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Maha Kumbh ends on note of devotion

PTI ■ MAHAKUMBH NAGAR

The Maha Kumbh, billed to be the world's largest gathering, ends on Wednesday as it began 45 days ago with lakhs of devotees surging towards the waters of the Sangam, the confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna and mythical Saraswati, for a dip on the auspicious day of Shivratri. The mega religious carnival wound to a close in a montage of images of the stampede that killed at least 30 people, the devout across every spectrum taking a dip in the belief it would cleanse their sins, huge crowds jostling not just at the Sangam but also stations and bus stands in north India and many a political slugfest over contested numbers and how clean the waters were. According to the Uttar Pradesh government, 64.77 crore people have visited Prayagraj since January 13, a number that exceeds the populations of all countries except China and India. President Droupadi Murmu, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, top ministers and film stars were among those who went to the Kumbh. It was a gathering of the faithful and believers but also of those driven by interest in the fabled Kumbh, where religion meets culture, where spirituality and tradition fuse, and where AI and modern-day technology this time blended with ancient stories of gods and miracles. The stars were aligned too with seers claiming that celestial permutations and combinations during the event took place after 144 years. It was a massive logistical exercise.



The religious fair witnessed unprecedented security measures, including anti-drone systems and AI-enabled cameras, to man the Mahakumbh Nagar's UP's makeshift 76th district set up for the event. It was spread across 40 hectares which remained abuzz with activity 24x7 over the past six weeks. As tourists and pilgrims from distant corners began returning home and vendors, from across the country, readied to shut shop, many were seen trying to take a dip before the Kumbh finally ends. The ritual bath is at the centre of the pilgrimage. Devout Hindus believe the coveted sacred dip at the Sangam leads to 'moksha' or salvation, especially during the

once-in-12-years planetary alignments. "To me, the Maha Kumbh would conclude when the last of the devotee has taken the dip. Put differently, you can say that the mela would end with the start of the new day at 'Brahm Muhurt' or early morning on Thursday," Chidanand Saraswati, the president of Parmarth Niketan Ashram, Rishikesh, who is camping at Prayagraj, told PTI. Held every 12 years, the Maha Kumbh showcased India's age-old spiritual traditions, from the grand processions of akharas (monastic orders) and the ash smeared Naga sadhus, to modern tech-savvy babas, all of whom camped by the Sangam banks, drawing devotees from across

the globe. The akhara seers participated in three of the total six 'snans', known as Amrit snans — Makar Sankranti (January 14) Mauni Amavasya (January 29) and Basant Panchami (February 3). Though not a Amrit Snan, Maha Shivratri dip was among the last of the total six 'snans', the other two being Paush Purnima (January 13) and Maaghi Purnima (February 11-12). The second Amrit Snan on January 29 is when chaos - and tragedy — broke out. The stampede near Sangam banks, leading to 30 deaths allegedly due to overcrowding. The tragedy triggered a political slugfest with West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee

slamming the Yogi Adityanath-led government to say it was an 'Mrityu Kumbh' and the BJP hitting back. The Samajwadi Party and the Congress accused the Yogi Adityanath-led government of concealing the stampede toll. But the devotees driven by faith, remained undeterred and kept growing in numbers even as a Central Pollution Control Board report on Ganga water quality triggered another controversy. As millions took dip in the confluence of rivers, the water quality also came under question amid claims of high levels of faecal bacteria and total coli form. Chief Minister Adityanath rejected the claims and said in the state assembly

that Ganga water at the Sangam was fit for both "snan and aachman" (bathing and ritual drinking). The opposition, including the SP, also questioned the pilgrim footfall cited by the government but the government cited the source of the numbers -- over 3,000 cameras, including 1,800 AI-enabled ones, underwater drones and 60,000 personnel. "Along with AI cameras, we also maintained regular touch with railways, roadways and airport personnel to corroborate pilgrim data," a senior official told PTI. The Kumbh, a familiar trope in Hindi films of the past when brothers and families separated in the surging crowds only to be united at the end, also saw nearly half a dozen fire incidents. Fortunately, there were no casualties. "As many as 59 fire stations, 20 fire posts were always on standby to meet any situation," Chief Fire Officer Pramod Sharma noted. In a first, "underwater drones" capable of diving up to 100 meters were deployed to provide round-the-clock surveillance at Sangam area, the Culture Ministry had said ahead of the Kumbh. Faith was the overriding factor, bypassing all considerations and apprehensions. This was apparent with the arrival of devotees like Bihar's Raushan Sah, who arrived for the dip along with his octogenarian mother and other family members. His brother was there on the day of the stampede but it mattered little. "It was god's will so I could attend the Kumbh. Continued on page 8

Centre replies to SC on convicted MPs

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Centre has opposed in the Supreme Court (SC) a plea seeking life ban on convicted politicians, saying imposing such a disqualification was solely within the domain of the Parliament. In an affidavit, the Centre said the prayer in a plea, seeking the same, amounted to re-writing of the statute or directing the Parliament to frame a law in a particular manner which was wholly beyond the powers of judicial review. "The question whether a lifetime ban would be appropriate or not is a question that is solely within the domain of the Parliament," the affidavit said. By confining the operation of penalty to an appropriate length of time, deterrence was ensured while undue harshness was avoided, it added. There was, said the Centre, nothing inherently unconstitutional in limiting the effect of penalties by time and it was a settled principle of law that penalties were limited either by time or by quantum. "It is submitted that issues raised by the petitioner have wide ranging ramifications and clearly fall within the legislative policy of the Parliament and the contours of judicial review would be suitably altered in such regard," the affidavit said. The plea in the top court filed by advocate Ashwini Kumar

Upadhyay seeks a life ban on convicted politicians. In its affidavit, the Centre underlined the apex court had consistently held that the legislative choice over one option or the other couldn't be questioned in courts over its efficacy or otherwise.



Under Section 8 (1) of the Representation of the People Act, 1951, the period of disqualification was six years from the date of conviction or in case of imprisonment, six years from the date of release, it added. "The disqualifications made under the impugned sections are limited by time as a matter of parliamentary policy and it would not be appropriate to substitute the petitioner's understanding of the issue and impose a lifetime ban," it said. The Centre said as a matter of judicial review, the court could declare the provisions to be unconstitutional, however, the relief sought by the petitioner effectively sought to read "life-long" instead of "six years" in all sub-sections of Section 8 of the Act. Continued on page 8



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

Amit Shah challenges MK Stalin

KUMAR CHELLAPAN ■ CHENNAI

The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK)-led Tamil Nadu Government has become anti-national and an embodiment of corruption thanks to Chief Minister (CM) MK Stalin and his son Udhayanidhi Stalin, the deputy CM of the state, according to Amit Shah, the Union Minister for Home Affairs. The Home Minister made the revelation in Coimbatore on Wednesday, speaking to reporters. Shah was in Coimbatore to attend the night-long Mahashivratri puja held by Sadhguru at the Isha Yoga Center in the outskirts of the city.

Shah's statement was in response to Stalin's declaration on Tuesday that the DMK was ready for a language war against the Centre. Stalin has been alleging that the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) was trying to impose Hindi on non-Hindi speaking states under the New Education Policy 2020. While stoutly denying Stalin's allegations, Amit Shah said that the NDA government has done a lot to promote and popularise Hindi. "Stalin and his son have institutionalised corruption. Charges of corruption are galore under the DMK ruling dispensation," said the home minister. He described the anti-Hindi campaign launched by

Stalin was an attempt to cover up the allegations of corruption and favoritism against Stalin and his family. Shah also scoffed at Stalin for making unsubstantiated claims that the Centre was trying to bring down the number of Lok Sabha seats in Tamil Nadu. "There is no such plan and the common man knows it well that it would not be easy to do so," he said. Shah also declared that the corruption ridden Tamil Nadu state government led by Stalin would be thrown out in the 2026 Assembly election and the NDA would form the next government in Tamil Nadu to lead the state to the path of development. Continued on page 8

Kedarnath temple to open on May 2

PTI ■ RUDRAPRAYAG

The doors of the Kedarnath temple in the Garhwal Himalayas will be reopened for devotees on May 2, after remaining closed for about six months during the winter season. The gates will open at 7 am on May 2, as announced by Vijay Prasad Thapliyal, the Chief Executive Officer of the Shri Badrinath-Kedarnath Temple Committee, on Wednesday. With the announcement of the opening of Kedarnath temple, the dates for the opening of all four sacred sites in the Garhwal Himalayas have now been fixed. Badrinath Dham will open on May 4, while Gangotri and Yamunotri Dhams will open on April 30, on Akshaya Tritiya. These four sites together form the Chota Char Dham, a small pilgrimage circuit. The auspicious hour and date for the opening of the Kedarnath temple were decided by religious gurus and Vedpathis on the occasion of Mahashivratri, after offering prayers at the Omkareshwar temple in Ukhimath, the winter abode of Baba Kedar, he said. Apart from the chief priest of Kedarnath temple Rawal Bhimshankar Ling, Kedarnath MLA Asha Nautiyal, temple committee officials, religious functionaries and hundreds of devotees were also present at the Omkareshwar temple which was decorated with flowers for the occasion.

BJP seeks its pound of flesh in Bihar



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

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ PATNA/NEW DELHI

A day after Prime Minister Narendra Modi sounded the poll bugle in Bihar, the BJP got a huge pounce in the Nitish Kumar led NDA government as the latter inducted seven new faces into his council of ministers incidentally all from alliance partner BJP. The expansion, which could be the last before the Assembly elections for this year-end are announced, raises the total number of ministers to 36, the maximum permissible in the state with a 243-strong Assembly. A careful calculation of the BJP's support base seems to have been

at work in the Cabinet expansion that took place a day after the party's national president chaired a meeting of the "core group" and before that PM visited Bihar for a rally and announcement of some reforms and projects. Governor Arif Mohammad Khan administered the oath of office to the new ministers who all are members of the assembly. The state also has a legislative council. The development took place on a day the state BJP president Dilip Jaiswal, the former minister for revenue and landforms, gave up his Cabinet berth citing the party's policy of "one person, one post". The new ministers include Jibesh Kumar, who was a

member of the state Cabinet till August 2022, when the chief minister abruptly quit the NDA, accusing the BJP of trying to "break" his JD(U). Jibesh Kumar, who returns to the state cabinet with just two days left for the commencement of the Budget Session in the Bihar Assembly, told reporters, "I am ready to discharge the responsibility to the best of my ability". Other inductees are Sanjay Saraogi, a fifth-term MLA from Darbhanga, and Sunil Kumar, who represents Bihar Sharif, in the CM's pocket borough Nalanda, for as many times, Continued on page 8

Trump offers Gold Card Centre braces for deaddiction

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

President Donald Trump said that he plans to offer a "gold card" visa with a path to citizenship for \$5 million, replacing a 35-year-old visa for investors. "They'll be wealthy and they'll be successful, and they'll be spending a lot of money and paying a lot of taxes and employing a lot of people, and we think it's going to be extremely successful," Trump said in the Oval Office. Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick said the "Trump Gold Card" would replace EB-5 visas in two weeks. EB-5s were created by Congress in 1990 to generate foreign investment and are available to people who spend about \$1 million on a company that employs at least 10 people. Lutnick said the gold card — actually a green card, or permanent legal residency — would raise the price of admission for investors and do away with fraud and "nonsense" that he said



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

characterise the EB-5 program. Like other green cards, it would include a path to citizenship. About 8,000 people obtained investor visas in the 12-month period ending September 30, 2022, according to the Homeland Security Department's most recent Yearbook of Immigration Statistics. The Congressional Research

Service reported in 2021 that EB-5 visas pose risks of fraud, including verification that funds were obtained legally. Investors' visas are common around the world. Henley and Partners, an advisory firm, says more than 100 countries around the world offer "golden visas" to wealthy individuals. Continued on page 8

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

A first-of-its-kind centre in the country to help children and youth fight internet and technology addiction will be set up at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), Delhi. The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) recently approved the proposal to set up the Centre for Advanced Research on Addictive Behaviours (CAR-AB) related to excessive and problematic use of technology. "Excessive and problematic use of technology has been recognised as a major public health problem," said Yatan Pal Singh Balhara, Faculty in-charge of the Behavioral Addictions Clinic (BAC) at AIIMS, Delhi who is leading this project. The Economic Survey of India (2024-25) has linked the increase in mental health issues in children and adolescents to overuse of the internet and highlighted the urgent need for school and family-



File photo: PTI

level interventions to keep children and adolescents away from the internet to improve their mental well-being, Dr Balhara said. "This is a first-of-its-kind centre in the country that has been mandated to develop evidence-based intervention targeted at excessive and problematic use of technology, especially among the

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

Also, resources would be developed for education and health sector workers to strengthen their capacity for the prevention and management of these problems. The interventions would also help reduce stress, depression, anxiety and addiction associated with the use of the internet and technology, Dr Balhara stated. Also, the centre aims to develop an AI-based predictive model to detect vulnerability to excessive and problematic use of technology among the youth. The project is estimated to have an outlay of ₹14 crore, Dr Balhara said. The CAR-AB, related to excessive and problematic use of technology, would partner with school and college students, parents, teachers and faculty from the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and other medical colleges to create a national network targeted at addressing the internet and technology related addictions, he said.

