

Illegal compensation to land owners: SC appoints SIT to probe Noida functioning

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Dissatisfied with a UP government-appointed panel probing the issue of illegal compensation to land owners paid by Noida officials, the Supreme Court has appointed an SIT to look into it. A bench of Justices Surya Kant and N Kottiswar Singh ruled while hearing the anticipatory bail pleas of the legal advisor and one of the law officers of Noida who were accused of corruption. It said the allegations related to the release of huge amounts of compensation in favour of some landowners, who were allegedly not entitled to seek such a higher compensation for their acquired land. The top court constituted the special investigation team (SIT) comprising IPS officer and Additional General of Police, Lucknow zone S B Shiradkar, Inspector General CBCID Modak Rajesh D Rao and Hemant Kutiyal, Commandant



of UP Special Range Security Battalion. "The special investigation team shall, inter alia, look into the issues (i) whether the quantum of compensation paid to the land owners was higher than they are entitled to in terms of the judgments passed by the courts from time to time; (ii) if so, who were the officers/officials responsible for such exorbitant payment; (iii) whether there was any collusion or con-

nivance between the beneficiaries and officers/officials of Noida; and (iv) whether the overall functioning of Noida lacks transparency, fairness and commitment to the cause of public interest," it said on January 23. Directing the SIT to file its report in a sealed cover within two months, the bench said the team was free to look into any other allied issue during the investigation. The bench however pro-

hibited the beneficiaries, farmers and landowners, who were paid the extra compensation from any coercive or penal action without its permission. It observed on September 14, 2023, when the matter was heard, it was learnt that the FIR in the case was not a solitary instance of alleged excess payment of compensation to the land owners but there were numerous instances of such payments, prima facie, for

extraneous considerations and on quid pro quo basis. "It was consequently desired that an independent agency should hold a deeper probe into the functioning of Noida as a statutory authority," the bench noted. On October 5, 2023, the state government informed the top court that it had constituted a fact-finding committee comprising three officers, including the additional director general of police, Meerut Zone, to examine the cases where Noida might have paid illegal compensation in collusion and connivance with the officers of the authority and the beneficiaries. It said, "Keeping in view the limited mandate given to that committee and the manner in which the proceedings were conducted, we were not satisfied with its outcome, especially when it was brought to our notice on November 22, 2023 that under the garb of investigation, the committee was trying to question the grant of higher compensation to the landowners under the court orders."

Defence Ministry unveils new system to boost reconnaissance capabilities

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh on Friday here flagged-off 'SANJAY - The Battlefield Surveillance System (BSS)'. It is an automated system which integrates the inputs from all ground and aerial battlefield sensors, processing them to confirm their veracity, preventing duplication and fusing them to produce a Common Surveillance Picture of the battlefield over secured Army Data Network and Satellite Communication Network. These systems will be inducted to all operational Brigades, Divisions and Corps of the Indian Army in three phases from March to October. This system has been developed under the Buy (Indian) category at a cost of Rs 2,402 crore. This system will enhance battlefield transparency and transform the future battlefield through a Centralised Web Application which will provide inputs to Command and Army Headquarters, and the Indian Army Decision Support



System. The BSS is equipped with state-of-the-art sensors and cutting-edge analytics. It will monitor the vast land borders, prevent intrusions, assess situations with unparalleled accuracy and prove to be a force multiplier in Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance. This would enable commanders to operate in both conventional and sub-conventional operations in a Network Centric Environment. Its induction will be an extraordinary leap towards data and network centricity in the Indian Army. SANJAY has been indigenously and jointly developed by the

Indian Army and Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL) creating a conducive ecosystem towards achieving 'Aatmanirbharta' as a follow up to the Indian Army's 'Year of Technology Absorption'. Minister of state for defence Sanjay Seth, Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) General Anil Chauhan, Chief of the Army Staff General Upendra Dwivedi, Defence Secretary Rajesh Kumar Singh, Secretary (Defence Production) Sanjeev Kumar, Chairman & Managing Director, BEL Manoj Jain and other senior officials of defence ministry and BEL were present on the during the flagging-off ceremony.

CEC Rajiv Kumar slams social media platforms

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Chief Election Commissioner (C) Rajiv Kumar on Friday lamented that social media platforms were not blocking or at least labelling easily detectable fakes and leaving it to poll bodies to engage fact checkers to rescue themselves. "Business interest appears to be at work here. It is like first spreading the disease and then selling medicines. The casualty is a fair election process and purity of democracy," he said. Delivering his valedictory speech on the conclusion of an international conference of election management bodies here, Kumar said social media companies need



to introspect before it is "too late". "Let the social media platforms, which have been instrumental in providing a critical space for free expression, especially to voices not heard, not be clouded by the shadows of fake, unverified

and misleading narratives, disruptive by design," he said. The CEC was of the view that it is in the interest of social media platforms that fake clutter is detected and blocked before it is too late. "Do not help forces disrupt-

ing democracies and thereby freedom of speech, which is the basic tenet of intermediaries as well," he cautioned. He said election management bodies must devise and adopt a framework to manage these challenges. As technologies evolve, Kumar noted, artificial intelligence (AI) will play a critical role. AI can help poll bodies refine voter rolls, detect irregularities, and manage polling logistics more effectively, he said. "It can help in optimising resource allocation and fostering greater efficiency. However, these advancements come with challenges that demand vigilance, particularly as we strive to balance innovation with inclusivity, facts with fake," he pointed out.

Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Goa among top-performing states in fiscal health index

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Mineral-rich Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Goa and Jharkhand have emerged as top-performing 'achievers' among the states listed in NITI Aayog's first Fiscal Health Index (FHI) report released on Friday. The report titled 'Fiscal Health Index 2025' ranked states for 2022-23, covered 18 major states that drive the Indian economy in terms of their contribution to India's GDP, demography, total public expenditure, revenues, and overall fiscal stability. According to the report, Punjab, Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal, and Kerala were worst-performing states in Fiscal

Health Index (FHI), each focusing significant fiscal challenges, and listed under 'aspirational' category. The report which aims to evolve an understanding of the fiscal health of states in the country has listed Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Telangana, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka under 'front-runners' category. Tamil Nadu, Bihar, Rajasthan and Haryana were classified as performers. As per report, released by Chairman of 16th Finance Commission Arvind Panagariya, Odisha excelled in fiscal health with the highest overall index score of 67.8. Referring to top five achiever states, the Aayog said these

states have higher capital outlay of up to 4 per cent of GSDP, effective mobilization of non-tax revenue, are revenue surplus and have low interest payments, which is up to 7 per cent of revenue receipts. Analysing the performance of front runners, the government think tank said these states reported high total developmental expenditure up to 73 per cent, witnessed consistent growth in own tax revenue, had balanced fiscal management and improved debt sustainability with debt-to-GSDP ratio of 24 per cent. The report noted that, the aspirational (Kerala, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh and Punjab) states are struggling to meet the

fiscal and revenue deficit targets, have low revenue mobilization, witnessing a growing debt burden with debt sustainability a concern in these states. As per the report, Odisha tops the debt index (99.0) and debt sustainability (64.0) rankings with better than average scores under quality of expenditure and revenue mobilization. Odisha has maintained low fiscal deficits, a good debt profile, and an above average capital outlay/GSDP ratio. While Kerala and Punjab struggle with low quality of expenditure and debt sustainability, the report said, West Bengal faces revenue mobilisation and debt index issues.

PM Modi pledges support for girl child empowerment

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his message on National Girl Child Day said on Friday that India is proud of the accomplishments of its girls across all fields. He also said his government is equally resolute in ensuring no discrimination happens against the girl child. In a social media post, Modi said, "Today, on National Girl Child Day, we reiterate our commitment to keep empowering the girl child and ensure a wide range of opportunities for her. India is proud of the accomplishments of the girl child across all fields." Their feats continue to inspire us all, the prime minister added. Modi said his government has focused on sectors like education, technology, skills and healthcare among others which have contributed to empowering the girl child. Union Women and Child Development Minister Annapurna Devi urged for a

collective commitment to their education, safety and empowerment. In a series of social media posts, the minister emphasised the importance of creating an environment that would allow every girl child to thrive and fulfil her dreams. She said in one post, "On National Girl Child Day, I extend my endless good wishes for a bright future to all daughters. Let us take a pledge today to remain committed to the education, safety, and empowerment of our girls." In another post, the minister reiterated the need for societal support. "Balika Devo Bhava: On this occasion of National Girl Child Day, let us resolve to provide every girl the opportunity to fulfil her dreams and create an environment where they feel free, empowered, and respected," she said. Observed every year on this day, National Girl Child Day highlights the importance of addressing issues such as gender inequality, access to education, and safety for girls.

