

MAHAKUMBH 2025: SPECIAL COVERAGE

'Sanskriti ka Mahakumbh' set to begin on January 16

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
LUCKNOW/MAHAKUMBH
NAGAR

The ongoing Mahakumbh Mela is set to witness a grand cultural extravaganza from January 16 to February 24. The event, aptly titled "Sanskriti ka Mahakumbh" (Cultural Mahakumbh), will showcase the rich tapestry of Indian culture through a series of captivating performances by renowned artists.

The main stage, Ganga Pandal, will host performances by renowned artists from across the country, including a special presentation by Shankar Mahadevan on the opening day. Cultural programs will also begin at the Yamuna and Saraswati Pandal on January 16, while the Triveni Pandal will host a blend of cultural melodies starting January 21. On January 16, Bollywood singer Shankar Mahadevan will regale audience at the Ganga Pandal, while students from Kashi's Sanskrit schools will offer their devotion through Mangalacharan at the Yamuna Pandal. The Saraswati Pandal will showcase the traditional art of Nautanki, with Padma Shri Ramdayal Sharma and his 30-member team presenting the story of Lord Krishna's friendship with Sudama.

The Ganga Pandal, with a capacity of 10,000 spectators, will be the main venue for this celebration of devotion and heritage. Located at Sector-1 Parade Ground, it will be the hub for grand performances by India's eminent artistes. In addition, Triveni, Yamuna, and Saraswati Pandal, each with



a capacity of 2,000, will host a variety of performances by renowned artists from Uttar Pradesh and across the nation.

Main events on January 16:

- Prof. Ritwick Sanyal (Varanasi) - Classical/Light Classical Singing

- Vichitrnanda Sween (Bhubaneswar) - Odissi Dance
- Kushal Das (Kolkata) - Sitar - Shankar Mahadevan (Mumbai) & Ravi Shankar (Uttar Pradesh) - Bhajans/Light Music
- Children from Sanskrit

Schools, Varanasi - Mangalacharan (Devotional Offering)
- Sanya Patankar (Rajasthan) - Classical Singing
- Sahiram Pandey (Gonda) - Alha Singing (Traditional Ballads)
- Sarita Mishra (Lucknow) - Folk Singing

- Ramprasad (Prayagraj) - Birha Singing (Traditional Folk Songs)
- Piyusha Kailash Anuj (Delhi) - Bhajans
- Arushi Mudgal (Delhi) - Odissi Dance
- Amarjeet (Sonbhadra) - Tribal Folk Dance
- Saraswati Pandal:

- Saurabh Banodha (Sonbhadra) - Bamboo Musical Instruments
- Shweta Dubey (Varanasi) - Bhajan Singing
- Shruti Malviya (Lucknow) - Bhajans/Folk Singing
- Padma Shri Ramdayal Sharma (Delhi) - Krishna-Sudama Nautanki



UP CM orders arrangement for Mauni Amavasya

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
LUCKNOW

Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, on Wednesday, directed improved arrangements for the expected 8-10 crore devotees at Sangam on Mauni Amavasya, January 29. Reviewing the turnout of over 6 crore devotees at the Mahakumbh during Paus Purnima and Makar Sankranti festivals with senior officials at a high-level meeting, he stressed the need for enhanced preparations for the upcoming event. He instructed officials to

coordinate with the railways to ensure timely operation of special Mahakumbh trains, emphasizing the need for continuous operation of both regular and special trains, with increased frequency to accommodate the large number of devotees. The Chief Minister highlighted the need to enhance the mobile network in the fair area and ensure the continuous operation of buses, shuttle buses, and electric buses. He also emphasized regular toilet cleaning, barricading of ghats, and 24x7 electricity and drinking water supply in all sectors.

UP deploys mobile labs to check food quality

PTI ■ MAHAKUMBH NAGAR

The Uttar Pradesh government on Wednesday announced the deployment of mobile laboratories to carry out food inspections at eateries in the Maha Kumbh Mela area here, aiming to monitor hygiene and safety standards. Assistant Food Commissioner (Grade 2) Sushil Kumar Singh emphasised the use of 'Food Safety on Wheels' to prevent the distribution of spoiled or adulterated food to the pilgrims.

"These mobile laboratories conduct on-the-spot testing of food and beverages. Regular quality checks are conducted at hotels, dhabas, and small stalls, with food safety complaints promptly addressed to ensure swift action," Singh added. In a statement, the Uttar Pradesh government said that under the leadership of chief minister Yogi Adityanath, efforts are being made to ensure clean and quality food for the millions of devotees attending the Maha Kumbh. "The fair is divided into five



zones and 25 sectors, with food safety officers in each sector regularly monitoring hygiene and safety standards," the government said. "All food safety operations are coordinated from the central office located on Sankat Mochan Marg in Sector 24. This office oversees food monitoring efforts and supervises the deployment of teams across the fair," it added. While food safety officers are stationed in every sector, while chief officers oversee every five sectors, the

government said. A maximum of 14 sectors are actively monitored in the Jhansi area, it noted. On January 13, the first day of the Maha Kumbh, around 1.75 crore devotees gathered at the Triveni Sangam. The number of devotees doubled to 3.5 crore on the second day, marked by Makar Sankranti. The Uttar Pradesh government estimates a footfall of 40 to 45 crore pilgrims and visitors over the next six weeks, until February 26, for the largest spiritual gathering on the planet.

Vidya Kumbh: Bringing education to children of sanitation workers in Mahakumbh mela

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■
MAHAKUMBH NAGAR

In a unique initiative, the Uttar Pradesh government has established five "Vidya Kumbh" primary schools within the sprawling Mahakumbh mela ground in Prayagraj. These schools are dedicated to providing free, high-quality education to the children of the 15,000 sanitation workers tirelessly maintaining cleanliness during the grand event.

The project, spearheaded by the state's basic education department, aims to ensure that the education of these children is not disrupted while their families work at the Mahakumbh. The schools, located in sectors 1, 2, 7, 10, and 13, are equipped with digital classrooms, playgrounds, and a host of amenities, creating a vibrant learning environment. Basic education minister Sandeep Singh hailed the effort as an example of the government's commitment to



education. "On the auspicious occasion of Maha Kumbh-2025, the Uttar Pradesh government is paving the way for a brighter future for the next generation," Singh said in a statement. The schools have enrolled over 500 students so far, with the target set at 1,000. Children

aged 6 to 14 have been surveyed and placed in classes appropriate to their age. Education is being provided free of cost, along with school uniforms, sweaters, books, and stationery under the 'Umang Kit' scheme. Director general, school education, Kanchan Verma,

said, "Through Vidya Kumbh, we are ensuring that the education of children belonging to labor families continues uninterrupted, even in the midst of this massive event."

For Sunita, a sanitation worker from Varanasi, the initiative has been life-changing. "I was worried about my daughter Rajkumari missing her studies while I worked here. Now, she's not only learning but also enjoying her time with new friends," Sunita shared with a smile.

Eight-year-old Arjun, a student at Vidya Kumbh Primary School in Sector-10, expressed his delight, saying, "I love studying here! We get to play in the big playground, and the teachers are very kind. The best part is that we also get tasty food every day." Another student, 10-year-old Meena, added, "The school gave us new books, sweaters, and even shoes. I'm happy to come here every day." The schools emphasize digital

and game-based learning, with lessons taught using audio-video content, whiteboards, and interactive activities. For nursery students, playful methods have been adopted to spark their interest in education.

Akanksha Rana, officer on special duty for the Kumbh Mela Authority, highlighted the broader vision: "We plan to establish Vidya Kumbh schools in all 25 sectors of Mahakumbh Nagar. This initiative not only ensures education but also builds a sense of community and care." The children also receive nutritious mid-day meals, with a dedicated dining area ensuring they remain healthy and energized throughout the day.

The Vidya Kumbh initiative reflects the state government's focus on inclusive development during Mahakumbh 2025, which is expected to witness millions of devotees from across the globe.

Consumer goods brands rush to grab eyeballs as pilgrims converge for holy dip at Mahakumbh

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

From putting products on display at stalls to setting up resting camps for pilgrims, consumer goods companies have been scrambling to showcase brands at Mahakumbh as devotees throng in record numbers to take a holy dip at Sangam - the confluence of rivers Ganga, Yamuna and the mystical Saraswati. Top brands, including Dettol, Dabur, Pepsico, Coca-Cola, and corporate houses such as ITC and Reliance have set up camp ashrams, lined up their products, and are distributing samples and refreshments. The unmissable signage boards make one thing clear: the companies are expecting to make their presence felt in the coming days. The brands -- which have been facing headwinds owing to multiple factors led by rising prices and tepid sales in urban markets -- are taking the Mahakumbh as an opportunity to directly engage with the consumers -- especially the rural

population -- and communicating with them through a host of special initiatives over 45-day-long events, in which about 40 crore people are estimated to attend.

Reliance Consumer Products Ltd (RCPL), the FMCG arm of billionaire Mukesh Ambani-led Reliance Industries retail empire, is offering services and product availability of its consumer products to enhance the pilgrim journey. "This will include providing essential refreshments to ensure pilgrims remain hydrated and energised during their spiritual quest. Signage and directional boards are also being installed to assist pilgrims with clear, easy-to-read signages and branding to navigate the vast expanse of the event smoothly," said RCPL Chief Operating Officer Ketan Mody. It will also operate 'aaram sthal' (resting areas), designated comfortable rest zones to offer pilgrims a moment to relax during their



long and often arduous journeys, he added. FMCG brand Reckitt through its flagship hygiene brand Dettol will support nearly 15,000 sanitation workers by

providing training programmes and making soaps accessible to them at Kumbh. It is also deploying health and hygiene volunteers across all

25 sectors of the Kumbh, offering on-ground support and guidance to the pilgrims, under the campaign 'Dettol Banega Swasth India'. "The Maha Kumbh Mela

2025 provides a unique opportunity to embed hygiene practices into one of India's most culturally significant events. We are delighted to take ahead our long-standing partnership with the Government of Uttar Pradesh and GIWA," said Reckitt -- South Asia Executive Vice President Gaurav Jain. Home-grown FMCG firm Dabur said it has also planned a series of consumer engaging activities to strengthen connect with people during the Kumbh Mela.