Newborns trafficking racket busted, 6 held

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

A joint team of Madaion police and the Crime Branch busted a newborns trafficking racket with the arrest of six persons, including a doctor and a hospital staff, on Tuesday. Police said that the gang sold male infants for Rs 5 lakh and female infants for Rs 3 lakh. The trafficking of fair complexioned male infants was the gang's priority. Acting on intelligence inputs, police set a trap to infiltrate the gang's network. An undercover officer, posing as a buyer, engaged with the traffickers and confirmed their operations. Following this, a raid was conducted near Shankarpur slope, leading to the arrest of a hospital manager, Dr Mohammed Altaf, manpower supplier Vinod Singh, compounder Neeraj Kumar Gautam, patient assistants Kusum Devi and Santosh Kumari, and one Sharma Devi. During the operation, a newborn was rescued and police seized two mobile phones and Rs 1.25 lakh in cash. Additional Deputy Commissioner of Police (North Zone) JK Dubey said that the gang also operated a surrogacy network, offering women as surrogate mothers on demand for different prices. Investigations further revealed that the traffickers targeted unwed mothers, exploiting their situation to procure infants for

Abetment to suicide case against five

Lucknow (PNS): A case of abetment to suicide was registered against five private employees of Trauma Centre in an eight month old case of death of a youth, Amir Raza, of Saadatganj. The case was registered on Monday on the orders of a court. Those named in the case have been identified as Sanjay Sharma, Divas Goyal, Diwakar Singh, Sunny Mirza and Sadija Ansari. Sabika, sister of the deceased, in her complaint to the court said her brother Aamir Raza left home for his work on 28-6-2024 around 7:30 am and did not return home till evening after which her father informed the Saadatganj police station about it verbally and in writing. "The complaint was registered and my father was sent back home

by the police saying that they will investigate at their own level," she stated in the complaint. On 30-6-2024, the body of her brother was found in Madehganj, Lucknow. Sabika alleged that Sanjay Sharma, Diwakar Singh, Sunny Mirza, Sadija Ansari, Dr. Divas Goyal used to mentally and physically harass her brother and threatened to kill him. She alleged that her brother had uploaded a video on social media and named all the above mentioned people, the harassment and threats by them to kill him and that fed up with the harassment and threats, he was committing suicide. She said the police did not register a case despite the recovery of the body and the video.

trafficking. Sources said that buyers were given the option to choose newborns based on religion, with both Hindu and Muslim infants available for sale. The accused had a well-established network within hospitals, and recruited staff members to steal or illegally procure newborns. Some infants were directly taken from hospitals, while others were sourced from vulnerable moth-

ers. The gang's network was spread in several states, including Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, New Delhi and UP. Police are now expanding the investigation to identify more suspects, including potential buyers and complicit hospital officials. Authorities have urged the public to report any suspicious activities related to child trafficking.

Inter-state cyber fraud racket unearthed

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

The cybercrime police busted an inter-state cyber fraud racket having international links. The mastermind of the racket is a Chinese national identified as Shin Shui. Police said that the gang used fake WhatsApp display pictures (DPs) to impersonate the boss of a popular distributor of a well-known apparel brand and tricked the company's accounts manager into transferring Rs 78 lakh into a fraudulent bank account. Cyber Cell Station House Officer Brijesh Yadav said that the case came to light on February 17 when the company's accounts manager Sarvesh Dwivedi filed a complaint stating that cybercriminals used the company boss's WhatsApp DP to chat with him and extract crucial banking details. The fraudsters then misused this information to siphon off Rs 78 lakh. Following the complaint, a case was registered at the Lucknow Cyber Crime police station. Yadav said that investigations revealed that the arrested cybercriminals were operating under the instructions of a Chinese handler, who provided them with fake identities, banking channels and encrypted communication tools. "The mastermind coordinated the scam from an undisclosed

overseas location, using dark web platforms to avoid detection. Police suspect that the gang is part of a larger international cyber fraud syndicate," he said. On the orders of Lucknow's commissioner of police, a special team was formed under the leadership of Cyber Crime Inspector Brijesh Kumar Yadav. Using advanced technical resources and intelligence inputs, the team successfully tracked and arrested the prime suspect along with two accomplices from Delhi. They were identified as Mohammed Amjad (38) and his aides Ibrahim Dar and Ehsan-ul-Haq, both from Jammu and Kashmir. SHO Yadav said that the cybercriminals first copied the profile picture of the original boss of the group and set it as their own WhatsApp DP. "Posing as the company head, they engaged in WhatsApp chats with various accounts managers, requesting sensitive banking details. Once they obtained the required information, they manipulated the accounts manager into transferring Rs 78 lakh into a fraudulent bank account before vanishing," he said. "We are now working with central cyber agencies to track the Chinese mastermind and identify other members of the international cyber fraud network," he said.

Rural tourism project transforming villages

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

The Tourism Department's rural tourism project is transforming selected villages, offering an authentic and enriching experience for visitors while empowering local communities and preserving cultural traditions. In collaboration with the International Centre for Responsible Tourism (ICRT), the Tourism Department is promoting responsible tourism that preserves the natural beauty and cultural heritage of these destinations while involving local communities as key partners in sustainable tourism. Special Secretary (Tourism) Isha Priya said that villages like Nehari (Udaipurva) in Banda district, Barara, Holipura and Badeshwar in Agra, Thakurnagar in Sitapur, Sehla in Pilibhit, Sahana and Bhanwat in Mainpuri, Jait in Mathura-Vrindavan, Anand Bhawan (Thirwa) in Kannauj, Singraur (Upahar) and Ghurpur in Prayagraj, Selha village in Pilibhit, Nangli Teerth in Meerut, Badaganj in Baghpat, Baruasagar in Jhansi, Baheda in Etawah, Mehandipur in Kannauj, Pura Mahadev (Best Tourism Village Award-2024) in Baghpat, Kathari village in Kanpur Dehat and Kurauana village (Best Tourism Village Award-2023), Rameshwar in Varanasi were gearing up to welcome day tourists. The department, alongside rural consultants, is actively

promoting these destinations. "Developed itineraries will be shared via social media and with tour operators, while familiarisation trips for bloggers and media will further enhance visibility," she said. "These villages, whether nestled in breathtaking natural settings, steeped in rich art and craft traditions, or located near existing tourist destinations, promise to offer a distinctive cultural experience. Currently, 229 villages have been earmarked for this transformation," she added. Officials inform that rural tourism offers significant potential for economic growth, community development and cultural preservation. It allows for the sustainable use of natural and cultural resources while creating employment opportunities for local communities. "Escape the hustle and bustle of city life and immerse yourself in the serene countryside of Uttar Pradesh through rural homestays and agro-tourism properties. These accommodations provide cozy retreats, offering a peaceful and relaxing stay for both domestic and international tourists. Guests can expect well-equipped amenities, clean rooms, and a warm, homely atmosphere, where they are welcomed as part of the family. Activities such as trekking, heritage walks, handicrafts, pottery-making, bird watching, and cycling tours further enrich the visitor experience while benefiting local communities economically and socially," a tourism official said. Agro-tourism experiences allow visitors to connect with rural livelihoods by engaging in organic farming, fruit-picking, and milking cows. Tourists can learn sustainable agricultural practices from local farmers while reconnecting with the land amidst the tranquility of village life. The culinary experience is equally immersive, with authentic traditional dishes prepared using fresh, local ingredients by villagers. To support these initiatives, the project focuses on skilling and training local youth as tour guides, tourist escorts, and village coordinators. It includes entrepreneurship development programmes for homestay owners and teaches storytelling techniques to identify local botanists, empowering young people and creating new opportunities within the villages. "The project is in various stages of development. Some villages have already identified beneficiaries for homestays and craft demonstrations, while others are finalising day-tour itineraries. Department is committed to promoting rural tourism through diverse marketing strategies. By showcasing the state's attractions – its cities, nature, adventure, food, heritage, religion, and culture – the department aims to establish UP as a preferred tourism destination in India," he said.

Woman duped of ₹ 3.30 lakh

Lucknow (PNS): A woman was duped of Rs 3.30 lakh in Para area by a man who promised to get her a licence for a liquor shop. The woman met the fraudster at a Jan Suvidha Kendra of the area. The police registered a case and are investigating the matter. The victim, Ishrawati of New Basti Purveedhi Kheda of Para, said that she met local resident Neelchandra at the public service centre. Neelchandra lured her into getting a liquor shop licence. Falling for his words, the victim reached the public service centre with her husband Vijay Kumar. The accused took Rs 30,000 from the victim on the pretext of making a character certificate. He later took about Rs 3 crore from the victim on various pretexts till September 24, 2024. When the licence was not received, the victim talked to Neelchandra but he shooed her away saying that Rs 1,900 will be deposited in the bank account every month. He kept sending Rs 1,900 to her bank account for a few months but later stopped sending money. The victim then filed a complaint against four people, including Neelchandra. The Para inspector said that the matter was being investigated.

Death of patient: Case registered against private hospital's director

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

A case was registered against the director of a hospital and others in connection with the death of a patient at Madehganj police station. The deceased, identified as Alam of Ghantey Wali Gali, in Wazirganj, was admitted to a private hospital near Pakka pul Khadra in Madehganj. The complainant Muskan, who is deceased's wife, said her husband died due to wrong treatment given by Dr Junaid, director of the hospital, Dr Mohammed Zafar, Pawan, a medical student and Dr Javed. "On 14-11-2024, some agents of the private hospital took my sick husband admitted at KGMU to the hospital by saying that they would make my husband healthy in 24 hours and send him back home. Under the influence of the doctors and staff I got my husband admitted to said private hospital in Khadra. While admitting him, they took Rs. 10,000 from me. My husband Alam was healthy and was talking at

the time of his admission to the hospital. Despite being healthy, to earn more money, hospital staff Pawan immediately put my husband on oxygen even though he did not require it. A person was treating my husband by introducing himself as Dr Junaid even though he does not have any medical degree. The hospital, at the behest of hospital staff and Dr Junaid and Dr Zafar, collected about Rs 1.5 lakh in the name of bed charges and medicines. The untrained staff of the hospital and Dr Javed put a tube in the throat of my husband and gave him wrong injection due to which his condition started deteriorating and he died on 15-11-2024 at about 2:30 pm," she alleged. She further alleged that the doctors and staff of hospital concealed the death of her husband and put him on ventilator and collected another Rs 50,000 from her. She further alleged that the hospital refused to hand over the body of her husband and demanded money.

Police registered a case in this connection.

WOMAN S-I ASSAULTED

A man beat up a female sub-inspector in the Madiyaon police station area for intervening in a brawl he had with his landlord. The victim had come to meet her acquaintance at his house in the Keshav Nagar area of Madiyaon. There, she had an argument with the tenant over something and he beat her up. She has been admitted to the KGMU Trauma Centre. ACP Brij Narayan Singh said that Sub-Inspector Manjulata Srivastava was posted in another district. She lives in Madaion area of Lucknow. She had gone to the house of her acquaintance in Keshav Nagar. The acquaintance was having a dispute with his tenant Bhanu Singh. When the woman sub-inspector tried to intervene, Bhanu attacked her on the head. The police have arrested the accused and are interrogating him, the ACP disclosed.

Criminal carrying ₹ 1 lakh reward killed in encounter

Lucknow (PNS): A murder accused carrying a Rs 1 lakh reward was killed in a police encounter in Mundali area of Meerut district early on Wednesday. The victim, Jitendra alias Jeetu of Haryana's Jhajjar district was wanted in a 2023 murder case in Ghaziabad. The police had declared a cash reward of Rs 1 lakh for information leading to his arrest. Additional Director General of Police (Special Task Force) Amitabh Yash said Jitendra, who had suffered serious injuries in the encounter, was sent to hospital where he succumbed to his injuries. The ADG said Jitendra had been sentenced to life in prison for a 2016 double murder in Jhajjar. He was released on parole in 2023. He jumped parole and had been absconding since he added. Jitendra allegedly committed a contract killing in the Teela Morh area of Ghaziabad district in 2023. The police said Jitendra had come in contact with the Lawrence Bishnoi gang while in jail.

4 killed as car rams into house in Pratapgarh

Lucknow (PNS): Four people were killed and five others were injured after a car crashed into a house near Baburaha turn on the Ayodhya-Prayagraj highway in Rajgarh village of Pratapgarh. Deputy Superintendent of Police (City) Shiv Narayan Baish stated that the accident occurred around 2:30 am when a car went out of control and crashed into a house, injuring nine people, including the occupants of the vehicle and the residents of the house. All of them were admitted to a hospital, where four – Raju Singh (25) of Chainpur Madhaura, Bihar; Abhishek Kumar Singh (24) of Chhapra, Bihar; Saurabh (26) of Raigarh, Jharkhand; and car driver, Abhishek Ojha (30) – succumbed to their injuries. Police said the seven car occupants were returning from the Maha Kumbh Mela in Prayagraj and were en route to Ayodhya for a pilgrimage. Three people were killed and another was seriously injured on Wednesday after an unidentified speeding vehicle hit their motorcycle in the Bilsa area of Budaun. The accident occurred around 2

pm near Parauli petrol pump when the vehicle ran over four youths riding a motorcycle, Additional Superintendent of Police (Rural) KK Saroj said. While two youths, identified as Jitin (24) and Dharmendra (21) of Hussainpur village, died on the spot, Gaurav (23) succumbed to his injuries during treatment. The fourth rider, Ashu Bansal, is critically injured and is undergoing treatment at the district hospital. Police registered a case and were making efforts to trace the unidentified vehicle involved in the accident. In another road accident reported from Hathras, two teenagers were killed after their motorcycle was hit by an unidentified vehicle on the Mursan-Sadabad Road in the Mursan area of the district. Circle Officer (Sadabad) Himanshu Mathur said late on Tuesday that Jitendra and Nankesh – both aged around 18-19 and natives of Magtai village in Mursan area – had gone to Mursan town for some work. They were returning home when an unidentified vehicle hit their motorcycle near RBS College around 9 pm.

Tigress attacks villagers, beaten to death

Lakhimpur Kheri (PTI): A two-year-old tigress that strayed into a village in the buffer zone of Dudhwa Tiger Reserve and attacked two villagers was allegedly killed by locals on Wednesday, officials said. The villagers of Phulwaria clubbed the tigress to death on the spot. Dudhwa Buffer Zone Deputy Director Sauresh Sahai said forest officials retrieved the carcass from the village in the Palia tehsil and sent it to the range headquarters. A case against unidentified persons has been registered at Palia police station under provisions of the Wild Life (Protection) Act and a probe has been initiated, he added. The injured villagers were admitted to a hospital where their condition was stated to be stable. Sahai said the animal's post-mortem was conducted according to National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) guidelines and the viscera sent to ICAR-Indian Veterinary Research Institute, Bareilly, for detailed analysis.



NOTICE

I have change my name from INDRA SINGH to INDRA PAL KUSHWAHA S/o Chhote Lal Kushwaha R/o 116/650, keshav nagar Rawatpur Kanpur Nagar for all future purposes.