Defence Secretary flags off school band competition

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Ahead of the 76th Republic Day celebrations, Defence Secretary Rajesh Kumar Singh on Friday said the National School Band Competition is being held here to evoke a feeling of oneness and foster a sense of pride and patriotism among children towards the country. Singh was addressing a gathering at the front lawns of the Major Dhyana Chand National Stadium where the top 16 school bands selected from across the country are battling it out in the grand finale. The National School Band Competition 2024-25 is being jointly organised by the Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Education. The defence secretary addressed students participating as members of contesting teams and others at the venue. In the grand finale, 16 teams spanning 466 school students are taking part, who have been selected after a "rigorous scrutiny", he said.



Referring to the participation of military bands in the annual ceremonial parade, Singh said the armed forces have a very vibrant tradition of military music. This tradition boosts morale, gives dignity to ceremonies and gives talented people opportunities to display their talent, he said. The defence secretary said in the last couple of years, the government has made efforts to "involve and encourage

"talented school children" to become co-participants in Republic Day celebrations. "The wonderful, visual spectacle of marching school bands...Rouses patriotic passion and courage among children and adults alike, thus evoking a feeling of oneness, belonging and national pride," he said. "The aim behind conducting the National School Band Competition is to evoke a feeling of oneness, of esprit

de corps, and a deep sense of pride among children towards their schools and the country, thus rejuvenating and rekindling the spirit of contributational values, patriotism and unity, and motivate them to walk the path of becoming patriotic and useful citizens of the country," he said. The students who are part of the finalist teams have been invited to witness the Republic Day ceremony on

January 26, as special guests, the defence ministry earlier said. The first performance by a pipe band of girl students from PM SHRI KGBV Patmada, East Singhbhum, Jharkhand was an instant winner, as they delighted the audience with their swinging moves and lilting tunes. A pipe band of boys followed PM SHRI Kendriya Vidyalaya No. 2 Belagavi, Karnataka. A brass band of girls from a government school in Gangtok, Sikkim and a pipe band of boys from a private school in North Sikkim are also among the finalists and their performances left the crowd spellbound. 'Sare Jahan Se Achha', 'Ae Watan Tere Liye' tunes were also played by several bands. A brass band of girls from St. Joseph Anglo-Indian Girl's Higher Secondary School, Kozhikode, Kerala belted out patriotic tunes and also played 'Raghupati Raghav Raja Ram' and 'Vande Mataram'. The competition is being held over two days, ending on January 25.

PM Narendra Modi congratulates Ireland's re-elected PM Micheál Martin

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday congratulated newly-elected Irish Prime Minister Micheál Martin and said he is committed to working together to further strengthen the partnership between India and Ireland. Martin has been elected Irish prime minister for the second time. Martin is one of the longest serving MPs in the Dáil (lower house of Irish Parliament) having been first elected in 1989. "Congratulations @MichealMartinTD on assuming the office of Prime Minister of Ireland," Modi said in a social media post. "Committed to work together to further strengthen our bilateral partnership that is based on strong foundation of shared values and deep people to people connect," the prime minister said.

India condemns disruption of 'Emergency' screenings in UK

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI/LONDON

Taking strong exception to pro-Khalistani extremists who stormed movie theatres across UK and disrupted screening of film 'Emergency', India on Friday said these elements should be held accountable. New Delhi also hoped the UK government would take appropriate action against the culprits. The film, which sees actor and BJP MP Kangana Ranaut playing the role of former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, focuses on 21 months of Emergency from 1975 to 1977. The film ran into controversy over allegations that it misrepresents the Sikh community. "We've also



seen several reports on how the film 'Emergency', which was being screened in several halls, was being obstructed. We consistently raise concerns with the UK government regarding incidents of violent protests and intimidation by anti-India limits. Freedom of speech and expression cannot be applied selectively, and those

obstructing it must be held accountable," Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said here at a weekly press briefing. "We hope that the UK side will take appropriate action against those responsible. Our mission is that our High Commission in London remains in touch and it is in regular communication with our community members for their safety and welfare," he added. This strong reaction came after pro-Khalistani protesters organised protests against Ranaut's 'Emergency', disrupting the film's screening at some cinemas in the UK during its opening weekend. Community organisation Insight UK posted a video on

its social media platform, showing protesters interrupting a screening of the film, directed by Ranaut, at a cinema in Harrow in north-west London. News agency PTI reported from London an Opposition Conservative Party Member of Parliament has urged the UK Home Secretary to intervene after his constituents in north-west London were threatened by "masked Khalistani terrorists" who burst into a screening of Kangana Ranaut's film 'Emergency'. Bob Blackman told the House of Commons that similar disruption of the screenings of the "very controversial" film took place in Wolverhampton, Birmingham, Slough, Staines

and Manchester. It has resulted in the Vue and Cineworld cinema chains deciding to pull the film from many theatres in the UK. "On Sunday, many of my constituents gathered and paid for a screening of the film 'Emergency' in the Harrow Vue cinema. At about 30 or 40 minutes into the screening of the film, masked Khalistani terrorists burst in, threatened members of the audience and forced the screening to end," Blackman said in Parliament. "The film is very controversial, and I am not commenting on its quality or content, but I defend the right of my constituents and other members' constituents to be able to view it and make a decision on it. It covers the period

when Indira Gandhi was the prime minister of India," he said. The MP noted that there are certain views in the UK that it is an "anti-Sikh film" but asserted that his constituents should be able to judge for themselves and not be "threatened by thugs who want to disrupt democratic opportunities to see public films". "May we have a statement from the Home Secretary (Yvette Cooper) next week on what will be done to ensure that people who want to see such films, which have been passed by censors, can do so in peace and harmony? I absolutely defend the right of people to demonstrate outside cinemas, but not to disrupt viewings," he added.

Gurugram police arrest five criminals after encounter

STAFF REPORTER ■ GURUGRAM

A crime branch team of the Gurugram police have arrested five dreaded criminals after an encounter from Golf Course Extension Road on the intervening night of Thursday and Friday, police said. The accused was present in the city to commit theft, police said on Friday. According to the police, the police received information regarding four to five youths coming towards Golf Course Extension Road with illegal weapons, riding in a CNG auto rickshaw to commit a crime. Based on an information, a police team blocked the Golf Course Extension Road from

Village Ghata to Faridabad Road. After some time, an auto rickshaw without a number plate was seen coming towards the police check point. When the police team signalled the CNG auto rickshaw driver to stop the auto-rickshaw, the auto-rickshaw driver tried to escape by increasing the speed of the auto-rickshaw and hitting the barricade and police vehicle. "Five persons got down from the auto-rickshaw and started firing at the police team and running towards the forest. During this, One bullet hit the bulletproof jacket of the in-charge of crime branch sector-39, and one bullet hit the window of the police car," Inspector Vishwa Gaurav, In-Charge of Crime Branch Sector-39, said.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Rekindling historic ties

The President of Indonesia is the chief guest at the Republic Day, a fitting tribute to the friendship between two nations

India will celebrate its 76th Republic Day on January 26, 2025, marking a moment to reflect on the country's remarkable journey since its first Republic Day in 1950. This year's celebrations will have a special touch as Prabowo Subianto, President of Indonesia, will be the chief guest. His presence is a reminder of the deep historical and cultural ties between the two nations, which have seen their share of highs and lows but continue to thrive. Incidentally, the chief guest at the first Republic Day parade was President Sukarno of Indonesia, highlighting the camaraderie between two newly independent nations that had emerged from colonial rule. The relations between the two countries have come a full circle. The early years of India-Indonesia relations were marked by solidarity and mutual support. Biju Patnaik, a prominent Indian freedom fighter, played a key role in aiding Indonesia's struggle for independence, even flying its leaders to safety during critical moments. This partnership extended to global platforms like the Bandung



Conference of 1955, which laid the groundwork for the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), co-sponsored by India and Indonesia.

India has come a long way since 1950. From grappling with post-independence challenges like poverty, illiteracy and infrastructural deficits, the nation has emerged as one of the world's fastest-growing economies. It boasts advancements in science, technology, space exploration and global diplomacy, while remaining rooted in its democratic ethos. Similarly, Indonesia has evolved into a vibrant democracy and a leading voice in Southeast Asia. Both nations share a legacy of anti-colonial struggles and have worked

together in various domains, including trade, culture and defence. The partnership between India and Indonesia has seen its ups and downs. In the 1950s, ties were warm and cooperative, but by the 1960s, geopolitical differences, particularly over relations with China and the 1965 India-Pakistan war, strained the relationship. Indonesia's support for Pakistan during that conflict and claims over parts of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands led to significant diplomatic tensions. However, the 1970s marked a period of reconciliation, with agreements on maritime boundaries and a renewed focus on cooperation. Today, Indonesia is one of India's largest trading partners in Southeast Asia, with bilateral trade reaching nearly \$30 billion in 2023-24. The two nations have also strengthened defence ties, including a Defence Cooperation Agreement signed in 2018, signalling a strategic partnership in a region increasingly shaped by competition with China. Prabowo Subianto's visit as the chief guest at India's Republic Day parade holds symbolic and strategic importance. This visit underscores the growing warmth in India-Indonesia relations. The presence of the Indonesian president at this year's parade is a tribute to the enduring friendship between two nations that have weathered challenges and found common ground in their aspirations for peace, prosperity and global cooperation.

