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FAITH, CHARITY, BUSINESS, CONVERGE AT MAHAKUMBH 2025

BISWAJEET BANERJEE
MAHAKUMBH NAGAR

CRORES OF BELIEVERS BATHE IN THE ETERNAL GLORY OF SANGAM



Devotees take a holy dip at Sangam during Maha Kumbh Mela 2025, in Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh

sight of millions standing waist-deep in the water, hands folded in prayer, was both humbling and awe-inspiring. "This is the heart of India, where the soul of our nation resides," said Dr. Vinod Kumar, a historian observing the event.

The first day of Mahakumbh also saw a bustling market atmosphere, with devotees enthusiastically shopping for food, puja items, and other essentials from both established stores and small vendors.

Ramkumar, a food vendor from Hardoi who arrived two weeks ago, shared his experience: "Here, we are not only feeding devotees but also earning spiritual merit. We are not overcharging anyone, and everything is running smoothly." Similarly, Sunil from Bhadohi, who is serving tea at the event, expressed gratitude for the opportunity. "I've come here for 45 days to earn a livelihood. On this chilly first day, tea is being served to the devotees without any extra charge," he added.

Mahakumbh 2025 is turning into a unique confluence of commerce and charity, as the first day witnessed both thriving business and widespread acts of generosity. Various organisations set up Bhandaras across the fairgrounds, distributing food and tea in abundance to the countless devotees present.

From piping hot Khichdi to Puri Sabzi, devotees were treated to a variety of meals, while tea was served at numerous stalls throughout the day.

Renowned saints, including Satua Baba, have also extended hospitality by organizing Bhandaras and making arrangements for devotees to stay in their camps, ensuring that no one leaves without being cared for. This seamless blend of spiritual service and economic activity highlights the inclusive spirit of Mahakumbh.

The sacred banks of the Ganga, Yamuna, and the mystical Saraswati came alive with a sea of humanity as the Maha Kumbh commenced on the auspicious day of Paus Purnima with over 1.65 crore people took a dip at the holy river.

Pilgrims from every corner of the country, carrying faith in their hearts and offerings in their hands, gathered to take the first holy dip. The air was filled with reverberating chants of "Har Har Gange" and "Jai Shri Ram," creating an atmosphere of divine fervor.

The devotion of the pilgrims was palpable as they began arriving at the Sangam from midnight, braving the biting cold. Wrapped in woollens, they carried their belongings on their heads, the weight of which seemed insignificant before their unwavering faith. "It feels like a burden lifted from my soul when I take a dip here," said Savitri Devi, a 65-year-old pilgrim from Rajasthan, as she emerged from the water with a serene smile.

The banks of the Sangam turned into a kaleidoscope of colors as people dressed in traditional attire thronged the ghats. Children played in the shallow waters, their laughter mingling with the chants of mantras, while elders sat in prayer, their lips murmuring sacred hymns. The youthful enthusiasm was especially striking, with many capturing the moments on their phones and sharing them instantly.

"It's a proud moment for us to be here and celebrate our culture with the world," said 22-year-old Aniket Mishra from Allahabad, holding a selfie stick as he stood at the edge of the waters.

The spiritual energy was matched by nature's grace, with a light drizzle the previous night followed

by a cool breeze enhancing the sanctity of the occasion. Pilgrims were seen lighting diyas, offering flowers, and performing rituals on the ghats. "The cold water feels like the blessings of the goddess herself. This is not just a bath; it's a spiritual rebirth," said Ramesh Gupta, a trader from Delhi who had traveled with his family for the occasion.

The elaborate security arrangements ensured a smooth flow of devotees. Police personnel stood alert at every corner, guiding the crowds and maintaining order. Drones hovered overhead, providing real-time monitoring from the Integrated Command and Control Center. "We feel safe and cared for. The arrangements this year are truly commendable," said Kavita Joshi, a teacher from Uttarakhand.

For many, the Maha Kumbh was not just an act of faith but also a celebration of cultural heritage. The ghats became a stage for

impromptu performances of bhajans and folk songs, as groups of devotees formed circles and sang in unison. The atmosphere was electric yet peaceful, a blend of human devotion and divine energy. Social media was abuzz with posts, photos, and videos from the event. "I shared a live video of the aarti, and my friends back in Mumbai were amazed. This is a part of our culture we should all be proud of," said Prerna Mehta, a first-time visitor to the Kumbh.

