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12 runover by train in Jalgaon

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ JALGAON (MAHARASHTRA)

At least 12 passengers were killed on Wednesday evening when they jumped from their train in panic due to a 'fire incident', only to be run over by another train on the adjacent tracks in North Maharashtra's Jalgaon district, officials said. Twelve bodies were sent to the nearby civil hospital while six to seven persons were injured, special Inspector General of Police Dattatraya Karale said. The accident took place between Maheji and Pardhade stations near Pachora, more than 400 km from Mumbai, where the 12533 Lucknow-Mumbai Pushpak Express had halted after someone pulled the chain around 5 pm, Central Railway officials said, without confirming the death toll. Some passengers of the Pushpak Express jumped off, and were hit by the oncoming Karnataka Express heading from Bengaluru to Delhi, said Central Railway's chief spokesperson Swapnil Nila. IG Karale said that a "fire incident" occurred on Pushpak Express, at km 372/07 between Maheji and Pardhade stations. The train stopped at the location, and some passengers disembarked. Train No. 12627, Bengaluru-New Delhi Karnataka Express hit people standing on the railway tracks, he added. "Six to seven people have been injured. All injured passengers are being treated at the hospital, none of their injuries are serious. Both trains have reached their respective next stations and the accident site has been cleared," the senior police official added. Pushpak Express departed from the spot in just 15 minutes, while the Karnataka Express was removed within 20 minutes after the accident.



People gather at the site following the death of several passengers after they stepped down due to a rumour of fire and were run over by another train passing on the adjacent tracks, in North Maharashtra's Jalgaon district

Modi to visit State on Jan 28



To inaugurate 'Utkarsh Odisha'

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will visit Odisha on January 28 to inaugurate the Utkarsh Odisha-Make-in-Odisha Conclave 2025 in Bhubaneswar. The PM's visit to the State will be his second in one month. On January 9, he was in Bhubaneswar to address the Indian diaspora at the 2025 Pravasi Bharatiya Divas Sammelan.

On January 28, he will arrive at the Biju Patnaik International Airport from Delhi at 10:35 am. Thereafter, his motorcade will head for the Make in Odisha Conclave at 10:40 am and reach the Janata Maidan by 10:55 am. Modi will inaugurate the event at 11 am and is expected to grace the conclave until 12:30 pm, following which his motorcade will again head for the airport to depart for another event at Dehradun in Uttarakhand.

BJP-AAP woo middle class

Modi targets AAP



SAUMYA SHUKLA ■ NEW DELHI

They are so scared that they have to make a victim of Jan Lokpal. But today it is neither in Delhi nor in Punjab nor do they speak in its name. They make excuses in Delhi, but they have a government in Punjab and they are not doing it there either," he said. "BJP kept Ram Mandir, Article 370, UCC at the core of its ideology and worked on them with complete honesty. There is only one focal point of our ideology - Nation First," he added. He also slammed both the AAP and Congress for not fulfilling their promises to the women. "Lakhs of sisters of Himachal are still waiting for the fulfillment of Congress' promise. First the sisters of Haryana and then those of Maharashtra too were misled by Congress by making false announcements," the PM said. Stating that the AAP is two steps ahead of the Congress, he said, "AAP-da had promised to give Rs 1,000 every month to the sisters of Punjab. It's been three years but they haven't given a single penny yet. In Delhi too, it was announced a long time ago that Rs 1,000 will be given to every woman; that money has not been received yet. But now they are announcing an increase in it. This is the first such AAP-da model in the world, which only makes announcements in the air, lies, and deceives."

Turning the heat up ahead of the Delhi Assembly elections, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday slammed the ruling Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) for failing to provide basic needs such as water to the people of the national Capital while taking a jibe at the party on the money laundering linked excise policy scam, stating that 'liquor is available but water is not'. Prime Minister made these remarks during his interaction with the booth level workers in the 'Mera booth, sabse mazboot' programme while urging the members of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the Capital to target winning over 50 per cent booths in the Assembly polls. Assuring a landslide victory in the Assembly polls, he asked booth workers to set two goals- breaking all voting records and ensure that the BJP gets more than 50 per cent at each booth. He said that the AAP is making new announcements daily because they are getting the new news of defeat every day. "These AAP-da people are now making a new announcement every day. This means that they are getting new news of defeat every day."



AAP national convener Arvind Kejriwal speaks during launch of manifesto for middle class ahead of the upcoming Delhi Assembly elections

Kejriwal bats for salary class

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

Terming the middle class a victim of tax terrorism and has been reduced to the government's ATM, Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) national convener Arvind Kejriwal on Wednesday unveiled his party's manifesto for the upcoming Delhi elections and Union Budget-2025, listing seven Budget demands from the Centre that AAP MPs will raise in Parliament for the interests of the middle class. Kejriwal accused other political parties of treating the middle class as "just an ATM for the government" saying the middle class is the real superpower of the Indian economy but has long been ignored and exploited solely for tax collection. The party's key demands from the Centre include increasing the education budget from 2% to 10%, providing scholarships for higher studies, enhancing the health budget, removing essential commodities, introducing a pension scheme for senior citizens, and offering a 50% concession on railway tickets for senior citizens. This is the first time that a political party in Delhi has tried to address issues of middle class. Delhi's middle class, which comprises a significant 45 percent of its population and could provide to be a key deciding factor in the upcoming polls. The poor account for 35 per cent, the middle class 45 per cent, and the upper class around 20 per cent of Delhi's population.

- ### KEJRIWAL'S SEVEN DEMANDS:
- Regulations on private school fees nationwide
 - Subsidies and scholarships in higher education
 - Raise health budget to 10 percent; tax free health insurance.
 - Increase IT exemption limit to Rs 10 lakhs.
 - Abolish GST on essential commodities.
 - Robust retirement plans and pensions
 - Reinstate the % concession for senior citizens in railway

6th State Finance Commission constituted

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

The State Government on Wednesday announced the constitution of the much-awaited Sixth State Finance Commission with former IAS officer Arun Kumar Panda as its Chairman. Prof Asit Ranjan Mohanty of XIMB, Prof Amaresh Samantray of the Department of Economics, Pondicherry University and Prof Bibhu Prasad Nayak of TISS would be its members while Dr Satya Priya Rath, Additional Secretary, Finance Department, would be the Member-Secretary. The chairman and other members including the member-secretary would hold office for a period of six months. The commission would make recommendations relating to the distribution between the State and the 3-tier Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) of net proceeds of taxes, duties, tolls and fees leviable by the State. The determination of taxes, duties, tolls and fees may be assigned to or appropriated by the Panchayati Raj Institutions and ULBs and (the grants-in-aid to the Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies from the Consolidated Fund of the State. Besides, the commission would recommend the measures needed to improve the financial position of Panchayati Raj Institutions and ULBs and any other matter which the Governor may refer to the commission in the interest of sound finance of the Panchayati Raj Institutions and ULBs.

Assembly Budget Session from Feb 13

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

The Budget Session of the 17th Odisha Legislative Assembly will commence on February 13 with the address of Governor Hari Babu Kambhampati and will continue till April 5. The session will have 29 working days with a recession from February 22 to March 6. According to a notification issued by the Assembly Secretariat, discussion on the motion of thanks on the Governor's Address will be held on February 14 and 15. Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi, who holds the Finance portfolio, will present the Annual Budget for the year 2025-26 on February 17 and the Appropriation Bill will be tabled on March 29.



The general discussion of the Budget is scheduled to be held on February 20 and 21 while discussion on Demands for Grants will start on March 10 and continue till March 28. Reports of various departmentally-related Standing Committees will be tabled before the House on March 7. The Assembly session is likely to be stormy as opposition parties have lined up various issues including burning topics like the Naba Das murder case, paddy procurement, farmers' suicide, etc.

State Cabinet decisions

Rs 12,000 cr set for overhauling primary education

50% incentive to a firm for silicon carbide semiconductor factory

NALINI SAHU ■ BHUBANESWAR

A State Cabinet meeting, chaired by Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi on Wednesday, approved ten proposals ranging from establishment of model schools in every gram panchayat to creation of cold storage facilities, laying of paver blocks on village roads and a demand for Rs 12,56,148 crore from the 16th Finance Commission for the period between 2026 and 2031. "The 16th Finance Commission will visit Odisha from February 6 to 8, and we will demand Rs 12,56,148 crore to be allocated over the next five years," Majhi told reporters. The CM informed the Cabinet's decision to overhaul the State's education system following criticisms of the



previous 5T Transformation programme. To ensure the students' bright future, the government outlined a plan to establish Adarsha Vidyalayas in every panchayat. The first phase will see creation of 114 Adarsha Vidyalayas in the current financial year with plans for a gradual expansion to other panchayats over the next four years. "Transformation of smart schools under the 5T initiative was not executed properly as no Detailed Project Report (DPR) was prepared nor were proper estimates made. This approach was detrimental to students' future. Hence, we have decided to establish

Adarsha Vidyalayas in each panchayat, starting with 114 panchayats in the first phase," said CM Majhi. "These schools will be named Godabarisha Mishra Adarsha Prathamika Vidyalayas. They will be fully equipped with necessary infrastructure and staffing. A total of 6,794 panchayats will have these schools. Each school will be allocated a budget of Rs 4-5 crore, and the project will be completed within four years, with a total budget of Rs 12,000 crore," he added. In addition, the government will provide a 50-per cent incentive (approximately Rs 110 crore in two phases) to the RIR

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KIIT (Deemed to be University) has only one permanent campus in Bhubaneswar, Odisha. It has no other campus / off campus anywhere else in the country and globe.

In city 2 get life for killing betel shop owner

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR
A court here on Tuesday sentenced two persons to life imprisonment on the charge of killing a betel shop owner in Bhubaneswar in 2022. The convicts were also directed by the court to pay Rs 10,000 each as a fine.
The convicts were identified as Ashok Das alias Kabu of Patharabandh Basti and Manoj Das alias Papuni of Dhirikuti Basti in the city. Both were auto-rickshaw drivers.
The deceased, identified as Soumya Ranjan Kunda, was running his betel shop near the

Metro Towers at Vani Vihar Square under the Saheed Nagar police station. Soumya's brother Sagar Kumar also owns a hotel near the betel shop.
"The convict auto-rickshaw drivers used to park their vehicles at an auto stand near Vani Vihar Square. The duo would often extort money from the shop owners in the area. The convicts had also picked a fight with the deceased Soumya when he refused to pay the extortion," said Special Public Prosecutor Rashmi Ranjan Brahma.
The accused were also en-

gaged in a heated argument with the deceased's brother in the latter's hotel a few days before the murder. The convicts who harboured a grudge later hatched a plan to kill Soumya," said Brahma.
He further added that the accused duo assaulted Soumya with a sharp weapon near his shop on the intervening night of August 30 and 31, 2022. A seriously-injured Soumya was rushed to the Capital Hospital in a police vehicle. Later, he was shifted to the AIIMS Bhubaneswar, but he succumbed to the injuries, said Brahma.

Cops warn of action on mobile use in Srimandir

PNS ■ PURI
Police have stepped up measures to prohibit mobile phone use in the premises of the Jagannath Temple in Puri. This follows recent incidents where photos taken inside the shrine were widely circulated on social media creating outrage among devotees.
The Puri police have launched a campaign to educate the devotees about the strict no-phone policy within the temple premises. Posters have been prominently displayed around the complex, clearly stating the prohibition on mobile phones.
Visitors found flouting these regulations would face



legal penalties as per the warnings issued by the police. Informative signage outlining these repercussions has been strategically placed at all four entrances of the temple to ensure maximum visibility.
"After the viral photos (taken in the sanctum sanctorum) came to our knowledge, we immediately registered a case and launched a probe. Three separate teams

are on job and we will certainly apprehend the wrongdoers," said Puri SP Vinit Agrawal.
"Another person was flying a drone near the temple yesterday. Our team detected it and nabbed the accused. We have registered a case against him and seized the drone from his possession. A detailed probe is underway," the SP said.
"I appeal to all devotees not to use any camera or mobile phone in the temple premises as use of those are strictly prohibited," the SP stated.
"The devotees must cooperate with us and abide by the prescribed norms. In case anyone flouts the norms, we will take legal action," the SP warned.

Cabinet decision 6,794 primary schools to be model schools

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR
The Odisha Government on Wednesday sanctioned a proposal of upgrading and strengthening 6,794 government-run primary schools/sections as model schools in the State under the Godavarish Mishra Adarsha Prathamik Vidyalaya (GMAPV) scheme. The proposal of the School and Mass Education department was approved by the State Cabinet headed by Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi.
According to the government, the Godabarish Mishra Adarsha Prathamik Vidyalaya initiative aims at establishing a model elementary school in every gram panchayat, aligning with the focus of the RTE Act, 2009 on inclusivity and quality education for marginalised communities which also reinforces the mission of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020.
The financial implication on account of such construction of 6,794 model primary schools will be Rs 11, 939.41 crore over a period of five years from 2024-25 to 2028-29. Approximately Rs 1 crore to Rs 4 crore will be spent per school depending on the number of enrolment. However, the actual expenditure will be based on the Detailed Project Report (DPR) for each school.
The operationalisation of 6,974 model primary schools will enhance education access and foster the holistic development of students apart from aligning with the objective of the RTE Act, NEP 2020 and NIPUN Odisha to bolster foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) among the students.

'Surrender ration cards or face action'

Minister warns ineligible beneficiaries

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR
The Odisha Government claims to be trying to weed out corruption from the welfare schemes by identifying ineligible beneficiaries. There have been allegations that several taxpayers and other well-to-do families have managed to acquire ration cards and have been availing of the benefits for years.
To put a check on these practices, Food Supplies and Consumer Welfare Minister Krishna Chandra Patra on Wednesday issued a stern warning to such ineligible beneficiaries. The minister stated that the ineligible beneficiaries should surrender their cards voluntarily before corrective



and stringent action is taken. It has been alleged time and again that thousands of ration card holders across the State are not genuinely eligible for the subsidised provisions. These include individuals with stable incomes or those employed in government services such as teachers and doctors.
The Minister stressed that no penalty would be imposed on those who surrender their cards voluntarily before the completion of the e-KYC process. However, actions would be strictly taken against the others.