NOTICE

I have changed my name from Armaan Khan S/o Mohammad Haseeb Khan To Mohd. Arman Khan. S/o Hazi Mohd. Haseeb R/o 131/4-A-2, Begumpurwa T.P.Nagar, Kanpur for all future purpose

NOTICE

I Ranu sareen D/o Mr. Umesh Kumar Agrawal R/O D 201, 202 Lake pleasant Lake home phase 2, near Gopal Sharma school off AS marg Powai, Mumbai, Maharashtra do hereby declare that the original Lease deed dated 19/03/1981 Bahi No. 1 Jild No. 2690 Page no. 210/219 serial no.1883 and original Sale deed dated 19/03/1981 Bahi No. 1 Jild No. 2690 Page no. 220/224 serial no.1884 registered in the office of sub registrar lucknow has been lost. The address of the property is HG 115 Sector E Aliganj Lucknow. I am selling the above mentioned property to Mr Aniket Ani and Mrs Sweta Shrivastava, that will be financed by SBI RACPC Aliganj Lucknow. If anyone have objection kindly contact Mrs. Ranu Sareen, Mobile no. 6391731555. An FIR has been lodged with the police in respect of lost Lease deed and sale deed vide FIR no. 20250000143269 dated 26/02/2025.

LMC to build roads using C&D waste

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

The debris once left on footpaths and roadsides in the city is now being put to good use. This initiative, launched by Lucknow Municipal Corporation ensures proper treatment of debris. The municipal corporation has started the Construction and Demolition (C&D) Waste Treatment Plant. Mayor Sushma Kharakwal while providing details about the plant, stated that the C&D Waste Plant has a capacity of 300 tons per day (TPR). "The installation of the plant

has cost approximately Rs 12 crore with Rs 5 crore contributed by the municipal corporation, and the remaining amount being spent by the company installing the plant. The primary goal of this plant is to recycle the city's debris and convert it into useful products. This will not only address the debris problem but also aid in road and other construction work," she said. The mayor said that Lucknow Municipal Corporation would now use C&D waste to construct roads in the city. The mayor mentioned that the debris from this plant will be used to build RCC (Reinforced

Cement Concrete) roads. Additionally, tiles made from C&D waste will be used in both small and large lanes, contributing to road construction. "This initiative will play a significant role in the city's development and improve the quality of roads in other parts of the city as well," she added. The C&D Waste Plant will produce various products, including tiles, planters, blocks, and boundary walls. "These products will be used in public spaces, parks, and other construction projects in the city. "Approximately 100 quintals of

waste will be processed daily at the plant, and useful items such as brick tiles and other products will be made," she added. A LMC official said that the municipal corporation had set up collection centres in each zone to gather debris. "The waste from the city is first brought to these collection centres from where it is sent to the C&D Waste Plant in Mohanlalganj. For debris collection, residents can contact the number 7459956211 or the toll-free number 1533. The waste at the collection centres is properly covered to prevent any environmental harm," the official added.

CITY BRIEFS

SOLO EXHIBITION

A retrospective exhibition 'Chaupal' of renowned artist Awadhesh Misra from Shakuntala Mishra National Rehabilitation University is running at a city hotel. Chief Guest, Bhatkhande Sanskriti Vishwavidyalaya's Vice-Chancellor, Prof Mandavi Singh, while inaugurating the exhibition said that she has been witnessing the art journey of Awadhesh Misra for a long time. "His bright colour scheme has always attracted me, but seeing the entire creative journey together is as pleasant as diving into the ocean of colours. This exhibition is a fragrant bouquet of nature, rural life, struggle and creativity. The sweetness of our culture and feelings is reflected in his paintings. The subject of these paintings not

only connects us to ourselves, but the frankness and self-confidence of the personality of Artist Dr Awadhesh Misra can be seen in the use of technique, medium and bold strokes of hue," she said.

TB CORE COMMITTEE MEET HELD AT KGMU

The prime minister has set a target to eliminate TB by the end of 20A 100-day intensive TB campaign was launched on December 7, 2024, in 15 high-priority districts of UP. After a review of the campaign, it was expanded to all 75 districts. Dr Surya Kant, head of Respiratory Medicine Department at King George's Medical University and Chairman of the North Zone TB Task Force, stated that medical colleges were playing an active role in this campaign.

"They are conducting screenings for high-risk individuals and initiating immediate treatment upon TB diagnosis. The probability of TB infection is higher in high-risk groups compared to healthy individuals. These high-risk groups include individuals above 60 years of age, patients with diabetes and HIV, patients who had TB in the past three years and completed treatment, people in contact with TB patients, patients who had TB within the past five years, malnourished individuals with a Body Mass Index (BMI) of less than 18.5 kg/m², smokers and substance abusers, residents of slums, overcrowded settlements, jails, and old-age homes. WORKSHOP The Centre of BioMedical Research, Lucknow, as part of its skill development initiative is

organising a hands-on training workshop on 'NMR-Based Metabolomics and In-Vitro Diagnostic Research'. The event is being organised as part of birth centenary celebrations of former Prime Minister Bharat Ratna Atal Bihari Vajpayee who exhorted the scientists to make India self-reliant in technology. The five-day workshop is providing a platform for students from more than 25 institutions from India to get firsthand experience in handling NMR as well as interact with eminent scientists from academia. MANAGEMENT FEST A four-day management festival "Tarang 2025" was inaugurated by the Department of Management Studies at Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University. The programme was presided over by Vice Chancellor SK Diwedi.

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NOTICE U/S 13(2) OF SECURITISATION & RECONSTRUCTION OF FINANCIAL ASSETS AND ENFORCEMENT OF SECURITY INTEREST ACT 2002 (HEREINAFTER CALLED 'ACT')

It is to bring to your notice that your loan account has been declared as NPA by secured creditor Shubham Housing Development Finance Company Limited having its registered office at 608 - 609 , 6th Floor, Block – C Ansal Imperial Tower, Community Center, Naraina Vihar, New Delhi – 110028. (herein after called 'SHDFCL') and you are liable to pay total outstanding against your loan to SHDFCL. You are also liable to pay future interest at the contractual rate on the aforesaid amount together with incidental expenses, cost, charges etc. Therefore, we hereby call upon you to discharge in full your liabilities to SHDFCL within 60 days from the date of this notice failing which SHDFCL will be empowered to exercise the power under Section 13(4) of the ACT. The details of borrowers and secured assets are as under:

S. No.	Loan Account No. Borrower(s) Name	Applicant Address	Demand Notice Amount & Date	Secured Asset
1.	OKAN1905000005019956, Mohd Javed, Sama Parveen, Parvej Akhtar Raza	117/832 P Block Kakadev Naveen Nagar Bilal Masjid Kanpur Nagar Uttar Pradesh - 208025	Rs. 8,18,112/- & 20/02/2025	House No. 117P/832 A, situated at Part of Arazi No. 832. Constructed at Vinayakpur, Kakadeo Kanpur Nagar Uttar Pradesh - 208020
2.	0ALB2204000005046150, Hena Akhtar, Mohd Ashar, Firdous Jahan	224-B, Purmanohar Das Akbarpur G T B Nagar Near Noori Masjid Kareli Allahabad Uttar Pradesh - 211016	Rs. 5,80,269/- & 20/02/2025	Part Portion Arazi No.14, Mauza Chak Lakhanpur Pargana And Tehsil Sadar Allahabad Uttar Pradesh-211012
3.	0VRN2305000005063257, Archana Shukla, Aniroodh Shukla	W/o Anirudh Shukla, 22, Malepur Maltepur Bank Mirzapur Uttar Pradesh - 231001	Rs. 10,83,301/- & 20/02/2025	House No.1706/1- Kh Mauza- Chandradripa Sabari, Tappa 84 Pargana- Kanit, Tehsil- Sadar, Distt.- Mirzapur, Uttar Pradesh- 231001
4.	0ALB2305000005063377, Vijay Kant Shukla, Legal Heirs (Deceased Narendra Kumar Tripathi), Poonam Tripathi	S/o Sarju Prasad Tripathi, 624, Baghambari Gaddi Allahpur Daraganj Water Tank Allahabad Uttar Pradesh - 211006	Rs. 1,51,472/- & 20/02/2025	House No. 591B/ 90A/9KHA/3, Mohalla- Baghambari Gaddi Allahpur Pargana & Tehsil - Sadar, Distt.- Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh - 211006
5.	0ADY2212000005055554, Raja Ram, Lalita Devi	Parasrampur Near Sbi Bank Basti Uttar Pradesh -272130	Rs. 7,52,941/- & 20/02/2025	House No. 238, Gram-Barahpur Pandey, Tappa Bangawa Pargana- Amodha, Tehsil- Harraiya District-Basti, Uttar Pradesh-272130
6.	0ADY2401000005076714, Mohamamd Tabish Khan, Jamila Begam	S/o Mohd Jawwad Khan, Kurebhar Kurebhar Sultanpur, Uttar Pradesh - 228151	Rs. 7,03,335/- & 20/02/2025	House on Plot Part of Khasra No. 231, Village- Kudaran Gallaaha, Pargana- Barausa, Tehsil- Jaisinghpur & Dist- Sultanpur, Uttar Pradesh - 228151
7.	0LKO2305000005062869, Vijay Kant Shukla, Madhuri Shukla, Vivek Shukla	Campwell Road Kishor Ganj Sarwar Headwear, Lucknow Uttar Pradesh - 226003	Rs. 14,11,686/- & 20/02/2025	House Built On Part Of Plot No 36 Part Of Khasra No. 193, Situated at Kishorganj Ward Haidarganj , Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh -226003
8.	0LKO2006000005028204, Kamal Kishor Shukla, Ritu Shukla	Kumar Puram New Para Colony Rajajipuram Lucknow Near Mandir Lucknow Uttar Pradesh - 226017	Rs. 2,71,328/- & 20/02/2025	Plot No. U, 43/2B part of Khasra Nos. 716, 722 & 723, Gram/ Mohalla- Para, Ward- Alamnagar Lucknow Uttar Pradesh - 226001
9.	0LKO2103000005039556, Shivram Yadav, Neelam Yadav	H.No. 22, Khasra No. 428, Gaurbheet Faizullaganj Power House Lucknow Uttar Pradesh - 226021	Rs. 10,20,864/- & 20/02/2025	Plot No- 22, Part of Khasra No- 428, Situated at Yaseen Bagh Colony, Gram Gaurbheeth, Ward- Faizullaganj, Tehsil and District Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh -226020

PLACE: GURGAON, DATE: 26-02-2025 SHUBHAM HOUSING DEVELOPMENT FINANCE COMPANY LTD.

AUTHORIZED OFFICER,

Maha Kumbh devotees spread message of national unity: CM

PNS ■ GORAKHPUR

Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath extended heartfelt greetings and best wishes to the people of the state and devotees from across the country and the world on the auspicious occasion of Mahashivratri.

He specifically acknowledged the devotees gathered at the Prayagraj Maha Kumbh, Baba Vishwanath Dham in Kashi, Ayodhya, and various temples and shivalayas across the state. The chief minister emphasised the significance of the Maha Kumbh in Prayagraj, stating that approximately 66 crore devotees have participated in the holy event, sending a powerful message of national unity and dedication to the spirit of nationalism.

On Wednesday, during his visit to major Shiva temples in Gorakhpur, Chief Minister Yogi spoke to the media at Mukteshwarnath temple. He highlighted the spiritual importance of Mahashivratri, calling it a special day dedicated to the worship of Devadhidev Mahadev, the god of welfare. He remarked that all arrangements function smoothly by Lord Shiva's divine grace and that the unwavering faith of devotees symbolises India's unity.

"The faith that devotees are expressing today in Prayagraj Maha Kumbh, Baba Vishwanath Dham in Kashi, and other major Shiva temples across the state is a testament to India's unity. I bow to this faith," he stated. The chief minister pointed to the unprecedented gathering at Prayagraj Maha Kumbh, which began on January 13 and was culminating on Mahashivratri. He noted that nearly 66 crore devotees have taken a holy dip in the sacred confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna, and Saraswati rivers, reaffirming India's rich spiritual traditions.

He further highlighted that Maha Kumbh exemplifies the philosophy of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (the world is one family), inspiring people

IAF's 'Mahasalami' marks end of Maha Kumbh

PNS ■ MAHAKUMBH NAGAR

The Indian Air Force (IAF) gave a grand 'Mahasalami' to mark the conclusion of the Maha Kumbh during the final bathing festival of Mahashivratri.

On Wednesday afternoon, as the deafening roar of fighter planes filled the skies over the Sangam, devotees looked up in awe, applauding with pride and enthusiasm.

The atmosphere resonated with chants of 'Jai Shri Ram', 'Har Har Gange', 'Har Har Mahadev', and slogans praising Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath. Excited by the breathtaking aerial display, devotees began capturing and sharing photos and videos of the air show on social media. According to an IAF official, the event was specially organised to salute the millions of devotees who had gathered for the Maha Kumbh. While over 1.5 crore pilgrims took a holy dip in the sacred waters of the Ganga, Sukhoi fighter jets, AN-32 transport aircraft and Chetak helicopters performed thrilling aerial manoeuvres above them, leaving the spectators spellbound. As part of the closing ceremony of the Maha Kumbh, the IAF's skilled pilots showcased incredible aerial acrobatics. The roar of the aircraft drew every eye skyward, where Sukhoi fighter jets, AN-32 planes, and Chetak helicopters executed mesmerising formations. The devotees captured and shared the spectacular display on their mobile phones on social media. People called it one of the most unforgettable



highlights of the Maha Kumbh. The last day of the Maha Kumbh witnessed a remarkable blend of devotion and military might. While sadhus, saints and devotees immersed themselves in religious rituals on the banks of the Ganga, the IAF demonstrated its valour in the skies. The stunning air show added a historic touch to the grand conclusion of the festival, making it an unforgettable experience for millions of devotees.

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to dedicate themselves to nationalism. Apart from Prayagraj, Chief Minister Yogi also acknowledged the overwhelming number of devotees flocking to Kashi Vishwanath Dham. He revealed that for the past month and a half, nearly 8-10 lakh devotees have been visiting Baba Vishwanath Dham daily, with even larger crowds expected on Mahashivratri. Similarly, he noted that Ayodhya Dham has been witnessing an influx of 8-10 lakh

devotees daily at Shri Ram Janmabhoomi, with Mahashivratri drawing an even bigger crowd. Other prominent temples across Uttar Pradesh, including Baba Dudheshwarnath Dham (Ghaziabad), Pura Mahadev Dham (Baghpat), Baba Aghadnath Dham (Meerut), Baba Lodheshwarnath Temple (Barabanki), Gorakhnath temple (Gorakhpur), Mansarovar temple, Mukteshwarnath temple, Baba Bhadeshwarnath temple

(Bareilly), Nageshwarnath temple (Ayodhya), Dudheshwarnath temple (Deoria), and Tameshwarnath temple (Sant Kabir Nagar), have also witnessed a surge in devotees. Expressing his confidence in the spiritual power of Mahashivratri, Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath stated that the inspiration drawn from Lord Shiva's divine blessings would strengthen the resolve to serve society and the nation with dedication.