"We feel direct engagement with consumers during such traditional melas that helps us strengthen our bond with consumers. They, in turn, get the opportunity to touch, feel and experience our products. This reinforces their long-standing trust in the brand Dabur," Dabur India CEO Mohit Malhotra said. In rural markets, success depends highly on how a brand is positioned and promoted. The greater the strategic attention to a unique demand, the greater the

chances of the product's success in rural pockets. "Since the Kumbh Mela is deeply rooted in cultural and spiritual traditions, brands that align their messaging with these values can create a stronger connection with the audience," he said. Moreover, standing out in a crowded environment requires creativity and innovation. "While the space may seem cluttered, it actually offers companies the opportunity to get consumers to touch, feel and experience their brands and build greater connections. This will generate sales in the days to come," he said, adding, "Most of our key power brands like Dabur Chyawanprash, Dabur Honey, Dabur Red Paste, Dabur Amla Hair Oil, Vatika, Hajmola, and Honitus will be undertaking consumer activations at the Kumbh Mela."

Beverages major Coca-Cola will pair with its portfolio of beverages with local foods and flavours. "We are committed to creating social impact through multiple

initiatives at the event that showcase the potential of repurposed packaging and raise awareness about recycling to inspire collective action," said Coca-Cola India and South West Asia Vice President Marketing Greishma Singh. Multi-conglomerate ITC sees the Mahakumbh as a unique spiritual, economic and cultural confluence, offering unparalleled opportunities for brands to engage with consumers. It has activated its Mangaldeep agarbatti (incense sticks) and packaged food brand Bingo.

"ITC's FMCG brands, including Bingo! and Mangaldeep, are leveraging this opportunity to connect with the masses through experiential initiatives at the mega event. Through its consumer connect initiative, Bingo will bring the local culture of Uttar Pradesh to life at the brand's activity booth with initiatives such as creating reels on famous local songs using traditional props and offering fusion dishes," said an ITC spokesperson.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Wildfires: A call for action

Los Angeles fires ravage city as President-elect Trump prepares for second term amid climate change controversy

As President-elect Donald Trump prepares to assume office for his second term, the United States faces devastation from the Los Angeles fires, which have claimed several lives and caused billions of dollars in damages. Trump has maintained that there is no such thing like climate change and has even withdrawn from Paris climate agreement. He has been fighting developing countries and even its own allies over climate change. The Los Angeles fires a direct consequence of climate change must come as an eye-opener to the president-elect. The city has become a focal point for devastating wildfires, which have grown in intensity and frequency over the past few decades. The wildfires of recent years, including the catastrophic ones in 2023, serve as a stark reminder of the urgent need to address the underlying factors fueling these disasters and to build a more resilient future. Wildfires in Los Angeles and the broader Southern California region are driven by a confluence of factors: prolonged droughts, climate change, urban sprawl into fire-prone areas, and an accumulation of dry vegetation. The Los Angeles fires have destroyed several homes, displaced thousands of residents and led to several fatalities. The economic toll have reached billions of dollars, while the ecological damage will take decades to repair.

The increasing frequency and severity of wildfires are directly linked to climate change. Rising temperatures, prolonged droughts, and shifting weather patterns create ideal conditions for fires to ignite and spread rapidly. These fires underscore the necessity of global and local actions to mitigate climate change, including reducing greenhouse gas emissions and transitioning to renewable energy sources. One of the significant contributors to wildfire vulnerability is urban sprawl into wildland-urban interface areas. Accumulated dry vegetation acts as fuel for wildfires. The Los Angeles fires are a wake-up call for governments across the world. Addressing the wildfire crisis requires a multi-faceted approach that includes tackling climate change, revising urban development policies, investing in emergency preparedness and fostering community engagement. Los Angeles, like many other regions around the world, must learn to adapt to a man-made reality where wildfires are a persistent threat. By applying the lessons learned from past disasters, the city can build a safer, more resilient future for its residents and ecosystems. But for that to happen the decisions must be taken at the highest level and the world leaders must bury the hatchet and come to an agreement that something concrete needs to be done to mitigate the climate disaster. It is a universal problem affecting all of us so a unified action alone can curb this menace. The Los Angeles fires might prompt Donald Trump to consider the importance of taking action for the greater good, rather than focusing solely on appeasing his supporters.

PICTALK



A woman makes 'rangoli' during 'Pongal' festival celebrations, in Chikkamagaluru

Women breaking the glass ceiling

Women are all set to break the barriers at the highest level as the Vatican and Canada brace up for the top post for a lady



KALYANI SHANKAR

Two dramatic announcements were made last week that could significantly advance women's empowerment worldwide. The first was a historic decision from the Vatican, which saw Pope Francis appoint Sister Simona Brambilla as the prefect for the first time.

This 59-year-old Consolata Missionary, previously the second-in-command of the order department, has created history. Her position corrects the gender imbalance to a certain extent. Sister Brambilla's appointment is seen as a progressive step forward. This position, long considered a male domain, is now open to women for the first time. She will oversee all religious orders within the Catholic Church, a significant step forward since no woman has held this prestigious position before. Thus, the contribution by women to the Church is at last acknowledged and an essential precedent for further empowerment of women. Incidentally, a significant Vatican summit brought Catholic leaders worldwide not long ago.

It addressed the importance of enhancing women's leadership roles, among other issues—important representatives from over 100 countries, including Cardinals and Bishops. It also considered a proposal concerning women deacons. Again, Pope Francis granted the women in the Church the right to vote for the first time two years ago, in line with his commitment to advancing women within the Church in decision-making roles. It also promoted gender equality within the Church and women's participation at the highest levels. The Pope had also set up two Vatican Commissions on the potential ordination of women as deacons. The second dramatic announcement was the resignation of Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and, subsequently, the race to become Prime Minister. It has all the potential to elect a woman Prime Minister. After a decade in power marked by both successes and challenges, Trudeau's resignation had been dramatic. Ten years ago Trudeau began with great promise but ended amid mounting difficulties



at home and abroad. He faced challenges such as inflation, housing issues, and immigration, which weakened the Liberal Party. After Trudeau's resignation, senior leaders in the Liberal Party, including Anita Anand, the current transport minister, were preparing to replace him. Anand, a senior party member, was born in rural Nova Scotia and moved to Ontario in 1985. She was first elected as the MP for Oakville in 2019 and has held various significant roles, including Minister of Public Services and Procurement, President of the Treasury Board, and Minister of National Defence. Anand missed the chance of making history as Canada's first female Prime Minister of colour and Indian descent. It would have potentially marked a significant shift in women's empowerment in Canadian politics. However, she withdrew from the race on Sunday to return to her academic career, disappointing her supporters. Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland and Innovation Minister François-Philippe Champagne are potential contenders to succeed Trudeau. Canada has a



IF CANADA ELECTS A WOMAN, IT WOULD CORRECT THE GENDER IMBALANCE DESPITE WOMEN HOLDING ESSENTIAL PORTFOLIOS LIKE DEFENCE AND FINANCE

record 103 female MPs, including 22 elected in the 2021 federal election. Other frontrunners include former central banker Mark Carney, whose recent resignation prompted Trudeau's exit. Candidates must declare their intent and pay a \$350,000 entry fee by January 23. So far, Finance Minister Dominic LeBlanc and Foreign Minister Mélanie Joly have withdrawn from the race to focus on their duties, with Anita also recently bowing out. The challenges Trudeau's successor will face, including repairing strained international relations and managing domestic policy issues, underscore the urgent need for a leader with a clear vision and strong leadership skills. Indians are interested in Canada because of the large Indian diaspora. Recently, tensions between India and Canada have escalated after Prime Minister Trudeau accused India of involvement in the shooting of a Khalistani terrorist in Surrey in June 2023. In retaliation, India stopped issuing new visas to Canadians and asked Canada to reduce its diplomatic presence. In contrast to Trudeau, India hopes for a pro-

India Prime Minister. If Canada elects a woman, it would correct the gender imbalance despite women holding essential portfolios like Defence and Finance. The election of a woman as the next Prime Minister could mark a significant milestone in Canadian politics, furthering the cause of women's empowerment and challenging traditional gender roles in leadership. Trudeau's successor will inherit a lot of problems. There are tensions between the US and India. One of the critical tasks will be to repair strains in foreign policy issues. There is also a lot of backlog in the immigration. On the domestic side, Canada's Liberal Party faced internal problems, which led to Trudeau's exit. The election results will be available on March 8. In the meantime, the election landscape is becoming more transparent, as leaders like Anita Anand have already withdrawn from the race. It is also interesting to note that Vice President Kamala Harris won in the 2020 polls. The US has yet to elect a woman president.

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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

BORDER FENCING DISPUTE

Madam — Apropos to the article "India summons Bangladesh Deputy High Commissioner." The escalation of tensions along the India-Bangladesh border is yet another reflection of the low point in bilateral ties between two neighbouring countries. Bangladesh's concern over India's efforts to fence the international boundary to stem smuggling and other transnational crimes is misplaced, especially since there have been several attempts by smugglers and traffickers from the Bangladeshi side to transgress the border.

But India is well within its rights to construct fencing in porous sections of the border to prevent transnational crimes in the wake of stray incidents of violence, including firing reported from along the border, especially in West Bengal. The key aim of fencing the India-Bangladesh border is cracking down on smuggling and streamlining the legitimate movement of goods and people. However, there are mechanisms in place to address these issues, and if necessary, these can be revisited to make them work more effectively. Meanwhile, it would be foolish to undo all the achievements of the past and create another point of dispute in a relationship that is already weighed down because of the new political dynamics in Dhaka. More than addressing the immediate irritants on the border, the two sides need to take further steps to arrest the slide in the overall relationship and prevent new areas of divergence.