Crop loss, loan, procurement blues Farmers' frustrations writ large in Odisha



PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR
Crippled with crop loss, loan burdens, and family woes, the problems of farmers in Odisha seem too far from being over as they continue to suffer in silence. The alleged irregularities in paddy mandis, arbitrary practices by mill owners, and crop harvesting policies have only added to their woes.
Farmers across the State are increasingly voicing discontent over the challenges faced by them on a daily basis. Despite repeated protests against procurement centers, mill administration, and crop harvesting policies, their pleas often allegedly fall on deaf ears. This has led to significant discontent amongst farmers.
Lack of protective measures
Before delivering their harvest to the mandis, farmers do not have adequate measures to safeguard their paddy. The grains remain exposed to adverse weather conditions, including drought, rain, and cold, which hampers the quality and quantity of their crops.
This is especially evident along roadsides in districts like Baleswar, notably in Jaleswar's Ikida and Bhogarai blocks, where the absence of storage facilities further complicates matters.
Insufficient storage facilities
Almost every block in Odisha is plagued with insufficient storage facilities and service societies. Despite numerous complaints to the administration, substantial solutions remain elusive. This has led to growing dissatisfaction among farmers, with increased calls for urgent intervention by authorities to address these issues.
Inefficiencies in procurement systems
The plight of farmers in Gajapati district, particularly in Paralakhemundi and Jaleswar, is illustrative of the broader problems. Here, inefficiencies in procurement systems have significantly impacted agricultural communities, adding to their burdens and intensifying their discontent.
Allegations have surfaced about pressure from millers who are said to have disproportionate control over purchase processes and grain grading.
Farmers are grappling with significant challenges as their paddy crops remain unsold in mandis, a predicament largely attributed to the erratic purchasing practices of mill owners. The growing discontent has prompted farmers to express their frustrations through protests, notably in the Gajapati district.
Protests and grievances
The inability to sell har-

Poetry book 'Sailabhasha' unveiled



Written by Sailabala Das
PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR
The poetry collection "Sailabhasha" by Sailabala Das was launched at a grand ceremony at the Bhubaneswar Club here. The event showcased how an ordinary housewife has emerged as a beacon of creativity, using poetry to express her perspectives on life and society in simple yet profound language.
Chief guest Prof Biswaranjan praised the poet's efforts, saying, "Sailabala Das demonstrates that creativity knows no boundaries."
The event commenced with a heartfelt welcome speech by the poet's son, Navajyoti Das, who shared insights into his mother's journey as a poet. Dr. Seva Mohapatra, an eminent gynaecologist, humanist and philanthropist, emphasized the poet's ability to weave emotions and reality through her poetry.
Chairman of the Bou Foundation Abhis Mohanty and Dr. Brajendra Mishra, an eminent scholar, spoke about the broader contributions of literature to society.
Director of the Gopabandhu Administrative Academy Dr. Shashank Grahacharya applauded the poet for addressing social themes with simplicity and depth. Former Superintendent of Safdarjung Hospital, New Delhi, Dr. Abhay Kumar Dash provided an insightful review of selected poems, appreciating their cultural and linguistic richness.
Poet Das shared her creative journey and the role literature has played in her life. Publisher Ramachandra Nath of Pallibani Publishers, New Delhi, who could not attend, sent a message emphasizing the importance of such works in enriching the literary landscape. The event was moderated by Dwipanita Das.

157 males applied for Subhadra Yojana

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR
Deputy Chief Minister Pravati Parida on Wednesday informed that 157 males (transgenders) applied for the Subhadra Yojana benefits though the scheme is meant for women.
"It's intriguing how so many men applied for Subhadra Yojana even as it is women-centric. It came to our notice that 157 men had applied for the scheme after the KYC of Aadhaar Card and bank linkage was done. However, they were subsequently dropped from the beneficiaries' list," Parida informed.
"Sometimes, the names of

HITTING THE BULL'S EYE

Only truly poor Padma awardees be given financial support

BISWARAJ PATNAIK
As per a thorough survey finding, hardly ten per cent of Padma awardees across India are poor. The rest are wealthy, nay 'filthy rich'. In the last few decades, bagging a Padma award has become pretty much easy as awardees are chosen by the government run by corrupt human creatures. So, publicity-crazy, guileful individuals with money find it extremely easy to buy over members of the political executive and steal Padma awards, particularly the base one called 'Padmashri'. So, not surprisingly many a nondescript thieving Tom, Dick and Harry manage to scoop the base award easily just for elevating the self status. Padmashri is virtually kept on sale. A most ordinary cine actor like Saif Ali Khan too had managed to grab a Padmashri, which caused big hue and cry across the country. He was eventually forced to give it back. But then the number of unworthy recipients keeps growing in time.
Quite a few controversial individuals with questionable backgrounds have received the 'Padma'



recognition. The selection process is considered badly opaque and arbitrary. Some Padma recipients have faced criticism openly due to allegations of corruption, criminal activity or other similar controversies.
Some high-profile business figures have also received Padma awards despite allegations of financial irregularities and unethical practices.
Politicians too have managed to steal the Padma honours even while facing charges of corruption

- and nepotism.
- The Padma awards are given in recognition of lifetime achievements and contributions to society. They are not monetary awards which are meant for people of all races, occupations, positions and sexes. Many Padma award recipients have dedicated their lives to helping others. In essence, these awards are specifically meant for individuals who have made significant contributions in the fields of arts, science, social work and public service. But they are now being stolen by anyone with influence of money or power only because the government-proposed names are not once put under public scrutiny, which would expose the non-deserving crooks.
- All the same, there are also quite a few poor awardees who are not given any special attention for their selfless and exemplary service to distressed communities in need of support on various fronts:
- Haldhar Nag, an Odia folk poet who sold spicy chickpeas for a living.
 - Harekala Hajabba sold oranges in a village in Harekala in Karnataka, unable to afford any education due to poverty.
 - Mangala Kanti Roy, a 102-year-old folk musician from West Bengal who lives in abject poverty, is one of the oldest folk musicians in West Bengal, famous for producing unique bird calls through 'Sarinda'.
 - Jagdish Lal Ahuja, a social worker who serves free food to poor patients and attendants outside PGIMER in Chandigarh.
 - Mohammad Shareef, a bicycle mechanic who has performed the last rites of thousands of unclaimed dead bodies for over 25 years.
 - Hemchand Manji, a herbal medicine practitioner from Chhattisgarh who is considered a magician healer.
 - Yanung Jamoh Logo, an herbal medicine expert from East Siang, Arunachal Pradesh.
 - Jankilal, a 'Behrupiya' artist from Bhillwara, Rajasthan who has no money to make both ends meet.
 - Babu Ram Yadav, a brass Marori craftsman from Uttar Pradesh leads a beggarly life.
 - Even the 69-year old Teejan Bai, a Chhattisgarhi 'Pandavani' folk singer is living in abject poverty despite having received Padma Vibhushan. Interestingly, sitarist Vilayat Khan had refused Padma Shri (1964), Padma Bhushan (1968) and Padma Vibhushan (2000) saying that the partial selection committee members were incompetent to judge the real quality of his music as much as the unique works of art by many other great masters.
- Lately, the government of 'not so developed' Odisha has decided to dole out a monthly honorarium of Rs 30,000 to all 55 Padma awardees of the State from January 2025. It will cost the public exchequer 2 crore rupees annually. The previous government too had promised the populist honorarium of Rs 25,000 per month.
- Incidentally, the commercially hyperactive cricketer Sachin Tendulkar was given the highest civilian award Bharat Ratna by the UPA government by modifying the selection criteria with a motive of attracting millions of cricket-mad youth votes.
- As many as 38 personalities have been awarded with Bharat Ratna, country's highest civilian award, since 1955 when it was instituted to recognise the work of people in politics, science, space, education, medicine and public service. Besides, 307 people have been awarded Padma Vibhushan, 1,255 Padma Bhushan and 3,005 Padma Shri awards by now.
- However, as the facts are in hand, the majority of Padma recipients are not poor. On the contrary, most of them abuse the honour as suffixes, prefixes and titles to further and boost multifarious commercial activities they are engaged in. As per norms, Bharat Ratna and Padma awards can be withdrawn in case of misuse in any manner as per Article 18(1) of the Constitution. In case of any misuse, the defaulter shall forfeit the national award conferred on him or her by following the procedure laid down in 'regulation 10' related to creation of these awards. This is not happening only because people are callous and indifferent to such violations which if only get reported before appropriate authorities or challenged in writ courts, the errant awardees can be brought to book and get disgraced publicly. Regulation 10 states that the President may cancel and annul the awards of the decoration to any person and thereupon his or her name shall be erased from the register and the awardee shall be required to surrender it.
- The gentleman Chief Minister of Odisha must take cognisance of the critical facts and organise a team of high-integrity experts for scrutinising the Padma awardees to ensure undeserving ones do not get to eat up scarce public money. The blanket honorarium package of twenty five thousand rupees must only go to the real poor.

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Assam detention centres: SC slams Government, summons Chief Secretary

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI



Calling it a "defective" affidavit, the Supreme Court on Wednesday slammed the Assam government for not giving in its reply reasons for detaining 270 foreigners at the Matia transit camp. A bench of Justices Abhay S Oka and Nongmeikapam Kotiswar Singh directed the Assam chief secretary to remain present through video-conferencing on the next date of hearing.

The top court said it granted six weeks time to the state government on December 9 to file the affidavit and expected it to give reasons for detaining 270 foreign nationals in the transit camp besides details on the steps taken for their deportation.

"The affidavit does not give any justification for detaining...Steps taken to deport are not set out. This is gross violation of orders of this court. We direct the chief secretary to remain present through video-conferencing

and explain the non-compliance," the bench said. The counsel appearing for the state government submitted that persons were detained only after they were declared foreigners by the foreigners tribunals and explained the mechanism of deportation of illegal migrants.

The top court sought to know why detentions were continuing without the deportation process even being initiated. The court expressed displeasure after the Assam govern-

ment counsel said the affidavit was confidential and should remain sealed. "This shows that the state does not want to come clean. Tell us what is confidential in the affidavit?" asked the bench.

The lawyer said the affidavit contained the addresses of foreigners and the details could go to the media. "Assam counsel states that affidavit filed should be kept in sealed envelope, as contents thereof are confidential. Though we are directing that it be kept in sealed envelope, prima facie we disagree with the counsel that there is something confidential about the contents," the bench said.

The top court had directed Assam State Legal Services Authority to conduct surprise visits at the Matia transit camp for foreigners to check the facility's hygiene and food quality.

The bench was hearing a plea concerning the deportation of persons declared foreigners and facilities at the detention centres in Assam.

While hearing the matter on May 16 last year, the apex court observed that the Centre must take immediate steps for deporting 17 foreigners at the detention centre in Matia. It said priority should be given to deport four, who had spent more than two years in the detention centre.

The plea also sought a direction to the Assam government not to detain any person declared a foreigner by the tribunal until it could show proof of a possible deportation in near future.

Kolkata rape-murder case: CBI seeks death sentence for Roy

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI



The CBI will file an appeal before the Calcutta High Court, seeking death sentence for Sanjay Roy, who was sentenced to "life imprisonment until death" by a Sealdah court in the rape-cum-murder case of an on-duty doctor at RG Kar Medical College and Hospital, officials said Wednesday.

The agency received a legal advice suggesting that the case may be categorised as the "rarest of rare", deserving capital punishment, they said.

The agency is likely to file the appeal against the Sealdah court order as soon as possible with detailed arguments in favour of capital punishment, they said.

The agency's plea seeking death penalty for Roy was turned down by the trial court, where Additional District and Sessions Judge Anirban Das said that the crime did not fall under the "rarest of the rare" category.

"The CBI prayed for the death penalty. The defence lawyer

prayed that a jail term be given instead of the death penalty. This crime does not fall under the 'rarest of the rare' category," the judge said on Monday while sentencing Roy.

"I am sentencing you to life imprisonment, meaning till the last day of your life, for causing injury during the act of committing rape on the victim that led to her death...", he told Roy.

The West Bengal government has already approached the high court, challenging the verdict and seeking death penalty for Roy.

The CBI has opposed the state's right to file an appeal in the case, claiming that as it was the prosecuting agency, it had the right to appeal on the grounds of inadequacy of the sentence.

Appearing for the CBI, Deputy Solicitor General Rajdeep Majumdar on Wednesday opposed the state's submission, maintaining that the West Bengal government does

not have the right to appeal against the trial court's order on the ground of inadequacy. He submitted that the CBI had prayed for awarding capital punishment to Roy before the trial court.

The high court said it would hear the CBI, the victim's family and the convict before deciding on the admission of the state government's appeal. The high court said it will hear the matter on January 27.

The trainee doctor was raped and killed in the early hours of August 9 in the seminar hall of RG Kar Medical College and Hospital when she had gone to have rest during her graveyard shift.

Her body with severe injury marks was found inside the hall by a doctor next morning. Civic volunteer Sanjay Roy was arrested the next day based on CCTV footage in which he was seen entering the seminar hall at 4.03 am on the day of the incident.

On August 13, the Calcutta High Court ordered the transfer of the probe from Kolkata Police to the CBI, which took over the case on August 14.

A Raja writes to Waqf panel chief to defer proposed JPC meeting

PNS ■ NEW DELHI



DMK MP A Raja on Wednesday wrote to Waqf panel chief Jagdambika Pal on behalf of the opposition to postpone the proposed sittings of the joint parliamentary committee proposed on January 24 and 25.