Yogi monitors final snan from control room in Gorakhpur

PNS ■ MAHAKUMBH NAGAR/ GORAKHPUR

Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath remained highly active during the early hours of the auspicious occasion of Mahashivaratri, the final bathing day of the Maha Kumbh 2025. Like every previous amrit snans and bathing festivals, he began his day early at 4 am to oversee the arrangements. Due to his ongoing visit to Gorakhpur, a control room was set up at the Gorakhnath temple, where he closely monitored the event, watching live feeds of devotees bathing at the Sangam on TV. From the control room, he gave real-time instructions to senior officials. Under the guidance of Chief Minister Yogi, top officials were on high alert and promptly took charge of the situation. Earlier, on the occasions of Basant Panchami and Maghi Purnima amrit snans, the chief minister had also held meetings with officials at the war room from early morning, ensuring smooth operations through constant monitoring. On this significant day of Mahashivaratri amrit snan, which also marks the closure of



UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath monitors the holy bath of Maha Shivratri going on in Prayagraj from the control room located at Gorakhnath temple. PTI

Maha Kumbh 2025 on Wednesday, Chief Minister Yogi closely assessed the security and arrangements for the event. From the Gorakhnath temple control room, he monitored live feeds of the snan festival, ensuring everything was proceeding as planned. He also gave strict instructions

to administrative officials to ensure that no devotee faced any inconvenience and that all arrangements were up to the mark. The chief minister specifically focused on security measures at all ghats and traffic management, ensuring that the millions of devotees attending the

Maha Kumbh could bathe at the Triveni Sangam without any issues. He also ensured that all essential services and arrangements were in place, with the administration remaining alert throughout the day to manage the large crowds and maintain safety.

Flowers showered on devotees

PNS ■ MAHAKUMBH NAGAR

On the auspicious occasion of Mahashivratri, the final snan of Maha Kumbh 2025, the Yogi Adityanath government ensured an unforgettable experience for the devotees by showering them with flowers from a helicopter.

Continuing its tradition from previous bathing festivals, the government arranged for 20 quintals of rose petals to be showered upon devotees at the Sangam ghat. The floral shower began at 8 am, just as thousands of devotees were taking a dip at the sacred confluence. Overwhelmed by the sight of rose petals raining from the sky, devotees chanted 'Jai Shri Ram', 'Har Har Mahadev', 'Ganga Maiya Ki Jai', and 'Tirthraj Prayag Ki Jai' in reverence.

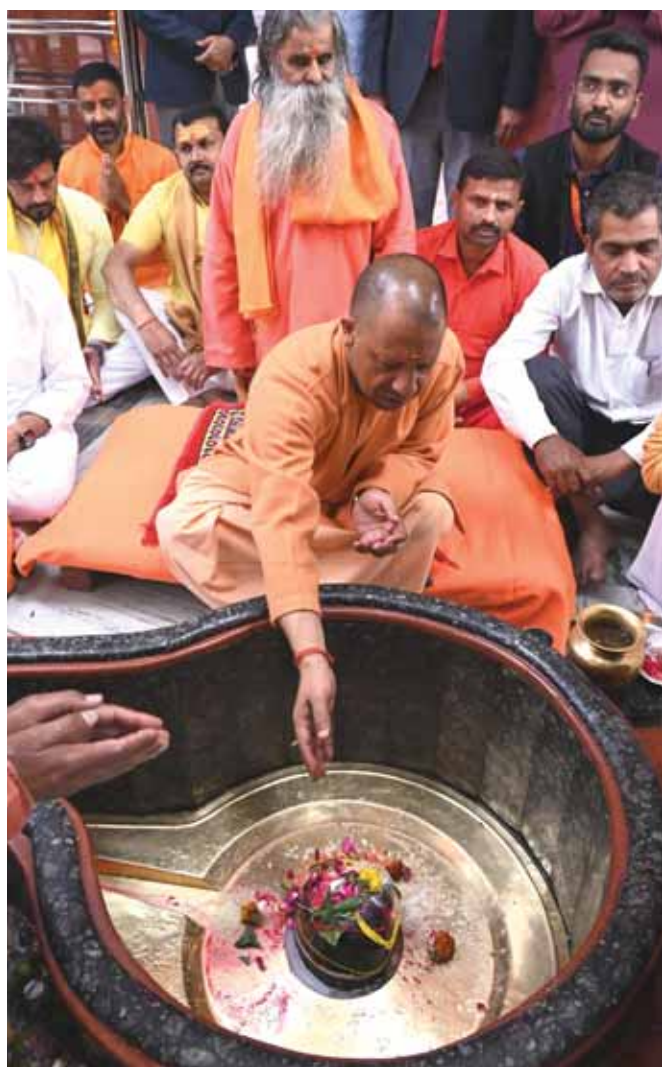


Many expressed their gratitude towards the Yogi government, appreciating the grand gesture that honoured their faith. With the Mahashivratri snan marking the last major bathing event of Maha Kumbh 2025, a massive influx of devotees began arriving at the Sangam

shores from Tuesday night. Krishna Mohan Choudhary, Deputy Director of the Horticulture Department, Prayagraj Division, confirmed that preparations for the floral shower were made in advance under the instructions of Chief Minister Yogi to accommodate

the overwhelming number of pilgrims. VK Singh, the official in charge of the floral showers, revealed that five to six rounds of flower showers were conducted at the Triveni Sangam ghats, with the first round starting at 8 am. Helicopters circled the area, showering devotees with rose petals, creating a breathtaking spectacle that enhanced the divine atmosphere of Maha Kumbh 2025. He further added that 120 quintals of rose petals were used so far in six major snan (holy bathing) events, with 20 quintals allocated for each occasion. This initiative aimed to provide devotees with a unique and spiritually enriching experience, making their participation in Maha Kumbh 2025 even more memorable.

Yogi visits Shiva temples, prays for welfare



PNS ■ GORAKHPUR

On the auspicious occasion of Mahashivratri, Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath dedicated his day to the worship of Lord Shiva. From the sacred premises of Gorakshpeeth to four major Shiva temples in the district, the chief minister performed rituals, including darshan, puja, 'jalabhishek' and Rudrabhishek, with utmost devotion.

Following the traditional rituals, Chief Minister Yogi prayed to Lord Adiyogi for the well-being of the people, national prosperity, and a life of health, peace and happiness for all citizens. His spiritual journey continued from morning till the afternoon as he visited multiple temples, offering prayers and seeking divine bless-

ings on this significant day. The chief minister started his Mahashivratri rituals at Gorakhnath temple on Wednesday morning. He performed the sacred Rudrabhishek of Lord Shiva using cow's milk at the Shakti temple on the first floor of the monastery. Following this, he performed a 'havan' and offered aarti, praying to Lord Shiva for the well-being of all living beings. Notably, the entire ritual lasted for over two hours. Before this, he also worshipped at the Shiva temple within the Gorakhnath temple complex, where he offered prayers to Lord Nandi and performed 'jalabhishek' (holy water offering) to Lord Shiva. In the Nath tradition, Guru Gorakhnath is believed to be an incarnation of Lord Shiva, dedicated to the welfare of all. The

...greeted devotees on Mahashivratri

PNS ■ MAHAKUMBH NAGAR/GORAKHPUR

Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath extended warm greetings to devotees taking a sacred dip at the Triveni Sangam on the auspicious occasion of Mahashivratri. Sharing his wishes on social media platform X, he conveyed his reverence to all devotees and saints, praying to Lord Shiva and the holy river Ganga for the well-being of all. The chief minister extended his best wishes to the entire nation on Mahashivratri, beyond the grand Maha Kumbh celebrations. Posting from his official X handle, Chief Minister Yogi wrote: "Heartfelt congratulations to all revered saints, kalpvasis and devotees gathered at the Triveni

Sangam for the sacred Mahashivratri bathing festival at Maha Kumbh-2025 in Prayagraj. May Tribhuvanpati Lord Shiva and the holy Mother Ganga bless all. Har Har Mahadev!" Additionally, while greeting the nation on Mahashivratri, he shared a Sanskrit verse: "Namo Devadevaya Mahadevaya Te Namah. Tr y a m b a k a a y N a m a s t u b h y a m Trishulvardharine."

He further said, "Heartfelt congratulations and best wishes to all devotees and the state's people on the sacred Mahashivratri festival, dedicated to the worship of Tribhuvanpati Lord Shiva. May the divine grace of Mahadev and Maa Parvati bless all, ensuring the well-being of the entire creation. Har Har Mahadev!"

Gorakhnath temple itself is rooted in this spirit of public welfare. This makes Mahashivratri an especially significant occasion for the Gorakshpeethadhishwar (head of the Gorakhnath monastery), Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath.

After completing rituals at Gorakhnath temple, the chief minister visited three major Shiva temples in Gorakhpur - Manasarovar Shiva temple in Andhiyari Bagh, Mukteshwarnath temple in Rajghat, and Jharkhandi Mahadev temple. He offered prayers, performed 'jalabhishek', and wished for the well-being of all. During his visit, he instructed officials to ensure proper security, cleanliness and facilities for devotees. He also interacted with worshippers and enquired about their well-being. At Manasarovar temple, Chief Minister Yogi offered belpatra, bhanga, dhatura, and flowers to Lord Shiva and performed rituals amid Vedic chants. Noticing children among the devotees, he warmly interacted with them and gave blessings. Later, at Mukteshwar Nath temple, he offered 'jalabhishek' and gifted chocolates to children. His

final stop was Jharkhandi Mahadev temple, where he performed traditional worship. In the afternoon, the chief minister visited the historic Piteshwar Nath temple in Bharohiya, performing prayers and 'jalabhishek'. This temple, linked to the Pandavas, holds a deep connection with the Gorakshpeeth, and every Mahashivratri, the peethadhishwar performs rituals here. Chief Minister Yogi also planted Harishankari trees (Peepal, Banyan, and Pakar) on the temple premises and observed the layout map of the project implemented by the Tourism Department for the beautification of the temple and gave necessary guidelines. He also met the local people in the premises of Guru Gorakhnath Vidyapeeth located in front of the Shiva temple in Bharohiya and enquired about their well-being. On the arrival of the chief minister in Bharohiya, many people, including MLA Fateh Bahadur Singh, Bharatiya Janata Party district president Yudhishtir Singh, block pramukh of Jungle Kauriya Brijesh Yadav, block pramukh representative of Bharohiya, Sanjay Singh, were present.

CM directs swift resolution of public grievances

PNS ■ GORAKHPUR

On Mahashivratri, the final bathing festival of the world's largest religious gathering, Maha Kumbh, while closely monitoring arrangements at Prayagraj online from early morning, Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath remained committed to public service, addressing concerns during Janata Darshan on Wednesday morning. During the interaction, the chief minister directed officials to resolve public grievances swiftly, ensuring transparency and efficiency. He issued a stern warning against miscreants who harass, threaten or illegally encroach upon public or private property, emphasising that strict legal action must be taken against such persons without any leniency. He stressed that the government's priority is ensuring justice and relief for every citizen. Chief Minister Yogi reached out to people seated outside Mahant Divvijaynath Smriti Bhawan at the Gorakhnath temple complex, listening attentively to their grievances. He assured nearly 200 individuals that no injustice would be tolerated and directed officials to expedite case resolutions.



Special emphasis was laid on cracking down on land-grabbers and those exploiting the weak. Several individuals sought financial assistance for medical treatment. Chief Minister Yogi assured them of full government support, instructing officials to expedite the necessary estimates and process their applications without delay. He also directed authorities to handle revenue and police-related matters with utmost transparency and impartiality, ensuring that every victim receives fair treatment. He emphasised the need for sensitivity in dealing with public grievances and ensuring justice. During his visit to Gorakhpur, the chief minister also paid respects at the Samadhi Sthal of his Guru, Brahmalin Mahant Avaidyanath, and took a tour of the temple premises. Amid his busy schedule, Chief Minister Yogi interacted warmly with children visiting the Gorakhnath temple. He enquired about their studies and as a token of his blessings, gifted them chocolates, while wishing them a bright future.

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Initiative towards empowering Divyangjan

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

The Uttar Pradesh government has taken a significant step towards empowering Divyangjan. Making the above claims here on Wednesday, an official spokesman of the government said that the Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath has allocated a substantial budget of ₹1,424 crore for Divyangjan welfare in the 2025-26 financial year. This provision aims not only to meet their basic needs but also to play a crucial role in making them self-reliant. The spokesman said Divyangjan often faces financial instability, making it difficult to lead independent lives. To address this, the government has allocated ₹1,424 crore under the Maintenance Grant Scheme, providing financial assistance to ensure they do not have to depend on others for their livelihood. Additionally, to enhance their mobility and quality of life, the government has proposed a budget of ₹35 crore for artificial assistive devices such as hearing aids, wheelchairs and tricycles. This initiative will improve their physical capabilities and boost their confidence, enabling

them to explore new opportunities with the help of technology. Healthcare is a fundamental right, yet many Divyangjans struggle to access proper treatment due to financial constraints. To address this issue, the Yogi government has allocated ₹10 crore for a grant scheme dedicated to the medical treatment of Divyangjan. This will enable them to receive timely medical care, significantly improving their quality of life. In addition, recognising the need for specialised care and education for Divyang children, the government has established Bachpan Day Care Centres in 18 state divisions. These centres will provide essential educational and care facilities for children aged three to seven years who are hearing impaired, mentally retarded or visually impaired. This initiative aims to integrate them into mainstream society by offering proper guidance and support. The Yogi government's initiatives are not just about providing financial and medical assistance; they aim to inspire Divyangjan to lead dignified and self-reliant lives. The initiative stems from the chief minister's belief that true development occurs only when the most vulner-

able sections of society receive equal opportunities and access to their rights. Under Chief Minister Yogi's leadership, the MGNREGA scheme has been effectively implemented to provide employment opportunities to Divyangjan based on their skills and capabilities. Since 2017-18, more than 1.24 lakh Divyangjans have been employed, contributing to the creation of 44.64 lakh man-days of work. This initiative has significantly strengthened their livelihood, promoting economic independence. The impact of this initiative has been particularly evident in the current financial year, where 23,262 Divyangjans have been provided employment out of 50,201 registered job card holders. This effort has generated 8.28 lakh mandays of work so far. Over the years, the employment figures under MGNREGA for Divyangjan have shown remarkable progress, increasing steadily from 11,332 in 2017-18 to 23,262 in the present financial year. Under the MGNREGA scheme, 100 days of employment is being provided to the needy workers as per their demand. Divyangjans are assigned work on the basis of their needs and capacity.

