richness of identity and culture that they represent. *Dhananjay Singh's Jungle* takes on the wild, untamed beauty of nature. The stainless steel wire feels fragile, yet complex and full of life. It draws a direct connection between human-made form and the unpredictable forces of nature. It's a visual reminder

of how chaotic and beautiful life can be. *Phaneendra Nath Chaturvedi's Chaturayatan-3* captures the essence of change. Made of high-gloss stainless steel, it reflects everything around it, shifting as the viewer moves. It's a commentary on transformation and perception, nothing stays the same and the world constantly reshapes itself. *Yashika Sugandh's Matar* offers a moment of calm amidst the dynamic energy of the other pieces. Crafted from acrylic on fibre resin and nylon, it evokes a

sense of softness and tranquillity. The gentle curves and subtle colours encourage you to pause, breathe and reflect, showing how even the quietest moments can leave a lasting impression. These monumental sculptures do more than just fill space. They tell stories, provoke thoughts and challenge how we see the world around us. Each piece carries its own rhythm and message, pulling us into a conversation between the artist and the viewer. *Alchemies of Form* is a chance to engage with art in a way that feels immediate, visceral and real.

PHOTOS: PANKAJ KUMAR



## A World Painted in Blue

By **TEAM VIVA**  
What is it about the colour blue that captivates the imagination? From serene skies to vast oceans, blue has long been associated with peace, hope and endless possibilities. This evocative colour takes centre stage at *Harvest 2024*, presented by *Payal Kapoor of Arushi Arts*, under the theme *Blue Horizons*.

The exhibition offers visitors a chance to explore art inspired by the symbolism of blue across cultures and history. Blue has held a significant place in human civilisation, cherished in Indian art and far-eastern traditions and revered in Western masterpieces. Artists like *Monet*, *Van Gogh* and *Picasso* have embraced its depth to convey emotions and ideas and this exhibition continues that legacy.

The artworks on display evoke tranquillity while stirring deep emotions. *K.G. Subramanyan's* pieces, with their playful narratives, draw viewers into a world of vivid storytelling. *Shobha Broota's* minimalist approach creates a meditative experience, while *Satish Gupta's* works are admired for their intricate details and spiritual undertones. *Lado Bai's* vibrant depictions of tribal life and traditions stand out, bridging the gap between cultural heritage and contemporary



expression. Each artist interprets blue in a way that feels both personal and universally relatable. The layers of textures, interplay of light and shadow and central use of blue create a visual narrative that inspires introspection and connection. The exhibition showcases a variety of perspectives, celebrating art's ability to unite history, emotion and creativity. This thoughtfully curated showcase of talent is a must-visit for art lovers and anyone looking to experience the magic of blue. *Held at W-23, GK-II, New Delhi*, the exhibition is open daily from 11:00 AM to 6:00 PM. This showcase of creativity and talent remains open until **10th February 2024**.



## FROM SITAR TO SAROD

By **TEAM VIVA**  
Music lovers gathered for a special evening as the *Raga Fellowship Foundation* brought together two maestros. An evening with sitarist *Abhik Mukherjee* and sarod player *Arbab Chakrabarty* proved just that. Their performance celebrated tradition, devotion, and the timeless beauty of Indian classical music.

*Mukherjee* began with a mesmerising 50-minute rendition of *Raga Puriya*, playing through the pain of an injured finger. His alaap was rich with emotion, each note carefully placed, making the raga feel fresh and deeply personal. His jod and jhala



sections carried a quiet intensity, and his adaptation of khayal compositions from the Agra gharana into sitar gats brought a new dimension to the music. *Ustad Rafiuddin*

*Sabri's* tabla accompaniment provided a steady yet dynamic rhythm, adding depth to *Mukherjee's* melodies. *Chakrabarty* followed with *Raga Hamer*, playing with a

grace that felt both effortless and profound. His alaap unfolded gently, drawing listeners into the raga's mood. The rhythmic flow of his Dhamar composition, set to

*Rupak tala*, added a lively pulse to the performance. With *Pandit Durjay Bhaumik* on tabla, the exchange between melody and rhythm was deeply engaging. The evening ended with *Raga Gara*, a tribute to *Chakrabarty's* musical roots, bringing a sense of warmth and nostalgia.

As the final notes faded, there was a moment of silence before the applause began, reflecting the depth of the experience. For those in attendance, it was a night of pure musical joy, a reminder of the enduring power of music to move hearts and bring people together.