PICTALK



Children holding national flags in a mustard field ahead of Republic Day 2025, at a village near Balurghat

The complex terrain of relationships



VINAYSHIL GAUTAM

Relationships, whether personal or professional, are a delicate balancing act of emotions, perspectives and communication

Relationships are a tricky business. Two people who, at one stage of life, can agree so well that they cannot see or believe in having any difference in the point of view that they will hold. Different perspectives are an enigma; affection, agreement and endorsement are all rolled into one. Identification with each other is more important than identity any day. Very often, it is the bedrock of affection and togetherness in action. The same couple, as time passes and because of hormonal changes in their systems, can and do start having different points of view. What is initially a pleasant disagreement can soon become an assertion of identity. Personality conflicts follow.

These personality conflicts can be a logical derivation, and very often, it is difficult to find the origin of the derivation itself. Coherent dialogue in a spirit of give and take can often be substituted by the urge not only to protect one's turf but also to prove oneself more talented and resourceful. It can often become the source of further identity conflicts. The skill to handle such disagreements cannot be taught and is often taken over by other habits.

These habits may include being short-tempered, incoherent talking and having a high pitch in conversation, which is seen as an extension of good logic. The aberrations are far too many to be recounted, and the results are easy to identify. Instead of working together to resolve the differences, it becomes a battleground to show who can prevail. The rest, as they say, is history. In an era, that is full of talk about skills, it is important at this stage of dialogue to focus on life skills. Two people who cannot get together try to demonstrate who has the right of way in a marital relationship.

The life story moves from one end of the spectrum to an often incoherent hurtling down the slope of not only a difference of opinion but also a difference in personalities. The analysis can go only so far because then logic gives way to preferences and pas-



sion. This is at the root of many marital discords, and it is difficult to reverse the gears and change the pitch. Unfortunately, while there are numerous dissertations in psychology and elsewhere on relationships, practical-oriented thinking in handling relationships is few and at best, commonsensical.

One is merely indicating the value of focused research and showing how a structured approach to problem-solving, even in everyday life, can be very valuable. There is a need to see research as an enabling situation for problem-solving, and many use the phrase 'applied research' for it. In the present day and age, more of the fashion world is about skill, and it is being generously used because of its attractive value in situations that cannot be practically handled. Sometimes it works; sometimes it does not.

The important thing is to realise that research requires insights and the adoption of a structured methodology, even in commonsensical situations. It is this aspect of research that can lead to a better quality of life, which can be termed as enabling research and it has to do with life skills. Solving this situation, which afflicts many interpersonal relationships, is simultaneously easy and yet difficult. It is easy to control if one can limit one's communication and how



THE LIFE STORY MOVES FROM ONE END OF THE SPECTRUM TO AN OFTEN INCOHERENT HURLING DOWN THE SLOPE OF NOT ONLY A DIFFERENCE OF OPINION BUT ALSO A DIFFERENCE IN PERSONALITIES

much one talks more wisely, keeping the number of words used in a conversation minimal. The truth is, that the more one seeks to talk and explain, the more complex it can become. Let simple things remain simple; it is a significant strategic choice.

This approach works because passion subsides, irritations sort itself out and the choice of words and pitch of the voice can be better controlled. One only has to look around to notice how talking less is such an asset in keeping relationships positive. Interpersonal relationships apart, work relationships, also get affected and the impression of losing an argument, even in work-spaces, is a personal defeat. This, by itself, is a self-defeating proposition. It is self-defeating because even if one wins the argument due to positional power or manipulative skills, the scars of a lost argument leave long-lasting damage to relationships. One can indeed often lose a battle to win the war. As indicated earlier, this applies to work situations as much as to real-life, non-work situations. Gentleness and soft words go far, especially when gentleness is received not as a proposition of the weaker person, but as a characteristic and indicator of mutual respect.

The best solution to many conflicts is when both come out as winners, and no one is

growing, smitten by the dangerous feeling of having 'lost one's face'. Be that as it may, it is necessary to reduce differences, not to personalities, but to find the best way forward. This best way forward must focus on protecting everyone's ego and be in the interest of the larger good. Much will depend on the personality elements of the players in the situation and indeed the time available to sort it out. Many times, a shortage of time necessitates two decisions that are suboptimal and more to 'get along with a job' than 'finding the best option'. Using tentative words and a hypothesis open to correction and improvement may be the best recipe for conflict resolution. In such situations, the personalities do not win or lose; it is the cause that is handled in a far-sighted way. Examples can be many, and one has to see what the issue at stake is how people perceive the result of the outcome and how they interpret it. In all cases, if there is a loser in an argument, it is best to make him feel that he has not 'lost' and that no personalities are involved. This can be a useful approach to handling institutional issues because every resolution of a conflict should be for the institutional good.

(The writer is a well-known management consultant of international repute. The views expressed are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

TRUMP'S HYPOCRISY EXPOSED

Madam — The ultimatum from Trump to end the prolonging Ukraine-Russia war exposes his hypocrisy. He is aware that it is with the pumping of arms by his country and its allies in Europe that Ukraine is continuing the war. He is also aware that the sanction imposed on Russia had failed miserably, as the same EU partners are buying the same Russian oil from different sources like India. Pumping arms and funds into Ukraine on one hand and giving an ultimatum to end the war on the other is rightly understood by one and all as meaningless, non-serious, and merely publicity-orientated. The entire world knows that maximum wars are waged or promoted by his country. Even while addressing after assuming office, he had demonstrated his imperial thirst by expressing his policy to take over the Panama Canal and Greenland, besides arbitrarily changing the name of the Gulf of Mexico into the Gulf of America. His threat to wage a tariff war goes against the very basic principles of globalisation that promote the free movement of goods, labour, and capital. The world also knows the key role played by the production of arms and promotion of arms trade in the economy of America. Therefore, America needs a war between some countries or the other. Mr. Trump speaking with concern over the huge human loss in Ukraine and Russia due to war is another display of his hypocrisy. Because more devastating impacts are experienced due to climate change, and his actions are hostile to the global efforts to overcome this serious issue. Therefore, one need not attach so much importance to his utterances or Quixotic actions.

A G Rajmohan | Anantapur

LIQUOR BAN AT RELIGIOUS SITES

Madam—CM of Madhya Pradesh Mohan Yadav has formally announced in Narsinghpur district that a liquor ban

UNESCO honours Mahakumbh



To foster the honour and delight of every Indian, the 45-day-long Mahakumbh Festival was listed in the UNESCO list as the largest peaceful religious congregation of pilgrims on earth. To disperse the Hindu aesthetic religious and spiritualism at the next

level, Maha Kumbh is truly a festival of positivity and spiritualism in India. From Naga Sadhus to Aghoris to all the other pilgrims, Kumbh is an auspicious celebration of Hindu devotees to enchant spirituality for developing godly connection, inner peace, and spiritual harmony.

A dip in the Triveni Sangam of the three rivers of Ganga, Yamuna, and Saraswati will be considered as the precursor of all devil deeds done during the lifetime. A congregation of 450 million, including people from local and global communities, is one of a kind incidence. It is welcoming that UNESCO added this one-of-a-kind religious festivity to its list. It is a moment of extreme celebration and glee for every Indian back at home. We all welcome the UNESCO listing favourably and positively with utmost joy in our hearts.

Kirti Wadhawan | Kanpur

will be implemented in 17 religious places in 11 districts of the state. It is believed that the government will send an order to the administration of the cities of the districts where the liquor ban is to be implemented, and the licensed liquor shops will be closed. He also said that liquor will not be allowed to be sold at any cost in the places where God Ram and Krishna set foot. These include Ujjain, Amarkantak, Maheshwar, Omkareshwar, Chitrakoot, Mandasaur, etc. In the Narsinghpur program, he also talked about the harm caused to the health of the family due to alcohol. I do not understand one thing: more or less all the politicians in India, in their speeches, there is a lot of mention of the ill effects & demerits of alcohol and the diseases caused by it. All those smart politicians are found appealing to the people that 'please stay away from consuming alcohol; it harms your health. Hey, when these leaders are so concerned about the health of the people, then why do they not declare a complete ban on the production and

marketing of alcohol?