Record turnout of devotees in Kashi on Mahashivratri

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ VARANASI

A record number of devotees turned out at Dwadasa Jyotirlinga Kashi Vishwanath Temple (KVT) on the auspicious occasion of Mahashivratri, the biggest festival of this holy city of Lord Shiva, on Wednesday. In view of massive crowd no space was left between Dashashwamedh Ghat and Godowlia crossing throughout the day. The scene of about one kilometre area between Dashashwamedh and adjoining ghats and Gate No 4 of Shri Kashi Vishwanath Dham (corridor) remained the same except during the restricted hours when the procession of Naga Sadhus reached the temple. Long queues of devotees were also seen from the Maidagin side as well as from the river side through Ganga Dwar near Lalita Ghat. On this auspicious occasion, the city witnessed an overwhelming surge of devotees seeking the blessings of Baba Vishwanath. Since midnight, serpentine queues stretching over three kilometers formed outside the temple, as the doors remain open for an uninterrupted 46-hour darshan. The local administration is expecting the visit of about 25 lakh devotees during the period. Meanwhile, according to report received from state capital, Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath was closely monitoring the arrangements to ensure a smooth and well-organised celebration. Senior officials patrolled the area, ensuring everything runs seamlessly under the chief minister's directives. This year's Mahashivratri in Kashi has become even more special as it coincides with the Maha Kumbh's return flow, leading to an unprecedented surge in devotees. To manage the enormous crowd, the Kashi Vishwanath Temple Trust and district administration, under CM Yogi's guidance, have implemented strict security measures. The entire temple



Crowd of devotees during the wee hours at Kashi Vishwanath Temple on the occasion of Mahashivratri in Varanasi on Wednesday.

complex is under high surveillance with police, paramilitary forces, ATS commandos, and STF units deployed to maintain order. Senior officials continue to assess the situation on the ground to ensure safety of devotees and their comfort. Adding to the grandeur, the grand procession of the akharas became a major highlight of the festival. Naga Sadhus of the Juna Akhada marched towards Baba Vishwanath's temple, carrying tridents, swords, and maces, chanting 'Har Har Mahadev'. The procession was welcomed with floral showers and garlands, with senior officials, including Divisional Commissioner Kaushal Raj Sharma, Commissioner of Police Mohit Agarwal, and District Magistrate S Rajalingam, personally honouring the Naga Sadhus at Gate-4 of the corridor. The procession of Juna Akhara started from Harishchandra Ghat, which was led by

M a h a m a d a l e s h w a r Avdhesanand Giri. Tight security arrangements were made during the procession. To ensure a smooth darshan experience for every devotee, VIP protocols were suspended, giving equal access to all. The temple doors were opened at 2.15 am after the Mangala Aarti, with Baba Vishwanath adorned like a divine groom. Meanwhile, thousands of devotees thronged the Ganga ghats, taking a sacred dip on this auspicious day. As it was a last day of Maha Kumbh in Prayagraj and also a bathing day, the rush of devotees was heavier at Dashashwamedh and its adjoining ghats. It was a big challenge for the River Police and personnel of National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) as well as a team of expert divers of Provincial Armed Constabulary (PAC) to keep watch on the river. In view of such a big rush, elaborate security arrangements were made and no vehicles

Flower shower makes celebration special

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ VARANASI

This Mahashivratri was indeed special in the sacred city of Lord Shiva, Kashi. On Wednesday, the Yogi government made the celebrations more special by orchestrating a grand flower shower from a helicopter, covering Shri Kashi Vishwanath Dham and the Ganga ghats. As rose petals rained from the sky, chants of 'Har Har Mahadev' echoed through the air, filling devotees with divine joy. Following the Maha Kumbh, Kashi witnessed a massive influx of devotees eager for Baba Vishwanath's darshan. Upholding its commitment to honouring religious faith, the state government ensured the continuation of



Flower petals being showered on devotees from a helicopter at the Kashi Vishwanath Temple on the occasion of Mahashivratri in Varanasi. PTI

this floral tribute even after the Maha Kumbh. The festivities saw vibrant processions of various akharas, with saints, sadhus, and devotees from across the

police officers were present there to keep a watch on the situation in corridor premises. Besides, all the activities were also watched through various CCTV cameras. To avoid congregation the devotees were asked to move towards Gyanvapi only through barricading and Rapid Action Force (RAF), para-military and PAC jawans were deployed both inside and outside of the premises. Due to the presence of a large number of devotees, the entire area was echoed with the traditional slogan of 'Har Har Mahadev'. Right from the wee hours after Mangla Aarti, the devotees started thronging the temple and there were continuous queues of devotees on both sides of the temple, including Maidagin and Godowlia, as well as Lalita Ghat. For the conveniences of the devotees, at several places big LED screens were installed to display the activities of garbhagriha (sanctum sanctorum) as the devotees were not allowed to touch the shivling as they offered jal-

Devotees throng Shiva temples

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ PRAYAGRAJ

The city on Wednesday reverberated with the chants of 'Bam Bam Bhole', 'Har Har Mahadev' and vedic hymns on Mahashivratri. Devotees and pilgrims in large numbers thronged the Shiva temples since early morning and offered prayers. People celebrated Maha Shivratri by thronging the abode of Lord Shiva in different parts of the city to offer obeisance and perform the 'Rudrabhishek' ritual. They made a beeline outside different temples, including the historic Padila Mahdeo, M a n k a m e s h w a r, Takshakeshwar Nath temple and Shivkuti temple at Teliyarganj.

Religious fervour grips city of Lord Shiva

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ VARANASI

Religious fervour gripped this city of Lord Shiva on the auspicious occasion of Mahashivratri on Wednesday. Huge crowd of devotees was witnessed not only at one of the Dwadasa Jyotirlingas Kashi Vishwanath Temple but also at several other famous temples located in the city as well as its outskirts. The maximum rush was seen at Markandeya Mahadev on Varanasi-Ghazipur highway located near the confluence of rivers Ganga and Gomti at Kaithi. This temple is known as parallel to Jyotirlingas. There was a heavy rush of devotees at all famous temples, including Mahamritunjya Mahadev (Daranagar), Gauri Kedareswar (Kedar Ghat), Jogeshwar Mahadev (Ishwargangi), Omkleshwar Mahadev (Chittanpura), Teel Bhandeshwar (Pandey Haveli), Sarangnath Mahadev (Sarnath) and many others in the city areas. In the outskirts, huge crowds of devotees was also seen at all Shiva temples located on Panchkoshi Marg, including Karmdeswar Mahadev, Bhim Chandi, Rameshwar Mahadev, Paach Pandev and Kapildhara. Apart from these famous temples, heavy rush of devotees was also seen at Vishwanath temple in Banaras Hindu University (BHU) premises and Shool Tankeshwar Mahadev and scores of all others as the city is famous for having the replicas of all the

Dwadasa Jyotirlingas. Meanwhile, various social organisations served the devotees by providing them drinking water, refreshment and other facilities. The wardens and volunteers of Civil Defence were deployed in Shiva temples for security arrangements and assistance to visitors. Meanwhile on Mahashivratri the activists of Namami Gange performed aarti at Ganga Dwar of Shri Kashi Vishwanath Dham and sought blessings of happiness and prosperity for the people of India. Invoking the message of nature conservation, they along with the employees of Municipal Corporation disposed of several tonnes of garbage from Manikarnika Ghat. On the occasion, Ganga Dwar and Manikarnika Avimukt Kshetra resounded with the proclamation of 'Shambhu Kashi Vishwanath Gange' and traditional slogan of 'Har Har Mahadev'. Regional coordinator of Namami Gange (Kashi) and Municipal Corporation's Cleanliness Brand Ambassador Rajesh Shukla said that Mahashivratri, the festival of Shiva worship, gives the message of conservation of nature and Lord Shiva's family is considered to have a special attachment with nature. Municipal Corporation supervisor Vishal Gaur, Deepak Yadav, cleaning staff Geeta, Neelam, Sunita, Manoj, Subhash Soni, Sita, Reena etc were present in the event.

Youth festival: Students display imagination

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ KANPUR

The three-day annual youth festival of Faculty of Arts 'Sanskriti 2025' concluded with great joy in Banaras Hindu University (BHU) on Tuesday. On this occasion, the students of the faculty danced to the music of Aarohan Band and cherished the memories of the festival. This event was not only a cultural festival for the students of the faculty, but also became an important opportunity to provide a platform to the hidden talents within them. Due to Covid-19, this festival could not be organised for the last four years, but this year it was completed with a new energy and enthusiasm. This festival was given grandeur with the guidance and coordination of the Faculty's student advisor Dr Vinayak Dubey. He said that the students displayed their talents in various competitions held during the three days. During the festival, various competitions and cultural activities were organised in the faculty, in which the students participated enthusiastically. For three days, a unique cultural atmosphere prevailed in the faculty campus, in which the beauty of theater, dance, music, debate, painting,



photography and other art forms was spread. In the classical dance (solo) and tribal dance competitions, the participants mesmerised the audience with their art. Especially in tribal dance, a glimpse of Indian folk traditions was seen, in which the students gave their performances with traditional costumes and folk music. In mono act, mime and drama competitions, students gave strong presentations on social issues. In mime competition, artists without words presented serious social messages through their gestures and acting, which left the audience emotional. In conversation and debate competitions, students presented their views on various contemporary topics with deep research and reasoning. In painting, collage and photography competitions, students showcased their imagination. The works displayed in painting and collage competitions highlighted social, historical and cultural topics.

Need for proactive approach to financial evolution emphasised

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ KANPUR

The Finance Fusion Conclave 2025 was successfully hosted by the Dr Gaur Hari Singhania Institute of Management and Research (GHS-IMR). The event brought together professionals, academics, policymakers and innovators from the finance sector to explore key trends, challenges and opportunities within the industry. The conclave focused on fostering collaboration and integrating traditional financial practices with emerging innovations such as fintech, sustainable finance, artificial intelligence (AI) and blockchain technology. The insightful discussions and deliberations set the stage for an enriching learning experience for students, academicians and industry leaders alike. In his welcome speech, Director of GHS-IMR Dr Rahul Goyal emphasised the need for a proactive approach to financial evolution. He highlighted that the ability to anticipate the future and adapt to emerging trends is crucial in today's dynamic financial landscape. Dr Goyal underscored how institutions like GHS-IMR serve as catalysts in brid-



GHS-IMR organised a Finance Fusion Conclave 2025.

ing the gap between academia and industry, providing a strong platform for students to gain practical exposure to contemporary financial strategies. Chief guest Dinesh Chandra, Past President ICAI & ITBA, delivered an insightful address on behavioural finance, emphasising its profound impact on customer investment decisions. He explained how psychological biases, emotions and cognitive errors influence financial choices, often leading to irrational investment behaviour. He also highlighted the growing significance of sustainable finance and ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance) investing for corporations. Stressing the need for responsible investing, he under-

scored how businesses must integrate ESG principles to ensure long-term profitability and stakeholder trust. His speech inspired attendees to adopt a more conscious and strategic approach towards finance, balancing profitability with sustainability. Director, LGT Wealth, Anubhav Shukla, shared valuable insights on investment banking and wealth management. Deputy General Manager, Reserve Bank of India, Suresh Kumar Venu, shared insights into RBI's journey and its pivotal role in India's economic development and financial stability. Corporate Law expert, ICSI Auditor, Gopesh Sahu delivered an insightful session on corporate governance and compliance in

the digital finance era. Tax Guru Govind Maheshwari provided an in-depth analysis of the Income Tax Bill, 2025, and its anticipated impact. The keynote addresses set the tone for the conclave, providing attendees with a comprehensive understanding of the present financial landscape and its future trajectory. The next session of the conclave featured an engaging panel discussion on "Education in Finance and Career," moderated by Govind Maheshwari. The panel includes distinguished experts from various domains of finance and education. A major highlight of the conclave was the Biz Canvas Clash, an exciting business model competition designed to assess ability of participants to develop robust financial strategies. Assistant Professor GHS-IMR Benu Chatterjee, convener of the event, proposed the vote of thanks, expressing gratitude to the speakers, panellists and attendees for their valuable insights and participation. He acknowledged the efforts of the organising team and sponsors, emphasising the event's success in fostering meaningful discussions on finance and career growth.

CMRS team in Kanpur to assess readiness of metro system



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ KANPUR

A four-member team of CMRS from Delhi has arrived in Kanpur to assess the readiness of the metro system. Their inspection, which continued on Wednesday also focused on evaluating metro tracks, stations, tunnels and other safety provisions related to passenger services, both on board and at stations. On reaching Kanpur, the CMRS team first examined the elevated ramp between Motijheel and Chunniganj, followed by an inspection of the tunnel and stations from Chunniganj to Kanpur Central. Other senior officials of UPMRC were also present with them during the inspection. Before the arrival of CMRS team UPMRC Managing Director Sushil Kumar visited Kanpur on Tuesday to assess the preparations for the expansion and returned the same day. In the coming days, the Commissioner of Metro Rail Safety will also visit Kanpur Metro. Following a thorough review, the CMRS will issue a No-Objection Certificate (NOC), paving the way for the expansion of the metro services from Motijheel to Kanpur Central. Currently, Kanpur Metro operates on the Priority Corridor from IIT to Motijheel, with a total of nine elevated stations. The extension beyond Motijheel to Kanpur Central will introduce five new underground stations — Chunniganj, Naveen Market, Bada Chauraha, Nayaganj and Kanpur Central. This expansion will significantly benefit thousands of commuters travelling daily to key destinations

such as the collectorate, court, Sadar tehsil and the divisional commissioner's office as well as major business hubs like Naveen Market, Bada Chauraha and Nayaganj. The connection to Kanpur Central railway station will offer commuters a convenient, safe and uninterrupted mode of travel, free from the city's traffic jams. UNVEILED: City police commissioner Akhil Kumar and Mayor Pramila Pandey unveiled the official jersey, cap and mascot of TSH Blasters Arya Nagar cricket team on Wednesday. Addressing the gathering, Mayor Pramila Pandey, while praising the role of TSH in promotion of sports in the city, said it was playing a pivotal role in grooming up the poor children in sports. Police Commissioner Akhil Kumar, former Ranji player, filled the atmosphere with enthusiasm by hitting an autograph ball which proved to be an unforgettable moment for the sportslovers. Patron Pranit Agarwal announced to award ₹21,000 cash prize to each team member subject to its winning the KPL trophy besides providing them the free members of TSH for one year. Team Franchise Piyush Agarwal said the event did not mean the victory of his team but it aimed at providing a platform to budding cricketers to make them shine on national and international levels. BOY DIES: A five-year-old boy died after falling into a septic tank in Chakeri police station area. Police recovered the child's body from the tank on Wednesday morning. He fell into it while playing hide-and-seek game with children in a newly-built house.