In a letter to the waqf parliamentary panel chief, Raja said it is practically not possible for the members to recollect the evidence and materials essentially needed for the moving of the amendments and discussion on the waqf bill at such a short notice.

He said during the tour programme to meet various stakeholders in Lucknow on Tuesday, the members had requested Pal to postpone the meeting of JPC proposed on January 24 and 25 for taking up the bill clause by clause. The panel is examining the waqf bill after it was introduced in Lok Sabha during the monsoon session of Parliament in August last year.

"Hence, it was requested by most of the members at the

Lucknow sitting (21.01.2025) that the proposed sittings of JPC on 24th and 25th have to be necessarily postponed on 30th (full day) and 31st of this month after the presidential address in the Parliament," Raja said in his letter to Pal.

He said unless the sittings of the JPC are postponed, the purpose of constituting the committee itself will be defeated as it raises doubts in the minds of the people of India that the secular fabric of the Constitution embodied in the Preamble is endangered and due process in conduct-

ing the JPC is also not followed.

"It is, therefore, prayed on behalf of the members of the opposition parties that the sittings of the JPC proposed on 24th and 25th may kindly be postponed to 30th and 31st of this month as already discussed with you at Lucknow," Raja said.

The Congress also shared Raja's letter in a post on X and said, "Lok Sabha MP and member of the Joint Parliamentary Committee on the Waqf (Amendment) Bill, 2024, Shri A Raja writes to the

Chairman of the joint panel, Shri Jagdambika Pal, on behalf of the members of the Opposition parties, requesting the sittings of the JPC be postponed from 24th and 25th Jan to 30th and 31st Jan 2025."

In his letter to the chairman of the JPC on waqf, Raja said the Lok Sabha Secretariat (JCWAP Cell) through a letter dated January 20 has requested the members of the panel to send their amendments to the proposed bill by 4 pm on Wednesday. Also, the next sitting of JPC has also been convened on January 24 and 25 for clause-by-clause consideration of the bill, he also said.

"It is needless to say that the tour programmes of the JPC to meet the stakeholders at Patna, Kolkata and Lucknow were completed only yesterday ie 21.01.2025; And the members were dispersed from the tour programme to their constituency/states to continue their scheduled programmes earlier.

"It is very strange that the next dates for a sitting of JPC were hurriedly announced without any formal discussion when the JPC was already on tour. Even during the sitting of JPC at Lucknow itself, it was requested by the members that the proposed sittings of 24th and 25th of this month are practically not possible as the members are expected to discharge their duties/programmes in the locality.

"Moreover, the members are not in a position to recollect the evidence/materials at such a short notice which are essentially needed for the moving of the Amendments and discussion thereon," he said.

The DMK MP also said Pal has directed the stake holders who participated in the tour programme at Patna, Kolkata and Lucknow to submit their views and submission in writing within seven days and the committee is waiting for the same for circulation.

"I sincerely recall that you have reacted to the request that it will be considered positively after consultation with the government realising the justification offered by us for the postponement," he said.

Beti Bachao Beti Padhao has become people powered initiative: PM

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI



With the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao initiative completing 10 years, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday said it has been instrumental in overcoming gender biases and at the same time it has created the right environment to ensure that the girl child has access to education and opportunities to achieve her dreams.

Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP) was launched by the prime minister on January 22, 2015 at Panipat, Haryana.

BBBP addresses the declining Child Sex Ratio (CSR) and related issues of women empowerment over a life-cycle continuum.

"Today we mark 10 years of the #BetiBachaoBetiPadhao movement. Over the past decade, it has become a transformative, people-powered initiative and has drawn participation from people across all walks of life," Modi said.

'Beti Bachao Beti Padhao' has been instrumental in overcoming gender biases and at

the same time it has created the right environment to ensure that the girl child has access to education and opportunities to achieve her dreams, the prime minister said.

"Thanks to the dedicated efforts of the people and various community service organisations, 'Beti Bachao Beti Padhao' has achieved remarkable milestones," Modi said in his post on X.

"Districts with historically low child sex ratios have reported significant improvements and awareness campaigns have instilled a deeper sense of the importance of gender equality," Modi said.

"I compliment all stakeholders who have made this movement vibrant at the grassroots level. Let us continue to protect the rights of our daughters, ensure their education and create a society where they can thrive without any discrimination," he said.

"Together, we can ensure that the coming years bring even greater progress and opportunity for India's daughters," Modi added.

'Skyrocketing' airfare, lack of tariff regulation dominate PAC meeting



PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Concerns over "skyrocketing" airfare and "little action" by government agencies and regulator dominated the Parliament's Public Accounts Committee (PAC) meeting on Wednesday as several MPs sought accountability from private airport operators and airlines to provide relief to passengers.

PAC Chairperson K C Venugopal described the meeting of the panel, which has witnessed fiery and at times acrimonious discussion along party lines in the past, as "one of the best" sittings.

Members, he said, expressed concerns that the Airports Economic Regulatory Authority (AERA) "is not acting properly as a regulator".

"We need clear cut answers," he told PTI after the meeting. He said the regulatory body could not answer adequately the questions raised by members.

The senior Congress MP said, "Concerns were raised by members that airfare is skyrocketing, and there is no action from the Directorate

General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) or the Civil Aviation Department."

Sources said some MPs called for an amendment in the AERA Act to make it more effective in regulating fare amid general unhappiness over issues like "arbitrary" rise in user development fees and price surge, as they alleged that the existing system fell short of fixing accountability and transparency in the functioning of private operators.

"A few MPs were upset over the manner in which both aeronautical tariff and non-aeronautical tariff are decided and flagged the need for having a mechanism in place for prior consultation," a source said.

An MP said there should be a quasi-judicial body to hear such issues.

Civil aviation secretary and AERA chairperson were among those who appeared before the panel in the meeting in which presentations were made on related issues.

While AERA is tasked with regulating tariff for services covering major airports, the DGCA is primarily concerned with safety issues.

Sources said the PAC members, in general, were unsatisfied with the replies of officials, and the panel has asked them to submit a detailed response. Several members, sources said, gave examples of a few airports where the user development fee (UDF), which is included in the airfare, has gone up many times since they were handed over to private operators.

Some of them sought details from officials about the revenue collected under different heads and to what use they were put to. An MP, sources said, spoke about the real estate development and subsequent rentals collected by private operators at airports, and called for transparency and accountability for the revenue's appropriate use.

An MP lauded the government's UDAN scheme, which envisages air connectivity for smaller cities, but noted that many of its routes are either not served or not served adequately by private airlines as they focus on more profitable routes. It strikes a blow to the vision of having the common man to fly, he added.

Railway Board extends some facilities to BRMS amidst protests

PTI ■ NEW DELHI



The Railway Board has extended some facilities to an unrecognised federation, the Bhartiya Railway Mazdoor Sangh, amid strong protest from other unrecognised unions and their alliances.

The Board recently held a Secret Ballot Elections in which the Bhartiya Railway Mazdoor Sangh (BRMS) failed to secure 15 per cent vote, a mandatory requirement to get recognition. Only two federations, All India Railwaymen's Federation (AIRF) and National Federation for Indian Railwaymen (NFIR) got the required percentage of votes and recognition of the Board.

"Bhartiya Railway Mazdoor Sangh (BRMS), an unrecognised Federation, who secured 10.12% of the total votes on all Zonal Railways and Production Units (Chittaranjan Locomotive Works and Rail Coach Factory, Kapurthala) in the last Secret Ballot Elections (SBE) - 2024, had represented and requested that keeping in view of their performance in the SBE-2024, they may be granted some facilities for raising the grievances of railway employees," a Railway Board's letter dated January 16, 2025, addressed to all zones, said.

The letter further said the Board considered the representation of BRMS and the fact that it registered its presence in all the Zonal Railways and PUs (CLW & RCF) in the last SBE - 2024 and secured third largest vote share after AIRF and NFIR.

According to the Board, it decided to extend the union facilities such as 'Informal meeting with senior officers' and 'Office Accommodation' in Railway premises.

"Representatives of BRMS will

be permitted to meet officials at Railway Board level as special invitees. However, no Special Casual Leave or Passes will be provided to BRMS officials for the same," the Board in its letter said.

"Accommodation, if any, may be provided to BRMS in any Railway office/premise located at New Delhi," it added.

Other railway employee associations and unions have strongly objected to the move. Manoj Pandey, President, Indian Railway Employees Federation (IREF) has written to the Board seeking recognition for IREF on the same lines it granted to BRMS.

"It is pertinent to note that the Railway Board laid down clear and specific criteria for the recognition of federations, according to which, a federation should secure at least 15% of valid votes in the SBE-III elections and its constituent unions should get recognition in at least six zones," Pande said in his letter.

"Member unions of IREF, such as WCRWU and ARKU, performed commendably in the SBE-III Elections 2024, securing over 15% of valid votes, thereby qualifying for negotiation powers," he added, claiming that IREF also deserves recognition like BRMS.

Pandey claimed IREF includes recognised unions such as ECREU, NERMC, and RCF, which are already serving the interests of railway employees effectively.

"These unions have been consistently recognised across multiple zones, fulfilling the Railway Board's mandate," he said.

Pandey added the IREF may approach court if its demand is overlooked.

Akhilesh Pandey, Central President, North Eastern Railway Men's Congress, too objected to the Board's decision. "It is unfortunate that the Railway Board disrespect its own norm to give benefit to a federation," Akhilesh said.

All India Railway Track Maintainers Union have also raised serious concerns and said that the Board cannot 'pick and choose' federation on its own whims and fancies.

"Once the Board laid the guideline before election, it cannot offer benefits to any federation which failed to secure the required vote percentage. The Board is violating its one norms for reasons best known to itself," Chand Mohammed, working president of All India Railway Trackmaintainers Union (AIRTU), said.

Delhi HC seeks Jamia stand on PIL over coaching academy



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Delhi High Court on Wednesday sought the stand of Jamia Millia Islamia on a PIL over admissions of OBC (non-creamy layer) students in its residential coaching academy meant for civil services aspirants.

"You are virtually asking us to reframe a policy. Admission is not to regular courses but coaching centre. It is for authorities to provide for reservation. You are asking us to create a right," it said.

In the petition filed through advocates Akash Vajpai, Ayush Saxena Puru Mudgal, the petitioner said UGC gave financial support to four Central universities, including JMI, and therefore it was under an obligation not to discriminate among the underprivileged students.

The petition said the current admission policy for the residential coaching academy was arbitrary and discriminatory as it left out a category of students who deserved admissions.

petitioner to inform if a university established by a statute was bound to follow the UGC mandate and said, "Issue notice to the respondents."

The court had questioned the petitioner on the "right" to seek admission in the coaching academy as an OBC (non-creamy layer) candidate.

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LPG safety guidelines issued for Maha Kumbh to protect devotees and Kalpvasis

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
PRAYAGRAJ



The Food and Logistics Department convened a crucial meeting to address LPG safety during the ongoing Maha Kumbh Mela. The meeting was attended by officials from the department, LPG distributors, gas company representatives, and officers from the Fire Department, all working towards ensuring the safety of devotees and Kalpvasis. During the session, detailed guidelines were issued to prevent accidents caused by LPG leakage. Among the key directives, cylinder testing was made mandatory, and strict restrictions were imposed on the sale of unauthorized cylinders. Officials emphasized that ensuring safety would be a top priority throughout the event. To ensure safe handling of LPG, technical assistants will inspect all cylinders before distribution, and any found to be leaking will not be supplied. Additionally, consumer equipment such as gas pipes and regulators will be scrutinized, with faulty or unsafe equipment being

replaced immediately. Special technical teams have been deployed in the fair area to respond to emergencies promptly. In a bid to further strengthen safety measures, the storage of gas within the fair area has been limited to 100 kilograms, and complete details of each supply vehicle must be submitted to the designated office. This measure aims to maintain tight control over the supply and prevent misuse. The meeting also addressed the rampant misuse of domestic LPG cylinders. It was resolved that strict action would be taken against those found using domestic gas cylinders for unauthorized purposes or selling unapproved cylinders. Violators will face punitive action to ensure compliance with the safety protocols. Pramod Sharma, Chief Fire Officer of Kumbh, said, "The safety of devotees is of utmost importance. We are committed to implementing these guidelines effectively to ensure a secure environment for all."

Sunil Kumar, the Food and Logistics Officer, urged distributors to conduct regular checks and remain vigilant. "We aim to make this Maha Kumbh a 'Surakshit Mahakumbh'. Any violation of the rules will be dealt with strictly," he stated. These measures reflect the administration's commitment to ensuring the safety and well-being of the millions attending the Maha Kumbh. The collaborative efforts of various departments aim to make this grand spiritual gathering a safe and memorable event for all.



Life and challenges of female Naga sadhus at Maha Kumbh

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■
MAHAKUMBH NAGAR

The Maha Kumbh Mela not only showcases the spiritual depth of Sanatan Dharma but also highlights the enigmatic lives of its sadhus and saints. Among them, the Naga Sadhus are a prominent attraction, embodying detachment and spirituality. While much is known about male Naga Sadhus, the lives of female Naga Sadhus remain shrouded in mystery and intrigue. Female Naga Sadhus dedicate their lives entirely to God, leaving behind domestic ties

and worldly attachments. Their daily routine revolves around rigorous worship, starting with prayers at Brahmanuhurta and culminating in evening rituals dedicated to Lord Dattatreya. Despite the reverence they receive in their Akharas, their lives are fraught with challenges and sacrifices. To become a Naga Sadhu, women must undergo a demanding initiation process. This includes observing strict celibacy for 10 to 15 years, convincing their guru of their devotion, and proving their ability to endure severe ascetic practices. A crucial part of the

initiation involves performing Pind Daan—a symbolic funeral rite—and shaving their heads as a gesture of renunciation. Unlike their male counterparts, who can remain Digambara (naked), female Naga Sadhus wear a single piece of unstitched saffron cloth, known as "Ganti," and are required to apply a Tilak on their foreheads. They are addressed as "Mai," "Avdhatani," or "Naagin" within their Akharas. However, female Naga Sadhus are not considered for leadership roles in the Akharas, reflecting traditional gender norms within the spiritual hierarchy.