Jang Bahadur Singh | jamshedpur

SCAMMERS TARGET JOB SEEKERS

Madam — The rise of job scams has become a significant problem, with scammers deceiving job seekers by creating fake job postings. These scammers often promise unsuspecting victims the opportunity to work from home and earn a high income, but only after paying for training or equipment. Research the company thoroughly to verify its legitimacy and reputation. Use reputable job boards and websites to search for job openings.

Report any suspicious activities or job postings to the relevant authorities. By being aware of these job scam tactics and taking the necessary precautions, job seekers can protect themselves from falling victim to these fraudulent schemes.

Khushi Uchenia | Ujjain

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Cooperative commodities exchange: A global vision for farmer empowerment



BINOD ANAND

This initiative leverages technology, blockchain and India's PACS network to empower farmers with fair pricing, sustainability and direct market access

The agricultural sector is the backbone of many economies, particularly in India, where nearly 60 per cent of the population depends on farming for their livelihood. Yet, smallholder farmers often remain at the mercy of intermediaries, fluctuating market prices and unequal access to global markets.

To address these challenges and promote equity, sustainability and growth, a bold initiative is proposed: the establishment of a Global Farmer-Centric Cooperative Commodities Exchange (GFCCE). This platform, rooted in the cooperative model, aims to empower farmers by ensuring fair pricing, direct market access, and sustainable practices. This ambitious project resonates with the global agenda of the World Cooperation Economic Forum to foster inclusive economic growth and social equity. **Empowering Farmers Through Technology** APEX Integration at the heart of this initiative lies technology—a powerful enabler that can bridge the gap between farmers and markets. The



GFCCE will leverage the Government of India's support to develop a robust and accessible digital platform integrated with blockchain technology to ensure transparency and reduce pilferage in the supply chain. Blockchain will create a tamper-proof record of transactions, from production to storage and distribution, enhancing trust and accountability.

The project will adopt a PACS-to-APEX (Primary Agricultural Cooperative Societies to Apex-level organisations) approach, leveraging India's extensive network of over 95,000 PACS. These societies will act as the foundational nodes, aggregating produce from farmers at the village level. The commodities will then be funnelled through district and state-level federations, culminating

at the national apex organisation, which will oversee operations, ensure fair pricing and manage exports. To address storage issues, a network of modern warehouses will be constructed and integrated with blockchain systems. These warehouses, equipped with real-time inventory tracking, temperature controls and pest management systems, will be strategically located across key agricultural regions.

Blockchain connectivity across warehouses will enable seamless tracking of stored produce, ensuring reduced wastage and pilferage. Farmers will also receive warehouse receipts, which can be used as collateral for loans, providing them with immediate financial support.

This interconnected system will not only provide farmers with better access to markets but also ensure that the supply chain is efficient, transparent and secure. It will serve as the backbone for procurement planning and play a vital role in stabilising food prices. **Impact on Food Inflation** The GFCCE's blockchain-enabled supply chain and warehouse network will rev-

olutionise procurement planning and control food inflation. With real-time data on production, storage, and distribution, government agencies will have accurate insights into commodity availability and demand patterns.

This data-driven approach will enable timely procurement decisions, ensuring that food stocks are adequately replenished and distributed. By reducing post-harvest losses and pilferage, the initiative will improve the efficiency of the Public Distribution System (PDS), preventing artificial shortages that often lead to price spikes. Additionally, the transparent pricing mechanism of the exchange will curb hoarding and speculation.

This system will also facilitate targeted interventions during periods of surplus or deficit. For instance, in the case of bumper harvests, surplus stocks can be stored efficiently and exported strategically to global markets, preventing a price crash domestically. (The writer was a member of the high level MSP committee, Ministry of Agriculture; views are personal)



FIRST COLUMN

SEEKING TRUE SHELTER IN THE DIVINE

Amid the chaos of desires, ego and karmaphal, how do we find lasting peace



AJIT KUMAR BISHNOI

We are small, ignorant, helpless and unsafe. There should not be any doubt about our smallness with eight billion of us on the earth's planet itself. How knowledgeable we are or can be? Knowledge is unlimited. How much can we learn in one lifetime? Helpless we are from the time we are born till the time comes to dispose of our bodies. Just count how many people we need daily to survive well. And unsafe all of us are, as the Covid-19 pandemic proved. Therefore, we instinctively seek shelter all the time. An infant needs his parents. As one grows, one takes shelter from education to maintain oneself. Education/training over, time comes to seek shelter in a job or a business.

The idea is to have the shelter of enough money to be able to survive decently. Sex overpowers thinking beginning from a young age. Some are drawn towards fame like a sportsperson, while others get into politics, etc. for power. The most fortunate seek the shelter of God. Shelter of God is crucial to exist well. Let us see the degree of difficulty for a quality life. Our nature ('svabhava') is a huge handicap. Something or other from lust, anger, greed, jealousy, ego, etc. predominates if not more than one.

What chance is there to have a quality life? Lust derails almost everyone. One assumes that sex is pleasure, and it has so many forms. The worst thing is it's possessing our minds. Ego is not far behind. Have you met anyone who does not feel his or her superiority vis-



à-vis others? Greed does not allow us to assess our needs sensibly. More is better is the desire and there is no satisfaction. Anger is always lurking near the surface. It surfaces at the drop of a hat, literally. Then, there are karmaphalas always ready to manifest. We know how bad ones hurt. What most people don't realise are the ill effects of good karmaphalas. This is when one gets the feeling of invincibility and makes big mistakes.

People look for rewards during success, and we know what these rewards do to us. The third big enemy is old age, when we become weak and are mostly written off. Are we stuck? Far from it. God would not have made such a sorry Creation. Guidance and help are available to all of us if we accept the role of God in our lives. Ignorance, false pride or laziness stops us from taking God's help, who is the owner, controller and everything. You seek guidance sincerely and see what happens. But we don't; we prefer to be in cyclic thinking short-circuiting our own lives. We condemn ourselves by our obstinate attitude. God is prepared to help all of us at any time, but there is a rider.

We must deserve such help. How to determine who should get or who shouldn't? Therefore, the question everyone should be asking is: how do we become deserving of God's 'kripa' (favour)? Simply, you recognise yourself as a soul – part of God. Then, all spiritual activities will make sense.

Shouldn't parts take shelter from God? Shouldn't we be very respectful to God and pay obeisance to Him? What about the 'dhyani' (meditation) of the entity, who is everything? How about thanking God for all that He does for everyone like providing air, water and sunlight free. In short, we should stop taking shelter of anyone or anything except God, and remain there.

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

Winter's tale in Northern India: A season of discontent



HIRANMAY KARLEKAR

Northern India's winter is more than just a fleeting season; it is a relentless narrative of marrow-freezing cold, breath-choking pollution and a grim forecast for years to come



Of freezing marrows and choking breaths William Shakespeare, emperor of narratives, master of metaphors, celebrated craftsman of sentences and acclaimed presenter of deep insights into human nature, had a way of coming up with expressions surviving the passage of time. One of them is "winter of our discontent." Richard, Duke of Gloucester, says in Richard III, "Now is the winter of our discontent/ Made glorious summer by this sun of York;/ And all the clouds that lour'd upon our house/ In the deep bosom of the ocean buried." The expression, which adorns one of John Steinbeck's most famous novels as its title, should resonate particularly strongly with people in northern India still in the grip of a winter that is cold, damp and utterly polluted. The chances of things improving in the next few years, are, to put it mildly, bleak.

As the chilling flipside of global warming, the cold months will continue to be increasingly marrow-freezing, since, with Donald Trump taking over as the United States' president, the chances of a deceleration in the pace of climate change, have diminished significantly. This is not to look wistfully back over one's shoulder to a mythical place like the island valley of Avilion, where, pace Alfred Tennyson in a very different context, "falls not hail, or rain, or any snow, / Nor ever wind blows loudly." Climates and the weather have been notoriously fickle cousins throughout history. If any part of the past seems golden, it is because of the distance in time which lends it enchantment.

It had, when it was the present, its warts, some of them rather large and ugly. Floods and droughts took very heavy tolls when meteorological devices and skills for predicting their advent and coping with their aftermath, were far less advanced. In the absence of electrical heating devices, which we have, life could not have been terribly pleasant during the last ice age which had covered



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about 30 per cent of the earth's surface and ended 15, 000 to 20,000 years ago. On a more specific note, slavery was legal in most parts of the world—including the chest-thumping democracies of the West—as late as the second half of the 19th century. The weather, doubtless, has an impact on life and its moods, which influence thought, speech and feeling which, in turn, trigger action.