As the sun rose over the horizon, casting a golden glow over the confluence, the Sangam appeared like a painting brought to life. The

India summons Bangladesh Deputy High Commissioner

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

India on Monday summoned Bangladesh Deputy High Commissioner Nural Islam amid escalating border tensions between the two nations. The development comes a day after the Bangladesh Foreign

Ministry summoned Indian High Commissioner to Dhaka Pranay Verma. The border tensions between India and Bangladesh have escalated after Dhaka alleged that India was trying to construct fences at five locations along the India-Bangladesh border, violating a bilateral agreement.

In a statement, the Bangladeshi foreign ministry said, "Bangladesh Foreign Secretary Ambassador Md Jashim Uddin on Sunday expressed the deep concern of the Government of Bangladesh to the High Commissioner of India Pranay Verma at his office at the Ministry of Foreign

Affairs over the recent activities of the Border Security Force (BSF) of India along the Bangladesh-India Border." The conflicts have surfaced in five areas, including (northwestern) Chapainawabganj, Naogaon, Lalmonirhat, and the Tin Bigha Corridor.

Fls exit, Sensex drops sharply

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ MUMBAI

The equity benchmark Sensex cracked over 1,000 points to dive below the 77,000 level on Monday, tracking heavy selling in global equities and a spike in international crude prices. A strong US jobs data, which dampened early rate cut expectations, the rupee logging its steepest single-day fall in nearly two years and unabated foreign fund outflows also dampened investors' sentiment.

MARKETS



Falling for the fourth straight session, the 30-share BSE benchmark Sensex tanked 1,048.90 points or 1.36 per cent to finally settle at 76,330.01. During the day, it plunged 1,129.19 points or 1.45 per cent to 76,249.72.

The NSE Nifty dropped 345.55 points or 1.47 per cent to close at 23,085.95. From the 30-share blue-chip pack, Zomato cracked nearly 7 per cent. Power Grid, Adani Ports, Tata Steel, NTPC, Tata Motors, Tech Mahindra, Mahindra & Mahindra, Asian Paints, Sun Pharma and UltraTech Cement were the other major laggards.

In contrast, Axis Bank, Hindustan Unilever, Tata Consultancy Services and IndusInd Bank were the gainers.

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Har Pal Apke Saath LIC/2024-25/11/Eng

PM Modi inaugurates Z-Morh Tunnel

MOHIT KANDHARI ■ JAMMU

On his maiden visit to Jammu and Kashmir after the Assembly polls, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday said he will keep the promises he made to the people of Jammu and Kashmir and right things will happen at the right time.

Prime Minister Modi also described the union territory as India's "crown," and expressed his desire to see it as "beautiful and prosperous."

Addressing a large gathering soon after inaugurating the strategically important Z-Morh tunnel in the Sonamarg area, Prime Minister, without referring to the issue of restoration of statehood to Jammu and Kashmir, said, "You have to believe that this is Modi and he keeps his promises. There is a right time for everything and the right things will happen at the right time."

Welcoming Prime Minister in Sonamarg, Chief Minister Omar Abdullah had earlier sought restoration of statehood to Jammu and Kashmir in his brief speech.

Omar also thanked Prime Minister Modi for visiting Kashmir in the cold weather and said, "We hope that you will come again and again, and join in our happiness."

Referring to the transformation happening across Jammu and Kashmir, Modi said that the dream of a developed India will be realized when its crown, Kashmir, is adorned with the jewels of progress. He expressed his desire for Kashmir to become even more beautiful and prosperous.

He emphasized that numerous road and rail connectivity projects are set to be completed in Jammu and Kashmir in the coming days.

The prime minister also paid tribute to seven people, including labourers, who were killed in a terror attack in the area in October 2024.

"First of all, I would like to thank all the brothers who worked in the most difficult circumstances, risking their lives, for the progress of the country and Jammu and Kashmir. Also, seven of our labour colleagues lost their lives but completed this task by overcoming all challenges. Today, I would like to remember the 7 colleagues who have lost their lives," he said.

Union Minister Nitin Gadkari, Jammu and Kashmir Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha, MoS PMO Dr Jitendra Singh, MoS MORTH Ajay Tamta were also present at the inauguration. In his inaugural speech, Nitin Gadkari listed out major infrastructural projects in



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Union Minister for Road Transport and Highways Nitin Gadkari, J&K Lt. Governor Manoj Sinha and Chief Minister Omar Abdullah during the inauguration of the Z-Morh tunnel.

the pipeline across Jammu and Kashmir.