Akhilesh criticises UP Cabinet meet at Maha Kumbh mela



BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■
PRAYAGRAJ

Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath has announced the creation of a new religious circuit that will encompass seven districts: Prayagraj, Varanasi (Kashi), Chandauli, Ghazipur, Jaunpur, Mirzapur, and Bhadohi. This initiative aims to preserve the state's spiritual and cultural heritage while boosting religious tourism and local economies. The announcement was made during a cabinet meeting held in Prayagraj on the sidelines of the ongoing Maha Kumbh. The meeting also approved infrastructure bonds for municipal corporations in Prayagraj, Varanasi, and Agra, aimed at accelerating urban development and improving civic amenities in these key cities. Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath said the formation of the religious circuit underscores the government's commitment to safeguarding Uttar Pradesh's rich spiritual legacy. He emphasized that this initiative would not only protect the cultural fabric of the included districts but also position them as prominent destinations for religious tourism, thereby fostering economic growth. The religious circuit will be supported by extensive infrastructure projects to enhance connectivity and visitor experiences. The Ganga Expressway will be

extended to link Prayagraj with Mirzapur, Bhadohi, Kashi, Chandauli, and Ghazipur, and eventually with the Purvanchal Expressway. A six-lane bridge over the Ganga River, a four-lane bridge connecting Prayagraj to Jhusi, and a signature bridge over the Yamuna River are also planned to facilitate seamless travel for pilgrims and tourists. However, the decision to hold a cabinet meeting during the Maha Kumbh has sparked political debate. Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav criticized the move, calling it inappropriate to conduct government business during a sacred event. "Kumbh is a holy occasion, not a platform for political programs," he remarked. Responding to such criticism, Deputy CM Brajesh Pathak said, "The cabinet meeting reflects our intent to prioritize development in areas that matter most. The opposition should recognize the transformative potential of these initiatives instead of resorting to baseless attacks." This initiative aligns with the government's broader vision of establishing Uttar Pradesh as a hub for religious tourism. By integrating cultural preservation with infrastructural development, the new religious circuit is expected to attract pilgrims and tourists from across the country, ensuring the preservation of the state's heritage while fostering modernization.

Objectionable comments on Maha Kumbh spark outrage, two arrested

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■
BARABANKI



The police have arrested two individuals for making objectionable remarks about the Maha Kumbh and Hindu deities, triggering widespread anger among the Hindu community. The incidents, which surfaced on social media, have prompted the authorities to issue a strict alert for online content monitoring to prevent further provocation. The first incident occurred in the City Kotwali area, where a video of the Maha Kumbh bath was shared on social media with offensive comments. As the video went viral, it reached senior officials, leading to immediate intervention from the state administration. On Tuesday late night, the City Kotwali police arrested Kamran Alvi, a resident of Deva Road, Civil Lines. Kamran was charged under sections 67 and 299 of the newly implemented BNS Act for insulting religious

sentiments. Speaking about the case, City Inspector Alok Mani Tripathi said, "Such comments are not just offensive but are a deliberate attempt to vitiate the peaceful atmosphere of the city. The accused has been taken into custody and will be presented in court. We are also

investigating others who may have played a role in circulating the video." In a separate case, Abhishek Kumar, a resident of Boja village in Jaipur, was arrested for posting inflammatory remarks about Hindu deities and the Maha Kumbh. According to SHO Amit

Pratap Singh, "The accused was apprehended immediately after the comments came to light. We have registered a case, and further investigations are underway. We will not tolerate any attempts to disturb communal harmony." Members of Hindu

organizations have strongly condemned these incidents, labeling them as deliberate provocations to disrupt social harmony. At Patel Square, one of Barabanki's busiest locations, a large screen continuously displays a film highlighting the significance of the Maha Kumbh. Community members argue that the comments were intended to provoke anger and disrupt the otherwise peaceful atmosphere. "Hindu festivals like the Maha Kumbh symbolize unity, spirituality, and our cultural heritage," said Rajesh Sharma, a local member of a Hindu organization. "When someone mocks such events or our deities, it hurts the sentiments of millions and creates unnecessary tensions." Anita Tiwari, a devotee, echoed these sentiments, saying, "The Maha Kumbh is a sacred event that unites people from all walks of life. Such derogatory comments are not only disrespectful but

also an attack on our collective faith. Strict action must be taken to deter such behavior in the future." Authorities have issued an alert, urging people to be cautious while sharing or commenting on social media content related to religious events. "Social media is a powerful tool, but it must be used responsibly," said Alok Mani Tripathi. "We will monitor platforms closely and take strict action against any content aimed at disrupting peace." As the Maha Kumbh continues, the police have assured the public of heightened vigilance to maintain harmony. "We appeal to citizens to report such content immediately and refrain from spreading inflammatory messages," added SHO Singh. The arrests serve as a stark reminder of the consequences of using social media irresponsibly, especially in a country as diverse as India, where religious sentiments run

Shri Ram Bank loans devotees the name of Lord Ram

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■
PRAYAGRAJ



Amidst the bustling Maha Kumbh Mela, there is a unique bank that does not deal in money but in faith. Shri Ram Bank, an institution with a 150-year-old legacy, offers "loans" to devotees in the form of "Ram Naam" (the name of Lord Ram). The bank encourages people to write the name of Lord Ram, and the response has been overwhelming, with millions of "Ram Naam" written and circulated so far. The bank's temporary branch was set up in Sector 6 of the Kumbh Mela on December 22. According to its custodian, Ashutosh Varshney, this bank operates just like any other—complete with loan disbursements, EMIs (equated monthly installments), and meticulous record-keeping. "The minimum loan is for writing 1.5 lakh 'Ram Naam,' but devotees can take more if they wish. The writing is done in

specially printed booklets provided for free, and every page records the number of 'Ram Naam' written," Varshney explained. **How the System Works** Devotees return the filled booklets to the bank, which are then used to grant loans to others. For instance, if a devotee takes a loan of 1.5 lakh "Ram Naam," they repay it by writing and submitting the

same number. To date, over 25 individuals have taken loans to write crores of "Ram Naam," with the final data expected to be released after the Maha Kumbh concludes. The bank accepts entries in multiple languages, including Hindi, English, Urdu, and Bengali. Anyone aged between six and 80 years can take a loan, but there are conditions—borrowers must abstain from

consuming meat, alcohol, garlic, and onions while fulfilling their loan. "The only requirement is a photograph for identification," said Rajkumar, a bank promoter at the Kumbh branch. The initiative has also drawn international devotees. Among them are Henk Kelman from the Netherlands, who now goes by the name Ramkrishna Das, and Sonal Singh, an Indian-origin resident of the U.S. Both have taken loans to write one crore "Ram Naam" each. **From Ledger Books to E-Ram** Tracing the bank's history, Ashutosh Varshney revealed, "I am the fifth generation in this tradition. It began with traders in the Chowk area who donated 10% of their earnings for social causes. Writing 'Ram Naam' emerged from this practice. Initially, it was recorded in ledger books, later in printed booklets, and now, we have introduced 'E-Ram' for digital transactions through social media platforms."



ISRO unveils satellite images of Maha Kumbh

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI/MAHAKUMBH NAGAR

The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) on Wednesday released before and after satellite images of the tent city here giving an insight into the grandeur of the Maha Kumbh which is drawing crores of people from across the world to take a holy dip at the Sangam. Maha Kumbh, a mega-religious event organised every 12 years, is being held in Prayagraj from January 13 and will continue for 45 days till February 26. More than eight crore pilgrims have taken a holy dip at the Sangam so far. "Time series images (15 Sep 2023 & 29 Dec 2024) of EOS-04 (RISAT-1A) 'C' band microwave satellite, with its all-weather capability and fine resolution (FRS-1, 2.25m), provides unique insights on details of the Tent City (Layout of Structures and Roads) along with its network of pontoon bridges and supporting infrastructure, set up for the

Maha Kumbh Mela 2025," ISRO said in a statement. The time series images captured by the satellites show the construction of Shivalay Park, the India-shaped park in Prayagraj, spread across 12 acres of land and is designed to be a major attraction for the festival. The images taken on three separate dates capture the construction of the landmark. On the National Remote Sensing Centre's (NSRC) website, time series images of the Triveni Sangam were also shared, showing the difference via images captured in September 2023 and on December 29, 2024. Three time series images also captured the Prayagraj Sangam and the zoomed section of the River Ganges showing temporary pontoon bridges. Several time series images of the Parade Grounds also showed the transformation the location went through as the city geared up to welcome millions of worshippers and host one of the largest congregations on Earth.

Defense Minister Rajnath Singh inaugurates Sainik school in Kerala

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■ KOCHI



Rajnath Singh, union defense minister on Wednesday, reminded the people of the country that the term Sainik is not confined to that of waging battle but it has a broad meaning. "Through Sainik Schools, we are moulding future leaders to take the country to new heights in all social fields. Please remember that persons like Swamy Vivekananda, Adi Sankaracharya, Sree Narayana Guru, Raja Ravi Varma were all soldiers fighting in different battlefields for social and cultural transformation of the nation," said Rajnath Singh while dedicating to the nation the fourth Sainik School in Kerala launched under the auspices of

Vidhyadhiraja Vidyapeetom at Mavelikkara in Alappuzha district. Interestingly, even as the minister was inaugurating the school, functioning of schools across Kerala came to an almost

standstill following the agitation by various trade unions of teachers demanding more pay and parks and lesser working hours. The new school is part of the initiative of the Prime

Minister's Scheme to set up 100 such schools across India to make available top quality education to all sections of society. Kerala has three Sainik Schools functioning in Thiruvananthapuram, Ernakulam and Kozhikode districts. While the Sainik School at Thiruvananthapuram is owned by the Government of India, the schools at Ernakulam and Kozhikode are managed by private management. The Sainik School at Mavelikkara is a dream come true for Vidhyadhiraja Educational and Charitable Trust launched in 1978. The school is affiliated to the Sainik School, Government of India. Students who pass out from the fifth standard in other schools

are eligible to apply for admission to the sixth standard and the selection is based on an all India entrance examination. Jayaprakash Valliathan, a marine engineer-turned-educationist told The Pioneer that 60 per cent of the total seats are reserved for students from the Vidhyadhiraja Vidyapeetom Central School while the remaining seats are available for students from rest of the country. "The curriculum has been prepared as per the directives of CBSE New Delhi and Sainik School Society. The students in the Sainik School stream get a taste of life in the defense services with specially trained teachers imparting them training in physical education, sports and games,"

said Valliathan. Minister Rajnath Singh further stated that the last few years saw a jump in the number of Sainik Schools functioning in the country. "There were just 33 Sainik Schools in India but the number has gone up by manifold because the nation is in need of youngsters with discipline, dedication and commitment to work not only in the armed forces and para military forces but in other areas too," said the minister. He pointed out that the Sainik Schools are the stepping stones to career in defense forces. "Since the Forces have started appointing girls too as officers, we need more trained professionals as well as Sainik Schools," he said.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

A Boost for Indian Professionals

H-1B visa reforms by Trump will go a long way in addressing the anomalies in the visa system and help Indian professionals

The H-1B visa has long been a critical pathway for skilled foreign workers, particularly Indians, to contribute to the US economy. With Indians accounting for over 72 per cent of H-1B visa recipients in 2023, any reform in this programme significantly impacts the Indian professional community. In his second term, President Donald Trump introduced groundbreaking reforms to the H-1B visa programme, shifting the selection process from a lottery-based system to a salary-based model. These changes, effective from January 17, 2025, aim to prioritise highly skilled professionals and streamline the visa process. The H-1B visa programme was established in 1990 to allow US companies to hire foreign workers with specialised skills. It has been a cornerstone of the tech and engineering sectors, enabling companies to bridge skill gaps. In 2023 alone, 386,000 H-1B visas were issued, with nearly three-quarters going to Indian nationals. This programme not only benefits the US economy by



addressing skill shortages but also strengthens India-US ties through the exchange of talent and innovation. The most notable change is the replacement of the lottery system with a salary-based selection process. This reform ensures that highly skilled professionals with competitive salaries are prioritised, making the programme more meritocratic. Besides, now the Indian professionals living in the US will be able to renew their H-1B visas domestically, eliminating the need for costly and time-consuming international travel. Another good news for the Students studying in the US on F-1 visas can now transition to H-1B visas more efficiently, fostering smoother career progression. Now on, research-oriented institutions are exempt from the annual visa cap, encouraging academic and scientific innovation. These reforms are poised to significantly benefit Indian professionals and students. With salary as the primary criterion, skilled Indian workers in high-demand sectors like technology, engineering and healthcare are likely to secure visas more easily. The streamlined process and in-country renewals will reduce uncertainties for professionals and their families. By retaining top talent, these changes will further strengthen the economic and technological collaboration between the US and India. President Trump's reforms reflect a strategic approach to talent acquisition and economic growth. By aligning visa policies with the needs of US businesses and rewarding merit, these changes demonstrate a commitment to fostering innovation and efficiency. While these reforms are a step in the right direction, they would require stricter scrutiny of visa holders and employers. This measure ensures transparency but might pose challenges for smaller companies offering competitive but lower salaries. Moreover, the shift in focus could pressure Indian professionals to align their career trajectories with higher-paying roles, potentially impacting sectors like academia and non-profits.