N Sathasiva Reddy | Bengaluru

CEASEFIRE IN SIGHT

Madam — An encouraging piece of news has emerged once again from Gaza. Hamas has recently agreed to release some of the Israeli citizens it has been holding hostage. Discussions between Hamas and Israeli officials had been ongoing for several days regarding this matter. On October 7, 2023, Hamas launched a sudden attack

BCCI disallows spouse travel with team



The step taken by the BCCI to improve the performance of the Indian cricket team is both positive and visionary. After facing consecutive defeats, the BCCI has decided to prohibit players from taking their families along on foreign tours to ensure discipline and main-

tain focus. This decision is a significant step toward enhancing the team's mental and physical health. When all team members unite and focus solely on the game, their performance is bound to improve.

Spending time with family is important, but during tournaments, undivided attention on the game is essential. This decision will not only strengthen players' mindsets but also fortify team spirit. It will create a healthy competitive environment, motivating players to deliver their best. Additionally, spending more time with team management and coaching staff will refine their strategies and skills. This decision, taken with players' long-term careers and national pride in mind, will instill professional discipline and inspire them to stay goal-oriented. In the long run, this will prove beneficial for Indian cricket.

R K Jain | Barwani

INDIA ENGAGES WITH AFGHANISTAN

Madam — India's ties with Afghanistan have been strong for a long time. However, over the last four years, the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan has slightly strained these relations. The recent meeting between India's foreign secretary and Afghanistan's acting foreign minister in Dubai might help strengthen the bond once again. It is essential for India to maintain close relations with Afghanistan, regardless of who is in power. Currently, both Afghanistan and the Taliban are at odds with Pakistan, especially after Pakistan's recent attack on the Afghanistan border, which has further strained their relations. Geopolitically, this situation benefits India, as Pakistan's focus on its border with Afghanistan reduces its capacity to infiltrate India with terrorists. Strengthening ties with the Taliban-led Afghanistan and extending support could help India reduce its security concerns.

Priya Thakur | Ujjain

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The timeless value of soft skills in the fast-paced world

In a world that often uses wealth and appearances as markers of success, the true essence of human interaction—soft skills—frequently takes a backseat

We are often judged by factors that may not be relevant in the long run. Wealth, physical features, the name of the school or college we attended, flashy clothes, and many more, are the parameters used to measure our success. We forget that soft skills are equally, if not more, important. I waited patiently for my turn in the check-in queue at the airport during a recent visit to Mumbai.



The young lady behind the counter handed the boarding pass to the passenger and guided her to walk some distance to get a wheelchair. The older lady cryptically remarked that the wheelchair was expected to come to her instead of the other way around. The counter girl looked clueless. Later in the evening, I walked over to the executive check-in counter at the hotel. I waited patiently as the gentleman bent down to retrieve something before completing my formalities. Another counter lady walked by looking at me. Since the man did not resurface even after a lapse of time, I looked at the gentleman behind the adjoining table, who offered

to assist me, explaining that the computer system at the other counter was not working. None from the crowd at the reception had bothered to assist me. The private company I worked for won laurels year after year as the best employer. I wondered about the criteria for the evaluation, more so since I saw many of the executives quitting the company and dissatisfied with the working conditions. The HR employees responsible for implementing all the right words in the rulebook failed to decipher the basic principles of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. All three companies are reputed names in the private sector.

They recruit people with the best credentials from the best business schools or the best in the hospitality industry. One would expect them to understand soft skills, unlike those working in the government sector. I was witness to and on the receiving end of a raid by an enforcement agency while working in a private company. The officials barged into the office accompanied by uniformed policemen. Orders were rudely barked at me not to touch the telephone. My mobile phone was snatched from my hands. The officials remained in the office for more than 24 hours during which I, and the other team members, were not allowed to contact our families. We were made to feel like criminals for no reason. I was recently stopped by a traffic policeman after I had crossed a legitimate green traffic signal. I was perplexed. Another policeman sauntered over to ask me the reasons for my arguing with the other official. He rudely reprimanded me when I showed my ignorance of the matter. The

policeman had stopped me apparently for crossing the red signal. Fortunately for me, there were cameras at the crossing, which proved my innocence. We face a similar lack of soft skills in our personal lives. Decades earlier, my wife and I were not given a table for lunch at a famous restaurant in Delhi. We were a newly wedded young couple and were probably not dressed the same way as their regular clientele. An attractive personality, a good education and a good job are enough for parents to settle marriages of daughters to strangers, not knowing if the young man will treat the girl well. There are countless examples. I was taught to be a good human being. The children of today are more intelligent and smart. All that we need to do is to teach them to be a better person each succeeding day. Soft skills will follow.

(The author is an electrical engineer with the Indian Railways and conducts classes in creative writing; views are personal)



SANJAY CHANDRA

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FIRST COLUMN

THE POWER OF POSITIVE SELF-TALK

It comes handy when the pursuit of happiness is interrupted by challenges



RAJYOGI BRAHMA KUMAR NIKUNJJI

All of us have a deep desire to be in a state of happiness forever. But it's quite difficult to find someone who is truly blessed, to remain always happy. Isn't it? The fact is that for most of us, the happy times are often broken by periodic sorrow or disappointment. It has been observed that a prerequisite for happiness is success in all our endeavours. Therefore, all of us go to great lengths to ensure that we succeed in everything we do. But unfortunately here too, things don't go the way we want them to.

Throughout our lives, we put in the maximum possible efforts to succeed to prevent failure, but ironically, despite all our desire for success, we undermine our efforts by thinking negatively. It might be hard to believe, but the reality is that we pave the way for our success or failure through our thoughts. Yes! After all, every human action begins with a thought, which is followed by reflection, a decision and then action. So, if our thoughts and actions are completely in harmony, we attain success. However, if our minds are full of doubts or fear about the task we are performing, it undermines our chances of success. So how does one



train a thought to work in our favour? Is it possible? Yeah! It is. The only thing that we need to do is to make our thoughts as pure and positive as those of the Almighty Supreme who transforms this world from one of sorrow and misery to one of peace and happiness with just a seed of powerful thought. A simple way to begin this process of transformation is to use asseveration. An asseveration is a resolute statement that we make to ourselves.

All of us use it intentionally or unintentionally throughout our day. When we wake up with a positive thought like "I feel great", that is a positive asseveration. On the other day if we drag ourselves out of bed in the morning and whimper: "Ohh I feel drowsy", that is a negative asseveration. We must understand that both these statements help us to maintain the emotional state that we are in. Majority of the people across the world do not give much importance to self-talk, i.e. the things that we say to ourselves. It is indeed a very important part of our lives because it deeply affects our conscious and subconscious minds. Remember! We listen to everything we say to ourselves consciously or subconsciously. Because our asseveration works so well to create and maintain our state of mind, we can use it cleverly to change our state of mind to our best advantage.

There is no doubt that it takes a lot of effort and time, but with persistence, asseverations can become a strong tool to make our outlook and life healthier and happier. We can either create or maintain a powerful state of mind with positive asseverations or use them to counter our negative self-talk. Let's say you are running for a half marathon. Despite all the preparations, you tend to lose rhythm and get into some snag.

All of a sudden your confidence sags and you catch yourself thinking "I can't do this. I shouldn't have registered for a half marathon. My capacity is too low. I am too weak as compared to others." All this negative thinking, if allowed to persist, will guarantee that you fail. You can make up some positive asseverations to counter this thinking. Like, you might think, "I feel confident. I can do this, Slow and Steady wins the Race." If you repeat this several times, you will soon start feeling better & achieve your desired goal. While using this self-motivation technique of asseveration, we become more conscious of our thoughts, feelings and behaviour, and start feeling better about ourselves. The only thing that we need to remember is "Never to give up", because however slow the results may seem to be coming, these techniques give us greater control of our thoughts, feelings and behaviour, putting us in charge of our lives.

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

The communication crossroads of 2025



CHAITANYA K PRASAD

With disinformation on the rise and the human connection often overshadowed by algorithms, the question looms: Are we fostering understanding, or fueling division?



In 2025, the world is navigating a labyrinth of communication complexities. From geopolitical tensions to the pervasive influence of technology, communication strategies are at the centre of global stability—or instability.

As the tools of interaction evolve, so too do the challenges, responsibilities, and opportunities they present. Are we prepared for what lies ahead, or are we hurtling toward a crisis of our own making? The challenges of communication in 2025 are markedly different from those a decade ago. Geopolitical dynamics have shifted, with nations leveraging digital platforms as both tools of diplomacy and instruments of disinformation. The lines between statecraft and cyber influence are blurred, creating a volatile ecosystem where words carry as much weight as weapons.

The rise of artificial intelligence and algorithm-driven content has exacerbated these challenges. While these tools offer unprecedented efficiency, they also prioritize engagement metrics over truth. The result is an overabundance of sensationalist, clickbait content that often prioritises superficiality over substance. In this cacophony, nuanced perspectives and deeply researched narratives are drowned out, leaving the global audience vulnerable to manipulation and misinformation. The role of media as the "fourth estate" has never been more critical—or more scrutinized. In an era of hyper-connectivity, the media's ability to shape public perception and influence geopolitical outcomes is unparalleled. But with great power comes great responsibility. Shouldn't media foster positive and conscious impact?

Shouldn't it hold itself accountable for the narratives it propagates? Unfortunately, the race for clicks and views often overshadows these ideals. The prevalence of sensationalist headlines, shallow analysis, and polarised reporting erodes trust in media institutions. This calls for a renewed focus on media literacy—not just for consumers but for creators as well.



OVERHYPERED NARRATIVES INFLATE MINOR ISSUES INTO CRISES, OVERSTRETCHED RESOURCES DILUTE THE QUALITY OF CONTENT, AND OVERIMAGINED SOLUTIONS PROMISE MORE THAN THEY CAN DELIVER. TOGETHER, THESE TENDENCIES CREATE A COMMUNICATION ENVIRONMENT RIFE WITH MISTRUST AND MIS-UNDERSTANDING

Journalists, editors, and content creators must be sensitised to the implications of their work, while audiences must be equipped to critically evaluate the information they consume. In dissecting modern communication challenges, one troubling trend emerges: superficial solutions to complex problems. Whether it's a rushed headline, an oversimplified tweet, or a reductive policy announcement, brevity often comes at the cost of depth.