After inaugurating the Rs 2,700 crore project, the prime minister went inside the tunnel and interacted with the project officials. He also met the construction workers who worked meticulously amid harsh conditions to complete the tunnel.

Announcing the inauguration of the Sonamarg Tunnel the Prime Minister highlighted that this tunnel will significantly ease the lives of people in Sonamarg, Kargil, and Leh. The 6.5-km-long two-lane bi-directional road tunnel between Gagangir and Sonamarg in central Kashmir's Ganderbal district is equipped with a parallel 7.5-metre escape passage for emergencies.

Situated at an altitude of over 8,650 feet above sea level, the tunnel will enhance all-weather connectivity between Srinagar and Sonamarg en route to Leh, bypassing routes prone to landslides and avalanches.

It will also promote tourism by

ensuring year-round connectivity to Sonamarg.

Emphasising the extensive infrastructure development from Jammu and Kashmir to Arunachal Pradesh, the Prime Minister remarked that Jammu and Kashmir is becoming a hub of tunnels, high bridges, and ropeways, with some of the world's highest tunnels and highest rail-road bridges being constructed here. The Prime Minister noted the engineering marvel of the Chenab Bridge, where a passenger train trial was recently completed. He mentioned several key projects, including the cable bridge enhancing Kashmir's railway connectivity, the Zojila, Chenani Nashri, and Sonamarg tunnel projects, and the Udhampur-Srinagar-Baramulla rail link project. The Prime Minister also mentioned the schemes for the Shankaracharya Temple, Shivkhori, and Baltal-Amarnath ropeways, as well as the Katra-Delhi expressway. He emphasized that over ₹42,000 crore worth of road

connectivity projects are underway in Jammu and Kashmir, including four national highway projects and two ring roads. The Prime Minister remarked that more than 14 tunnels like Sonamarg are being constructed, making Jammu and Kashmir one of the most connected regions in the country.

Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Omar Abdullah stole the show while praising efforts made by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in bridging the gap between "Dil (heart) and Delhi".

Abdullah said the inauguration of projects like the 'Sonamarg Tunnel' tunnel would bridge the gap between Jammu and Kashmir's "dil" (heart) and Delhi.

Omar said terrorism will be defeated to ensure peace and development besides safeguarding democracy in Jammu and Kashmir.

Referring to Modi's speech during his visit to Srinagar on International Yoga Day last year, the chief minister said, "My heart says that very soon, you will fulfill your promise to the people of Jammu and Kashmir which is the restoration of statehood to the Union Territory."

The chief minister's statehood remark in the presence of the prime minister was welcomed by the audience with a round of applause.

Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha also lauded Prime Minister Narendra Modi for transforming Jammu and Kashmir into a "real paradise" and eradicating terrorism from the region. Speaking at the inaugural ceremony of the 6.5-km-long Z-Morh tunnel in Central Kashmir, LG Sinha, highlighted the developmental strides J&K has achieved under PM Modi's leadership.

"The government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi has wiped out terrorism from Jammu and Kashmir and has turned it into a real paradise. Peace, progress, and prosperity have become the hallmarks of his regime," said LG Sinha.

LG Sinha termed the inauguration of the Z-Morh tunnel, built at a cost of Rs 2,700 crore, as a "game changer" for the region. He described the (Z-Morh) tunnel as a "Bhagya Rekha" (lifeline) for Jammu and Kashmir, enabling year-round connectivity to the picturesque Sonamarg.

"This is a day of immense pride. This tunnel will boost connectivity and usher in a new era of economic opportunities for the region," said LG Sinha.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi during the inauguration of the Z-Morh tunnel.

PM Modi to launch Mission Mausam

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will launch 'Mission Mausam' on the occasion of India Meteorological Department 150th Foundation Day on Tuesday, the Prime Minister's Office said on Monday.

Mission Mausam aims to make India a 'weather-ready and climate-smart' nation by developing cutting-edge weather surveillance technologies and systems. He will also release the IMD Vision-2047 document for weather resilience and climate change adaptation. It includes plans for weather forecasting, weather management and climate change mitigation, said the PMO.

"The PM will participate in celebrations of 150th Foundation Day of India Meteorological Department on January 14 at Bharat Mandapam, New Delhi. He will

also address the gathering on the occasion," it said.