PICTALK



A woman prepares yarn to make the tricolour ahead of Republic Day 2025, in Nadia

PTI

Breaking the cycle of violence: Lessons from personal trauma

Violence against the weak manifests in countless forms—child abuse, bullying, ragging, molestation and domestic violence—leaving deep and often irreparable scars

Violence against the weak is a timeless and universal phenomenon. Child abuse, bullying, ragging, eve-teasing, molestation and domestic violence are only a few that can result in irretrievable damage to the psyche or can even have tragic consequences. I joined the hostel for the first time as a 12-year-old adolescent. I was out in the world, away from the shelter of my parental love, trying to overcome my insecurities. One time a senior shouted at me to fetch a packet of cigarettes from the dormitory. I still remember my tears as I was roughly reprimanded for being tardy. I was scared of the hostel life. Three years later, I joined the college hostel. Ragging had not yet been banned and was openly indulged in by seniors. It was supposed to be a harmless fun activity to initiate the newly joined youngsters into college life. It had degenerated into something completely different. One Sunday, we were forced to sit above the wardrobe and hurl choice profanities at each other. I mouthed words



from my limited vocabulary. We were so traumatised that we started returning home over the weekends. When our parents questioned us, we started bicycling into the desert on the weekends when ragging was at its peak. We slept in remote towns before returning to the campus at the start of the week. We even spent a night in the waiting room of a railway station. We were particularly wary of one young man called the 'ragging king'. In time, after the freshers had been welcomed, I settled down. I forgot my earlier

trauma and looked forward to the next year when I would be bestowed the dreaded title by the new arrivals. One incident changed my outlook. I was ragging a fresher, who was terrified and not responding to my questions. Frustrated, I barked at him to jump into a nearby well. Much to our horror, he turned around and ran towards it. Momentarily stunned, I must have run the fastest race of my life and managed to stop him in the nick of time. I was a changed person. The government stepped in to ban the practice. Sadly, it continues. A recent news report mentioned ragging in several medical colleges where male seniors force fresh entrants to memorise and read aloud from booklets filled with profanities and promoting sexual violence against women, specifically against classmates and nurses. The booklet also teaches freshers to look at women of all ages, including those in the 0-15 years age bracket, as sex objects. Many of us may have been at the receiving end of the local or the school

bully. It exists even at the workplace, sometimes in the guise of the rude superior who would not think twice before throwing the file back at you, or the one preying upon the junior female colleague. Women do not have a pleasant experience travelling on public transport. They are afraid to step out after sunset. Every day we read of brutal assaults and deaths. The list is endless. Many are unable to bear the trauma and give up on life. I am not a psychologist. The reasons might be more complex than blaming it on not inculcating the right values in the children. But, that can be a starting point. We can teach our young what English author Brian Jacques wrote in one of the Redwall series of fantasy novels for children, "Defend the weak, protect both young and old, never desert your friends. Give justice to all, be fearless in battle, and always ready to defend the right." (The author is an electrical engineer with the Indian Railways and conducts classes in creative writing; views are personal)



SANJAY CHANDRA

breaking the cycle of violence: lessons from personal trauma

The legacy and survival of the Fourth Estate

Initiatives promoting media literacy, particularly among youth, can help bridge the gap between traditional journalism and contemporary audiences



SANTHOSH MATHEW

In 1780, James Augustus Hicky published India's first printed newspaper, 'Hicky's Bengal Gazette,' also known as the Calcutta General Adv, normative power of print media. It was the printing press that propelled humanity into a new era of knowledge dissemination. In India, newspapers have become an essential pillar of democracy, freedom of expression, and public discourse. The celebration of Indian Newspaper Day reminds us of the transfer of a potent tool in the freedom struggle, awakening the masses to issues of injustice and fostering a collective national consciousness. The legacy of stalwarts like Mahatma Gandhi, who wielded publications like Young India and Harijan as instruments of change, underscores the unparalleled influence of newspapers in shaping society. Historically, the press has been a mirror reflecting societal truths, a watchdog ensuring accountability, and a platform amplifying diverse voices. Newspapers have been central to the articulation of ideas, the dissemination of information, and the fostering of debate and dialogue. The printed word has held power, credibility, and a permanence unmatched by fleeting digital narratives. Yet, the world of print media today faces an existential crisis. In an era dominated by smartphones, the internet, and instant news apps, the relevance of traditional newspapers is being questioned. Circulation and readership have declined sharply. Advertisements, which once constituted the backbone of newspaper revenue, have shifted to digital platforms. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this decline, as lockdowns disrupted distribution networks and readers turned to online alternatives. The Fourth Estate, embodied by traditional media, has paved the way for the Fifth Estate, represented by social media, as youth increasingly gravitate toward digital platforms for their news and engagement. India, despite its rich newspaper history, has not been immune to these global trends. While the country boasts a vibrant linguistic diversity in its



press—with publications in Hindi, English and regional languages—even stalwarts like Dainik Bhaskar and Malayala Manorama are grappling with reduced readership. Legacy newspapers such as Deepika, India's oldest surviving Malayalam publication, and Mumbai Samachar, the nation's longest-running newspaper, now struggle to adapt to the digital age. The shift is not merely technological but also cultural. The younger generation's preference for quick, digestible content over in-depth reporting signals a change in information consumption patterns. Traditional newspapers, with their rich investigative journalism and nuanced storytelling, are increasingly viewed as slow and outdated. The immediacy of apps like Daily Hunt and platforms offering free e-papers has made paying for physical newspapers seem redundant. This decline, however, should not overshadow the irreplaceable value of print media. Unlike digital platforms prone to misinformation and algorithmic biases, newspapers have long been trusted for their credibility and editorial rigour. They offer a depth of coverage that ensures stories are not just told but examined and contextualised. Newspapers are archives of history, recording



HIGH LITERACY RATES AND A CULTURE OF RESPECT FOR WELL-RESEARCHED JOURNALISM HAVE ENABLED NEWSPAPERS TO THRIVE EVEN IN A DIGITAL AGE

events with an accuracy and permanence that digital platforms, with their ephemeral nature, cannot replicate. Japan provides a remarkable case study in media literacy and the enduring power of print. Despite being at the forefront of technological innovation, Japan boasts the world's largest-circulated dailies, such as Yomiuri Shimbun with a circulation nearing 10 million and Asahi Shimbun not far behind. High literacy rates and a culture of respect for well-researched journalism have enabled newspapers to thrive even in a digital age. This example underscores the potential for print media to coexist with digital platforms when supported by an informed and engaged readership. Indian Newspaper Day is a reminder to recognise and preserve this legacy. While print media must innovate to survive, readers, too, bear a responsibility to support credible journalism. The rise of e-papers and hybrid models—combining print and digital—offers hope for the industry's evolution rather than extinction. Newspapers continue to play a vital role in fostering democracy. They provide a platform for marginalised voices, hold power to account, and offer citizens the information they

need to make informed decisions. At a time when digital echo chambers threaten the very fabric of public discourse, newspapers serve as a counterbalance, offering diverse perspectives and challenging groupthink. The theme of survival is intrinsic to the narrative of Indian newspapers. Just as Hicky's Bengal Gazette persevered despite colonial censorship and competition, today's publications must navigate the challenges of the digital age. The story of newspapers is one of resilience and adaptation. From the handwritten Acta Diurna of Julius Caesar's Rome to Gutenberg's printing revolution, and from Hickey's modest four-pager to modern broadsheets like The Times of India, the medium has continually evolved to meet the needs of its time. As we celebrate Indian Newspaper Day 2025, it is an opportunity to reflect on the enduring significance of the printed word. While the medium may change, the principles of journalism—truth, accountability, and the public good—remain timeless. It is up to readers, journalists, and policymakers to ensure that these principles continue to thrive in an age of rapid technological change. (The writer is an associate professor; views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

US EXITS FROM PARIS AGREEMENT

Madam — American President Donald Trump signed an executive order on Monday, pulling the US out of the Paris climate agreement. The Paris Agreement provides a durable framework guiding the global effort for decades to come, marking the beginning of a shift towards net-zero emissions. Thus, at a time when the whole world prepares to celebrate the International Day of Clean Energy on January 26, Trump's decision to exit is a severe blow to worldwide efforts to combat global warming. The way Donald Trump signed an order to withdraw the US from the Paris climate agreement for a second time reflects his party's hawkish stance on the agreement. In fact, the track record of the Republican Party shows its reluctance to make any commitment on an action plan on climate change. Even in the case of the Kyoto Protocol, President George W Bush had withdrawn the signature of the Democrat Vice President Al Gore, who had signed the Protocol on behalf of the US. The Republicans want any future American involvement in climate change agreements to be matched by equivalent commitments by developing country parties. Will recent severe natural disasters due to climate change, ranging from floods in Florida to wildfires in California, open the eyes of the Republicans?

Manoj Parashar | Ghaziabad

LACK OF SKILLED WORKERS

Madam— When the issue of the growing threat of unemployed youth came to the fore, a few industrialists expressed the fact that they were facing difficulty in getting skilled and employable youth to recruit in their firms. It was then the Union government came with the apprenticeship scheme under which willing unemployed youth are allotted firms to take training with a monthly incentive to trainees as well as the firm. Though 500 firms were to be identified to engage under this scheme, the number could not

Ban criminals from contesting election



The Supreme Court observation barring criminals from contesting elections should be taken into cognisance by the government, the Elections Commission and the political parties. The SC should have passed the order incorporating such observation in the interim bail order, thus binding the EC, the government, and the parties. How can a criminal, violating laws, killing people, illegally possessing properties,

confiscating others' lands and buildings, extorting, and rioting, serve as a public representative in the Parliament, assemblies, and local municipal bodies? Uttar Pradesh and Bihar are glaring examples of such billionaire mafia dons whose crime list knew no bounds. Both states suffered in development, education and growth for decades. Fielding the criminals and convicted killers in the elections is the antithesis of democracy and the Constitution. Money and muscle power win elections for them even if in jails. Such a list is quite exhaustive across all political parties. If 25-30 per cent of elected representatives have a criminal background, people are also to be blamed for their own decline and eclipsed future. Some political parties prominently field criminals and extremists in elections and depend on the cadre of criminal backgrounds.

Vinod Johri | Delhi

SENIOR CITIZEN DEMAND CONCESSIONS

Madam — The Union Budget 2025-26 is going to be presented in Parliament on the first of February. One of the pressing demands on the minds of many senior citizens is whether the Indian Railways will bring back concessions on train fares for senior citizens. The issue holds significant importance as it directly impacts about 15 crore senior citizens across the nation. The Indian Railways had, in March 2020, decided to withdraw the concessions providing a 50 per cent discount to female senior citizens and a 40 per cent discount to males on train fares. According to Railways norms, males and transgenders aged 60 and above and females aged 58 and above, are treated as senior citizens. It represents a pivotal opportunity for the government to demonstrate its commitment to elder care, social equity, and responsive governance by restoring concessions to senior citizens in the ensuing budget.

S K Khosla | Chandigarh

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

A G Rajmohan | Anantapur



FIRST COLUMN

SHUN THE VIOLENCE,
EMBRACE PEACE

True transformation lies not in vengeance but in reconnecting with the divine qualities of love and peace



RAJYOGI BRAHMA KUMAR NIKUNJ JI

Today we are living in a world where violence has become our culture. It may be seen in the hundreds of wars going on in different parts of the world or it may be seen through innumerable violent incidents that occur every day in cities and homes across the universe. So, what exactly has led to the spread of violence so much even though people strongly denounce it? We all know that the history of human civilisation is an epic saga of violence punctuated by episodes of relative calm. Violence, subtle and gross, manifest and incognito, has been the defining force of humanity's quest for power in the last two millennia. The rise and fall of empires, the religious crusades and socio-political uprisings down the ages were impelled by violence on a massive scale. One of the major reasons why violence has become so deeply embedded in the human psyche is that on the one hand, we denounce it but on the other hand we condone or even justify it. In the 21st century, which we all boast of living in, violence has been glorified in ingenious ways by the media, especially television, the internet and films. A world that has been fed so much on violence is no wonder becoming increas-



ingly dangerous to live in for its occupants. It's a known fact that today violence has become the means to seek political and social justice. Men kill men in the name of the almighty and later on, these killings are then justified as dharma by the custodians of religion when it is used for a righteous purpose. Amidst all these, a question that comes up is, Can one justify so much violence? Or, can violence ever root out adhama (unrighteousness)?

Well!!!! To conquer dharma we need to first understand the true dharma of the self. We all must realise that good or evil are the traits of the human soul and even after death these traits or *sanskar* are carried on to the next birth. This *sanskar* may change or become stronger as per the person's karma in the next life. Hence, it follows that one may kill an evil person but one cannot destroy the evil in that person. It would instead increase due to feelings of hatred and revenge. Remember!! An evil act is bound to be punished as per the Law of Karma in the present or the next birth because there is a natural justice system that works infallibly and eternally. Hence, one must never think that if someone avenges a wrong by doing wrong in turn, he/she will not suffer. No!! The truth is that in this case, both persons will have to pay for their respective wrong actions by undergoing some suffering because any act done with ill will towards others is violence and it is bound to bring sorrow for the doer. Hence, a person may escape the laws of the land but his karma will catch up with him sooner or later for sure. We all need to understand the philosophy behind the word religion or dharma. Dharma in the true sense simply means living by eternal spiritual values such as peace and love. When we share love and goodwill with others it is bound to stir up similar feelings in that person. On the contrary, when we hate and harm others it is bound to spark ill will in them. The world that God created for us was a completely non-violent and harmonious world where no evil existed. Goodness exists eternally; it is when we begin to lose touch with our real values that we are enslaved by negative tendencies. We are all children of "Almighty" who is the ocean of love, peace and joy, so his qualities are our qualities too eternally, aren't they? That is why all humans resist hatred. They never resist love or joy. He is always merciful and benevolent towards all, so how can he justify violence? And the only way to bring peace and harmony back on earth is to empower ourselves spiritually and rid our minds of all negativities. This will uproot violence completely out of the world and the world would become the one that it was, serene and peaceful.