While the demand for digestible content is understandable, it risks trivialising critical issues and fostering a culture of intellectual complacency. To counter this, there is an urgent need for robust communication evaluation strategies. Independent evaluators should assess the quality, accuracy, and impact of information disseminated by platforms, news outlets, and governments. This would not only enhance accountability but also restore faith in the integrity of communication. The phenomenon of the "3Os"—overhyped, overstretched, and overimagined—poses a significant threat to effective communication in 2025.

Overhyped narratives inflate minor issues into crises, overstretched resources dilute the quality of content, and overimagined solutions promise more than they can deliver. Together, these tendencies create a communication environment rife with mistrust and misunderstanding. In geopolitics, this can have disastrous consequences. Overhyped tensions can escalate conflicts, overstretched diplomacy can falter under scrutiny, and overimagined strategies can fail to address the realities on the ground. To mitigate these risks, communication must be grounded in authenticity, clarity, and purpose. Despite these challenges,

there is hope. The rapid evolution of communication technologies offers opportunities for better synergy and collaboration. Tools like multilingual AI models, real-time translation software, and immersive virtual platforms can bridge cultural and linguistic divides, fostering a greater understanding of geopolitics. However, these tools must be wielded with care. Over-reliance on algorithms and automation can lead to a loss of human connection and empathy. The human element in communication—context, emotion, and nuance—remains irreplaceable. To ensure these tools are used effectively, their deployment must be guided by ethical frameworks and human oversight. When it comes to India, the nation stands as a dynamic force in efficient geopolitics and communication, blending tradition with innovation. With its rich heritage of diverse narratives and its growing role as a voice for the Global South, India's communication outreach is uniquely positioned to bridge cultural and ideological divides.

The country's influence has expanded far beyond its borders, particularly through its active participation in multilateral forums like the G20, BRICS, and the United Nations. India's emphasis on South-South cooperation and its role as a leader in digital innovation makes it a fertile ground for reshaping global communication paradigms.

By championing inclusive narratives and fostering dialogue on issues critical to the Global South—such as climate justice, sustainable development, equitable access to technology, and strengthening the education system—India leverages its communication landscape to promote solidarity and shared growth among developing nations. As a

communication powerhouse, India's strategies offer a template for balancing tradition and innovation, providing hope for a more connected and empathetic world. Looking ahead, the most profound paradigm shift in communication lies in its potential to resolve, rather than exacerbate, conflicts. In a world marked by division, the ability to convey messages of reconciliation, empathy, and cooperation is invaluable. Governments, media, and technology companies must prioritise communication strategies that unite rather than divide. For instance, collaborative storytelling initiatives could bring together voices from conflicting regions to share common experiences. Platforms could amplify narratives of peacebuilding and resilience, while governments could invest in cultural diplomacy to foster mutual understanding. The communication landscape of 2025 is a double-edged sword. While challenges like misinformation, and superficiality loom large, the potential for positive transformation is equally significant.

To navigate this precarious moment, we must prioritize media literacy, accountability, and ethical use of technology. We must move away from shallow, divisive narratives and embrace depth, authenticity, and empathy. The question is not whether we have the tools to create meaningful change, it is whether we have the will to use them wisely. In an age of unprecedented connectivity, the power of communication lies not in the tools themselves but in how we choose to wield them. The future depends on our ability to communicate with clarity, conscience, and care.

(The writer is a former civil servant; Views are personal. Inputs provided by Zoya Ahmad)

California's wildfire tragedy: A wake-up call for India's forest fire management

The Los Angeles disaster underscores the growing wildfire risks in India due to climate change and human activity

For the past week, firefighters in Los Angeles have been locked in a desperate battle against devastating wildfires, which have claimed numerous lives and forced the evacuation of over 200,000 residents. Driven by powerful Santa Ana winds and prolonged drought conditions, these fires have scorched hundreds of square kilometers, wreaking havoc in densely populated areas like Pacific Palisades and Altadena.



SATENDRA

wildfires in US history. Beyond the immediate destruction, the long-term effects are profound: soil degradation, harm to water systems, loss of wildlife, and deteriorating air quality. Moreover, the vast carbon emissions from these fires will intensify global climate change,

further exacerbating the environmental crisis. This catastrophe serves as a stark warning for India. According to the IPCC Sixth Assessment Report, climate change will likely worsen drought conditions and elevate temperatures in forested areas of South Asia, including India, thereby increasing the risk of wildfires. To address these emerging challenges, India must overhaul its forest fire management strategies, drawing on lessons from global experiences like California's recent tragedy.

India's forest cover is already under significant pressure from human activities and changing climatic conditions. The Forest Survey of India (FSI) reveals that 36 per cent of Indian forests are classified as highly, very highly, or

extremely vulnerable to fires. Regions such as the Northeast, Garhwal Himalayas, and Central India are particularly at risk. Alarming, over 90 per cent of forest fires in the country are attributed to human actions, ranging from negligence to deliberate acts. California's wildfire crisis underscores the urgent need to rethink existing forest fire management strategies to address the evolving challenges posed by changing climatic and socio-economic conditions.

With its rich biodiversity and diverse forest ecosystems, India stands to gain valuable insights from such disasters. Developing a comprehensive strategy that prioritises effective early warning systems, robust governance, institu-



tional collaboration, and increased investment in research and development is crucial to safeguarding India's forests. A national action plan aligned with international frameworks like the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction would significantly enhance India's

ability to manage forest fire risks. Understanding the dynamics of disasters is essential to mitigating these risks. Conducting vulnerability assessments at both meso- and micro-levels can help identify high-risk zones. Investment in research and development, in collaboration with national and international organisations, can advance technologies for fire detection, prediction, and suppression.

Enhancing governance in forest fire management is equally critical. Updated policy frameworks should integrate forest fire management into disaster management plans at both national and state levels. Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and field manuals must be revised and

streamlined to support effective detection, reporting, and management of forest fires. Establishing a dedicated National Institute of Forest Fire Management could strengthen training programmes for forest officials, community members, and other stakeholders, while fostering better coordination among forest departments, disaster management agencies, and local communities.

Building resilience is paramount. Leveraging advanced technologies like drones, artificial intelligence, and satellite monitoring systems can significantly improve early detection and suppression efforts. Creating a national Air Operation Wing to handle aerial firefighting operations would enable rapid responses

to fires. Capacity-building initiatives, such as training sessions and mock drills, would equip forest personnel and local communities with essential firefighting skills and SOPs. Collaboration with international research institutions to develop innovative solutions—such as replacing non-native tree species with indigenous, fire-resistant varieties and creating eco-friendly fire suppression methods—can further strengthen forest resilience and sustainability. Establishing a national forest fire knowledge network would facilitate the sharing of best practices, research findings, and innovative approaches.

(The writer is former executive director of the National Institute of Disaster Management; views are personal)

India's fiscal conditions to constrain credit strength in 2025: Moody's ratings

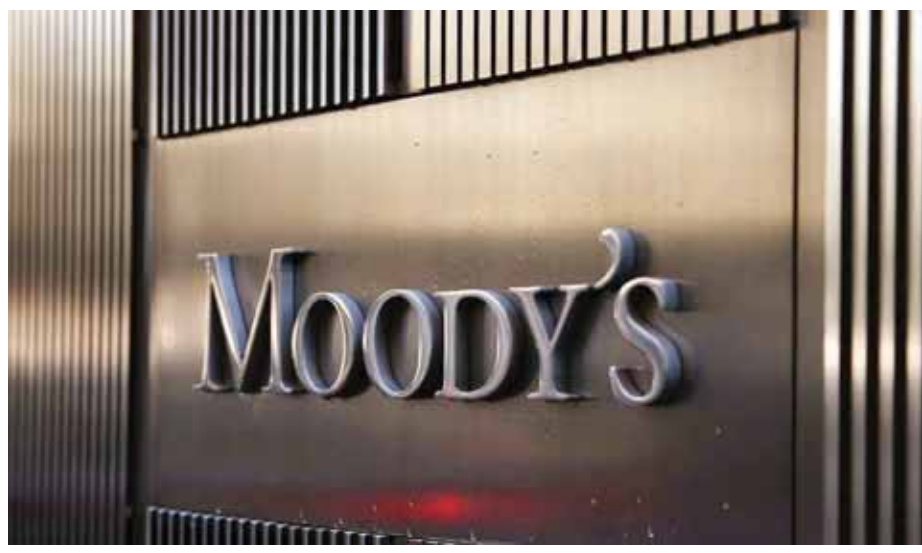
PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India's fiscal conditions will continue to constrain its credit strength in 2025, although tension in US-China relations could benefit the Indian economy, Moody's Ratings said on Wednesday.

In its report on Asia Pacific Sovereigns, Moody's Ratings said growth and inflation are levelling out, with strong domestic demand bolstered by modest easing in global and regional financial conditions.

But proposed trade restrictions by the US would weaken economic output across the region.

"India's fiscal conditions will continue to constrain its credit strength in 2025. We expect only gradual fiscal consolidation, and debt to remain significantly higher



than the Baa-rated peer median of around 57 per cent," Moody's said.

"Despite gains in revenue in recent years, we also expect

debt affordability to remain much weaker than rated peers," it added.

It said politics and social unrest pose significant

economic and fiscal risks. In APAC, geopolitical risks will persist in 2025, flowing from tensions in the US-China relationship and around

regional hotspots.

Moody's assesses a low likelihood of military conflict in the Taiwan Strait or Korean Peninsula, and tensions will remain elevated, particularly driven by US-China relations.

"These tensions are shaping trade and investment flows, which may be further diverted away from China as the US tightens investment in strategic sectors, further weakening China's economy and dampening regional growth. However, this shift could benefit India and Southeast Asian economies," Moody's said.