Mission Mausam will implement high-resolution atmospheric observations, next-generation radars and satellites, and high-performance computers. It will also focus on improving the understanding of weather and climate processes, and provide air quality data that will help strategise weather management and intervention in the long run.

The mission was approved by the Union Cabinet, chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in September 2024. It aimed to boost India's weather and climate-related science, research, and services and better equip stakeholders, including citizens and last-mile users, in tackling extreme weather events and the impacts of climate change.

The ambitious programme, with an outlay of Rs 2,000 crore over two years, will chiefly be implemented by the India

Meteorological Department, the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology, and the National Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasting.

Mission Mausam will directly benefit numerous sectors, such as agriculture, disaster management, defence, environment, aviation, water resources, power, tourism, shipping, transport, energy, and health, the communique said, adding that it would also enhance data-driven decision-making in areas such as urban planning, road and rail transport, offshore operations, and environmental monitoring.

To celebrate the 150th Foundation Day of IMD, a series of events, activities, and workshops have been organised to showcase IMD's achievements during the past 150 years, its role in making India climate-resilient, and demonstrate the role played by government institutions in providing various weather and climate services.

Soldiers at Siachen glacier now have high-speed internet

PTI ■ SRINAGAR

Soldiers posted at Siachen glacier, the highest battlefield in the world, can now enjoy high-speed internet services, a telecom company said.

In the run-up to Army Day on January 15, Reliance Jio, in collaboration with the Indian Army, has achieved a

groundbreaking milestone by extending its 4G and 5G network to the Siachen glacier, the company said.

"With support from the Army Signallers, Reliance Jio becomes the first telecom operator to deliver seamless connectivity in this harsh region," a spokesperson for the telecom company said.

She said Reliance Jio

successfully deployed plug-and-play pre-configured equipment at a forward post, leveraging its indigenous full-stack 5G technology.

"This achievement was made possible in coordination with Army Signallers from planning to multiple training sessions, system pre-configuration and comprehensive testing. The

Indian Army was pivotal in managing logistics, including airlifting Jio's equipment to Siachen glacier.

"This collaboration ensured connectivity at 16,000 feet in the Karakoram range, an area characterised by extreme conditions with temperatures plummeting to -50 degrees Celsius," the spokesperson added.

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Union minister Ashwini Vaishnaw hit back at Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg on Monday for making a "factually incorrect" statement that the incumbent government in India lost the election in 2024 due to its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Zuckerberg, chairman and CEO of Meta Platforms, triggered a row by claiming in a podcast interview that the Indian government lost the election in 2024 due to its weak COVID-19 response. The issue spiralled from the social media platform X.

Vaishnaw opted for Meta's

vaccines, and aid to nations worldwide during COVID, to leading India as the fastest-growing major economy, PM Modi's decisive 3rd-term victory is a testament to good governance and public trust," he said.

Vaishnaw said as the world's largest democracy, India conducted the 2024 general election involving more than 640 million (64 crore) voters.

"People of India reaffirmed their trust in the NDA led by PM Narendra Modi J's leadership," he added.

Vaishnaw said Zuckerberg's remarks failed to recognise these efforts and the strong mandate secured by the Indian government, and risked undermining the credibility of Meta's platforms.

"Mr Zuckerberg's claim that most incumbent governments, including India in the 2024 elections, lost post-COVID is factually incorrect," the minister said.

Appearing on the Joe Rogan podcast, Zuckerberg said 2024 was the big election year around the world and in a lot of countries like India, the incumbents lost the polls.

CBI get approval to prosecute AAP leader Satyendar Jain

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The CBI on Monday informed a special court it has obtained requisite sanctions from Delhi LG to prosecute AAP leader and former Delhi minister Satyendar Jain in a disproportionate assets case.

The central bureau of investigation (CBI) informed special judge Jitendra Singh, who posted the matter on January 22, observing a supplementary chargesheet was filed against Jain in the case on January 3.

"Today, a sanction dated December 31, 2024 for prosecution of Satyendra Jain under Section 19 of the POC (Prevention of Corruption) Act, has been filed by the IO (investigating officer). The same is taken on record... Be listed for consideration on January 22, 2025," the court said.

In November 2024, the CBI in a status report said the file seeking sanction to file the supplementary chargesheet was sent to the offices of the chief secretary and the Lieutenant Governor (LG).

The court had noted the CBI's sanction request and asked it to "personally monitor the matter" for the completion of the process in reasonable time.