All of these, at a certain elevated level, power the wheels of history. These also affect inter-personal relations, causing friction and hostility arising from anger and discontent, or cordiality and warmth caused by harmony. The sum total of the interaction among these factors determines the quality of a community's social existence in terms of tensions between collective bodies like class and caste, and stress caused by individual actions like crime, which is often caused by alienation resulting from marginalisation, poverty and anonymity in impersonal societies. A crime can be a perverse act of self-assertion, a sub-conscious statement like, "I kill, therefore I exist"—a variant of Rene Descartes much-quoted assertion, "Cogito ergo sum (literally, "I think, therefore, I am")."

Another form of self-assertion can be participation—to say nothing of playing a leading role—in a mass movement. Eric Hoffer writes in *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements*, "There is in us a tendency to locate the shaping forces of our existence outside ourselves. Success and failure are unavoidably related in our minds with the state of things around us. Hence it is that people with a sense of fulfilment think it a good

world and would like to conserve it as it is, while the frustrated favour radical change. The tendency to look for all causes outside ourselves persists even when it is clear that our state of being is the product of personal qualities such as ability, character, appearance, health and so on." What is the result? Hoffer quotes Thoreau as saying, "If anything ail a man, so that he does not perform his functions, if he has a pain in his bowels even ... he forthwith sets about reforming—the world." (Italics by Hoffer; Thoreau has used the plurals "ail" and "have" as it was done by many in his time in such contexts).

Attempts to reform the world invariably lead to struggles with status quoists. Besides, social tensions and conflicts will increase following rising ocean levels, caused by global warming, submerging coastal areas. Inward migration of people from these regions would trigger clashes over land and resources in the interior areas. The same factors will also be in operation in other areas to which people may escape from regions made uninhabitable by temperatures rising too high to support life.

One can, of course, argue that people would be kind to global warming refugees, realising that they may have to leave their homes someday for the same reason. But then, kindness is not what a person encounters frequently in life; it is the same with gratitude, the lack of which weighed heavily on the Bard of Avon. "Ingratitude," he lamented in *King Lear*, "thou marble-hearted fiend..." He bewailed in *As You Like It*, "Blow, blow, thou winter wind, / Thou art not so unkind/As man's ingratitude."

And he says in *Twelfth Night*, "I hate ingratitude more in a man/ Than lying, vainness, babbling, drunkenness, / Or any taint of vice whose strong corruption/ Inhabits our frail blood." Character attributes like openness towards gratitude are rooted deep inside one's DNA and are modified by the environment as one grows up. Seasonal changes can impact their intensity, as discomfort caused by extreme heat or cold can put one's temper on a short leash.

On the other hand, as Anton Chekhov put it, "People don't notice whether it's winter or summer when they're happy." This brings us back to our starting point—northern India's butt-freezing, breath-choking winter. Can one be happy in its midst? The answer will be in the affirmative, as the news of a progeny scaling new heights at work or being gifted with a baby, will warm the cockles of one's heart. This, however, is most likely to be a passing phase, overwhelmed, sooner than later, by the many worries and sadnesses that quotidian existence brings and that, again, are ephemeral.

The more relevant question will be whether one can survive northern India's winter and for how long. The transition to the hereafter caused by pollution stalks one silently but lethally. The final truth in life is mortality. All this has been said before, and will be said again, as one will hear the much-quoted proverb, "What can't be cured must be endured." It has joined the ranks of venerable clichés blessed with eternal life.

(The author is Consulting Editor, The Pioneer. The views expressed are personal)

Cultural heritage tourism: A path to sustainable growth and mutual understanding

Respecting the balance between tourism and heritage enables a mutually beneficial relationship that supports communities, preserves cultural identity and promotes global harmony

Cultural tourism, as defined in the 22nd session of the UN Tourism General Assembly in 2017, is an activity where a visitor's primary motivation is to learn, discover, experience, and engage with the tangible and intangible cultural attractions and products of a destination. These motivations shape the agendas of both the visitor and the tour guide at cultural heritage destinations, bridging the gap between the historical and the contemporary.

The Evolution of Cultural Heritage and Tourism
Cultural heritage has undergone a significant shift in perception, moving from an archaeological focus to the concept of "living heritage" and its reuse. Similarly, tourism has evolved from being largely

centered on pilgrimage to a multifaceted industry encompassing learning, entertainment, experiences, and relaxation. This transformation has elevated tourism as a catalyst for inclusive economic growth and job creation across diverse sectors, such as hospitality, transportation, and entertainment. The industry's ripple effect benefits individuals and communities alike, engaging local businesses, transport operators, craftspeople, tourist guides, and the hospitality industry in a symbiotic relationship.

For these benefits to be fully realised, collaboration among stakeholders is essential. They must work collectively to offer authentic and meaningful experiences that resonate with travelers while preserving the



SUKHDEV SINGH

integrity of cultural sites. **Cultural Heritage as a Driver of Tourism**

A rapidly growing segment within the tourism industry is cultural heritage, which encompasses natural and architectural sites, traditional crafts, cultural events, performances, and intangible knowledge. Recognised as both a commodity and an experience, cultural heritage attracts mar-

ket players, planners, and governments aiming to expand the scope of tourism. It promotes inclusive growth, intercultural exchange and mutual understanding.

The relationship between tourism and cultural heritage is built on mutuality. While cultural heritage serves as a key attraction for tourism, the latter provides the financial and structural support required for its preservation and promotion.

Navigating Contradictions
Tourism operates on the principle of profit and economic growth, while cultural heritage centers on identity and inheritance. These differing foundations can create contradictions. For the tourism industry, cultural heritage is often commodified, whereas for her-



itage conservation, tourism acts as a feeder for sustainability. While these sectors can support one another to an extent, unchecked tourism practices can lead to significant challenges, including overcrowding, environmental and degradation.

To mitigate these issues, regulated practices in cultural heritage tourism must prioritise the symbiotic relationship

between factors influencing tourist experiences and those fostering cultural understanding. Tour operators and tourists must respect the sanctity and protocols of cultural heritage sites. Travelers should be encouraged to appreciate local customs without overstepping boundaries, ensuring a balance between immersion and respect. Sustainable cultural heritage tourism, thus, becomes a pathway to fostering "culture for peace."

Economic and Cultural Benefits of Heritage Tourism
Cultural heritage tourism creates opportunities for income generation and employment. This is achieved by maintaining and showcasing heritage structures, sites, and products. Preservation and management efforts, such as cata-

logging and storytelling, directly benefit from tourism revenue. Simultaneously, the broader economic ecosystem, including hospitality, transportation, and entertainment, flourishes through increased visitor engagement.

However, cultural heritage is far more than a revenue-generating commodity. It serves as a repository of customs, values, and artifacts, connecting communities to their past and reinforcing their identities. Tourism, when responsibly managed, can amplify the significance of heritage sites by fostering research, introducing new narratives, and raising awareness. Reinvestment of economic returns into preservation ensures the longevity and authenticity of cultural heritage.