Seminar on 'ONOE' today

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ VARANASI

A seminar on 'One Nation, One Election' will be held under Kashi Samagam on Thursday at 2 pm in the Swatantra Bhawan of Banaras Hindu University (BHU). The chief guest will be Rajya Sabha MP Dr Sudhanshu Trivedi, while former Governor of Bihar and Meghalaya Fagu Chauhan will preside over it. Giving this information, regional Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) president Dilip Patel said that scholars, advocates, doctors, teachers, businessmen, students etc of Kashi will participate in this programme. This event is being considered an important step towards spreading widespread public awareness on the subject of 'One Nation, One Election' and turning it into a holistic public movement as all intellectuals are being invited to attend the seminar on behalf of the

organising committee", he added. UNNAYAN-25 ORGANISED: The annual cultural festival 'Unnayan-25' was organised on Tuesday at the Institute of Management Studies, Banaras Hindu University (IM-BHU). Unnayan is a two-day flagship cultural event organised every year by the Institute's cultural club 'Visvires'. The event was organised under the guidance of Dr Shashi Srivastava, coordinator of club 'Visvires'. In this two-day event, participants showed their creativity in competitions such as pot painting, mimicry, solo dance, Best out of waste, paper bag making, and T-shirt painting. The ceremony ended with prize distribution to the winners of various competitions organised. Unnayan-25 was inaugurated by the IM-BHU Director Prof Ashish Bajpai and Dean Prof SK Dubey by lighting the lamp and garlanding the statue of Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya.

Bid to promote plastic-free environment

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ PRAYAGRAJ

Under the leadership of General Manager Upendra Chandra Joshi and Principal Chief Mechanical Engineer (PCME) Animesh Kumar Sinha, to make the Green Kumbh successful and to promote a plastic-free environment, stainless steel plates and cloth bags were distributed at Subedarganj railway station on Wednesday on behalf of North Central Railway Women Welfare Organisation (NCRW-WO) president, Chetna Joshi, secretary, Richa Verma, Pratiibha Kadam and Environment Section, North Central Railway (NCR) headquarters. The purpose of distributing steel plates is to reduce the use of single-use plastic. Chetna Joshi wished all the officers and employees a Happy Mahashivratri and praised the cleanliness and as well as well-planned and team work done by cleaning staff and



the Operating department and their efforts to make the Kumbh Mela a success. After this, the cleaning staff was requested not to throw garbage back on tracks after sweeping. The chief environment manager advised against using single-use plastic and requested for one bottle one plant for the protection of plants in summer. The distribution of plates and bags received from a social service institute is proving to be very helpful in preventing pollution. Railway officers and employees like Chief

Environment and Housekeeping Manager, NCR, Shivaji Kadam, ASC/Prayagraj, Sudeep Kumar Ghosh, Station Superintendent Rajesh Kumar Gupta, Senior Section Engineer Akhilesh Kumar Singh etc. were present. MURDERED: A school operator was murdered by some unidentified assailants in Koraoan area. The killers burnt his face with acid to hide his identity. The body was thrown in a field two km away from the village. The incident took place in Patehari village under Koraoan

police station area. The school operator was missing since Saturday evening and his phone was also switched off. After this, his family members lodged a missing report in this connection. The family members have accused a girl from the same village, her brother and father of murder. Reports said that the body of Arun of Patehari who used to run a school in the village was found in a field two km away from the house. Meanwhile a sanitary worker slit his throat with a knife over some unknown reasons at Maha Kumbh. His condition remains critical and has been admitted to the ICU of a hospital in the Mela area itself. In another incident, the body of a GNM student was found hanging from the ceiling fan in a room of the nursing hostel. On being informed police reached the spot and the body was sent for postmortem. SHO Kotwali Rohit Tiwari said a suicide note has been found from the room.

CBI names Abhishek Banerjee in job scam chargesheet

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

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

The central agency, in the chargesheet, never clarified the identity of this Abhishek Banerjee, although the name bears exact resemblance to the name of Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's nephew and Trinamool Congress national general secretary, against whom the state's political opposition has, in the past, repeatedly alleged involvement in the scam.

The TMC MP has already appeared before central probe agencies — the ED and the CBI — multiple times and faced examinations in connection with the alleged recruitment irregularities.

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



TMC leader Abhishek Banerjee

Pioneer photo

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

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

CBI states that the appointments were secured by Ghosh, Banerjee and Bhadra "through accused Partha Chatterjee, the then Education Minister".

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

themselves," the agency further stated in its charge sheet.

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

Banerjee referred to the "previous failed attempt by the ED" to implicate him and hit back at the "political forces" who have now turned to the CBI for "misusing central agencies to push their agenda".

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

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI



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

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

India and Japan, with their complementary strengths, are well-positioned to support Africa's development in a sustainable and inclusive manner, he said. The external affairs minister was delivering a lecture at the Japan-India-Africa Business Forum. "India's approach to Africa has always been guided by a deep-rooted commitment to building long-term, mutually-beneficial partnerships," he said.

"Unlike extractive models of engagement, India believes in capacity-building, skill development and technology transfer, ensuring that African countries not only benefit from investments but also develop self-sustaining growth ecosystems," he added. India is Africa's fourth-largest trading partner, with bilateral trade reaching nearly USD 100 Billion and growing steadily, Jaishankar noted. India has also made significant

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

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

CBSE allows schools to set up branches under new rule



Representative photograph of a classroom

Pioneer photo

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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

Ayush Ministry confers National Dhanwantari Ayurveda Award to three distinguished practitioners

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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

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

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

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

GainBitcoin scam: CBI seizes cryptocurrencies worth ₹23.94 Crore

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

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

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

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



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Disparities rising

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

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



This trend of 'premiumisation' has seen brands pivot towards offering high-end, upgraded products that cater specifically to the rich. For example, ultra-luxury housing and premium smartphones are experiencing surging sales. In contrast, lower-priced alternatives are struggling. Affordable homes now represent a mere 18 per cent of the overall market. Moreover, the booming 'experience economy'—evident in the rapid sell-out of high-priced concert tickets for international artists like Coldplay—further illustrates the evolving consumption pattern that favours upscale offerings over mass-market products.

A critical dimension of the report is its analysis of income inequality in India. The long-term trend of widening disparities has been stark. The top 10 per cent of Indians now control 57.7 per cent of the national income—a dramatic increase from 34 per cent in 1990. Conversely, the bottom 50 per cent have seen their share decline from 22.2 per cent to just 15 per cent. The affluent continue to prosper, while the majority of the population grapples with stagnant incomes, diminished savings, and mounting debt. The situation is particularly alarming for India's middle class. The report reveals that the middle 50 per cent of India's tax-paying population has experienced income stagnation over the past decade. The situation is alarming as financial savings are nearing a 50-year low. The insights from the report paint a sobering picture of the Indian economy. While the nation boasts rapid growth in certain sectors and an expanding base of emerging consumers, the benefits of this growth are unevenly distributed. The government must focus on strategies that not only promote growth but also ensure that economic gains are more broadly shared. Investments in education, upskilling and initiatives to revive the middle class's purchasing power will be crucial in steering India towards a more balanced and inclusive economic future.

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PICTALK



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

Allahbadia's remarks: Digital decency under fire



RAJDEEP PATHAK

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

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

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

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

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



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

The Historical Context of Drama

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

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

who entertained audiences through mimicry, storytelling, and political satire. Unlike today's digital comedians, 'Bahurupias' adhered to ethical storytelling, ensuring their humour remained socially constructive rather than destructive. Offending sensibilities in their era could lead to stringent punishments, yet they managed to craft thought-provoking and respectful humour. The 'Bahurupias', named after Sanskrit "bahu" (many) and "roop" (form), are traditional impressionists known for their ability to assume multiple identities depicting their art that required deep cultural understanding. Dhirubhai Thakar, the renowned Gujarati literary historian, highlighted the significance of folk traditions like Bahurupias, stating, "The Bahurupia tradition is a testament to how humour, when wielded responsibly, can be both entertaining and enlightening."

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

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

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

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



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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

STALIN DEFIES CENTRE ON LANGUAGE

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

T T Sakaria | Delhi

VC APPOINTMENT RULES CRITICISED

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

Judiciary: The beacon of hope



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

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

Deepak Sharma | Panchkula

ENSURE WOMEN SAFETY

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

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

Vinay Kr Malhotra | Ambala Cantt

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

Shreyanshi Jain | Ujjain

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

A legacy of visionary education and unyielding innovation

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

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



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

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

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

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



SAKSHI PRIYA



FIRST COLUMN

OUR REAL WEALTH: RELATIONSHIPS

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



RAJYOGI BRAHM KUMAR NIKUNJ JI

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

Future-proofing employability: The skills will set you apart



DIENSH SOOD

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



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

The Demand for Skills in a Rapidly Evolving Market

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

Bridging the Skills Gap

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



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

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

The Changing Nature of Work

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

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

The Education System's Role in Workforce Readiness

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

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

Closing the Gap Through Collaboration

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

The Role of Technology in Job Creation

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

The Power of Continuous Learning

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

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

The Growing Value of Soft Skills

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

The Future: Adaptability is Key

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

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

How antibiotic-free poultry empowered a mother and her community

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

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

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

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

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



SWAPNA MAJUMDAR

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

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



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

difference in their lives and communities through sustainable and ethical poultry farming practices after each was given 50 pre-vaccinated 21-day-old Sonali breed chicks free along with support for feeding and constructing chicken coups.

It was the AKF strategy to impart rigorous, yet easy-to-understand hands-on demonstration and training on using commonly found medicinal plants and herbs as alternatives to antibiotics that helped the women, mostly uneducated, understand the importance of adopting ethnoveterinary methods or traditional practices for treating animal health and illness. "I used to give antibiotics to keep my poultry healthy before I met the AKF team. Yet, many died.

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

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

Traveller raped in Pune bus depot

TN RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

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

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

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

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

Systra did not raise any complaint contract was termination: MMRDA

TN RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

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

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

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

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

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

PTI ■ MUMBAI

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

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

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

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



PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

Kejriwal plots lateral entry

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) on Wednesday named Rajya Sabha member Sanjeev Arora as its candidate for the Ludhiana West Assembly bypoll, triggering strong speculations that the seat has been vacated for the entry of AAP chief Arvind Kejriwal in Rajya Sabha. Hours after the nomination announcement, the AAP dismissed the speculations, saying the 56-year-old former Delhi chief minister would not make his way to Rajya Sabha. The announcement was made by AAP national general secretary Sandeep Pathak in a post on X. Arora will have to resign from the Rajya Sabha if he wins the bypoll, the date for which is yet to be announced. Arora, meanwhile, posted on X: "Humbled and grateful to the leadership @AamAadmiParty for reposing faith in me to contest the Ludhiana West by-elections. As someone deeply connected to my hometown, I look forward to serving my people with dedication and sincerity". After the loss of Delhi polls, it was believed that Kejriwal would make his Rajya Sabha entry via Arora's vacant seat. The speculations around Kejriwal began following Punjab Congress leader Partap Singh Bajwa's allegations. "Kejriwal wants to enter power through Punjab, and some Rajya Sabha members will have to sacrifice and make way for him," he said. Punjab is currently the best bet for Kejriwal after his party lost power in Delhi after a decade. Since vacating the government bungalow after resigning as chief minister last year, he has been living in Delhi at another Punjab MP Ashok Mittal's house. Insiders say Kejriwal had met Arora in New Delhi on Tuesday and asked him to contest Ludhiana West by-elections while assuring him a key role and responsibility in the state government. If Arora contests and wins the by-election, he will have to vacate his Rajya Sabha seat. Insiders say that he could be inducted into the Bhagwant Mann Cabinet as a minister. This potential vacancy in the Upper House has fueled rumours about Kejriwal possibly replacing him. However, a final decision is likely to be made only after



Arora's election as an MLA. The AAP will need to make one of them MPs resign for Kejriwal's entry. However, the AAP cannot win back the Rajya Sabha seat if a Delhi Rajya Sabha MP resigns, because the party do not have majority here. In Punjab, the party has 93 MLAs and seven MPs and can easily regain a seat from there. AAP currently holds 10 Rajya Sabha seats - three from Delhi and seven from Punjab. The tenure of Delhi's Rajya Sabha seats are until 2030 while Punjab's Rajya Sabha seats are valid until 2028, making it the most viable route to the Upper House. Currently, Sanjay Singh and Narain Dass Gupta are the Rajya Sabha members from Delhi from the AAP. Swati Maliwal, who has turned critical of Kejriwal and the AAP in the last few months, is also representing the AAP in the Rajya Sabha. While it is the first term for Maliwal, Singh and Gupta have been the party's RS choice in the last term as well. AAP has seven members in the Rajya Sabha from Punjab - Sanjeev Arora, Sandeep Pathak, Raghav Chadha, former cricketer Harbhajan Singh, Ashok Mittal, environmentalist Balbir Singh Sechehal and industrialist Vikramjit Singh. The Election Commission is yet to announce the dates of the Ludhiana West bypoll. It is expected to be held in November along with the Bihar Assembly elections. Soon after the AAP announcement, BJP IT cell head Amit Malviya also weighed in on Sanjeev Arora's candidature, asking whether this move was intended at "clearing the path for Arvind Kejriwal, who just lost his own seat in New Delhi, to get nominated to the Rajya Sabha from Punjab". "Wouldn't it be better if someone from Punjab represented the state instead of Kejriwal?" Malviya asked in a post on X. Malviya further asked

whether the AAP had promised Arora a ministerial berth once he won the bypoll and vacated his seat. "This kind of transactional politics must be condemned. The people of Ludhiana must defeat Sanjeev Arora so that he cannot offer his seat to Arvind Kejriwal without losing his own," he added. AAP spokesperson Priyanka Kakkar dismissed the buzz of Kejriwal's possible entry to the Parliament. "Arvind Kejriwal is not going to Rajya Sabha," she said that as far as the AAP she said that is concerned, earlier there were reports of him becoming the Punjab CM, now it is of him contesting from Rajya Sabha. "Both of these are absolutely wrong. Arvind Kejriwal is the national convener of AAP. I agree that his demand is very high, but he is not limited to any one seat," Kakkar added. BJP national spokesperson Jaiveer Shergill also questioned the AAP's move to field Arora for the Ludhiana West bypoll. He posed three questions as to why this decision was made. "Kejriwal wants to enter Rajya Sabha? Kejriwal wants Govt accommodation in Delhi? Kejriwal having major power FOMO after losing elections? Shergill asked whether AAP asked Arora to vacate the seat in order to make "3P" power, perks & privileges' greedy Kejriwal happy?" Arora, who was elected to the Rajya Sabha from Punjab in 2022 for a six-year term ending in 2028, would have to resign from Parliament to contest the state elections. If he steps down, his vacant Rajya Sabha seat could potentially be allocated to Kejriwal. The Ludhiana West Assembly seat had fallen vacant following the mysterious death of AAP MLA Gurpreet Bassi Gogi on January 10. As per rules, the bypoll to elect new MLA from vacant seat has to be held within six months.