A range of geopolitical and domestic political risks persist, it said, adding after elections in key economies, governments may need to make choices whether to fulfill pledges or to focus on fiscal consolidation.

India to achieve 20 per cent ethanol blending target in two months, says Nitin Gadkari

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India will achieve its target of 20 per cent ethanol blending in the next two months, Union minister Nitin Gadkari said on Wednesday.

The practice of blending ethanol with petrol began in 2001 as a pilot project. "We will achieve this target of 20 per cent ethanol blending in the next two months."

Use of E20 (petrol with 20 per cent ethanol) will help in reducing pollution," Gadkari said while speaking at an event.

The road transport and highways minister said Tata Motors, Mahindra & Mahindra, Maruti Suzuki, and Hyundai Motors have started manufacturing vehicles that run on 100 per cent bio-ethanol.

Gadkari said pollution is a serious problem in the country as 42 Indian cities are among 50 most-



polluted cities in the world. "We import fossil fuels worth Rs 22 lakh crore, which is also causing pollution," he said.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi had launched the higher 20 per cent ethanol-blended petrol in 2023. In the first phase, 15 cities were covered.

Use of ethanol, extracted from sugarcane as well as broken rice and other agri produce, will help India -

the world's third largest oil consumer - bring down its reliance on overseas shipments. India is 85 per cent dependent on imports for meeting its oil needs.

Use of E20 leads to an estimated reduction of carbon monoxide emissions by about 50 per cent in two-wheelers and about 30 per cent in four-wheelers compared to E0 (neat petrol).

Vedanta Resources raises USD 1.1 Billion through dual tranche bond issuance

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Mining mogul Anil Agarwal's Vedanta Resources has raised USD 1.1 billion through a new bond offering to prepay existing liabilities, the company said in a Singapore exchange filing.

Vedanta Resources Finance II plc, a wholly owned subsidiary of Vedanta Resources, raised USD 1.1 billion through a new dual tranche issuance in international debt capital markets.

Vedanta Resources Ltd (VRL) has raised USD 3.1 billion in USD bonds since September 2024.

As per the exchange filing, the latest bond issuance consists of two tranches - a USD 550 million tranche of 5.5 years tenor at a 9.475 per cent interest rate and a USD 550 million tranche of 8.25 years tenor at a 9.850 per cent interest rate.

Both tranches garnered strong investor demand with the bonds receiving final orders of USD 3.4 billion from over 135 accounts, representing an oversubscription of 3.1x, the company said.

"The net proceeds from the offering of the Bonds will be used to prepay Vedanta's outstanding bonds (including any accrued interest thereto), pay any related transaction costs in connection thereto and to service other debts," it said. Marquee investors from the United States, EMEA (Europe, the Middle East and Africa) and Asia were amongst the major investors.

Bonds are expected to be rated 'B' by S&P Global and 'B2' by Moody's Ratings. Moody's recently upgraded VRL corporate family rating (CFR) to B1 from B2 on the back of recent moves.

The final bonds allocation included 61 per cent from Asia, 30 per cent from EMEA, and 9 per cent from the US for the 5.5-Year Tranche and 54 per cent from Asia, 30 per cent from EMEA, and 16 per cent from the US for the 8.25-Year Tranche.

Markets log gain for second day, sensex climbs over 200 points



PTI ■ MUMBAI

Benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty logged gains for the second straight session on Wednesday, buoyed by buying in bellwether stock Reliance Industries, Zomato and Kotak Bank amid a largely firm trend in global markets.

However, elevated crude oil prices in the international markets and buying by foreign investors weighed on market sentiment, traders said.

The 30-share BSE index climbed 224.45 points or 0.29 per cent to close at 76,724.08. During the day, it jumped 491.42 points or 0.64 per cent to 76,991.05.

As many as 2,150 stocks advanced while 1,806 declined and 108 remained unchanged on the BSE.

The NSE Nifty advanced 37.15 points or 0.16 per cent to 23,213.20.

"The domestic market continues to be volatile on account of elevated US bond yields, strengthening dollar, and increasing FIIs outflows. Global markets are cautious

ahead of the US December CPI inflation data, which is anticipated to be in the elevated range in the short term, limiting the US Fed's ability to cut rates.

"Also, a rise in oil prices and dollar appreciation is likely to affect domestic inflation in the near future," Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services, said.

From the Sensex blue-chip pack, Zomato jumped over 4 per cent. NTPC, Power Grid, Kotak Mahindra Bank, Maruti, Tech Mahindra, Larsen & Toubro, Reliance Industries and Adani Ports were the other big gainers.

Mahindra & Mahindra, Bajaj Finserv, Bajaj Finance, Axis Bank and Tata Motors were among the laggards.

The BSE smallcap gauge climbed 0.34 per cent, and the midcap index went up by 0.11 per cent.

Among BSE sectoral indices, utilities jumped 2.45 per cent, power (1.75 per cent), realty (1.58 per cent), services (0.98 per cent), BSE Focused IT (0.74 per cent) and consumer discretionary (0.62 per cent).

Exports contract one per cent in December, trade deficit narrows to USD 22 Billion

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India's exports in December 2024 contracted for the second month in a row by about one per cent year-on-year to USD 38.01 billion due to global uncertainties, while the trade deficit narrowed to USD 21.94 billion.

According to the commerce ministry data, imports rose by about 5 per cent year-on-year to USD 59.95 billion in December. Cumulatively, during April-December this fiscal, exports recorded a growth of 1.6 per cent to USD 321.71 billion and imports by 5.15 per cent to USD 532.48 billion. Trade deficit, the difference between imports and exports, during April-December widened to USD 210.77 billion from USD 189.74



billion during the same period previous fiscal. Briefing the media on the latest data, Commerce Secretary Sunil Barthwal said that India's

exports are doing better than other countries both in goods and services. "This shows resiliency of our exports. In all the three quarters of this this

fiscal also, we have done better. We are doing much better in non-petroleum exports," he told reporters here. The ministry has recently held a meeting with

commercial wings of Indian Missions in 20 countries to deliberate on issues impacting exports and ways to resolve them. These 20 countries account for about 60 per cent of India's exports. In December last year, Bartha said sectors which have registered healthy growth in exports included electronics, engineering and pharmaceuticals.

When asked about the revision of gold and silver import data for November 2024, the secretary said a committee has been set up to create a robust mechanism for publishing consistent data.

The government revised gold import data for November 2024, bringing down numbers by USD 5 billion to USD 9.84 billion.

ITA submits white paper on Darjeeling tea industry to West Bengal government

PTI ■ KOLKATA

Leading producers body Indian Tea Association (ITA) on Tuesday said it has submitted a white paper on the Darjeeling tea industry to the West Bengal government highlighting the challenges and opportunities.

A team of ITA officials met Labour Minister Moloy Ghatak on Tuesday evening and submitted the white



paper, the association said in a statement.

The paper attempts to provide an in-depth analysis of the current state of the Darjeeling tea industry. It also highlighted key issues like production challenges and market dynamics.

According to ITA, the paper also suggested recommendations aimed at reviving the industry and ensuring long-term viability.

ITA said that the Darjeeling tea industry is not just an economic asset, but a cultural heritage which needs immediate attention and strategic intervention by the central and state governments by way of financial assistance.

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Government should target ₹11 lakh crore in FY26, give relief to taxpayers in lower bracket in Budget: ICRA

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The government should target a capital spending of Rs 11 lakh crore in the Budget for the next fiscal while giving inflation-adjusted relief on personal income tax to boost consumer spending, rating agency ICRA said on Wednesday.

ICRA Chief Economist Aditi Nayar said last year's record budgeted capital expenditure of Rs 11.11 lakh crore is likely to fall short by about Rs 1.4 lakh crore and the next year's target should be fixed at the last year's level with a focus on keeping borrowing within reasonable limits.

Further, Nayar said capex numbers are trailing the run rate required to get to the



Budget target in the current fiscal.

Between April and November 2024, capex spending stood at Rs 5.13 lakh crore, 46 per cent of the Budget estimates of Rs

11.11 lakh crore.

"We are looking at a large shortfall in the current fiscal. For next year, we are hoping that we will get fiscal space to prioritise capex..." For FY26,

based on the revenue numbers...A fiscal deficit of 4.5 per cent of GDP will be quite reasonably achieved. That would allow us Rs 11 trillion of capex, a growth of

11-12 per cent over the number that we think is feasible for FY25," Nayar told PTI in an interview.

She said putting in a larger capex number may not be "prudent" as a larger borrowing and fiscal deficit would push up yields.

She said the Budget for 2025-26 should put a "realistic capex number" upfront and if, during the course of the year, it looks like it will be over-achieved, then the government could take the supplementary demands for grants route to up the target.

To shield the economy from the impact of Covid, the government has been spending heavily on infrastructure and building capital assets. It earmarked Rs 4.39 lakh crore capex in 2020-

21, which increased to Rs 5.54 lakh crore in 2021-22. In 2022-23, capex spending was hiked to Rs 7.5 lakh crore and in 2023-24, it reached Rs 10 lakh crore.

On being asked if the government would continue with the investment push in FY26 as well, Nayar said the capex push creates positivity in the economy and a virtuous cycle that trickles down to other parts of the economy as well.

"I would think that capex would be low in FY25 and the fiscal space available should be prioritised for capex. Our forecast suggests that every 10 basis points of additional fiscal deficit would get us another Rs 35,000 crore of capital expenditure. Probably better to start with a realistic

capex number, a fiscal deficit that would come down in line with medium-term forecast that will give a reasonable borrowing figure for markets to absorb," Nayar said.

ICRA forecasts a fiscal deficit, which is the difference between government expenditure and revenues, at 4.8 per cent of GDP in the current fiscal and 4.5 per cent in FY26.

Nayar also said that GDP growth has bottomed out in the September quarter and going forward, it is expected to recover. The ratings agency projects GDP growth of 6.5 per cent for both the current and next fiscal years.