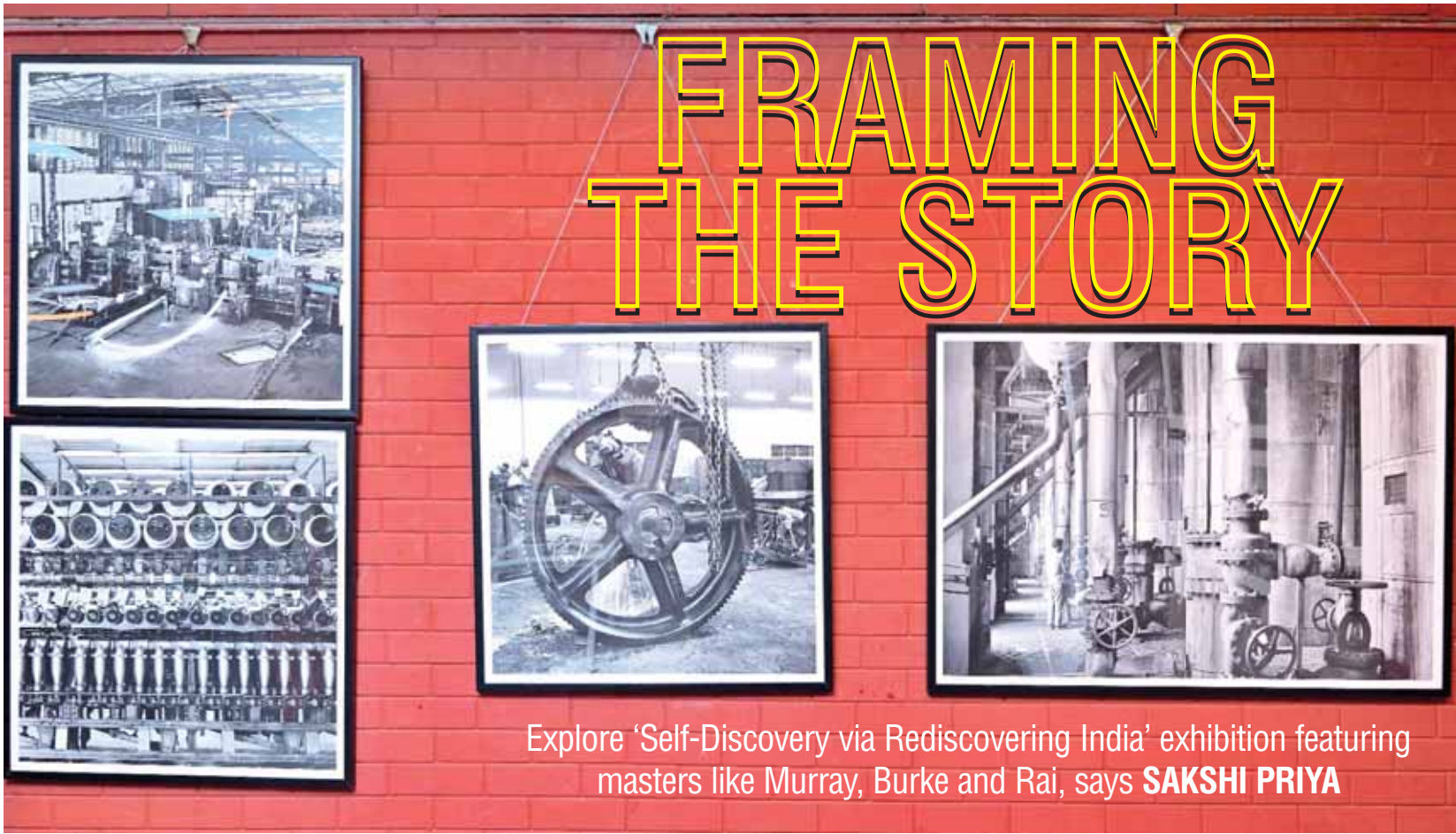
Challenges of Cultural Heritage Tourism

While tourism can elevate the value of cultural heritage, it also introduces challenges. Overcrowding, environmental degradation, and disruptions to the local population's way of life are common issues.

Sustainable and Responsible Tourism

To maintain a harmonious balance between tourism and cultural heritage, sustainable practices are essential. These include regulating visitor numbers, promoting eco-friendly initiatives, and ensuring that tourism revenue is reinvested into preservation efforts.

(The writer is retired professor of Guru Nanak Dev University Amritsar and Vice-Chairman, INTACH; views are personal)



Explore 'Self-Discovery via Rediscovering India' exhibition featuring masters like Murray, Burke and Rai, says **SAKSHI PRIYA**

becomes evident how photography has documented India's evolution. Early works by pioneers like *Linnaeus Tripe* and *Samuel Bourne* provide a visual history of India's landscape and architecture. Their photographs are windows into a bygone era, evoking a sense of nostalgia for a time that is both familiar and distant. The collection doesn't just stop at capturing landscapes or monuments, it explores the lives of people, the complex relationships between humans, animals and nature and the political shifts that have shaped the country. Works by contemporary masters like *Raghu Rai* and *Jyoti Bhatt* add a modern perspective, demonstrating how photography has continued to evolve as an art form while remaining true to its roots as a medium for storytelling. The exhibition's focus on India's cinematic and political history further enhances its significance. Photographs from the sets of iconic films, as well as snapshots from key political



moments, provide an intimate look into the country's cultural and social landscape. These images not only reflect history but also shape the way we remember it. With access to an extensive digital archive containing over 22,000 photographs, the exhibition offers a deeper dive into India's history, allowing visitors to explore beyond the gallery walls. This combination of physical and digital resources provides a comprehensive view of India's rich visual heritage. The *Self-Discovery via Rediscovering India Part III* exhibition is a reflection of India itself. It is an invitation to reconnect with the nation's history, to see it through the eyes of those who have captured its most defining moments. For anyone interested in understanding the soul of India, this exhibition is a rare and valuable opportunity to experience the country's past, present and future through the lens of some of the greatest photographers.

PHOTOS : PANKAJ KUMAR

Photography has a way of preserving moments, not just in images but in emotions, in stories and in history. Stepping into the *Self-Discovery via Rediscovering India* exhibition, curated by *Neville Tuli*, feels like embarking on a personal journey through time. Hosted by the *Tuli Research Centre for India Studies (T.R.I.S.)*, the collection showcases photographs that capture the essence of India, spanning over a century. This third installment of the series presents a stunning collection of photographs that bring together India's rich cultural heritage, its landscapes, and the people who have shaped its story. The exhibition offers a unique opportunity to experience not only the visual beauty of India but the depth of its historical and emotional connections. The collection highlights some of the earliest photographs from the mid-1800s, including *Dr. John Murray's Bishessur Nath Temple, Benares (1858)*. The albumen print, preserved in its pristine form, speaks to the timeless spirituality of Varanasi. Similarly, *Colin Roderick Murray's Jagmandar Water-Palace at Udaypur (1873)* captures the reflective beauty of Rajasthan, where the delicate interplay of water and architecture tells its own story. As one moves through the exhibition, it

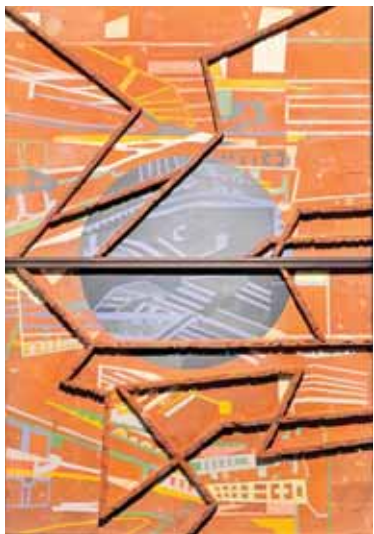


ART BEYOND THE CITY

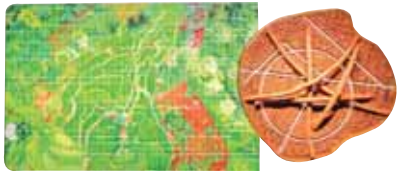


By **SAKSHI PRIYA**

In *Terraform*, *M. Pravat* invites us to walk through a world that feels both familiar and unsettlingly fragmented. This solo exhibition, hosted at STIR Gallery, Delhi, is an ambitious exploration of how our built environments intersect, clash and coexist with nature. By using materials like bricks, pigment, dust and LED lights, *Pravat* creates pieces that feel like echoes of urban landscapes, half-built, half-ruined and wholly captivating. Walking into the gallery feels like stepping into a suspended reality. The sculptures and installations seem to hold secrets, each fragment whispering stories of cities in transition. *Pravat's* work doesn't just replicate the urban environment; it deconstructs it, laying bare the tensions between construction and destruction, between human ambition and nature's quiet defiance. As I moved through the space, I found myself reflecting on my own relationship with the city, its noise, its chaos and its beauty.



What struck me most was how each piece felt alive, as if caught mid-metamorphosis. There's a raw, unpolished energy to the work that mirrors the constant flux of modern life. *Pravat* has a remarkable ability to take the ordinary, bricks, stone, dust



land elevate it into something profound. The interplay of light and shadow adds another layer, creating moments that feel almost cinematic, as though you're watching the city breathe. But beneath the aesthetic appeal lies a deeper message. *Terraform* is a powerful commentary on the relentless pace of urbanisation and its cost to the natural world. *Pravat's* art is not preachy; instead, it nudges you gently, encouraging introspection. It's a reminder that we are living in a delicate balance, one that we often take for granted. For me, the most thought-provoking aspect of the exhibition was its sense of incompleteness. These aren't polished, finished works, they're intentionally raw, mirroring the way cities are always in a state of becoming. It's both unsettling and oddly hopeful, a

expression to human resilience and the possibility of change. *Pravat's* ability to turn complex themes into visceral experiences is what makes this exhibition so memorable. *Pravat's Terraform* goes beyond being a traditional art exhibition. It's an immersive experience that urges us to pause and reflect on the way we shape and inhabit the world around us. It encourages a deeper look at the delicate balance between creation and destruction, challenging us to rethink our relationship with the spaces we build and the nature we often overlook. As the artist explained, "This landscape is actually magical lands, a digital landscape. I'm inspired by the digital format and I started rendering a digital feeling. When you see it from a distance, it looks consciously faded, like it's mathematically exercised in certain ways, cutting your land and developing your shape. The challenge is how I mixed everything together, where contrast exists between the elements, and people should think about why this context has changed."