Amit Shah challenges MK Stalin

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

Trump offers Gold Card

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

Trump offers Gold Card

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

Centre replies to SC on convicted MPs

From page 1

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

BJP seeks its pound..

From page 1

losing his cabinet berth in the bargain. Another notable face was Krishna Kumar Mantu, the MLA from Amnour in Saran district, who was recently in the news for organising a "Kurmi Chetna Rally" in Patna, with a view to reaching out to the powerful OBC community to which the JD(U) supreme belongs. The remaining two inductees were Vijay Kumar Mandal, who represents Sikti in Araria district and Moti Lal Prasad, the MLA from Riga in Sitamarhi. Besides, with the exception of Sunil Kumar, all hail from the region north of the Ganges, where the NDA has been performing better than the rival RJD, Congress and Left combine.

Maha Kumbh ends...

From page 1

I was here on Makar Sankranti day, and on the day the stampede happened," added Kirpal Singh from Jhansi. Besides large-scale security arrangements, there has been regular monitoring of the social media 24x7 to check any spread of misinformation regarding the Maha Kumbh," DIG (Kumbh) Vaibhav Krishna told PTI as he oversaw law and order throughout the mega event from the ground. Bhutan King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck was among those who paid a special visit to the Mela and took a holy dip too. Besides showbiz stars, business tycoons, including Mukesh Ambani and Gautam Adani, along with family members visited the mela. Laura Powell, the widow of Apple founder Steve

Jobs, British rock band Coldplay's Chris Martin, also came for the dip. Actor-turned-sadhvi Mamata Kulkarni, anointed as a mahamandeshwarshar of the Kinnar Akhara also hogged limelight, triggering a controversy following objection from some seers, leading to her resignation, which was later withdrawn. Social media influencer turned 'sadhvi' Harsha Richharia, flower seller Monalisa Bhosle from Madhya Pradesh, and Abhay Singh famously known as 'IT' Baba, also made headlines at the Kumbh. But this Kumbh, as all others before this, was about the common person, the many millions who forgot about everyday conveniences to meet their trust with faith.

Centre replies to SC on convicted MPs

From page 1

It said lifetime disqualification was the maximum that could be imposed under the provisions and such a discretion was "certainly within the power of Parliament". "However, it is one thing to say that a power exists and another to say that it must necessarily be exercised in every case," the Centre argued. The affidavit said the impugned laws were "constitutionally sound" and "did not suffer from the vice of excess delegation" aside from being intra vires the powers of Parliament. While imposing any penalty, it said, Parliament considers the principles of proportionality and

reasonability as for instance, the entirety of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023, or penal law provide for imprisonment or fines up to certain limits and the rationale behind it was that the punitive measures would co-relate with the gravity of offence. There were numerous penal laws that prescribe imposing restrictions on the exercise of rights and freedoms, which in most cases are time-specific, it said. The Centre said the petition failed to make the crucial distinction between basis of disqualification and effects of disqualification. "It is true that the basis of disqualification is conviction for an offence and that this basis remains unchanged so long as the conviction stands. The effect of such conviction

lasts for a fixed period of time. As stated above, there is nothing inherently unconstitutional in limiting the effect of penalties by time," it said. The affidavit said the petitioner's reliance on Articles 102 and 191 of the Constitution was totally misplaced. Articles 102 and 191 of the Constitution deals with disqualifications for membership of either house of parliament, legislative assembly or legislative council. The Centre said Clause (e) of Articles 102 and 191 were enabling provisions that confer on Parliament the power to make laws governing disqualification and it was in exercise of this power that the 1951 Act was enacted.

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

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

AP ■ KYIV

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

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

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

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

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

Hamas to turn over bodies of four Israeli hostages

Hundreds of prisoners to be released in exchange

AP ■ CAIRO

Hamas will return the bodies of four dead Israeli hostages on Thursday in exchange for Israel's release of hundreds of Palestinian prisoners, the group said, just days before the first phase of the ceasefire between the warring parties was to expire. Israel has delayed the release of some 600 Palestinian prisoners since Saturday to protest what it says is the cruel treatment of hostages during their release by Hamas. The militant group has said the delay is a "serious violation" of their ceasefire and that talks on a second phase are not possible until the Palestinians are freed. Hamas spokesman Abdul Latif al-Qanou told The Associated Press on Wednesday that Hamas would hand over the bodies of four Israelis the next day.

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

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

Pope being treated for double pneumonia

AP ■ ROME

Pope Francis was sitting upright and receiving therapy for double pneumonia Wednesday, the Vatican said, as Argentines and Romans alike gathered in the Eternal City to pray for his recovery. Francis remained in critical condition. The Vatican said that it hoped to have information later in the day about the results of a CT scan taken Tuesday evening to check on the status of the complex lung infection that has kept him hospitalised since Feb. 14. The Vatican said the pope had a peaceful night and was up, sitting in his armchair on Wednesday receiving therapy. Doctors have said he isn't out of danger, but hasn't had any further respiratory crises since Saturday.



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

AP/PTI

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

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

AP ■ ROME

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

The posts suggested that what ever happened occurred at a gate for the base. It urged service members to "avoid traveling on highway SP105 between Marinari Housing Complex" and a part of the base. The posts didn't elaborate on what happened. After several hours, a new post described the alert ending at around 11:25 a.m. (1025 GMT) and traffic

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

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

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

PTI ■ SINGAPORE

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

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

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

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

AP ■ WASHINGTON

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

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

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

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

Thousands offer prayers at Nepal's Pashupatinath Temple

PTI ■ KATHMANDU

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

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

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

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

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

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

Toll in Sudan military plane crash rises to 46

AP ■ CAIRO

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

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

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

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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

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

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

PTI ■ GUWAHATI

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



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

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

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

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

NCLT asks RCAP lenders to complete all procedural issues

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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

PTI ■ MUMBAI

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

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

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

Centre, Paytm partner for startup mentorship

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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

CBI FIR against Godrej Properties in Chandigarh project

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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

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

IndiGo leases three Boeing 787-9s

PTI ■ MUMBAI

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

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

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

88 per cent parents seek action on minors faking age

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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

India's proposed FTA with UK explained

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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

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

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

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

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

Praggnanandhaa set to battle David Navara in Prague Masters

PTI ■ PRAGUE

On a high after his triumph at the Tata Steel Masters, Indian Grandmaster Praggnanandhaa got a good draw and will take on local star David Navara in the first round of the Prague Masters. Starting as the second seed, Praggnanandhaa will have his task cut out with the white pieces against Navara, who has been around for a long time as one of the top European players.



Praggnanandhaa will have five games as white in the 10-players, nine-rounds tournament which adds to his advantage of being one of the top favourites to annex the crown. The other Indian in the fray, Aravindh Chithambaram, will start his campaign against another local player, Nguyen Thai Dai Van, who impressed everyone recently by winning the challengers section of the Tata Steel tournament and qualified for the premium event in 2026.

Shankland will have the slightly favourable colour against 16-year-old Turkish talent Gurel Ediz. Praggnanandhaa will have white games against Dai Van, Aravindh, Wei Yi and Quang Leim as the tournament progresses. The Indian has a last round game with Giri, who is also tipped for a podium finish and is someone who can turn things around.

In other games of the opening round, top seed Wei Yi of China will have black pieces against German Vincent Keymer, Dutch Anish Giri will also start as black against Le Quang Leim of Vietnam, while American Sam

Aravindh could well be the dark horse of the tournament given his ability to calculate deep and his insatiable hunger for success. Like Praggnanandhaa, Aravindh also has

five games as white in the tournament but needs to get in to the groove early. Wei Yi has been maintaining himself in the top 10 of the world rankings and can be a very hard nut to crack. What makes him a feared opponent is his ability to play dynamic chess at the highest level when the opportunity demands.

In the challengers' section Divya Deshmukh is the lone Indian participant and will face Ivan Salgado Lopez of Spain. Divya had a forgettable Tata Steel challengers and will like to recover some of the lost ground here.

Inter Miami beats Sporting KC, 3-1

PTI ■ FORT LAUDERDALE (USA)

Lionel Messi opened the scoring with a masterful strike in the 19th minute, and Inter Miami beat Sporting Kansas City 3-1 in the second leg of the CONCACAF Champions Cup's first round. Luis Suárez and Tadeo Allende also scored as Inter Miami advanced with a 4-1 aggregate on Tuesday night to face Jamaica Premier League champion Cavalier FC in the round of 16 on March 6. Messi also scored in Miami's 1-0 win at Kansas City in the first leg last Wednesday.



Memo Rodriguez scored for Kansas City — the team's first goal of 2025. Miami scored on all three of its first-half shots despite Kansas City getting the majority of opportunities early, with six shots and three on goal.

Messi slipped a through ball to Suárez, then controlled Suárez's pass off his chest and rifled it past John Pulskamp into the bottom right corner. Messi also started Miami's second scoring opportunity with a perfectly placed ball into the path of Jordi Alba, who found Allende for the finish in the 45th minute.

Two minutes later, a misplayed touch by Kansas City's Jacob Davis led to Suárez's difficult goal that he bounced past Pulskamp.

"There is this level of quality that guys like Messi, Suarez (bring), Kansas City coach Peter Vermes said. "They know the moments in the game. They just know them. They operate at such a different level than other players, and they've done it at all leagues and levels. ... If you let them get ahead of you, the game can open up because with one chance they can break you."

The 37-year-old Messi, who played every minute in Miami's first two matches, checked out in the 69th

minute on Tuesday. Suárez and veteran Sergio Busquets each played 81 minutes. Miami coach Javier Mascherano said he talked to his veterans about managing their minutes throughout the season to keep them healthy. That made room for contributions from younger players like the 26-year-old Allende.

"We will try this season to push them as much as we can because we believe in them," Mascherano said of Miami's young players. "Obviously, I love to work with the old guys, or the big men, but I know that the young players can give us much." Kansas City had plenty of chances with 10 shots and four

on goal. Dejan Joveljic appeared to make it 1-1 in the 40th minute, but he was ruled offside.

Rodriguez entered in the 58th minute and scored from outside the box five minutes later.

Kansas City, still trying to find its footing after significant offseason turnover, remains winless in 2025.

The FIFA Club World Cup trophy was on display at Chase Stadium ahead of the tournament's start in June.

The tournament, which will feature Inter Miami and European powers Real Madrid and Manchester City, among others, will take place in 11 U.S. Cities in an expanded format with 32 teams.

"It's a privilege to have the trophy here," said World Cup chief tournament officer Manolo Zubiria, "and for Inter Miami to be the first club that has it here in the U.S. ... A lot of excitement building up. The clubs are ready. We're ready." Inter Miami will open the monthlong tournament on June 14 against Al Ahly of Egypt at Hard Rock Stadium, the 65,000-seat home of the NFL's Miami Dolphins.

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



PTI ■ SHARJAH

The Indian senior women's team went down to Korea 0-3 in their concluding Pink Ladies Cup match at the Al Hamriya Sports Club Stadium in Sharjah on Wednesday.

The Koreans, placed 20th in the FIFA rankings, led 2-0 at half time. While Choi Yoojung (8') and Choi Dayeong (27') put Korea Republic in the lead in the first half, Mun Eunju rounded off the tally in the 81st minute.

In the Pink Ladies Cup, India

played three matches winning the opener against Jordan, before losing to Russia and Korea.

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

resulted in the first goal in the eighth minute. Choi Yoojung and skipper Lee Youngju were the livewires of the Korean attacks and the former struck the first blow. The direct free kick India conceded was on the edge of the box with a clear view of the frame. Choi Yoojung hammered the free kick brilliantly providing the right trajectory that made the ball find the net with a smoothness for which Shreya Hooda had no answer.

Overall, Shreya was an alert customer, always on her toes as she had to negotiate with too many onslaughts from all angles. She did her job well, including saving a penalty in the 66th minute, but she could do little when Choi Dayeong scored the second goal in the 27th minute. The Indian defenders allowed the ball to stay in the Indian box for too long and paid the penalty. Dayeong tapped the ball in from an almost handshaking distance.



Mbappé to miss match against Real Sociedad

PTI ■ MADRID

Kylian Mbappé was not included in Real Madrid's squad for the Copa del Rey match against Real Sociedad on Wednesday.

Coach Carlo Ancelotti said Tuesday Mbappé was going to be available for the first leg of the semifinals in Basque Country, but the France star did not fully recover from a tooth problem and was left out of the traveling squad for the match.

Also not included were regular starters Thibaut Courtois and Federico Valverde, who are going to be

rested by Ancelotti. Mbappé had missed practice on Tuesday after having a tooth removed, according to Spanish media.