# Manchester United, Tottenham reach Europa League round of 16

PTI ■ LONDON

**M**anchester United and Tottenham put their inconsistent domestic campaigns aside and advanced to the Europa League round of 16. Diogo Dalot tapped in a precise cross by Kobbie Mainoo on the hour mark and Mainoo netted eight minutes later for a 2-0 victory over Romanian champion FCSB in Bucharest on Thursday. Tottenham got goals from academy graduates to beat Swedish club Elfsborg 3-0 in London. Spurs waited until the 70th minute for substitute Dane Scarlett to break the deadlock before adding two more through substitute Damola Ajayi and 17-year-old Mikey Moore. Of the 36 teams in the revamped competition, the top eight go directly to the round of 16 in March. Teams ranked ninth to 24th go into the two-legged knockout

playoffs on Feb. 13 and Feb. 20 with the winners making the last 16. **The draw is scheduled for Friday.** United, which is 12th in the Premier League, competed the league phase of the second-tier European competition in third place and undefeated with five wins and three draws, trailing the top by one point. "Kobbie (Mainoo) played very well in that position, with more freedom and not so much responsibility running back all the time," United manager Ruben Amorim told TNT Sports. "The lads did a good job, another clean sheet." Amorim's squad has shown signs of improvement since he said the team was "the worst, maybe, in the history of Manchester United." Thursday's victory was the third straight in one week after beating Rangers in the Europa League a week ago and Fulham in the Premier



League three days later. Tottenham is languishing in 15th place in the Premier League. Its seven-match winless run in the league is its worst since 2008. But it won five, drew two and lost one for the fourth place in the Europa League. Lazio, the only team that qualified to the round of 16 with a game to spare, was handed its first defeat, 1-0, away at Braga. Still, the Portuguese team was eliminated. Lazio still topped the standings with 19th points, the same as the second Athletic Bilbao. Bilbao secured the second place after a 3-1 home win over 10-man Viktoria Plzen, which has a playoff spot. Frankfurt completed the league phase in fifth despite a 2-0 loss at Roma. Angelino and Eldor Shomurodov lifted Roma with the goals at Stadio Olimpico. Lyon was sixth despite being held 1-1 at home by

Ludogorets. Olympiacos in seventh after routing Qarabag 3-0. Rangers squeezed in to complete the top eight by beating Union Saint-Gilloise 2-1. José Mourinho's Fenerbahce avoided an embarrassing early exit with a 2-2 away draw at Denmark's Midtjylland. The result sent both into the playoffs. The hosts were 20th while Midtjylland took 24th, giving Mourinho a chance to add to his European trophies. Ajax ended a three-game losing streak by handing Galatasaray its first defeat, 2-1 with both teams making the playoffs. Hoffenheims 4-3 away win at Anderlecht was not enough for the Bundesliga team to advance. The Belgian club finished 10th. Real Sociedad, FCSB, Porto, AZ Alkmaar, Twente and PAOK are among other teams that advanced.



## Lyon confirms Paulo Fonseca as its new coach

PTI ■ LYON

**L**yon has confirmed the hiring of Paulo Fonseca as its new coach. Fonseca is replacing Pierre Sage, who was fired despite leading the French league club out of a crisis last season and having the team within reach of a Champions League place in this campaign. Sage's dismissal on Tuesday followed a 1-1 draw with Nantes in Ligue 1 last weekend and left many observers perplexed. Sage had rapidly become a fans' favorite after guiding Lyon from the bottom of the standings to a sixth-place finish last season. The Associated Press reported earlier this week that Lyon had sealed a deal with Fonseca. Fonseca's first match in charge will be against Marseille in the French league on Sunday, Lyon said. Fonseca won the Portuguese Supercup with Porto in 2013 and the Portuguese Cup with Braga in 2016. He also coached Shakhtar Donetsk, where he won three league-cup doubles (2017, 2018, 2019) and the Ukrainian Supercup in 2017. Paulo Fonseca then coached AS Roma between 2019 and 2021 before joining Lille in June 2022, where he built one of the best attacking and efficient sides in France despite operating on a limited budget. More recently, he was less successful at AC Milan,

producing only 12 wins in 24 matches across all competitions. Fonseca had been out of a job since he was fired by AC Milan on Dec. 30. After 19 matches this season, Lyon is sixth in the league — just four points off a Champions League spot — and has qualified for the knockout stage of the Europa League. Lyon, however, said the decision to part ways with Sage was a "sporting choice" after the Frenchman averaged fewer points per game this season and struggled against big rivals. Lyon is owned by American businessman John Texor, who visited the club in person this week. He had been in regular contact with Fonseca in recent years and previously tried to hire him. Fonseca joins on a deal until the end of June 2027. Lyon believes that Fonseca will be able to add defensive stability to the team and make it more competitive against the top four Ligue 1 teams. The club's ambition is to qualify for the Champions League on a regular basis and to challenge Paris Saint-Germain's supremacy. "Paulo Fonseca and his staff will be tasked with starting a new cycle and taking the club to the highest level in the second half of the season, with the ultimate goal of qualifying for next season's Champions League," Lyon said.