Steps of Serenity

By **TEAM VIVA**

In moments where words cannot express the depth of emotion, dance becomes a powerful form of communication. *Samaya Chauhan's Rangapravesham* performance in New Delhi was a beautiful example of this truth. At just sixteen, *Samaya's* talent shone brightly, captivating the audience and bringing to life the rich tradition of Kuchipudi. The evening marked her transition from a student to a full-fledged performer, celebrating her growth as an artist. The recital opened with the graceful *Ganpati Vandana*, a prayer to Lord Ganesha, followed by *Dashavtar*, in which *Samaya* depicted the ten avatars of Lord Vishnu. Through her precise footwork and expressive movements, she brought each avatar's story to life. A particularly emotional part of the performance was *Saanson Ki Maala pe Simrun Main Pii Ka Naam*, choreographed by *Padma Bhushan Shri Raja Reddy*, where *Samaya* beautifully expressed the spiritual

connection between two souls. The performance concluded with *Tarangam*, in which *Samaya* danced on the rim of a brass plate, telling stories of *Lord Krishna's* childhood. The complexity of the rhythmic patterns and *Samaya's* graceful footwork demonstrated her technical skill and deep understanding of the dance form. *Dr. Aseem Chauhan*, Chancellor of Amity University, presented a Vote of Thanks, saying, "The essence of today's incredible performance by my daughter *Samaya* is the notion of Guru Shishya Parampara, the sacred bond between the Guru and his disciple." This connection was evident in the performance, with *Samaya* drawing on the teachings and guidance of her esteemed gurus, *Padma Bhushan Shri Raja Reddy*, *Smt. Radha Reddy* and *Smt. Kaushalya Reddy*. The evening was a celebration of culture, tradition and the bond between mentor and disciple. *Samaya's* performance highlighted the beauty of Kuchipudi, reminding the audience of the timeless connection between dance, history and emotion.



BRM 2025: UNITING CULTURES THROUGH THEATRE



By **TEAM VIVA**

The *National School of Drama (NSD)* is set to host the 25th edition of *Bharat Rang Mahotsav (BRM)* from 28 January to 16 February 2025, marking a significant milestone in its history as the world's largest theatre festival. For the first time, the festival will expand beyond India, with performances in Colombo, Sri Lanka, and Kathmandu, Nepal, alongside 11 Indian cities including Bengaluru, Jaipur and Ranchi. Themed *One Expression, Supreme Creation*, BRM 2025 will feature over 200 productions from nine countries, including Russia, Germany and Taiwan, creating a

global platform for collaboration and cultural exchange. Renowned actor and NSD alumnus *Rajpal Yadav* has been named the *Rang Doot* (Festival Ambassador) of this year's event. The festival will also emphasise inclusivity by featuring productions involving marginalised communities such as *Santhal tribes, sex workers, transgender persons and children*. Virtual performances under the initiative *Vishwa Jan Rang* will include NRIs and youth from all seven continents. NSD Director *Shri Chittaranjan Tripathy* said, "Bharat Rang Mahotsav has evolved into a global celebration of theatre, providing a platform to share and celebrate

diverse creative expressions. With its expanded reach, this year's festival sets a new benchmark." BRM 2025 will also include director-audience dialogues, masterclasses, seminar and cultural experiences like folk and traditional performances, Rang Haat exhibitions and a vibrant food bazaar. The Opening Ceremony at Kamani Auditorium, New Delhi, will feature Rang Sangeet, a musical performance by the NSD Repertory Company, as part of celebrations marking NSD's 65th anniversary and the Repertory's 60th year. With its unique blend of global outreach, inclusivity, and cultural immersion, BRM 2025 promises to be a landmark event in the world of theatre.

Bumrah, Jadeja and Jaiswal named in ICC Test Team of the Year

PTI ■ DUBAI
 Indian pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah, veteran all-rounder Ravindra Jadeja and young opener Yashasvi Jaiswal deservedly found a place in the ICC's Test Team of the Year 2024 that featured four Englishmen with Australian Pat Cummins as its captain. The team also had two New Zealanders, including the redoubtable Kane Williamson. Cummins was the lone Australian to make the all-star XI. Bumrah was nothing short of magical in 2024, dominating every team and every batter he bowled to. He became the first bowler to average under 20 with a minimum of 200 wickets in Test cricket, solidifying his place in history. In total, Bumrah took 71 wickets in 2024 at an astonishing average of 14.92, finishing as the highest wicket-taker in Test cricket for the year. Thirty two of these scalps came in the

recent Border-Gavaskar series against Australia, which India lost 1-3. He began the year with a stellar performance against England, taking 19 wickets in four matches, including a remarkable nine-wicket haul in Visakhapatnam. At home against Bangladesh, he further extended his tally with 11 wickets in just two games. Although his outing against New Zealand was subdued, where he picked up three wickets, it was against Australia that Bumrah truly cemented his legacy as one of the greatest bowlers of all time. Jadeja, meanwhile, scored 527 runs in 2024 at an average of 29.27 and picked up 48 wickets at an impressive average of 24.29. Jaiswal established himself as a premier Test opener and a standout figure in Indian batting during 2024. After a challenging series in South Africa, he made an impressive comeback in the home series against England,



amassing a staggering 712 runs. This included two double centuries and three fifties, showcasing his dominance. The 23-year-old left-handed batter continued his fine form with three half-centuries in four innings as India thrashed Bangladesh at home. He was also one of the few bright spots in an otherwise disappointing series for India, as New Zealand achieved a historic whitewash on Indian soil. In the Border-Gavaskar Trophy, Jaiswal demonstrated his class with a magnificent 161 in the second innings at Perth, bouncing back strongly after a first-innings duck. He finished as India's top scorer in the series, accumulating 391 runs. Over the calendar year, Jaiswal scored a remarkable 1,478 runs at an impressive average of 54.74, a tally second only to England's Joe Root (1,556 runs in 2024 at an average of 55.57), who was also named in the ICC all-star team. Williamson was also one of the stand-out performers in 2024 as he accumulated 1,013 runs in 2024 at an outstanding average of 59.58, making him the sixth-highest run-scorer of the year. Sri Lanka's Kamindu Mendis also figured in the team after his 1,049 runs in 2024 at an extraordinary average of 74.92. Cummins led his team to series victories against the West Indies, New Zealand, and most notably India. He took 37 wickets in 2024 at an average of 24.02 and scored 306 runs, averaging 23.53. ICC Test Team of the Year 2024: Pat Cummins (c) (Australia), Yashasvi Jaiswal (India), Ben Duckett (England), Kane Williamson (New Zealand), Joe Root (England), Harry Brook (England), Kamindu Mendis (Sri Lanka), Jamie Smith (wk) (England), Ravindra Jadeja (India), Matt Henry (New Zealand), Jasprit Bumrah (India).

Zverev in Australian Open final as injured Djokovic left Smriti Mandhana, Deepti Sharma in ICC women's ODI Team of the Year

PTI ■ MELBOURNE
 Spectators booed an injured Novak Djokovic as he left the court in Rod Laver Arena after quitting one set into his Australian Open semifinal against Alexander Zverev on Friday. Dealing with a what he said was a torn muscle, Djokovic lost the opener 7-6 (5) when he put a forehand volley into the net, then began shaking his head and immediately walked over to shake Zverev's hand. The 37-year-old Djokovic packed up his equipment and walked off toward the locker room, pausing to respond to the jeers by giving two thumbs-up. At his news conference, Djokovic said the pain in his taped left leg was "getting worse and worse." He hurt it during his quarterfinal victory over Carlos Alcaraz on Tuesday night. "I knew," Djokovic said, "even if I won the first set, it was going to be a huge uphill battle for me." He was bidding for an 11th



championship at the Australian Open and record 25th Grand Slam title overall. But this is the second time in the past four major tournaments he was unable to finish because of an injury: He withdrew from last year's French Open before the quarterfinals because he tore the meniscus in his right knee during a match. Djokovic underwent surgery in Paris and, less than two months later, reached the final at Wimbledon, then won a gold medal for Serbia at the Paris Olympics. The number two-seeded

"For that, I need to get better. I need to improve on the court. I need to improve physically." During his on-court interview, Zverev pleaded with the fans not to give Djokovic a hard time. "I know that everybody paid for tickets and everybody wants to see hopefully a great five-set match," he said. "But you've got to understand - Novak Djokovic is somebody that has given this sport, for the past 20 years, absolutely everything of his life." The only set of Djokovic vs. Zverev lasted one hour, 21 minutes and included 19 points that lasted nine strokes or more apiece. The first four games alone lasted 31 minutes, slowed both by the lengthy baseline exchanges and Djokovic's deliberate pacing between points, taking the 25-second serve clock down to - and occasionally slightly beyond - the full allotment. The match was grueling - and would have been even without dealing with a leg problem that initially became an issue late in the first set against Alcaraz.