Observing the agency did not maintain the case diary according to the rules, the judge sought a status report from the CBI's deputy inspector general concerned on November 5, 2024.

The judge was informed by the central probe agency that the investigation in the case was complete and the file was sent to the appropriate authority for approval.

BSF shoots Bangladeshi smuggler

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

Amid ongoing unease over the Indian efforts to build fence along the international border with Bangladesh the Border Security Force had to open fire reportedly injuring one Bangladeshi cattle-smuggler near the Mathabhanga outpost. The incident took place late on Sunday night. According to Bangladesh newspaper, "Shahidul Islam, 44, has been injured in firing by the BSF in Patgram.

Delhi Police arrest Gogi-Karalia gang members for extortion operation in NCR

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Delhi Police's Crime Branch claimed on Monday to have arrested a key member of the Gogi-Dinesh Karalia gang, who was wanted in three extortion cases lodged across Delhi-NCR.

According to the police on Monday, the gang made extortion calls from Malaysia and Dubai, targeting high-profile businessmen in the region. Acting on a tip-off, a Crime Branch team conducted a raid near Bhagwati Garden Extension and apprehended Sitender Kumar.

"He initially denied any involvement but later, during interrogation, confessed to orchestrating multiple extortion calls along with his associate Ajay, who is currently in Dubai," Special Commissioner of Police (Crime Branch) Devesh Chandra Srivastava said, adding that Kumar admitted to making extortion calls to prominent businessmen in Delhi's Rohini and Palam areas as well as in Ghaziabad,

demanding crores of rupees.

"To intimidate its targets, the gang arranged for associates to fire shots at the residence of a relative of an NRI businessman in Ghaziabad," the officer added.

The gang relied on SIM cards and phones sourced from abroad to avoid detection and ensure anonymity, he said.

The gang's activities were coordinated by Ajay and Kumar, who received instructions from associates based in foreign countries, including jailed members of the Gogi-Dinesh Karalia gang. Kumar told the interrogators that Ajay had persuaded him into joining the gang and expanding its extortion operations.

"With his arrest, police worked out three major extortion call-related cases registered at KN Katju Marg, Palam and Masuri in Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh. Legal provisions related to extortion have been added to these cases," the officer said.

The Gogi-Dinesh Karalia gang has a

well-organised network operating both locally and internationally. Extortion calls were made from Malaysia and Dubai to evade law enforcement. Additionally, the gang used sharpshooters to intimidate its targets, with logistical support provided by associates in India.

A resident of Haryana's Jhajjar, Kumar completed a polytechnic diploma in 2011 and worked with private firms, before venturing into the money-lending business. After meeting Ajay, a member of the gang, Kumar started indulging in criminal activities, leveraging his financial resources and connections. His involvement in extortion schemes escalated over time, making him a key member of the gang, police said.

The officer said police arrested Naveen alias Sonu, the brother of Dinesh Karalia, in an extortion case in December. Further investigations are focused on dismantling the gang's network, he added.

Vaishnaw's reality over Zuck's myths on Lok Sabha poll results

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Union minister Ashwini Vaishnaw hit back at Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg on Monday for making a "factually incorrect" statement that the incumbent government in India lost the election in 2024 due to its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Vaishnaw opted for Meta's



Facebook platform to call out Zuckerberg for spreading "misinformation".

"It is disappointing to see misinformation from Mr Zuckerberg himself. Let's uphold facts and credibility," the Union information and broadcasting minister said, tagging Meta on X and other social media platforms.

"From free food for 800 million, 2.2 billion free



vaccines, and aid to nations worldwide during COVID, to leading India as the fastest-growing major economy, PM Modi's decisive 3rd-term victory is a testament to good governance and public trust," he said.

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Appearing on the Joe Rogan podcast, Zuckerberg said 2024 was the big election year around the world and in a lot of countries like India, the incumbents lost the polls.

Raut, Pawar discuss local polls, seat-sharing possibility as INDIA bloc falters

TN RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

Within days after he announced that his party would go it alone in the forthcoming local body polls, Shiv Sena (UBT) MP and chief spokesperson Sanjay Raut met NCP (SP) president Sharad Pawar on Monday and discussed the issues relating to the forthcoming local body elections.

In a development that reflected its flexibility to explore the possibility of having seat-sharing for the forthcoming local body polls, Raut called on Sharad Pawar at the latter's residence "Silver Oak" in south Mumbai and their meeting lasted for 25 minutes.