(The writer is a spiritual educator & popular columnist, views are personal)

Renuka Ji Dam: Addressing
Delhi's water woes

K S TOMAR

Conceived over half a century ago on Giri River in Himachal Pradesh, the Renuka Ji Dam is finally set to redefine water and energy security across six Indian states



The visionary Renuka Ji Dam project, conceived 58 years ago on Himachal Pradesh's serene Giri River, is finally transcending decades of delays to emerge as a game-changer. This landmark initiative promises to alleviate Delhi's chronic water scarcity while energising Haryana, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh with sustainable power generation. Beyond its functional benefits, the dam exemplifies federal cooperation and political resolve. Prime Minister Narendra Modi virtually laid the foundation stone of this Rs 6,946-crore project on December 27, 2021. Now, with 95 per cent of procedural hurdles cleared, global tenders will soon be floated, paving the way for construction. Cost estimates have surged to Rs 8,262 crore, factoring a 5 per cent annual escalation. Targeted for completion by 2030, with operations commencing in 2032, this project's progress is critical for Delhi and beyond.

For Delhiites, the dam symbolises the realisation of a 58-year-old aspiration. The stored water will be routed to Delhi-NCR, Uttar Pradesh and Haryana through the Hathnikund Barrage, further reaching the Wazirabad and Okhla Barrages. Delhi's water demand exceeds 1,200 million gallons daily (MGD), with severe shortages during summer. The Renuka Ji Dam, promising 275 MGD, will bridge this deficit, bolstering domestic supply, industrial growth, and infrastructure development. Haryana leads with a 5.73 BCM share (47.82 per cent), contributing Rs 555.95 crore. Uttar Pradesh's 3.721 BCM (31.05 per cent) follows with Rs 361.04 crore. Rajasthan holds 1.119 BCM (9.34 per cent), contributing Rs108.58 crore. Himachal, Uttarakhand, and Delhi contribute Rs 36.67 crore, Rs 30.17 crore, and Rs 70.25 crore, respectively. Uttarakhand's share of water in the upper Yamuna basin is 0.311 BCM, which constitutes 2.60Rs30.17 crore of the total share. Together, the states allocate Rs 1,162.66 crore for this critical project.

Originally slated to showcase progress before Delhi's 2025 Assembly elections, the dam faced delays, pushing construction timelines by 5-6 months. Intervention by the Prime Minister's Office (PMO)



RENUKAJI, NESTLED IN HIMACHAL'S SIRMAUR DISTRICT, IS IDEAL FOR THE DAM DUE TO ITS GEOGRAPHICAL AND HYDROLOGICAL ADVANTAGES. THE GIRI RIVER, A YAMUNA TRIBUTARY, ENSURES A STEADY WATER FLOW

could expedite design approvals and tendering. Local tensions remain high. The Jan Sangharsh Samiti criticised project authorities for inadequate rehabilitation efforts, including compensation gaps for displaced families. Activists demand higher pay-outs aligned with Public Works Department estimates, claiming the current compensation is insufficient. Harikesh Meena, Managing Director of HP Power Corporation, refutes these allegations, stating Rs 1,573 crore has been disbursed, with 90 houseless families offered relocation options. Himachal Pradesh is set to gain 200 million units of electricity annually, worth Rs 66 crore. Delhi has already transferred Rs 270 crore, funding 90 per cent of the Rs 300-crore power machinery cost, underscoring the project's importance. Renuka ji, nestled in Himachal's Sirmaur district, is ideal for the dam due to its geographical and hydrological advantages. The Giri River, a Yamuna tributary, ensures a steady water flow.

The site also holds immense cultural significance. Named after Goddess Renuka, the mother of Parashurama (an avatar of Lord Vishnu), the area is steeped in mythology. Renuka Lake, India's largest natural lake, draws pilgrims year-round. Ancient temples dedicated to Goddess Renuka and Lord Parashurama further enhance its spiritual and historical value. The project blends technological ambition with religious reverence, ready to address Delhi's water woes and power needs for generations. The Rs 8,262.28-crore Renuka Ji Dam project, a 148-meter-high rock-filled structure, will transform water and power availability across six states. Submerging 1,508 hectares and displacing 7,000 residents, including 346 houseless families, the project spans 41 villages across 25 panchayats. Proposed in 1976, the dam faced decades of procedural hurdles. Initially estimated at Rs 4,596 crore

in 2015, costs have ballooned. A significant milestone was achieved in January 2019, when a MoU among the six beneficiary states, brokered by then Union Minister Nitin Gadkari, resolved water-sharing disputes. In 2022, the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs, chaired by PM Modi, approved financial support, pushing the project into execution mode.

Located near Dadahu village, the dam will store 498 million cubic meters of water, routed to Delhi-NCR, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, and Rajasthan via key barrages. As part of the PM Krishi Sinchayee Yojana, it will deliver 23,000 litres per second to Delhi. Additionally, incidental hydroelectric power generation (40 MW) will earn Himachal Rs120 crore annually. Technical Experts predict a 110 per cent increase in the Giri River's flow, ensuring reliable water supplies during lean periods. Despite challenges faced by displaced communities, the Renuka Ji Dam promises long-term benefits: improved water security for Delhi, agricultural irrigation, and energy generation marking it a milestone in cooperative federalism and infrastructure development.

Despite its potential, the project's journey was fraught with challenges. Environmental concerns, inter-state disputes, land acquisition hurdles, and funding delays plagued progress. Securing environmental clearances was a monumental task. Forested landscapes raised alarms over wildlife displacement and green cover submergence. Years of negotiations and compensatory afforestation plans eventually paved the way.

Inter-state discord over water-sharing ratios and financial contributions delayed progress. Himachal Pradesh had to acquire 1,477 hectares of land, including 909 hectares of forest. Protests and legal battles over compensation and rehabilitation compounded delays until enhanced packages and livelihood restoration initiatives placat-

ed affected communities. The project's escalating cost was another sticking point. Initially pegged at Rs 3,600 crore, delays ballooned the budget to Rs 6,946 crore by 2021. Financial deadlock broke when the central government agreed to fund 90 per cent of the cost under the Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchayee Yojana (PMKSY). This eased the financial burden on states, with Delhi swiftly sanctioning Rs 1,066 crore as its share.

The central government played a crucial role in reviving the project. Integrating it into initiatives like the Jal Shakti Abhiyan and National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC), underscored the dam's importance. Accelerated clearances, robust mediation, and funding commitments demonstrated political resolve. With construction set to commence by mid-2025 and completion targeted for 2032, strict oversight will ensure timely execution.

The Renuka Ji Dam epitomises cooperative federalism at its finest—where the centre and states unite to tackle shared challenges. For Himachal Pradesh, it heralds economic growth, energy self-sufficiency, and enhanced infrastructure. For Delhi, it is a lifeline, promising a reliable solution to its chronic water crisis. Beyond immediate benefits, the dam's capacity to regulate river flow and mitigate downstream flooding enhances its value as a climate-resilient infrastructure.

As a testament to sustainable development, the Renuka Ji Dam underscores the synergy of political will, inter-state collaboration, and community engagement in overcoming complex challenges. By transforming Himachal Pradesh into a green energy hub and securing Delhi's water needs, the project exemplifies inclusive growth and environmental stewardship.

(Writer is a senior political analyst and strategic affairs columnist based in Shimla; views are personal)

Empowering panchayats: The key to achieving Viksit Bharat 2047 through community actions

India must transition from top-down governance to a model where community leadership is the driving force behind sustainable development

India's development trajectory has been shaped by significant contributions from the office of Prime Minister (PM), Chief Minister (CM) and District Magistrate (DM). To achieve the vision of Viksit Bharat 2047 empowering Panchayat leadership, headed by Village Mukhiya (VM) is a critical strategy.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 mandated the transfer of authority of 29 functions, underscoring their vital role in delivering services directly to the communities. Despite this mandate, Gram Panchayats (GP) lack functionaries and have limited infrastructure and capacity for planning and implementation. This often leads to either underutilisation



MANMOHAN SINGH

of allocated funds or prioritising local infrastructural projects decided by either the district or state. Addressing these challenges is crucial for India to meet its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and improve its Human Development Index (HDI) ranking. It requires building

the capacity of GPs to adeptly identify, plan, and implement projects that align with the needs established through Gram Sabha.

The Panchayat Raj System established panchayats as the foundation of decentralised power, emphasising that sustainable development must begin with our smallest unit of democracy: the Panchayat, led by the VM (Sarpanch). Elevating the role of the VM akin to the PM and CM at the centre and state, supported by a strong administrative structure, can drive effective grassroots decision-making. The Ministry of Panchayati Raj has grouped the 17 SDGs into nine themes, demonstrating India's commitment to achieving these goals through the implementation of Localised

SDGs (SDGs) by Panchayats. GPs across India, are tasked with creating Gram Panchayat Development Plans (GPDs) that align with LSDG priorities. However, a survey of 800 panchayats revealed that only 7 per cent of Sarpanches independently chose their LSDG themes using the Gram Panchayat Planning Facilitation Tool (GPPFT), while 34 per cent of themes were decided by Block officials, 22 per cent by Sarpanches or Sachivs, and 16 per cent were directed by the state, reflecting a need for strengthening planning at the panchayat level.

To develop Viksit Panchayats, four key actions are proposed: **Support panchayat for last-mile convergence:** When a 13-year-old girl drops out of school, the responsibility



extends beyond the education department, requiring collaborative efforts across health, social welfare, and community development. A central coordinating body at the village level, led by the VM can drive such convergence. For instance, Anita Devi, Village Mukhiya of Bhetaura Panchayat in Gaya, Bihar has

embraced the 'Healthy Panchayat' LSDG theme. Collaborating with ASHAs, Anganwadi Didis, and Gandhi Fellows to achieve 'Zero Home Delivery' eventually boosting institutional delivery rates from 25 per cent to nearly 90 per cent in just one year. Replicating such successes requires empowering panchayat through convergence of funds, and functionary and administrative support.

Reimagine development of Panchayat Leaders: India has 2.6 lakh elected VMs, dedicated to strengthening panchayat governance. Prime Minister's call to bring 1 lakh youth into politics is a great encouragement for local youths. To unlock their full potential, we need to reimagine the institutional framework

that focuses on capacity building for elected 'VM and Ward Members'. For example, Jyoti Behar Devi, Mukhiya in Gumla, Jharkhand, banned alcohol in her panchayat, focused on livelihood opportunities and also started the "Siti Bajo aur School Aao" campaign to boost school attendance, effectively transforming her community. **Democratise data through Panchayat:** Village Mukhiyas, as key information providers of government schemes, need real-time access to comprehensive beneficiary data and scheme details. Implementing technology solutions that provide such access is paramount for informed decision-making and efficient governance. The Ministry of Panchayat Raj and the Ministry of Rural

Development has taken some initiatives which need further integration with planning and execution at the panchayat level.

Revitalise Village Committees Village-level committees such as School Management Committees, Village Health and Sanitation Committees, Jan Arogya Samitis, and Village Water and Sanitation Committees, play a pivotal role in fostering decentralised governance and community participation in development efforts. To achieve Viksit Bharat, these committees need to align to avoid duplication of efforts and promote community ownership.

(The writer is Co-Founder and CEO Aspirational Bharat Collaborative; views are personal)

RBI Monetary Policy Committee member Nagesh Kumar advocates two inflation rates

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

RBI Monetary Policy Committee member Nagesh Kumar has suggested that there should be two inflation rates - one including food prices and the other without food prices - so that relevant rates could be taken into account for policy making. Chief Economic Advisor V Anantha Nageswaran in the Economic Survey 2023-24 had pitched for excluding food inflation from the rate setting calls, saying that the monetary policy has no bearing on the prices of food items, which are dictated by supply side pressures. "I think there is a healthy debate on what should be the target, whether overall headline inflation rate or inflation rate excluding the food products, which are, you know, very seriously affected by seasonal demand, supply mismatch," Kumar told PTI while responding to a question on suggestions made in the Economic Survey for excluding food inflation while setting benchmark interest rates.



The weightage of food in the overall consumer price inflation, which stands at 46 per cent, was done in 2011-12, and needs to be revisited. "I think we should have two inflation rates, one including food inflation and one without food inflation... So the relevant rate could be considered for what, which particular policy

parameter one is looking at," he said. India introduced the inflation-targeting framework in 2016 under which the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) is mandated to keep retail inflation at four per cent, with a margin of two per cent on either side. The benchmark policy rates are decided bi-monthly by the

RBI on the basis of movement in consumer price index, which includes food, fuel, manufactured goods and select services. Responding to a question on high food prices, Kumar said retail inflation slowed to a four-month low of 5.22 per cent in December. "A large part of this 5.2 per

cent is because of the food prices inflation, and then also a seasonal mismatch of vegetable prices... And that corrects by itself, when more supplies come to the mandis, we should see inflation being restrained much more," Kumar added. On India's current macroeconomic situation, he said slowdown in India's economic growth to a seven-quarter low of 5.4 per cent in the second quarter was a temporary, transient kind of slowdown. According to Kumar, it reflected the lag effect of the very strong squeeze in capex of the government in the first quarter because of the election code of conduct, but the capex started to pick up in the second quarter. "We expect a strong growth in the second half of the year, and overall, I think we should be making up somewhere around 6.5 per cent or 6.6 per cent," he said. Responding to a question on outlook of the Indian economy in FY26, Kumar said the performance of the Indian economy will be slightly better next fiscal year than this year.