Mbappé has scored six goals in his last five matches in all competitions, including a hat trick in the return leg of the Champions League playoffs against Manchester City. Brazil forward Endrick and Ibrahim Diaz are the likely replacements for Mbappé in attack.

Barcelona and Atletico Madrid drew 4-4 in the first leg of the other Copa semifinal in Barcelona on Tuesday.

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

PTI ■ MADRID

Barcelona and Atletico Madrid both rallied from two goals down in a frantic 4-4 draw in the first leg of the Copa del Rey semifinals.

Atletico scored twice in the first six minutes on Tuesday before conceding four unanswered goals and coming back to even the match with goals in the final 10 minutes, including the equalizer by substitute Alexander Sorloth three minutes into stoppage time.

"It's the worst result after we were up 4-2," Barcelona playmaker Pedri said. "It had already happened in the league and again now. We have to be more careful, we have to learn to keep it from happening."

Atletico had beaten Barcelona 2-1 in Barcelona in the Spanish league when the teams last met in December, with Sorloth scoring the winning six minutes into stoppage time. "We never give up," Atletico forward Julian Alvarez said. "We always keep our heads up, believing that we can come



back. That's what we always do. We played a great match but there are still 90 minutes left." Barcelona saw Atletico jump to an early lead with goals by Alvarez in the first minute and Antoine Griezmann in the sixth, but the hosts tied the game by the 21st minute thanks to goals two minutes apart by Pedri and Pau Cubarsi.

The Catalan club took a 3-2 lead into halftime after Inigo Martinez scored in the 41st. Robert Lewandowski increased the lead in the 74th. Atletico pulled closer with Marcos Llorente in the 84th and Sorloth got the equalizer from close range.

The second leg will be at

Atletico's Metropolitan Stadium will be in April. The winner will play either Real Madrid or Real Sociedad, which will play their first-leg match on Wednesday in Basque Country. Barcelona last won the competition in 2021 and Atletico in 2013.

The teams will meet again in the Spanish league in a match in Madrid on March 16. Until the semifinal stage, the Copa's knockout rounds were played in single-elimination games.

Spanish media said a fan was detained following conflicts between Barcelona supporters and police.

Prince William welcomes England football coach

PTI ■ LONDON

Thomas Tuchel went from a castle to a palace on a busy day for England's recently hired men's soccer coach. Tuchel, who will take charge of his first England match next month, was welcomed at Windsor Castle by Prince William.

"Great to meet with new England men's manager Thomas Tuchel today, and hear about plans for the team," read a message from the Prince and Princess of Wales on their X account, along with a photo of the prince and Tuchel shaking hands in a doorway at the castle. Their meeting at Windsor lasted more than an hour, Britain's Press Association reported. Continuing the royal theme,

Tuchel was later seen attending a match involving Premier League team Crystal Palace, which was hosting Aston Villa in England's top division. The prince is a passionate Villa fan.

Tuchel, a German, was hired in October as England's latest foreign-born coach and officially started work in the role on Jan. 1. He has attended many Premier League games to check out players who could make his squad for upcoming World Cup qualifying games.

Tuchel's first matches in charge will be the qualifiers against Albania on March 21 and Latvia three days later. His contract with England runs through to the World Cup finals in the United States, Canada and Mexico in the summer of 2026.

Lewis Hamilton starts F1 preseason testing for Ferrari

PTI ■ SAKHIR (BAHRAIN)

Lewis Hamilton has started Formula 1 preseason testing for Ferrari in the next step in his bid to win an eighth F1 title with his new team.

The 40-year-old British driver left Mercedes to join Ferrari this season after spending 12 years and winning six of his seven world titles with the Silver Arrows.

After Hamilton drove out of the garage Wednesday in the red car No. 44 at the circuit in Bahrain, F1's social media posted the message: "Lewis Hamilton. Ferrari driver" followed by a heart emoji. Hamilton joined the team last month and will line up in the 2025 season alongside Charles Leclerc, who has been at Ferrari since 2019.



Each team is allowed one car on track at a time during preseason testing, and Wednesday's morning session saw Hamilton joined by Andrea Kimi Antonelli, the 18-year-old Italian rookie who has taken over his old seat at Mercedes.

Among the other drivers on track were Liam Lawson, who's partnering champion Max Verstappen at Red Bull this

season, McLaren driver Oscar Piastri and two-time champion Fernando Alonso of Aston Martin.

Two factors mean preseason testing could be less useful in predicting the teams' race pace this year.

The weather so far Wednesday has been windy and unusually cool for Bahrain, unlike a typical F1 race weekend.

Rublev loses in first round in Dubai Championships

PTI ■ DUBAI

Third-seeded Andrey Rublev followed up his Qatar Open title with a first-round exit at the Dubai Championships, losing to qualifier Quentin Halys 3-6, 6-4, 7-6 (5).

For the 77th-ranked Halys, who next faces Roberto Bautista Agut, it was his first victory over a top-10 opponent.

"At the moment, it's a bit hard to comprehend," the 28-year-old Frenchman said on Tuesday.

"Mentally, it was a very difficult match. Andrey is maybe tired from his week in Doha. Beating a top-10 (opponent) is a significant moment in your career. I'm



happy it happened today." The ninth-ranked Rublev had won the Dubai title in 2022. On Saturday, he beat Jack Draper to win the Qatar Open.

Also Tuesday, top-seeded Daniil Medvedev beat Jan-Lennard Struff 6-4, 7-6 (4) and will next face Giovanni Mpetshi Perricard. Second-seeded Alex de

Minaur lost to 2014 U.S. Open champion Marin Cilic 6-2, 3-6, 6-3. Nuno Borges eliminated eighth-seeded Arthur Fils 6-2, 6-1.

Other winners Tuesday included fifth-seeded Ugo Humbert, Matteo Berrettini, Felix Auger-Aliassime and qualifier Christopher O'Connell.

Chelsea thrashes Southampton 4-0 in Premier League

PTI ■ LONDON

Chelsea wasn't so reliant on Cole Palmer this time.

On a frustrating evening for the England star, his Chelsea teammates stepped up — as demanded by their manager — to share the goals in a 4-0 thrashing of last-place Southampton in the Premier League on Tuesday. Christopher Nkunku, Pedro Neto, Levi Colwill and Marc Cucurella were the scorers as Chelsea ended a three-match losing run by beating a team destined to go down, perhaps as one of the worst-performing teams to ever play in the Premier League. Southampton has just nine points from 27 games.

As for Palmer, he will wonder how he didn't get on the score sheet and add to his 14 league goals so far this season. The best of his many

opportunities at Stamford Bridge came midway through the first half when he was played clean through one-on-one with Southampton goalkeeper Aaron Ramsdale. He delayed and delayed and then shot too close to Ramsdale, who parried the effort away.

After wasting another chance in the second half, Palmer appeared to laugh at himself.

Palmer is on his driest run since joining Chelsea from Manchester City in September 2023. He hasn't scored in seven games now.

On the eve of the match against Southampton, Chelsea manager Enzo Maresca said Palmer's dip in productivity has probably arisen because "we rely on him for everything." Maresca returned to that same theme after the game.

"He has to continue to work, continue to be happy, continue to



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

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

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

the standings. The Premier League is likely to get five qualification berths for next season's Champions League.

Another loss for Bournemouth, another win for Brighton

Bournemouth started the match in sixth place — one point behind fifth — but dropped to seventh and has now been joined on 43 points by Brighton, another improbable candidate for Champions League qualification. It was a fourth straight win in all competitions for Brighton since a 7-0 loss at Nottingham Forest. Palace wins in front of Thomas Tuchel.

Crystal Palace beat Aston Villa 4-1 at home, with Ismaila Sarr scoring twice for the hosts in a match watched by England men's coach Thomas Tuchel. Jean-Philippe Mateta and Eddie Nketiah also netted for Palace, with Morgan Rogers replying for Villa.

Fulham won 2-1 at Wolverhampton thanks to a goal in the first minute by Ryan Sessegnon and a winner by Rodrigo Muniz.

Justin Kluivert had equalized for Bournemouth in the 61st, canceling out Joao Pedro's 12th-minute opener from the penalty spot after he was fouled by goalkeeper Kepa Arrizabalaga.

Afghanistan knock England out of Champions Trophy

PTI ■ LAHORE

Ibrahim Zadran's majestic 177 and pacer Azmatullah Omarzai's fifer trumped Joe Root's masterful hundred, as the brave Afghanistan registered a thrilling 8-run win to knock a largely-insipid England out of the Champions Trophy here on Wednesday.

England are winless after two matches and in their last league match in Group B they will face South Africa, who already have three points along with Australia. Afghanistan now have two points and will have to beat the Aussies in their final group match to entertain the hopes of reaching the last eight.

For a long time, England's chase merely rattled along as the dismissal of Phil Salt and Jamie Smith jolted them early. They were 30 for two then, and eventually ended up at 317 all out with a ball to spare as pacer Omarzai (5/58) struck at crucial junctures.

But Root (120, 111b, 11x4,

1x6) brought stability to England's innings through two alliances, adding 68 runs with Ben Duckett (38), who was dropped on 29, for the third wicket and then an 83-run stand with skipper Jos Buttler for the fifth wicket.

They were not really blazing partnerships but kept England afloat, keeping them



CHAMPIONS TROPHY MATCH REPORT

in the vicinity of the asking rate. But the jettisoning of Duckett and Buttler prematurely curtailed those blossoming ventures, as Root had to shoulder the burden all by himself.

Root's was a clever innings, as he hardly hit any ball in anger but still managed a strike-rate close to 100, and at times above 100.

But there those little flourishes which are so central to a Root innings such



IBRAHIM ZADRAN

as a reverse sweep four off wrist spinner Noor Ahmad or a scooped six behind wicketkeeper off Fazalhaq Farooqi.

He brought up his 17th ODI hundred with a single off Rashid Khan, and looked to stay on. But a rather tired ramp off pacer Omarzai ended in the gloves of keeper Rahmanullah Gurbaz.

But England had another willing soldier in Jamie Overton (32, 28b), who added precious 54 runs for the

seventh wicket, but a feeble heave off Omarzai ended his stint.

It also marked the end of England's journey in this tournament.

Earlier, Zadran's remarkable innings helped Afghanistan pile 325 for seven.

Zadran, whose daddy hundred came off 146 balls (12x4, 6x6), had solid support from skipper Hashmathullah Shahidi (40, 67b, 3x4), with whom he raised 103 runs for the fourth wicket, and

Azmatullah Omarzai (41, 31b) with whom he milked 72 runs for the fifth wicket.

Later, he plundered 111 runs for the sixth wicket with Mohammed Nabi (40, 24b) to put England through the wringer.

But Afghanistan's start to a must-win game was way off the mark after they elected to bat first. Jofra Archer's (3/64) pace and accuracy put them under considerable strife inside the first 10 overs on an absolute batting beauty.

Rahmanullah Gurbaz dragged an Archer delivery back onto his stumps while attempting a drive, Sediquallah Atal was trapped in front and Rahmat Shah pulled one straight to Adil Rashid at square leg as the Afghans slumped to 37 for three inside the Power Play.

Zadran began the repair work in the company of Shahidi and they were understandably circumspect.

But once he reached 50 off 65 balls, Zadran opened up more and smoked Jamie Overton for a couple of fours to signal the shifting of gears.

However, Shahidi was

dismissed when he tried to reverse sweep leg-spinner Rashid, whose front-of-the-arm delivery crashed onto the stumps.

But Zadran flourished in the company of Omarzai as England felt the heat of double-barrel firing.

England also had to deal with a knee injury to pacer Mark Wood, as he bowled only eight overs even after spending some time away from the field during the Afghan innings.

Zadran, who brought up his sixth ODI hundred off 106 balls, soon slipped into overdrive, smashing Overton for 6, 4, 4, in an over.

The departure of Omarzai did not slow down the 23-year-old as he blasted Archer for 6, 4, 4, 4 to reach the 150-run mark for the second time in his career.

Along with a veteran batter Nabi, Zadran added quick runs for the sixth wicket at over 11 runs an over as England fell apart spectacularly in the final 10 overs, conceding 113 runs.

Zadran eventually fell to Liam Livingstone in the final over.



Committee formed to revise norms for assistance to NSFs

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Vijender calls for 'fresh and fair' elections in BFI

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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



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

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

"It will be unfair on Shubman

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Subhman Gill consolidates top spot in ICC ODI rankings

PTI ■ DUBAI

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

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

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

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

ICC clears bowling action of Matthew Kuhnemann

PTI ■ MELBOURNE

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

After the test series in Sri Lanka, match officials asked for an independent assessment of Kuhnemann's bowling action.

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

Champions Trophy: Pakistan to play for pride against Bangladesh

PTI ■ RAWALPINDI

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

Meanwhile, star batter Babar Azam and captain Mohammad Rizwan have also fallen short of

expectations, offering little resistance when it mattered the most.

Pakistan has historically relied on its formidable pace attack to win matches, but frontline quicks Shaheen Afridi, Naseem Shah, and Haris Rauf have looked rusty and ineffective, failing to provide

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

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

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

On the spin-friendly tracks of Dubai and Karachi, Pakistan bafflingly named only one specialist spinner in Abrar Ahmed, leaving their bowling unit toothless. Like Pakistan, last edition's semifinalists Bangladesh

have also been knocked out of the tournament after successive defeats to India and New Zealand.

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

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

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

Dropped catches in both matches have only added to their woes. However, up against an off-colour Pakistan, Bangladesh could sense an opportunity to finish their

campaign on a high and salvage some pride.

Teams (from):
Pakistan: Mohammad Rizwan (captain), Salman Ali Agha (vice captain), Babar Azam, Fakhar Zaman, Kamran Ghulam, Saud Shakeel, Tayyab Tahir, Faheem Ashraf, Khushdil Shah, Usman Khan, Abrar Ahmed, Haris Rauf, Mohammad Hasnain, Naseem Shah, Shaheen Shah Afridi.
Bangladesh: Nazmul Hossain Shanto (captain), Soumya Sarkar, Tanzid, Hasan, Tawhid Hridoy, Mushfiqur Rahim (wicketkeeper), MD Mahmud Ullah, Jaker Ali Anik, Mehidy Hasan Miraz, Rishad Hossain, Taskin Ahmed, Mustafizur Rahman, Parvez Hossain Emon, Nasum Ahmed, Tanzim Hasan Sakib, Nahid Rana.

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