There was official word from either Raut or Pawar as to what transpired at the meeting. However, informed sources in both the parties said that the two leaders deliberated on the issues relating to the local body polls, especially municipal corporation elections in major cities in Mumbai, Pune, Thane, Nagpur, Sambhaji Nagar and Nashik.

Though the Shiv Sena (UBT) has taken a stand that it will contest the local body polls in the state on its own strength, it is unlikely that the Uddhav Thackeray-led party will do so, considering that such a move would affect its poll prospects in the municipal corporations in the major cities of the state.

Sharad Pawar has already gone on record saying that the Shiv Sena (UBT)'s

decision to go it alone in the local body polls would have a negative impact on the prospects of all three MVA partners in the polls.

On its part, the Congress' central leadership is expected to reach out to Shiv Sena (UBT) chief Uddhav Thackeray after the Delhi Assembly polls, in which the Thackeray Sena is supporting the Arvind Kejriwal-led AAP in its fight against the BJP and the Mallikarjun Kharge-led grand-old party.

The Shiv Sena (UBT)'s announcement that it would go it alone in the local body polls should be seen in the context of the fact that the Opposition MVA is in total disarray after its miserable performance in the recent Maharashtra Assembly polls - in which the Shiv Sena (UBT), Congress, and NCP won 20, 16, and 10 seats, respectively, as against the 230 seats out of the total 288 seats collectively bagged by the ruling MahaYuti partners - comprising the BJP, Shiv Sena (Eknath Shinde) and NCP (Ajit Pawar).

Notwithstanding the Shiv Sena (UBT)'s posturing that it would contest the local body polls on its own strength, the Uddhav Thackeray-led party realises that its stakes are high in the municipal corporations, especially the ones in Mumbai, Thane, Pune, Sambhaji Nagar and Nashik and it can ill-afford to take on the might of the ruling MahaYuti-

comprising the BJP, Eknath Shinde-led Shiv Sena and NCP (Ajit Pawar).

In the normal course, the elections to the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) and other municipal corporations should have been held in February 2022.

The Shiv Sena, led by Uddhav Thackeray, was ruling the BMC for more than two decades. However, the political equation has changed after the split witness in the Shiv Sena in June last. There are now two Sena factions - one led by Uddhav and the other one by chief minister Eknath Shinde.

It may be recalled that the BMC polls held in 2017 had thrown up a hung house. The Shiv Sena had emerged as the single largest party with 84 seats in the 227-member BMC, followed by BJP-82, Congress- 31, NCP- 9, MNS- 7 and others- 14. During the first two and a half years in power, the Shiv Sena increased its strength to 94, by inducting among others seven corporators from the Raj Thackeray-led MNS.

In the forthcoming BMC polls, the Uddhav Thackeray-led Shiv Sena will contest the polls in alliance with the NCP and Congress, while the Shinde-led Sena will team up with the BJP to contest the crucial polls. The Raj Thackeray-led MNS may have an understanding with the BJP in the BMC polls.

Situation along LAC 'sensitive but stable': Army Chief

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Army chief General Upendra Dwivedi said here on Monday the situation along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) is "sensitive but stable". Addressing a press conference ahead of the Army Day on January 15, he said there is still a "degree" of standoff in the eastern Ladakh region and efforts are needed to restore trust between the Indian and the Chinese militaries. The Army chief said patrolling and grazing in traditional areas have started in Depsang and Demchok, the two friction points from where the two sides have disengaged in October. Our deployment is balanced and robust and we are capable of handling any situation, he said. We are focusing on boosting border infrastructure and capability development,

the Army chief said on the overall LAC situation. He said there is still a "degree" of standoff between the Indian and Chinese militaries along the LAC in eastern Ladakh and both sides need to sit down and firm up a broader understanding on how to calm down the situation. General Dwivedi, describing the situation in the region as "sensitive but stable", said the corps commanders have now been delegated powers to resolve "trivial" matters or "minor frictions" relating to patrolling and grazing so that they do not become "big" issues later.