Irregularities found in one rupee crop insurance scheme for farmers

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Maharashtra Agriculture Minister Manikrao Kokate has admitted irregularities in the implementation of the one rupee crop insurance scheme for farmers, noting places of worship were shown as agricultural lands to claim benefits. More than four lakh crop insurance applications, some filed even by those residing outside Maharashtra, have been rejected, Kokate on Tuesday said, adding a "bogus industry" has come to light which involves non-eligible people seeking benefits of the scheme. The minister, however, asserted that no money has been actually lost as funds were not transferred by the government into the bank accounts linked to bogus applications. Speaking to the media here, Kokate said instances of malpractice in the scheme have been identified in several aspects, including cases where mosques, temples and vacant lands were falsely declared as agricultural lands to claim benefits. "I have instructed district collectors to take immediate action," he said. The crop insurance scheme



was introduced in the 2023 budget by the then deputy chief minister and finance minister Devendra Fadnis. Under the scheme, farmers can get crop insurance for just Re one. Before the scheme, farmers had to pay the company two per cent of the insurance premium. The agriculture department had received several complaints from farmers about the scheme's implementation, chiefly on grounds of non-payment of the insurance amount as well as mismatch of records. Agriculture Secretary Vikaschandra Rastogi later headed a committee which compiled the complaints and conducted a probe into them. Kokate said, "Over four lakh crop insurance applications were rejected across the state. Some of these applications

were filed by people from outside Maharashtra. We have taken significant steps to address the irregularities. Farmers will be issued unique ID cards linked to Aadhaar to ensure transparency." An updated database of farmers is being prepared, the minister said, adding that significant reforms will be introduced in the scheme. Asked how the large-scale bogus claims could be made, Kokate attributed much of the malpractice to certain Common Service Centres (CSCs), where people involved in data entry of details of farmers are paid Rs 40 per application. "The operators of such centres filed bogus applications to earn more. We have ordered action against 96 such centres," he said.

I like competent people coming to US: says President Trump



PTI ■ WASHINGTON

US President Donald Trump has said he likes both sides of the argument on the H-1B foreign guest workers' visa, noting that the country needs "very competent" and "great" people which is possible through this visa programme. Trump also said that he has also used the H-1B visa programme. The H-1B visa is a non-immigrant visa that allows US companies to employ foreign workers in speciality

occupations that require theoretical or technical expertise. Technology companies depend on it to hire tens of thousands of employees each year from countries like India and China. "I like both sides of the argument, but I also like very competent people coming into our country, even if that involves them training and helping other people who may not have the qualifications they do. But I don't want to stop- and I'm not just talking about engineers, I'm talking

about people at all levels," Trump said on Tuesday. He made these remarks while talking to reporters at the White House during a joint news conference with Oracle CEO Larry Ellison, Softbank CEO Masayoshi Son, and Open AI CEO Sam Altman. The president was responding to a question on the ongoing debate on H-1B visas within his support base. Indians are the main beneficiaries of the H-1B visas, which bring in the best of the talent and brains from across the world. Highly skilled professionals from India walk away with the overwhelming number of H-1B visas - which is Congressional mandated 65,000 every year and another 20,000 for those who received higher education from the US. While his close confidants like Elon Musk, the Tesla owner, support H-1B visas as they bring in qualified tech professionals, many of his supporters oppose it arguing that it takes away jobs from

Americans. "We want competent people coming into our country. And H-1B, I know the programme very well. I use the programme. Maitre d', wine experts, even waiters, high-quality waiters -- you've got to get the best people. People like Larry, he needs engineers, Masa also needs... They need engineers like nobody's ever needed them," Trump said. "So, we have to have quality people coming in. Now by doing that, we're expanding businesses and that takes care of everybody. So I'm sort of on both sides of the argument, but what I really do feel is that we have to let really competent people, great people, come into our country. And we do that through the H-1B programme," Trump said. Since December, the debate on foreign guest workers visas for highly skilled professionals, the H-1B, has intensified which has literally created divisions in both the Democratic and the Republican parties

EPFO adds 14.63 lakh net members in November

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Retirement fund body EPFO has added 14.63 lakh net members in November 2024, a growth of 4.88 per cent over the same month last year, according to the latest payroll data. The growth in net member additions signifies increased employment opportunities and heightened awareness of employee benefits, bolstered by EPFO's effective outreach initiatives, a labour ministry statement said. On a monthly basis, net member additions rose by 9.07 per cent over October 2024, the ministry said. The EPFO enrolled around 8.74 lakh new members in November 2024, up by 18.80 per cent over the year-ago month and a 16.58 per cent rise against October 2024, the provisional data showed. The ministry said a noticeable aspect of the data is the dominance of the 18-25 age group, with 4.81 lakh new members added in this age group constituting a significant 54.97 per cent of the total new members added



in November 2024. Net member additions in the age group of 18-25 years are approximately 5.86 lakh for November 2024, reflecting an increase of 7.96 per cent compared to the previous month of October 2024. This is in consonance with the earlier trend which indicates that most individuals joining the organised workforce are youth, primarily first-time job seekers, the ministry said. The payroll data highlights that approximately 14.39 lakh members exited and subsequently rejoined EPFO. This figure represents an 11.47 per cent increase compared to the previous month of October 2024. It also depicts a significant year-

on-year growth of 34.75 per cent in November 2024. These members switched their jobs and re-joined the establishments covered under the ambit of EPFO and opted to transfer their accumulations instead of applying for final settlement thus, safeguarding long-term financial well-being and extending their social security protection. Gender-wise analysis of payroll data unveils that out of the new members added during the month, around 2.40 lakh new members are female, it said. The comparison with the previous month of October 2024 shows an increase of 14.94 per cent.

NSE adds one crore investors in five months

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The National Stock Exchange (NSE) on Wednesday said its unique registered investors have crossed the 11 crore mark, with the latest one crore addition taking place in just five months, reflecting investor participation in the stock market through direct means. Investor registrations at the NSE have experienced a remarkable acceleration in recent times, with a 3.6 times jump in the last five years. It took 14 years since the NSE's commencement of operations in 1994 to reach one crore investors. The pace then quickened, with the next 1 crore registrations taking about seven years, followed by another 3.5 years for the next crore and the subsequent milestone of adding the fourth crore took just over a year. "The rate of growth has since quickened significantly, with each additional one crore investors being added in roughly six-seven months, while the last one crore investors were added in just over five months, reflecting a shift in investor enthusiasm and participation in the stock market through direct means," NSE said in a statement. In the last five months, daily new unique investor registrations have consistently ranged between 47,000 and 73,000. This growth has been driven by several key factors, including the rapid advancement of digitisation, heightened investor awareness, financial inclusion efforts, and strong market performance. In 2024, the Nifty 50 index delivered a return of 8.8 per cent while the Nifty 500 index saw an impressive 15.2 per cent gain. Indian markets have had positive returns for the past nine consecutive years.

Rupee rises 25 paise against US Dollar



PTI ■ MUMBAI

The rupee appreciated 25 paise to close at 86.33 (provisional) against the US dollar on Wednesday, supported by positive domestic equities and soft US dollar index. Forex traders said the rupee is likely to witness high volatility with a negative bias ahead of key events in the global and domestic economic landscape. Moreover, the overall uncertainty about the global economy continued to weigh on both currencies and commodities, keeping investors on edge. At the interbank foreign exchange, the rupee opened at 86.56 against the greenback. During the day, the local unit touched an intraday high of 86.30 and a low of 86.71. It finally closed at 86.33 (provisional) against the US dollar, up 25 paise from its previous close. On Tuesday, the rupee fell 13 paise to 86.58 against the US dollar. "We expect the rupee to remain largely weak on underlying

strength in the US dollar and overall weakness in the domestic markets. Importer demand for dollars may also pressurise the rupee. However, any extended sell-off in crude oil may support the rupee at lower levels," Anuj Choudhary - Research Analyst at Mirae Asset Sharekhan, said. Choudhary further noted that markets may see some volatility on incoming statements and announcements by the Trump administration. "USD-INR spot price is expected to trade in a range of 86.20 to 86.65," he added. Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading down 0.15 per cent to 107.89 as traders pondered over the Trump Tariff Plan. Brent crude, the global oil benchmark, rose 0.48 per cent to USD 79.67 per barrel in futures trade. Crude oil prices had fallen due to fears of tough US policies and had touched USD 78 per barrel, a 4 per cent decline from recent highs following President Trump's mention of increasing US oil output. In the domestic equity market, the 30-share BSE Sensex rose 566.63 points, or 0.75 per cent, to settle at 76,404.99 points, while the Nifty rose 130.70 points, or 0.57 per cent, to 23,155.35 points. Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) remained net sellers in the capital markets on Tuesday, as they offloaded shares worth Rs 5,920.28 crore, according to exchange data.

Sensex, Nifty rebound on buying in Infosys, HDFC Bank, firm global trends

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Benchmark Sensex rebounded nearly 567 points and Nifty regained 23,150 level on Wednesday following gains in blue-chip stocks Infosys, HDFC Bank and Tata Consultancy Services, and firm global trends. The 30-share BSE Sensex surged 566.63 points or 0.75 per cent to close at 76,404.99. During the day, the benchmark surged 624.77 points or 0.82 per cent to hit an intraday high of 76,463.13 on the BSE. On similar lines, the broader NSE Nifty climbed 130.70 points or 0.57 per cent to settle at 23,155.35. In the intraday session, the Nifty rose 144.9 points or 0.63 per cent to



23,169.55 on the NSE. Among Sensex shares, Infosys, Tata Consultancy Services, Tech Mahindra, Sun Pharmaceutical, Bajaj Finserv, HCL Technologies, Bajaj Finance, HDFC Bank, IndusInd Bank and Kotak

Mahindra Bank were among the gainers. Tata Motors, PowerGrid, Axis Bank, State Bank of India, NTPC, Tata Steel and Adani Ports were the major laggards. "The benchmark indices rebounded amidst heightened

volatility following better-than-expected results from a major private bank. The IT sector led gains, recovering from recent losses, while mid and small-cap stocks continued to underperform due to valuation concerns," Vinod Nair, Head of

Research, Geojit Financial Services said. European markets were trading higher on Wednesday. In Asian markets, Tokyo and Seoul were settled on a positive note while Hong Kong and Shanghai closed in the negative territory. Wall Street had ended higher on Tuesday. International oil benchmark Brent Crude was trading 0.49 per cent higher at USD 79.68 a barrel. Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) offloaded shares worth Rs 5,920.28 crore on Tuesday. The BSE Sensex plummeted 1,235.08 points to settle at 75,838.36 and the broader NSE Nifty plunged 320.10 points to close at 23,024.65 on Tuesday.

Some equity research firms shutting shops after SEBI's new guidelines on research analysts

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Markets regulator SEBI's new guidelines on research analysts (RAs) are forcing several equity research firms publicly announcing plans to shut down their shops due to heightened compliance and operational requirements. The Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi), on January 8, came out with guidelines for Research Analysts in a bid to curb fraudulent stock recommendations and illegal practices in the securities market. The new guidelines necessitate research firms to comply with stricter measures such as maintaining records of

client interactions, conducting compliance audits, and following Know-Your-Customer (KYC) procedures and these requirements have led to increased operational costs for smaller entities. Consequently, a few firms including Sentinel Research, Stalwart Advisors, and Mystic Wealth have announced their plans of shutting their research services citing significant operational and compliance burden. Market experts said that the new guidelines have notably lowered the threshold for individuals to register as RAs, making it easier for newcomers to enter the profession. However, for established RAs, these



guidelines have imposed heightened compliance and operational requirements. They believe that the new regulations are too stringent and could undermine the quality of research in the market.

Sandeep Parekh, founder of Finsec Law Advisors, posted on microblogging site X that Sebi is "going way overboard in its regulations and shutting down competent and honest advisors and researchers from the

market". "If it goes down this path, all that will remain will be incompetent and dishonest, or incompetent or dishonest advisors," he added. Neeraj Marathe, who operates independent research firm Sentinel Research, also expressed his dismay on social media. He had paused his research services last year when the draft RA regulations were first announced, hoping for more clarity and more balanced guidelines. However, upon reviewing the final regulations, he stated that the rules were even more burdensome than expected. "Last year, when the proposed RA regulations came, I had paused my

research services at sentinelresearch.in. The hope was that the actual regulations would be better in terms of conditions and compliance and I shall restart after getting clarity. Well, the actual regulations have turned out to be much worse! I too shall be discontinuing my research services portal," he added. Stalwart Advisors, which has been operating its equity research service "Treasure Trove" for over a decade, announced it would be closing its operations. The firm cited the increased operational and compliance requirements, including the rule that limits subscription fees to a quarterly payment model, as a key factor in its decision.

Liverpool beats Lille to reach Champions League round of 16

PTI ■ LIVERPOOL

Liverpool became the first team to guarantee a place in the last 16 of the new Champions League format by beating Lille 2-1 on Tuesday, while Barcelona fought back from two goals down to stun Benfica 5-4 in a thriller.

Harvey Elliott's bouncing, deflected shot gave Liverpool its seventh win from seven games, just after 10-man Lille had equalized following Mohamed Salah's opening goal.

Liverpool needed a point at Anfield to be sure of reaching the round of 16 as one of the top eight teams in the league stage, skipping the playoff round for teams ranked ninth to 24th.

Salah raced through in the 34th minute to sweep Liverpool ahead with his 22nd goal in all competitions this season. And when Lille's Aissa Mandi was sent off just before the hour mark, Liverpool looked certain to extend its 100% record in the league phase.

But Anfield was stunned when Canada striker Jonathan David converted from close range to level the score in the 62nd. It

didn't take long for Liverpool to regain the lead through Elliott's deflected effort five minutes later. "All my life I've dreamt of playing Champions League football, not only for my boyhood club but to play here at Anfield in front of our fans and especially to score, it's kind of a pinch-me moment," Elliott said.

Barcelona's comeback win It was a night of high drama in the Champions League with 33 goals scored across nine games. Nine of them came in Barcelona's battle with Benfica.