of ODI engagements for the country last year. India played only three ODIs -- an away series against Sri Lanka --, losing two of them while the third one ended in a tie. The 28-year-old Mandhana accumulated 747 runs in 13 matches to be the highest run-scorer in women's ODIs in 2024. She is also in the running for the ICC Women's ODI Cricketer of the Year award. In the home series against South Africa, Mandhana was in sublime form, beginning with back-to-back centuries in the first two ODIs. She narrowly missed a third consecutive ton, falling for 90, though her remarkable tally of 343 runs in the series earned her the Player-of-the-Series award. Mandhana had a shaky start in the first two ODIs against New Zealand in October, but ended the series on a high note with a brilliant century in the final match. With this



PTI ■ DUBAI
 Star batter Smriti Mandhana and all-rounder Deepti Sharma were on Friday named in the ICC women's ODI Team of the Year 2024 but none of their male counterparts found a place in the men's side that was dominated by Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Afghanistan. The women's all-star team

has three players from England, two Australians, two South Africans and one each from Sri Lanka and West Indies, besides the two Indians. South African batter Laura Wolvaardt, who scored 697 runs in 12 matches in 2024, was named captain of the ICC team. The men were, however, absent from the ICC XI and that can be attributed to lack

U-19 Women's T20 World Cup: Pakistan, Nepal win fourth place play-off matches

PTI ■ KUALA LUMPUR
 Pakistan and Nepal were hardly tested on way to winning their fourth-place play-off matches in the ICC Women's U-19 T20 World Cup here on Friday. Pakistan, riding on young pacer Haniah Ahmer's four-wicket haul, crushed Samoa by 52 runs while Nepal got the better of Malaysia by seven wickets in a low-scoring match. Put into bat, Pakistan scored 136/8 with Maham Anees and Fatima Khan scoring 28 and 25 respectively. Norah Salima was the most successful Samoa bowler taking three wickets for 20 runs. Right-arm pacer Haniah then unsettled the Samoan batters, returning with excellent figures of 4/20, while Quratulain Ahsen (2/13) and



Fatima Khan (2/19) were the other wicket-takers as Samoa were all out for 84 in 18.5 overs. Malaysia were off to an inauspicious start with Nepal striking off the very first ball to dismiss Nur Aliya Binti Mohd Hairun for a duck. The team could not recover from the early loss and folded up for 45 runs with skipper Puja Mahato (4/9) and Rachana Chaudhary (3/5) emerging as the most successful bowlers. In reply Nepal reached 47/3 in 11 overs to complete a seven-wicket victory with Mahato scoring 23 runs. Left-arm spinner Suabika Manivannan took all three wickets.

Indian GM P Iniyar wins title in Malaysia

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
 Indian Grandmaster P Iniyar Panneerselvam clinched the ninth Johor International Open chess tournament title in Malaysia with a dominating performance. The 22-year-old from Erode in Tamil Nadu accumulated 8.5 points in nine games. He finished 1.5 points ahead of his nearest rival, winning against four International Masters and one Grandmaster. The nine-round tournament, which ended on Thursday, had 84 participants from eight countries, out of which 24 were titled players. In fact, at the end of the penultimate round where he beat Indonesian IM Nayaka Buddhidharma, Iniyar had already secured the title as he



was 1.5 points ahead in the points table. Iniyar beat Vietnamese GM Nguyen Van Huy in the final round in an impressive performance. Indian IM VS Raahul and Chinese IM Li Bo finished second and third respectively. Iniyar, who had won the Chennai Open earlier in January, secured 15 rating points from the title win.

Rohit Sharma shows some spark but falls for 28 on Ranji Trophy return

PTI ■ MUMBAI
 He pulled Umar Nazir for a trademark six, effortlessly lofted Auqib Nabi and Yudhvir Singh for a couple of more hits over the ropes to give a glimpse of his absolute best. But eventually, a fifty on Ranji comeback was not meant to be for India captain Rohit Sharma who fell for 28 here on Friday. Playing his first game for Mumbai in domestic red-ball cricket in nearly a decade, Rohit's first day on the field was a disaster with the 37-year-old falling for a 19-ball 3 in the opening hour of the Ranji Trophy clash against Jammu Kashmir. But on Friday, Rohit gave a far better account of himself to notch up a fluent 28, his best in first-class cricket since a 52 in the second innings of the

Bengaluru Test against New Zealand last year. It indeed has been that long for Rohit, who has since scored 0, 8, 18, 11, 3, 6, 3 and 9 in subsequent outings against New Zealand and Australia. Back then in mid-October, India were cemented on top of the World Test Championship points table and the house was in complete order for the national side. But it all came crumbling down following defeats to New Zealand and Australia which forced Indian superstars to play domestic cricket. On Friday, he looked for a big one but it wasn't to happen. Rohit's knock of 28 was mixed with hits and misses in the initial stages, which all began with a tough dropped chance by Nazir in the fourth over when he could not grab a return catch on his follow through. Rohit immediately responded with a pull shot for a six over the square leg. A thick outside edge then flew between the fielder at gully and second slip, and on the final ball Rohit flashed hard and wide to put the ball away for another four on the off-side. Dropped on one, Rohit had raced to 21 off 11 balls at one stage but he remained cautious mostly, even though there were a few times he was beaten. With comparatively no moisture on the second day wicket here at the BKC, J&K bowlers also had to work hard to keep it tight but could not stop Rohit from freeing up his arms for a total of three sixes and two fours.

India keeps eye on Shami's fitness, looks to extend lead against England

PTI ■ CHENNAI
 Unruffled by the lingering fitness concerns surrounding Mohammed Shami, the well-oiled machine that is India's T20 team will be eyeing an encore of its opening game performance against a stunned England in the second game of a five-match series, here on Saturday. India lead the rubber 1-0 after a facile seven-wicket victory at the Eden Gardens on Wednesday. The hosts would certainly want to see Shami in action but his inclusion in the eleven, as things stand now, will depend on further evaluation of his fitness. The 34-year-old was expected to feature in the first game and he was actively involved in the nets too, but his comeback was postponed possibly because the management wanted to take a deeper look at his readiness. However, India did not miss Shami much in Kolkata where pacer Arshdeep Singh, with the

new ball, and spinner Varun Chakravarthy, in the middle phase, wrecked England, producing impressive spells. The Chepauk spin The Eden pitch had enough help for both quicks and their slower colleagues but the corresponding 22-yard trampoline here could offer more assistance to the spinners, as it often has been the case in the past. India would not be complaining whatever be the nature of the track. The home side boasts of quality and variety in a line-up consisting Varun, vice-captain Axar Patel and Ravi Bishnoi. From England's perspective, they would require much better contributions from experienced spinners Adil Rashid and Liam Livingstone to challenge the Indians. Apart from pacer Jofra Archer, none of the other English bowlers could survive the onslaught of Abhishek Sharma and the mini cameo of Sanju



Samson in the first match. Sanju-Abhishek pair on a roll. Since coming together in the T20s last year, Samson and Abhishek have had considerable success, often

giving India a flying start. The desired double-barrel firing has been occasional, but at least one of them has produced the goods rather consistently.

In Kolkata, Abhishek hurt England with a brutal knock, striking at over 230. Samson has three hundreds in the last six innings, and it would not be unrealistic to imagine

these two as the first-choice openers once India hit the road to next year's T20 World Cup at home. They also offer that rare right-hand-left-hand combination at

the top. Here too, the Indian openers will have to give their side a solid start considering the tricky nature of the pitch. England too will hope for a fiery start from their openers to clinch early momentum, as Phil Salt and Ben Duckett jointly made just four runs off seven balls. Time for Surya to shine It's not a matter of grave concern yet but skipper Suryakumar Yadav will be mindful of the fact that he has just two fifties in the previous 11 innings after the T20 World Cup final last year. Further distilled, the stats will show that he has made no significant contributions in the last three matches, including a three-ball duck at Kolkata. But such things often get papered over when the team is on a roll as the reigning T20 World Champions have steamrolled Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and South Africa in their last three assignments.

But he would not want to miss the party for long and will be eyeing a fruitful outing here. Team combination India might not ring in many major changes considering the series is just one-match old, and if Shami is indeed fit to make his international comeback since the 2023 World Cup final, then Nitish Kumar Reddy could make way for him. Keeping in mind the character of Chepauk pitch, two-time world champions England might look to reinforce the spin department, adding young leg-spinner Rehan Ahmed. The visitors have made one like-for-like change to the side by bringing in right-arm pacer Brydon Carse for Gus Atkinson. They have also added another wicketkeeper -- Jamie Smith - to the 12-player squad. His addition has been forced by Jacob Bethell's illness. He might make the playing XI if Bethell does not recover in time.