## Only Santos can give me the love I need: Neymar

PTI ■ SAO PAULO

**N**eymar has confirmed he will sign what is expected to be a short-term contract with his boyhood club, Santos, as the Brazil striker aims to recharge his career ahead of the 2026 World Cup. The 32-year-old Neymar said on Thursday that he's returning to the Sao Paulo club, and local media reported that the deal will extend only to June 30. "Only Santos can give me the love that I need to prepare for the challenges I have in the next few years. All of you, no matter who you support, know well what I am talking about," Neymar said on his social media channels. "I hope you all follow me in this new phase of my life." Santos used its social media channels to respond to Neymar's video: "Your home awaits. Your people awaits." Neymar left Santos nearly 12 years ago to join Barcelona. The striker's return follows the termination of his contract with Saudi Arabian club Al-Hilal. Neymar had returned in October from an



ACL injury sustained while playing for Brazil only months after he joined Al-Hilal. He played only seven matches and scored once for the Saudi team. Neymar also left Paris Saint-Germain under criticism from fans, who accused him of not caring enough about his fitness. In 2017, his exit at Barcelona was also frustrating for club supporters, who hoped he could help Lionel Messi and Luis Suárez win more trophies. A Santos official told The Associated Press that Neymar is expected to arrive at Sao Paulo's international airport at 9 am on Friday. He will then board a helicopter to go to the club's Vila Belmiro Stadium. After he signs his contract, he will be reintroduced to fans during the evening. The official spoke on condition of anonymity due to lack of authorisation to discuss the matter publicly. Neymar has already played 225 matches with Santos. He scored 138 goals for the club, many of which key for the six titles he won at the Brazilian giant, which was relegated in 2023 and returned to the country's top division last year. Neymar became the most expensive player in soccer

history when he transferred from Barcelona to PSG for 222 million euros (then USD 262 million) in 2017. Neymar's most recent match was played in November. Al-Hilal coach Jorge Jesus had repeatedly cast doubts about the striker's form to play. Neymar left the Saudi Arabian league after playing just seven games in 17 months following his big-money move to the oil-rich kingdom. The Brazilian's contract was due to expire after this year's FIFA Club World Cup, which will be played between June 15 and July 13 in the United States. The striker joined the Saudi club from PSG in August 2023 for 90 million euros (USD 94 million). His salary was reportedly one of the biggest in world soccer as well. Neymar, Brazil's all-time top goalscorer with 79 goals in 125 matches, also said he is focused on getting more playing time so he can prepare for the World Cup in North America next year in what could be his last shot at winning the tournament.



## D Gukesh to meet Wei Yi in Tata Steel Chess Tournament

PTI ■ WIJK AAN ZEE

**O**n top of the table with a slender lead, world champion D Gukesh will take on Wei Yi of China in the 11th round of Tata Steel Chess Tournament, aiming to continue his unbeaten streak and claim the season's first title. With five victories and five draws, Gukesh has remained unbeaten in the first major tournament of the year and if he adds another 1.5 points in the last three rounds, it should be enough to lift the title. With 7.5 points, Gukesh is in pole position, half a point ahead of Nodirbek Abusattorov of Uzbekistan and a full point more than compatriot R Praggnanadhaa. Yet to play two white games out of last three, Gukesh has to meet Jorden van Foreest of Holland in the penultimate round and then finally an out of sorts Arjun Erigaisi. Both Abusattorov and Praggnanandhaa have two black games left which makes Gukesh a huge favourite to win his maiden title here. It may be recalled that the Indian had lost in tiebreaker to Wei Yi last year after tying for the top spot. Not only a victory here, what is also at stake for Gukesh is the 2800 rating barrier and he will be the third Indian to achieve it after Viswanathan Anand and Arjun if he can. He is at 2794 points in live ratings. Praggnanandhaa will meet pre-event rating favourite Fabiano Caruana of United States while Abusattorov has to tackle the solid defenses of Vincent Keymer of Germany in the other key clashes of the 11th round. It has been tough for the Masters section as Harikrishna has scored 4.5 points while Arjun and Leon Luke Mendonca are at the bottom of the table with three points each. These three will have to work hard in the remaining rounds to finish better in the final standings. In the challengers section, R Vaishali is on five points out of a possible 10 and has shown brilliance in patches. Divya Deshmukh is on two points and needs a pullback. This section is led by Czech Grandmaster Nguyen Thai Dai Van on 7.5 points with Erwin L'Ami of Holland in close pursuit a half point behind. **Pairings round 11** Masters: Jorden van Foreest (Ned, 4) vs Arjun Erigaisi (Ind, 3); D Gukesh (Ind, 7.5) vs Wei Yi (Chn, 5.5); Fabiano Caruana (Usa, 5.5) vs R Praggnanandhaa (Ind, 6.5); Vincent Keymer (Ger, 4) vs Nodirbek Abusattorov (Uzb, 7); Anish Giri (Ned, 5) vs Max Warmerdam (Ned, 3.5); Alexey Sarana (Srb, 5) vs P Harikrishna (Ind, 4.5); Vladimir Fedoseev (Slo, 6) vs Leon Luke Mendonca (Ind, 3). Challengers: Oro Faustino (Arg, 2.5) vs Nodirbek Yakubboev (Uzb, 5); Lu Miaoyi (Chn, 5.5) vs Erwin L'Ami (Ned, 7); Nogerbek Kazymbek (Kaz, 5.5) vs Ediz Gurel (Tur, 5.5); R Vaishali (Ind, 5) vs Aydin Suleymanli (Aze, 6.5); Svane Fredrik (Ger, 6) vs Nguyen Thai Dai Van (Cze, 7.5); Irina Bulmaga (Rom, 1) vs Divya Deshmukh (Ind, 2); Benjamin Bok (Ned, 6.5) vs Arthur Pijpers (Ned, 4.5).