Raphinha scored in stoppage time to complete a rousing comeback as Barcelona won in Lisbon despite having been 4-2 down with less than a quarter of an hour remaining.

Benfica's Vangelis Pavlidis scored the third-fastest hat trick at the start of a Champions League game, with two of his goals coming after errors by Barcelona goalkeeper Wojciech Szczesny.

Barcelona stays second with 18 points from seven games, and is now unbeaten in six games in all competitions since the new year. "We came with the mindset that we could turn the game," Raphinha said. "We never gave up



and managed to grab a win." Robert Lewandowski scored two penalties for Barcelona to stay the Champions League's top scorer on nine goals, one ahead of Raphinha, who also scored twice. Another Spanish club staged a comeback as Julian Alvarez scored a 90th-minute winner to lift Atletico Madrid past Bayer Leverkusen 2-1. Atletico lost Pablo Barrios to a 23rd-minute

red card and went into half time 1-0 down to a Piero Hincapie header for Leverkusen.

Alvarez scored in the 52nd and had the momentum when Hincapie was sent off for a second yellow card, before Alvarez struck again to take the win and lift Atletico to third.

Villa slides out of the top eight
With Prince William watching on, Aston Villa's hopes of automatic qualification for the round of 16 took a blow after a 1-0 loss to Monaco.

Villa led the standings early in the league phase of the competition after winning its first three games. But defeat to Monaco left the Premier League club eighth. Wilfried Singo's goal at a corner in the eighth minute was enough to secure the win for ninth-place Monaco.

Dortmund slump continues
Borussia Dortmund's 2-1 loss at Bologna increased the pressure on coach Nuri Sahin in Dortmund's fourth consecutive loss at the start of the new year in all competitions.

Serhou Guirassy gave Dortmund, last season's runner-up, the lead with a chipped penalty and ran to celebrate with Sahin.

It looked like the Champions League could provide a much-needed boost for a team floundering in the Bundesliga, but two goals in two minutes from Thijs Dallinga and Samuel Iling-Junior changed the game for previously winless Bologna. Results elsewhere meant Bologna will be heading out of the competition despite its win, since the Italian club can't finish in the top 24. Sturm Graz and Red Star Belgrade are also out after losing Tuesday.

Atalanta beat Graz 5-0, strengthening the Italian club's push to qualify directly for the round of 16. Atalanta finished the evening fourth.

PSV Eindhoven hung on for a 3-2 win at Red Star despite losing defender Flamingo to a red card just after halftime while leading 3-0. Stuttgart eased to a 3-1 win over Slovan Bratislava, which was already eliminated and has lost all seven of its games. Club Brugge and Juventus drew 0-0.

Europa League
In the only Europa League game of the night, Galatasaray missed a chance to go third in the table, giving up a 3-1 lead to draw 3-3 with last-place Dynamo Kyiv.



Australian Open: Ben Shelton criticises TV interviewers

PTI ■ MELBOURNE

American tennis player Ben Shelton criticized on Wednesday some of the questions and comments made by post-match TV interviewers at the Australian Open.

After Shelton reached the semifinals at the Grand Slam tournament, he followed his final answer at his news conference by saying: "One thing that I just want to say before we're done: I've been a little bit shocked this week with how players have been treated by the broadcasters." He began by referencing the flap over a television commentator's on-air insults about Novak Djokovic, which caused the 24-time Grand Slam champion to refuse to speak to the local broadcaster, Channel 9, after one match.

Djokovic eventually relented after receiving public apologies from the network and its employee, Tony Jones. "I don't think that was just a single event," Shelton said. "I've noticed it with different people, not just myself."

Shelton went on to mention the interview with 19-year-old American Learner Tien after his upset win over 2021 U.S. Open champion Daniil Medvedev ended at about 3 a.m. In the second round at Melbourne Park last week, calling it "embarrassing and disrespectful".

That awkward exchange included a series of statements to Tien, rather than questions, including observations by the interviewer that "19-year-

olds are not meant to be that good" and "I know where you live, by the way."

Shelton also noted two of his own on-court TV interviews. After the 22-year-old's win against 38-year-old French veteran Gael Monfils in the fourth round, interviewer Roger Rasheed, a former tennis coach, attempted to make a joke by saying, "He's almost your Dad."

Both Shelton and Monfils are Black. Shelton responded to Rasheed: "Was that a Black joke?" To which Rasheed replied, "I'm not sure."

Then, after Shelton's 6-4, 7-5, 4-6, 7-6 (4) victory over Lorenzo Sonego in the quarterfinals Wednesday, he was asked about facing either the defending champion, Jannik Sinner, or an Australian player, Alex de Minaur, next, with the interviewer pointing out that the spectators likely would be cheering against Shelton in the semifinals, either way.

Shelton answered: "I know I've got a few people out in the crowd who are going to be pulling for me, too."

At his news conference, Shelton said that what the interviewer said about the fans' support "may be true, but I just don't think the comment is respectful from a guy I've never met before in my life."

Shelton closed by saying: "I feel like broadcasters should be helping us grow our sport and help these athletes who just won matches on the biggest stage enjoy one of their biggest moments. I feel like there's just been a lot of negativity.

428 athletes from 19 teams to take part in KIWG 2025

PTI ■ LEH/JAMMU

The Khelo India Winter Games (KIWG) 2025 that starts on Thursday will feature 428 athletes from 19 competing teams.

Sports Minister Mansukh Mandaviya is set to declare the Games open in Leh on Thursday.

Nineteen teams, comprising states, Union Territories, and institutional outfits, will compete over five days across two events - ice hockey and ice skating - marking the first part of KIWG 2025.



A traditional Ladakhi-style opening ceremony has been planned to welcome 594 participants, including 428 athletes.

The second part, featuring snow games like skiing, will be hosted by Jammu and Kashmir from February 22 to 25. "Sports Minister will attend the opening ceremony at the iconic Nawang Dorjay Stobdan Sports Complex in Leh on Thursday and will declare the games open," an official spokesperson said.

Mandaviya will be joined by a host of dignitaries, including the Lieutenant Governor of Ladakh, Brigadier Dr BD Mishra, and senior officials from the

Sports Authority of India and the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council.

This will be the second time Ladakh hosts the Winter Games, now in its fifth edition, the spokesperson said. "All teams have arrived in Leh, which is at an altitude of 11,562 feet. Himachal Pradesh has the largest contingent, comprising 78 athletes and support staff," he added.

Haryana (62), hosts Ladakh (52), and Maharashtra (48) will compete in the Ladakh edition. Uttarakhand, which will host the National Games later this

month, has the smallest team, comprising just one athlete.

The fifth edition of the Khelo India Winter Games will be held across two phases in Ladakh and Jammu & Kashmir, from January 23 to 27 and February 22 to 25, respectively, covering two ice and four snow disciplines, the spokesperson said.

Apart from identifying talent, the Khelo India Winter Games aim to showcase a region's art, culture, heritage, and promote tourism through sports. Several young skaters will compete at the Nawang Dorjay

Borussia Dortmund fires coach Nuri Sahin



PTI ■ DORTMUND

Borussia Dortmund fired coach Nuri Sahin on Wednesday, a day after its 2-1 loss to Bologna in the Champions League.

The loss extended Dortmund's losing streak to four games since the new year and dropped last season's Champions League runner-up to 13th in the standings. Dortmund is also struggling in the Bundesliga, where it's 10th.

"We really value Nuri Sahin and his work, we had wished for a long cooperation and until recently we hoped that we could manage to turn things around in sporting terms," sporting director Lars Ricken said in a statement.

"After four losses in a row, with just one win from the last nine games and currently being 10th in the Bundesliga, unfortunately we lost our faith in being able to achieve our sporting goals in the current configuration. This decision is personally painful for me too, but it was no longer avoidable after the game in Bologna."

There was no immediate word on a successor. Dortmund's next game is Saturday in the Bundesliga against Werder Bremen.

The 36-year-old Sahin had been Dortmund coach since June. He had been an assistant to Edin Terzic, who resigned following Dortmund's 2-0 loss to Real Madrid in the Champions League final, saying the club needed to enter a "new era" without him.

Sindhu, Lakshya to lead team in Badminton Asia Mixed Championship

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Double Olympic medallist PV Sindhu and World Championships bronze winner Lakshya Sen will lead a 14-member Indian team for the Badminton Asia Mixed Team Championship to be held in Qingdao, China from February 11-16.

India had clinched a bronze medal in the last edition of the competition in Dubai in 2023. "The national selectors have given importance to the world rankings and current form of the players while selecting the squad that will have HS Prannoy and Malvika Bansod as the second men's and women's singles players respectively," the Badminton Association of India said in a release.

The strong Indian team will also have star doubles players Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and



Chirag Shetty. The women's doubles pairing could be either Gayatri Gopichand and Treasa Jolly or Ashwini Ponnappa and Tanisha Crasto. Tanisha will also pair up with Dhruv Kapila in mixed doubles while Sathish Kumar K and Adya Variyath will be the second combination. BAI secretary general Sanjay Mishra said, "We did well by winning the bronze medal two years ago, but the target this year is to reach the finals, and then anything is possible, and we will go all out."

Mainz signs US midfielder Lennard Maloney

PTI ■ MAINZ

German-born U.S. Midfielder Lennard Maloney has joined Mainz from Bundesliga rival Heidenheim, where he was dropped last month after expressing his wish to leave.

The 25-year-old Maloney, who had informed Heidenheim he was going to join Mainz when his contract expired at the end of the season, got his wish Tuesday when the clubs agreed on a deal.

"Maloney has been able to prove himself in the Bundesliga over the last year and a half," said Mainz sporting director Niko Bungert said. "His preferred position is as a number six and as a player, he's the perfect fit for Mainz 05. He brings a strong mentality, as well as a willingness to run hard, and is also strong at winning challenges and aerial duels. Lennard will find it easy to fit into our squad with his warm, open



personality." Maloney signed a contract to 2028.

After 18 rounds of the league, Heidenheim is in the relegation playoff spot while sixth-place Mainz is on course for European qualification.

Heidenheim coach Frank Schmidt said in December he wasn't picking the defensive midfielder because he lacked commitment amid a series of

disappointing performances. "I can only count on players in this phase who are 100% focused on the interests of Heidenheim," Schmidt said. "From a coaching perspective I simply want another focus and another level of performance from my vice-captain."

The Berlin-born Maloney has made two appearances for the United States - both in 2023.

Enrique must outwit Guardiola when PSG meets Manchester City

PTI ■ PARIS

Luis Enrique credits Pep Guardiola with inventing arguably the "perfect model" of attacking soccer.

He must now outwit him when Paris Saint-Germain faces Manchester City in the Champions League on Wednesday, in a match both teams must win to avoid the prospect of early elimination in the new-look format.

"It's a special game. Not just for the two teams but because I will come across a friend who I shared many great moments with as a player and a person," Enrique said on Tuesday through a translator.

"What brings us closer is our vision of football: To try and be better than the opponent on the ball, to constantly press the opponent. We can fine-tune our game but we have a similar way of

seeing things." Guardiola rose to fame as a coach during a glory era for Barcelona, winning the Champions League twice and multiple other trophies. Guardiola's sides hypnotized opponents with a pulsating brand of attacking soccer led by Lionel Messi that was the envy of Europe.

Guardiola then turned City into a Premier League force. "The 4-3-3 with Barcelona was almost the perfect model. He opened up a different way of playing in England and did so with success, he opened many doors for others," Enrique said. "Pep has innovated throughout his career and is not scared to do so again."

Guardiola won the Champions League again with City in 2023, while Enrique's PSG reached the semifinals last season.

Enrique and Guardiola have history



They go back far. "We were mates in Barcelona and our families are really close friends," Guardiola said. "Our friendship will be eternal. They (Enrique's family) love us (and I

think we have an incredible connection." Enrique and Guardiola, who both are 54, played together in Barcelona from 1996-2001: Enrique the tireless dynamo who

scored 109 goals for the club; Guardiola the astute minesweeper protecting defense. As coaches, they are more similar.

"If anything can define both Pep and I as coaches (it) is that we like to attack. We like to defend properly but we like to devise our game plan to be better than the opposition," said Enrique, who won the Champions League with Barca in 2015. "There are a lot of things I must think about when I have my cappuccino tomorrow morning."

Namely that PSG is in danger of going out. So is City.

PSG is 25th out of 36 teams, and City is only one point ahead in 22nd. The bottom 12 are eliminated.

"Everyone has to be ready," Enrique said. "Man City do a lot of things tactically, they switch positions a lot. But we pose a lot

of problems. The team that is best prepared or best develops its ideas will win."

City is turning the corner after a slump that had Guardiola interrogating himself. City has rebounded with 22 goals in the past five games. Attacking midfielder Phil Foden is finding form and prolific striker Erling Haaland has signed a mega-contract until 2034.

"City are also very at ease with a transition game and have very dangerous players in attack," Enrique said. "We will see who makes the most of the possession. We want to keep the ball, it's when you retain possession that you have the most chance of winning."

As long as you score. Wasteful PSG has netted just six goals in six games and was blanked by Bayern Munich and Arsenal.

"I hope for a horrible

performance from PSG tomorrow," Guardiola said, jokingly.

Mbappe's shoes not filled
The void left by Kylian Mbappe since he joined Real Madrid is still felt. He scored a career-high 44 goals last season.

"We obviously had a player of reference who scored an immense amount of goals," Enrique said. "I don't think any one of our players previously showed they could score 25 goals in a season, so we have to resolve it through the team."

PSG's main scoring threat comes from winger Ousmane Dembélé, who has recovered from a heavy flu.

"I feel much better," he said on Tuesday. "I had five or six days when I wasn't feeling well." Dembélé has 11 goals from 22 games and is well on course to beat his best of 14 with Barcelona in 2018-19.