The Army chief also said there was no such thing called buffer zones as a temporary moratorium was put on patrolling in certain areas to avoid chances of violence. Delving into changes witnessing the region since the face-off began in April 2020, General Dwivedi said both sides "doctored" the terrain, carried out

constructions, made deployment of troops and resorted to stocking of military hardware. "Therefore, what it means is that there is (still) a degree of standoff. Now as you have changed the situation after April 2020, so the trust between the two countries has to have a new definition," the Army chief said. "Therefore, there is a requirement for us to sit together and thereafter come to a broader understanding of how we want to calm down the situation and restore the trust," he said. General Dwivedi said the Army is looking forward to the next meeting of the Special Representatives on the boundary question of the two countries as well as talks under the framework of WMCC (Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination) on India-China border affairs. "We will be moving forward based on the guidance emerging from the



meetings," he said. Following an understanding reached on October 21 last year, the two sides completed the disengagement of troops at the two remaining friction points of Demchok and Depsang. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping held talks on the mar-

gins of the BRICS Summit in Russia on October 23 and agreed to revive various bilateral dialogue mechanisms, signalling an intention to normalise the relations. Last month, National Security Advisor(NSA)Ajit Doval travelled to Beijing and held Special Representatives talks with Chinese Foreign Minister

Wang Yi on the boundary dispute. "As you are aware, the situation is sensitive but stable. In October 2024, the situation in Depsang and Demchok in eastern Ladakh was resolved," General Dwivedi said. "The patrolling to traditional areas in these two sub-sectors has commenced. Similarly, the traditional grazing has also commenced in these two areas," he added. Calling India's military deployment along the LAC as "balanced and robust", he said the Army is "well poised" to deal with any situation. "A focused capability development for northern borders enabled infusion of niche technology into a war-fighting system," he said. Asked about the creation of buffer zones as part of disengagement process at certain friction points, Dwivedi said the terminology was used for temporary moratorium on

patrolling. "It means that both sides will remain back and will not go to the common areas because we still feel that if we meet at those places, the violence level may go high. The terminology was used for temporary moratorium," he explained. On the situation in Manipur, the Army chief said "synergised efforts" by security forces and "proactive" government initiatives have brought the situation in the state under control. "However, cyclic incidents of violence continue. We are working towards establishing peace in the region," he said. General Dwivedi said various NGOs and Army veterans are reaching out to the community leaders in an attempt to ensure reconciliation. He said the Army has put in place "enhanced surveillance" and "domination" along the India-Myanmar border to insulate the areas from a "spillover of turbulence" taking place in

Myanmar. "Fencing is a significant step and we have started new progress on this," he said. As regards Jammu and Kashmir, the Army chief said the situation is "firmly" under control and the 2021 "ceasefire" with the Pakistan military on the Line of Control (LoC) was holding up. At the same time he said: "The violence level is being orchestrated by the epicentre of terrorism that is Pakistan." The Chief of Army Staff said infiltration attempts are continuing including at the IB (International Border) sector along with attempts to smuggle in war-like stores and narcotics. "Last year, 60 per cent of terrorists eliminated were of Pakistan origin. As of today, whatever is a remnant in the Valley and Jammu area, we feel that around 80 per cent or more are of Pakistan origin," he said.

CDS urges youth of India to never give up in their journey of life



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Chief of Defence Staff(CDS)General Anil Chauhan on Monday urged the youth of India to never ever give up in their journey of life, underlining that "a bend in a road is not the end of the road". Addressing a gathering of cadets and officers during his visit to the ongoing National Cadet Corps (NCC) Republic Day Camp at Delhi Cantonment, he also said the country's youth will contribute towards reaching the goal of becoming a 'Viksit Bharat' by 2047 and they will also be the largest beneficiary of it. General Chauhan said January is a month of festivities and Tuesday is Veterans' Day followed by the Army Day on January 15. Then comes the Republic Day on January 26 and immediately next day the prime minister's rally happens at the NCC R-Day Camp, he said, adding, "this is symbolic of the fact that future of a nation rests with the youth of the country". A total of 2,361 NCC cadets from across the country are taking part in the month-long camp, which began on December 30. The annual event is also witnessing the participation of 917 girl cadets, the largest so far. Out of the total number of cadets, 114 are from Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh and 178 from the northeast region. General Chauhan said youths are the microcosm of the society, a demographic truth, a statistical reality. "The nation desires to be a Viksit Bharat by 2047. The youth of the coun-