She said rural consumption is expected to be steady, while urban consumption would be uneven. Once food inflation

starts to recede, urban consumption may begin to see a bit of an uptick, she said.

On her expectations from the Budget, Nayar said some tinkering with income tax slabs and rates would give a "mood upliftment" for urban taxpayers. That is what the budget can bring in without too much revenue loss.

"Inflation does eat away disposable income. It is not an unfair ask (tax relief). While some modest concessions could be given in terms of tax relief, we need to make sure that we are not losing out too many people from the I-T net," she said, adding that two things will be important - one, not to have too much revenue loss, and second, not to lose too many taxpayers from the tax net.

Juventus the draw specialists, AC Milan the comeback kings

PTI ■ MILAN

Juventus is earning a reputation as draw specialists, AC Milan as the comeback kings. Juventus was held 1-1 at Atalanta on Tuesday for its seventh draw in its past eight league matches and its 13th out of 20 Serie A games this season. It remains unbeaten in Serie A, however. Milan fought back to win 2-1 at nearby Como. Atalanta moved level on points with second-placed Inter Milan, which has played two matches less, and four points behind Serie A leader Napoli. Milan was three points below fifth-placed Juventus. They face each other in Turin on Saturday and Milan is likely to be without key player Christian Pulisic after the United States

international limped off on the stroke of halftime at Como. Juventus took the lead in Bergamo in the 54th minute following great play by Weston McKennie. The United States midfielder ran onto a long ball and then played a perfectly-weighted pass for Pierre Kalulu to fire past Marco Carnesecchi at the near post. Kalulu had come incredibly close to scoring moments earlier when his header bounced off the inside of the far post and rolled across the line before Carnesecchi managed to claw it away. Television replays showed that only a few millimeters were still on the line, with about 98% of the ball having gone over. Mateo Retegui made his comeback in the 65th minute after several weeks out with



injury and the league's top scorer headed Atalanta level 13 minutes later with his 13th league goal of the season. Historic Hernández goal. A historic Theo Hernández goal saw Milan earn a comeback victory for the third time in four matches under Sérgio Conceição, who got his first Serie A win as coach. Conceição, who replaced the fired Paulo Fonseca at the end of last year, had got his reign off to the perfect start as he steered Milan to the Italian Super Cup trophy with two comeback wins after just over a week at the helm. That was followed by a disappointing 1-1 draw against relegation-threatened Cagliari on Saturday, however. Milan again went behind on Tuesday, when Como's new signing Assane Diao — on the teenager's first start — ran down the right flank and cut inside before firing into the near bottom corner. Hernández had perhaps been at fault for backing off Diao too much but he atoned for that error with a fine equalizer in the 71st minute. It was his 30th goal in Serie A, overtaking Paolo Maldini as the most goals in the Italian league. Milan turned the match around completely five minutes later when Rafael Leão ran onto Tammy Abraham's through ball and dinked it over Como goalkeeper Jean Butez. Leão and Hernández are two of Milan's key players but they have both had a difficult first half of the season as they often clashed with Fonseca.

Djokovic breaks a tie with Roger Federer for the most Grand Slam matches in tennis history

PTI ■ MELBOURNE

Novak Djokovic added yet another record to his lengthy list, breaking a tie with Roger Federer for the most Grand Slam matches played in tennis history by reaching 430 on Wednesday at the Australian Open in what was a tougher-than-expected second-round victory. Djokovic improved to 379-51 for his career at major tournaments, a .881 winning percentage, by defeating 21-year-old Portuguese qualifier Jaime Faria 6-1, 6-7 (4), 6-3, 6-2 in a match briefly interrupted by light rain before Rod Laver Arena's retractable roof was shut. "Grand Slams, of course, they are the pillars of our sport. They mean everything for the history of the sport. ... Definitely the most important tournaments," Djokovic said. "I'm just blessed to be making another record, I guess, today." Oh, yes, Djokovic already holds so many marks, many



of which used to belong to Federer — who went 369-60 during his 429 Slam matches, a .860 winning percentage — and there are more on the horizon. As it is, Djokovic has won the most Grand Slam singles titles of any man, 24, ahead of Rafael Nadal's 22 and Federer's 20 (those other two members of the Big Three are now retired). The 37-year-old Serb has spent more weeks at No. 1 in the rankings than any other player. He's played in 37 Slam finals, six more than Federer's old record. And so

on and so on. Consider, too, what could possibly await for Djokovic. A title at the end of the 15 days at Melbourne Park would be his 25th at a major, a number never reached by any man or woman. It would also be his 11th at the Australian Open, equalling Margaret Court for the most. It would make him the oldest man in the Open era — which began in 1968 — to collect a Grand Slam singles trophy (Ken Rosewall was about six months younger when he won the 1972 Australian

Open). And it would be Djokovic's 100th tour-level tournament title, a nice round number behind only Jimmy Connors' 109 and Federer's 103 in the Open era among men. Not everything has gone perfectly this week in Australia for Djokovic in his first tournament working with former on-court rival Andy Murray as his coach. Both of Djokovic's matches so far came against a young player making his Grand Slam debut. And both times, he was pushed to four sets. In the first round, it was against Nishesh Basavareddy, a 19-year-old American who turned pro only last month and is ranked 107th. In the second, it was Faria, who is ranked 125th, giving him a bit of a hard time, especially during a four-game run in the second set. "He was playing lights-out tennis. ... I had to weather the storm," Djokovic said. "I think I responded very well in the third and, particularly fourth, (sets).

Sindhu can reach an even higher level with more speed and power: New coach Irwansyah

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Indonesian coach Irwansyah Adi Pratama aims to not just tweak PV Sindhu's technique and fine-tune her skills but also reignite the fire within her, believing that, with added speed and power, she can regain her lost glory and surpass her previous achievements. Irwansyah, who has been recently roped in by Badminton Association of India (BAI) to train women's singles players, was court-side when Sindhu overcame rustiness to reach the second round of the India Open Super 750 tournament, defeating world No. 24 Sung Shuo Yun of Chinese Taipei 21-14, 22-20 on Tuesday. "Every player has been through something like this. What I've learned, I want to pass on to her. I'll try my best. I believe she can still do it. She can come back and reach an even higher level than before. I do believe in it. That's the reason I'm here," Irwansyah, a former long-term head coach



of the Indonesian men's singles team, told PTI. "My plan is to make her more of an attacking player. She has all the right qualities, so I just want to build on that and push her further. I want to change her game to be more aggressive — more speed and power." It has been a challenging two years for Sindhu, who broke a title drought by winning the Syed Modi Super 300 crown last December. After clinching the 2022 Singapore Open and Commonwealth Games titles, she faced a setback with a stress

fracture. Although she recovered and reached the final at the 2023 Spain Masters, a knee injury in October hampered her progress. She returned to action in February, reaching the final of the Malaysia Masters Super 500, but was unable to secure a title. "I want to help her enjoy herself more on the court. It's important that she enjoys it because when she enjoys it, she'll become more confident. That's the main focus right now — working hard to get her

to believe in herself again," Irwansyah said. "After everything, the last two years have been tough — injuries, maybe... It's really about confidence. I'm doing my best to help her believe in what she has. She has a lot of potential." Sindhu might be in the final phase of her career but Irwansyah emphasised it is about discipline and success has nothing to do with age. "It's not about age. What's important is how she manages discipline, what she eats, how she rests, and doing the right training. And with the whole team in place — strength and conditioning coach, nutrition, physio, and me — it will happen." Sindhu, who achieved remarkable success, including a silver medal at the Rio Olympics under Pullela Gopichand, later partnered with Korea's Kim Ji Hyun to win the 2019 World Championships and claimed another silver at the Tokyo Olympics with coach Park Tae-Sang.

Koneru Humpy to compete in Norway Chess Women 2025

PTI ■ STAVANGER

Reigning World Rapid chess champion and Indian Grandmaster Koneru Humpy will return to compete in the Norway Chess Women in May. Currently ranked world number six in women's classical chess, Humpy aims to make her mark in the prestigious chess tournament. Humpy's return to Norway Chess Women highlights her remarkable career, filled with significant milestones. In 2002, she became the first Indian woman to achieve the GM title, securing her place in chess history. Today, she remains India's top ranked women's player in the country. Her achievements include winning the World Rapid Championship title twice -- in 2019 and 2024. She was also named BBC Indian Sportswoman of the



Year in 2020, recognising her contributions to Indian sports. Her victories in the Olympiad, Asian Games, and Asian Championships have further confirmed her status as one of the top female players in chess. "It's an honour to play in the prestigious Norway Chess Women tournament," Humpy was quoted as saying in a media release. Asked to describe herself, she

chose the word "self-disciplined," a quality that defines her approach to chess and her rise to the top. This discipline has helped her remain focused, consistent, and resilient, even against tough opponents. "Humpy's achievements speak volumes, and we are delighted to welcome her back to Norway Chess Women 2025," said Kjell Madland, Founder and Tournament Director of Norway Chess.

Christian Pulisic limps out of AC Milan match sparking new injury fears

PTI ■ MILAN

There are renewed injury concerns for Christian Pulisic after the United States international limped off of AC Milan's match at Como on Tuesday. Pulisic was forced off the pitch on the stroke of halftime, leaving Milan with 10 men for the final moments of the first period. He was replaced by Alejandro Jiménez for the second half. The 26-year-old Pulisic went down after being caught on the ankle by Como defender Marc-Oliver Kempf. He immediately waved the medical staff over and appeared to be pointing to his left thigh. His availability is unknown for Milan's match at Juventus on Saturday. Pulisic had only just returned



from injury — making his comeback in the Italian Super Cup, which Milan won. He had been out for nearly a month after tearing a muscle in his right calf and then sustaining a minor ankle issue. Pulisic scored in both the semifinal and the final of the Italian Super Cup. He has been one of Milan's top players this season with five goals and four assists in Serie A. He has also scored three goals in the Champions League.