# BCCI Award: Bumrah chosen for Best International Cricketer

PTI ■ MUMBAI

**T**alismanic pacer Jasprit Bumrah was chosen for the BCCI's Polly Umrigar Award for Best International Cricketer 2023-24 in men's category while elegant batter Smriti Mandhana was picked for the corresponding women's trophy in the Board's annual honours that will be presented here on Saturday. Bumrah, who was selected as the ICC Test and overall Cricketer of the Year for delivering "a master-class in skill, precision, and relentless consistency", was India's standout bowler last year, playing a pivotal role in India's home wins over England and Bangladesh. The 31-year-old was also the Player of the Series against Australia in the Border-Gavaskar Trophy, bagging 32 wickets across five Tests. Mandhana, who was the ICC Women's ODI Cricketer of the Year, made 743 runs in the 2024 calendar year. She scored four ODI centuries, a record in the women's game, and found the boundary more than a hundred times in the year, hitting 95 fours and six maximums. The 28-year-old cricketer's ODI runs came at an average of 57.86 and an impressive strike rate of 95.15. Spin great Ravichandran Ashwin, who retired from

international cricket in December 2024 as India's second highest wicket-taker in Tests with 537 dismissals and overall eighth highest, has been bestowed with a special award at the end of his career. The 37-year-old Ashwin, who made his Test debut in November 2011, played a defining role in India's 12-year domination in the longest format at home wherein they won 18 series on the trot. Among newcomers, Mumbai batter Sarfaraz Khan was picked for the Best International Debut among men for his quick-fire fifty against England in the Rajkot Test in February 2024.



The middle-order mainstay also hit a counter-attacking 150 against New Zealand in the Bengaluru Test to continue his ascent. Among women, Asha Sobhana has been chosen for the award for Best International Debut as she picked up 4/21 against South

Africa to help India win by 143 runs in their first ODI at Bengaluru in June 2024. Mandhana will also be honoured with the Highest Run Getter in ODIs medal after she finished as the highest run-scorer in 2024, smacking 747 runs in 57.46 in 13 matches with four tons and one fifty. Similarly, Deepti Sharma was awarded with the Highest Wickets in ODIs medal for taking 24 wickets in 13 matches. Tanush Kotian continued to make waves with his rise through the ranks in Mumbai in the 2023-24 season, which culminated with his maiden call-ups for the India A side for their tour of Australia and

subsequently for the Indian team for the last two Tests of the Border-Gavaskar Trophy. Kotian will be awarded with the Best Performance in BCCI Domestic Tournaments trophy. The 26-year-old, who rose to limelight with all-round performances in Mumbai's 42nd Ranji Trophy win in 2023-24, scored 502 runs in 10 matches at 41.83 with one century and five fifties and also grabbed 29 wickets. Having won the Ranji Trophy for a record-extending 42nd time in the season, Mumbai also claimed the Irani Cup after a gap of 27 years. The Mumbai Cricket Association would be given the Best Performance in

BCCI Domestic Tournaments Trophy for winning various titles such as Ranji Trophy, U-16 Vijay Merchant Trophy, U-14 West Zone Championship, senior women's T20 Trophy, women's U-19 One Day Trophy, Bapuna Cup T20 Tournament and men's U-19 All India Tournament. Mumbai teams also finished as runner-up in Cooch Behar U-19 Trophy and Vinoo Mankad U-19 Trophy. Akshay Totre from Indore was adjudged the Best Umpire in Domestic Cricket for the season. Legendary batter Sachin Tendulkar has been chosen for Col CK Nayudu Lifetime Achievement Award.

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