Italian football club Lazio fires falconer for posting photos of his own prosthetic penis

PTI ■ ROME

Lazio has fired the man who handled the Italian soccer club's eagle mascot after he posted photos and videos online of his own prosthetic penis. Falconer Juan Bernabé shared the images on his private social media accounts after undergoing surgery for a penile implant, which he said was for non-medical reasons. Bernabé also gave an interview to controversial Italian radio show La Zanzara on Monday and elaborated on his reasons for undergoing the procedure. Bernabé added that he felt "very proud" and "more masculine" being part of Lazio. The Serie A club clearly did not feel the same as it fired the Spaniard shortly afterward. "Shocked to see the photographic images and video of Mr. Juan Bernabé and



to read the statements that accompanied them, Lazio announces that it has stopped, with immediate effect, all relationship with this person, given the seriousness of his behavior," the capital club said in a statement. "The club realizes — and shares — the pain that the fans will feel at the loss of the eagle in the next home games, but believes that it is not possible to be associated ... with a person who, by his own initiative, has made the

continuation of the relationship unacceptable." The eagle — a bird that symbolizes ancient Rome — traditionally flies over Stadio Olimpico before home games. Bernabé said he had no regrets about sharing the images. Lazio suspended Bernabé in 2021 when he was filmed performing a fascist salute at the end of a match and chanting "Duce, Duce," which was the name used to praise former fascist Italian leader Benito Mussolini.

Zheng loses to No. 97 Laura Siegemund, Osaka rallies to advance at the Australian Open

PTI ■ MELBOURNE

Distracted by a time penalty and unable to counteract No. 97-ranked Laura Siegemund's aggressive approach, Zheng Qinwen's loss in the second round Wednesday fell a long way short of last year's run to the Australian Open final. "I feel maybe today is not my day. There's a lot of details in the important points. I didn't do the right choice," Zheng said. Of a weak serve that bounced before the net, Zheng said the time warning from the umpire "obviously that one really distracted me from the match." "This is my fourth year in the tour, and never happen that to me." Both of last year's women's finalists were playing at the same time on nearby courts. Sabalenka, the two-time defending champion, extended her run to 16 wins at Melbourne Park by

serve from the chair umpire — she said she couldn't clearly see the clock — and was worried about some minor issues which sidelined her before the Australian Open. "I feel maybe today is not my day. There's a lot of details in the important points. I didn't do the right choice," Zheng said. Of a weak serve that bounced before the net, Zheng said the time warning from the umpire "obviously that one really distracted me from the match." "This is my fourth year in the tour, and never happen that to me." Both of last year's women's finalists were playing at the same time on nearby courts. Sabalenka, the two-time defending champion, extended her run to 16 wins at Melbourne Park by



winning the last five games to beat No. 54-ranked Jessica Bouzas Maneiro 6-3, 7-5. Naomi Osaka, another two-

Australian Open champion, reached the third round of a major for the first time since 2022 when she

weathered an early barrage from U.S. Open semifinalist Karolina Muchova before rallying to win 1-6, 6-1, 6-3.

Osaka lost in the first round here last year to Caroline Garcia in her comeback from maternity leave but avenged that with a first-round victory over Garcia this week. Osaka said she used a loss to Muchova at the U.S. Open as motivation. "She crushed me in the U.S. Open when I had my best outfit ever," Osaka joked in a post-match interview. "I was so disappointed. I was so mad. This was my little revenge." Osaka will next meet Belinda Bencic, the Tokyo Olympic gold medalist who is playing in her first major since the birth of her daughter, Bella, last year. Also advancing were No. 7 Jessica Pegula, had a 6-4, 6-2 win over Elise Mertens, and 17-year-old Mirra Andreeva, and the No. 14 seed who beat Moyuka Uchijima 6-4, 3-6, 7-6 (8).

The scoreline in Sabalenka's match didn't reflect the difficulty, with Bouzas Maneiro taking huge swipes at the ball in her Australian Open debut and dictating some of the points against the world No. 1-ranked player. Her serve let her down, with Sabalenka able to relieve some pressure on her own serve with five breaks. No. 7 Jessica Pegula had a 6-4, 6-2 win over Elise Mertens to reach the third round, along with Belinda Bencic and 17-year-old Mirra Andreeva, the No. 14 seed who beat Moyuka Uchijima 6-4, 3-6, 7-6 (8). Siegemund has never been past the third round in Australia, but is taking confidence from her big upset. Her only lapse was when she was broken serving for the first set. She

recovered to dominate the tiebreaker, while Zheng remained too conservative in her tactics until right near the end. "I knew I just had to play more than my best tennis. I had nothing to lose. I just told myself to swing free," Siegemund said. Zheng is "an amazing player. One of the best players right now, but I know I can play well and I wanted to show that to myself." Third-seeded Carlos Alcaraz, aiming to add the Australian Open title to complete a set of all four major crowns, advanced 6-0, 6-1, 6-4 victory over Yoshihito Nishioka. "The less time you spend on the court in the Grand Slams, especially at the beginning of the tournament, it's gonna be better, especially physically," Alcaraz said.

Naomi Osaka is back in third round of Grand Slam for the first time in three years

PTI ■ MELBOURNE

Naomi Osaka's second-round match at the Australian Open could not possibly have started in a worse way. All of 21 minutes in, she sailed a forehand service return well long and, just like that, trailed 5-0.

Osaka strode to the sideline for the changeover, plopped herself down and draped a white towel over her head, blocking out all sights and leaving her with just her thoughts. She stayed like that throughout the break between games, even maneuvering a water bottle under that towel to take a drink.

This was not a match against some unknown opponent, someone Osaka knew for sure she could beat. It was against 20th-seeded Karolina Muchova, the runner-up at the 2023 French Open and a three-time semifinalist at other majors, including at Melbourne Park in 2021. Muchova also had defeated Osaka in their two most recent matchups. None of that mattered on this afternoon, though: Osaka

forgot about that disappointing start and came all the way back to win 1-6, 6-1, 6-3 on Wednesday. What was her mindset? "Just be aware and try not to get so negative on yourself. I think, for me, the score in the first set was very dramatic, but there was key points that I could have maybe won a game here or there," Osaka explained afterward. "So I kept trying to tell myself that."

This was, in some ways, a significant moment for Osaka, who once reigned atop women's tennis, winning four Grand Slam titles — two at the Australian Open, two at the U.S. Open — and ascending to No. 1 in the WTA rankings. The victory allowed her to reach the third round at a major tournament for the first time since the 2022 season.

Getting to that stage was not considered a big deal at one point for her. But time off because of mental health breaks and then a pregnancy — Osaka's daughter, Shai, was born in July 2023 — changed things.

Since returning to action a year ago, Osaka has shown signs of



getting her game back together, including a memorable and narrow loss to then-No. 1 Iga Swiatek at the French Open. This, though, followed a win against 2022 U.S. Open semifinalist Caroline Garcia in Melbourne and meant the progress is real.

"It definitely was something that is a goal of mine, especially after last year; I wasn't able to beat a seed in a Grand Slam," Osaka said. "I'm obviously very thankful that that happened so early this year."

She also joked about gaining a measure of "revenge" by defeating Garcia — who eliminated Osaka in Melbourne a year ago — and Muchova in consecutive matches. Next for Osaka is a matchup against Tokyo Olympics gold medalist Belinda Bencic, who is also a mother; her daughter, Bella, was born last year. Both Osaka and Bencic are big hitters.

"It's going to be a fun match," Bencic said.

Muchova wasn't the highest-seeded player to exit Wednesday. That was No. 5 Zheng Qinwen, the runner-up to Aryna Sabalenka at the 2024 Australian Open and the gold medalist at the Paris Games last August. Zheng lost a bit of focus after being called for a time violation and never managed to counter 97th-ranked Laura Siegemund's strokes, bowing out 7-6 (3), 6-3 at John Cain Arena.

After the chair umpire cited her for taking too long to serve, Zheng hit her next offering so poorly it bounced way before reaching the net.

"I knew," the 36-year-old Siegemund said, "I just had to play more than my best tennis." The player who beat Zheng in the final 12 months ago, No. 1-ranked Aryna Sabalenka, stretched her Melbourne Park winning streak to 16 matches as she eyes a third consecutive title, beating No. 54 Jessica Bouzas Maneiro 6-3, 7-5 at Rod Laver Arena.

Other women's winners included No. 7 Jessica Pegula, No. 14 Mirra Andreeva and No. 30 Leylah Fernandez, with 2023 U.S. Open champion Coco Gauff in action during the night session.

Novak Djokovic added to his record collection by playing in his 430th career Grand Slam match — one more than Roger Federer — and, though he dropped a set for the second outing in a row, moved into the third round with a 6-1, 6-7 (4), 6-3, 6-2 win over Jaime Faria.

Other men who advanced included No. 3 Carlos Alcaraz, who joked that he is now a "serve bot" after hitting 14 aces while dismissing Yoshihito Nishio 6-0, 6-1, 6-4.



SA20: Joburg Super Kings, Pretoria Capitals register convincing wins

PTI ■ DURBAN

Joburg Super Kings and Pretoria Capitals claimed crucial victories over Durban's Super Giants and Sunrisers Eastern Cape respectively in the Betway SA20.

The JSK spin trio of Tabraiz Shamsi, Donovan Ferreira and Imran Tahir combined in perfect tandem to propel the visitors to a 28-run victory at Kingsmead, while the Capitals seamers were influential in their six-wicket bonus point win over the defending champions.

Super Giants' middle-order batter Quinton de Kock played a lone hand of 55 (45 balls, 5x4, 2x6) to keep his team afloat in pursuit of JSK's 169/4.

But Shamsi, Ferreira and Tahir snared five wickets between them to bowl out the Super Giants for 141. Tahir also produced a moment of brilliance in the field which proved to be hugely inspirational for the visitors.

The 45-year-old displayed the athleticism of a teenager to snare a brilliant two-handed diving catch at point off a Wiaan Mulder reverse-sweep. JSK were certainly galvanised by the veteran to squeeze the Super Giants middle-order after the home team seemed well set at 99/4 with the dangerous pair of De Kock and Heinrich Klaasen at the crease.

Klaasen (29 of 17 balls) was

building up momentum by striking Matheesha Pathirana for a couple of boundaries and a six, but the Sri Lankan exacted revenge by having him caught down the leg side with the final ball of the 12th over to set in the collapse.

Earlier, the Super Kings rallied to a competitive total through contributions from Leus du Plooy (38), Jonny Bairstow (26) and Ferreira (26) before Gerald Coetzee smashed the final two balls of the innings for six for the visitors to seize the momentum.

At Centurion, the Capitals benefited from winning the toss with captain Rilee Rossouw having no hesitation in electing to bowl. It immediately proved to be the correct decision on a surface that had been under the covers for a lengthy period of time with the home team's fast bowlers gaining significant seam movement early on.

Eathan Bosch (2/18) landed the first blow when he removed opener Zak Crawley. Bosch was well supported by Daryn Dupavillion (3/32), who struck with successive deliveries to send both David Bedingham and Sunrisers captain Aiden Markram back to the pavilion to leave the defending champions in tatters at 3 for 4.

The visitors slipped deeper into trouble when Tom Abell and Tristan Stubbs also departed within two runs of each other.

England batter James Vince quits First-Class cricket to play in PSL

PTI ■ LONDON

England batter James Vince on Wednesday quit First-Class cricket to play for Karachi Kings in the upcoming Pakistan Super League, defying ECB's decision not to grant NOCs for its cricketers to appear in the T20 competition.

The England board had decided in November, 2024, to refrain from issuing NOCs to all-format players to play in the PSL, scheduled for April-May this season, because the league clashes with the early rounds of the County Championship.

Vince, who has played 13 Tests, was expected to lead Hampshire this season as well, but he was retained by the Kings ahead of the PSL draft.

"I love Hampshire. It's been my club and home for 16 years, so I want to be able to maintain my best to keep delivering for Hampshire in T20 cricket, and hopefully even further our success in the competition [the Blast]," Vince said in a statement.

"I also need to understand what is best for my family, and combine that with the stage of my career I am at," he added. The 33-year-old, who has been leading Hampshire since 2015, is currently playing for Gulf Giants in the ILT20 tournament in the UAE.

Giles White, Hampshire's director of cricket, said they respected Vince's decision.

"James has been at the heart of the club for the best part of 20 years, showing absolute commitment on and off the field as the team's leading batter and captain," said White.

"We recognise that this announcement will be tinged with disappointment for many fans but hope everyone will join us in celebrating what he has given to our club over many years."

From 216 First-Class matches, Vince has scored 13340 runs at an average of 40 with 30 hundreds.

The ESPNcricinfo has, meanwhile, reported that England batter Tom Kohler-Cadmore too quit County cricket to play in the PSL for Peshawar Zalmi, and he is in talks with Somerset in this regard.



Yashasvi Jaiswal joins Mumbai Ranji camp

PTI ■ MUMBAI

India opener Yashasvi Jaiswal on Wednesday joined the Mumbai camp after confirming his availability for the next round of Ranji Trophy but skipper Rohit Sharma was not to be seen after turning up for a couple of practice on the opening day of training.

Rohit, who batted alongside Mumbai captain Ajinkya Rahane on Tuesday here at the Wankhede Stadium, is expected to resume training in a day or two.

However, it remains to be seen if the incumbent Indian skipper would play in the domestic giant's next Ranji Trophy fixture. Rohit is yet to confirm his availability for the Elite Group A contest against Jammu and Kashmir starting on January 23 but so far, no formal discussions have been taken place.



Champions Trophy opening in Febuary third week; PCB hopeful Rohit Sharma will be there

PTI ■ LAHORE

The opening ceremony of the Champions Trophy will be held either on February 16 or 17 and the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) is confident that India captain Rohit Sharma will be in attendance at the event.

The PCB source also said that it is awaiting communication from the ICC on the schedule of the customary captains' photo-shoot and the pre-event press conference.

The eight-team tournament will get underway on February 19 in Karachi. However, India will play all their matches in Dubai, starting with the clash against Bangladesh on February 20, after refusing to travel to Pakistan owing to security concerns.

The source said PCB has procured all relevant clearances from its government to promptly opening match is on 19th the opening ceremony can be expected either on the 16th or 17th," the source added.

He said the schedule of the opening ceremony would depend on the warm-up matches list.

The source said that recently three Indian nationals, who were a part of the ICC delegation which came to Pakistan, were promptly issued visas once the world body sent their names to the PCB.

issue visas to all captains, players and team officials who will come here for pre-tournament events.

"This obviously includes Rohit or any other Indian team player or official or board official," he added.

Another source confirmed to PTI that the PCB has made it clear to the ICC that the opening ceremony, featuring all teams and their captains, will take place in Pakistan.

"This is in line with the usual protocols and since the



East Bengal seek government intervention over ISL 'step-motherly treatment'

PTI ■ KOLKATA

Alleging "step-motherly treatment" by the Indian Super League organizers, century-old East Bengal club has sought Union Sports Minister Mansukh Mandaviya's intervention, claiming that systemic bias, the outdated "refugees club" tag, and refereeing controversies have stalled their progress in the top-tier football competition.

The incident occurred during the "Kolkata Derby" in Guwahati on Saturday where East Bengal lost to arch-rivals Mohun Bagan by a solitary goal.

The club claimed the match was marred by biased officiating, including the denial of a clear penalty and a controversial yellow card issued to midfielder Souvik Chakrabarti, which led to his red card and team being reduced 10 players.

In an emotional plea to the sports minister, East Bengal highlighted how the "refugees club" tag has led to their ongoing marginalisation in Indian football.

"Fight, Fight and Fight -- this has been the perennial motto of East Bengal club for the last 150 years. This club and its supporters have endured the tumultuous period pre and post-partition only through its fighting spirit.

"While the displaced people fought tooth and nail for their substance, the club had to fight the stigma and the tag of a 'Refugees Club' to establish itself as the leading football club of the country," East Bengal general secretary Rupak Saha wrote in a statement.

"We are surprised that even 75 years after independence, we are in a situation where East Bengal Club has been victimised in almost every match of the ISL.

"We are forced to think why all this is happening to us is it because we are still considered the 'Refugees Club'. Throughout the last 10-12 years, we had to bear the brunt of biased refereeing, be it in the I-League and more so in the ISL.

"During this period, we must have sent close to 50 complaint letters to all the concerned authorities but to no avail and the standard of refereeing has only gone from bad to worse to the worst.



Can't wait to meet Ricky Ponting and ask him about the pull shot: Priyansh Arya

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

When Priyansh Arya hit six sixes in an over last year, he mainly targeted the straight boundary. But when he joins the Punjab Kings IPL camp, it's the pull shot that he wants to perfect with some help from head coach Ricky Ponting, who patented the stroke in his playing days.

Those half a dozen sixes off left-arm spinner Manan Bhardwaj's one over in the inaugural Delhi Premier League put Arya under the spotlight and eventually led to the left-hander drawing a potentially life-changing Rs 3.8 crore winning bid from Punjab Kings, more than 12 times his base price of Rs 30 lakh.

It was as if the stars aligned for the 23-year-old at the mega auction as he made a belligerent hundred against UP in the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy days before the high-profile event in Saudi Arabia.

Having been part of Punjab Kings' first pre-season camp in Mumbai last week, Arya has already got the taste of the higher level and says he is bound to become a better



player after his maiden season in the IPL, which begins on March 21.

Has life changed for the Delhi lad since the auction day?

"Life has not changed much since the auction. Yes, there is more interest from people and my expectations from myself have increased. The pre-season camp gave me a fair idea where I need to be come the IPL as I got to do things I have never done in training before."

Arya got to chat with his IPL skipper Shreyas Iyer briefly during the Mumbai camp and apart from him, he is equally excited about spending time with Ponting.

"I have not had the chance to speak to Ricky sir. But when I get to meet him, the first thing I want to ask him is about the pull shot," he said referring to one of the best exponents of the pull shot.

"I am also really excited about spending time with Iyer. I love the attitude of Iyer and Ricky sir, both on and off the field. I would also like to ask them about their mindset in highs and lows.

"Just by interacting with the best you can learn a lot, I have already experienced it (in the camp)," said Arya, whose parents teach in a government school in the national capital.

The IPL is still some time away and if he does get to open alongside Prabhsimran Singh, there will be immense pressure and scrutiny. Will his price tag also play on his mind?

"I am not thinking on those lines. For me it is just about learning from the best minds in the game."

And what does he plan to do with the money?

"That (is something) my parents will decide," pat came the response from Arya.

Growing up, he closely tracked the career of now India head coach Gautam Gambhir as they both came to the same academy in Delhi.

Arya loves Gambhir's play against spin and he too has gone on to become a decent batter against the turning ball. No wonder those six sixes came off a spinner.

Besides Gambhir, Arya also draws inspiration from Sri Lankan great Kumar Sangakkara.

"Right from the beginning, I like to play down the ground. That is what I was thinking at that time (when he hit six sixes). I have followed Gautam bhaiya a lot. I loved how he used to pick spin and that is what I tried to pick from him.

"Among overseas players, I like Kumar Sangakkara. I love his cover drive a lot though personally I like pull shot the most."

The moment when his name

came under the hammer will remain fresh in Arya's memory forever.

"We were playing the domestic T20 (SMAT) and I was sitting in the hotel with my teammates. I could not express myself after Punjab made that winning bid.

"I did not know what do. My phone stopped working. I would have been happy at just being picked but to get this bid made me feel really good," Arya recollected.

Arya made his T20 debut for Delhi in 2023 and List A in 2021, long before he achieved the memorable feat in the DPL last year. The southpaw looked back at his journey thus far.

"There were challenges. The year I made my debut I got to play only two games and was on the bench the rest of time. The year after I was dropped from the senior team. When I got the DPL stage, I told myself I have to be the best batter in the competition and that happened."

He is yet to play first-class cricket and that his next target. However, the ultimate aim is to play Test cricket.