try will contribute towards reaching that goal and will also be the largest beneficiary of it," he said. The CDS said he was sure that "as a nation we will be able to achieve this goal or dream of being a Viksit Bharat by 2047". The momentum will take it as the mass exists and the velocity is the vector which coupled with it, will help achieve the target, he added. General Chauhan said the country's youth will provide the speed and the direction will be provided by the senior leadership. The CDS also offered some life lessons to the cadets and through them to the youth of the country. "Destiny and success is not preordained, you have to work for it. It is often said, destiny is not by chance, it is by choice. And, for success you will have to work hard to achieve it," he asserted. "There will be ups and downs in life. So, remember a bend in a road is not the end of the road," the CDS said. In his address, he also quoted lines from a poem 'If' by Rudyard Kipling and recited poetry 'Koshish Karne Walon ki Haar Nahin Hoti' by Sohanlal Dwivedi. "That is the message I want to leave with you, 'koshish karne walon ki kabhi haar nahin hoti'. So, never, never, ever give up," the CDS said. General Chauhan during his visit to the NCC R-Day Camp also visited the 'flag area', the NCC Hall of Fame and also interacted with a few cadets before being treated to some colourful cultural performances by groups of cadets from different directorates of the Corps.

Dhankhar lauds EC for conducting polls that earned global accolades

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar on Monday here lauded the Election Commission(EC)for holding polls that have earned global accolades, saying there will always be an urge to criticise it to get the best of it. He also said the independence of the poll panel is never a casualty as the bureaucracy is so trained and the election machinery so greased and fuelled. His remarks came against the backdrop of the opposition's attacks on the EC over alleged discrepancies in electoral rolls, allegations of fudges voter turnout data and the efficacy of

electronic voting machines. Addressing a book launch event, Dhankhar said "We have an Election Commission that has worked. And it has worked in a fashion that global recognition is coming to it. Many countries in the world want their elections to be overseen by our Election Commission." There will always be, the vice president said, an urge to criticise to get the best of it. "But we all are assured because our bureaucracy is so trained. Our election machinery is so greased and fuelled. Independence is never a casualty". Dhankhar, who is also the Rajya Sabha chairperson, said a functional Parliament is quintessential to the survival of democracy because it is



Parliament that allows the power of expression. "A power of expression where no one can question. What you say in Parliament, you are immunised from any other concern, you can't be taken to civil court, you can't feel culpability in it. When you have that supreme authority, that no matter what you say in Parliament, no citizen of this country can take recourse to law if they are hurt," he said explaining parliamentary privileges. He said it puts a heavy obligation on Parliament itself. The privileges come with "heavy responsibility," he explained. The vice president opined that Parliament is the "most possible" platform for the represen-

tation of the people. "... Most possible because eligibility to vote has an age factor and those below that age are not entitled to reflect themselves. Therefore it is not very idealistic, but it is very close to idealism. So Parliament reflects the will of the people," he said. One of Parliament's powers is to hold the executive accountable. He said the executive is held accountable only through a parliamentary mechanism which is based on dialogue, debate, discussion and deliberation. He said Parliament is not a place for a free fall of information and not a place to settle scores with people or institutions that cannot have their say in Parliament.

GMDA Enforcement Wing acts heavily on encroachment at SPR

STAFF REPORTER ■ GURUGRAM

The Enforcement Wing of the Gurugram Metropolitan Development Authority (GMDA) on Monday acted heavily on encroachment on SPR where-in 12 acres of green belt area was cleared of encroachment. DTP GMDA R. S. Baath with his team including ATP Mange Raam with four earth movers and 50 police persons held the demolition drive. About 12 acres area was cleared by GMDA by removing big nurseries and illegal parking and building material. Nurseries developed across four acres and building materials spread across three acres were cleared. In the drive DTP GMDA also got the building material that was encroaching green belts mixed by earth movers and thereafter all concerned requested for one day time to remove all material. Additionally, about five permanent rooms and 10 temporary structures were also removed. GMDA looks after the important stretches and major sector dividing roads and green belts in gurugram. Recently the Enforcement



Wing of GMDA led by DTP GMDA, R.S. Baath assured that entire SPR of about 12 km length from national highway to Ghata will be cleared by 31st January. Though efforts were made earlier however now strict enforcement drives will be conducted and systematic ways will be worked out to make the area greener. Earlier Minister of Environment and Industry Minister Rao Narbir Singh also directed that SPR road must be made clean and green. Furthermore, CEO GMDA also directed DTP GMDA to work on important roads and green belts on top priority to further enhance the development and infrastructure. DTP R.S. Baath also visited surrounding area and directed all to remove the encroachment in 24 hours and drive will be continued.

Ramesh's petition challenging tweaking of election rules to come up for hearing on Wednesday

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Congress general secretary Jairam Ramesh's writ petition in the Supreme Court challenging the recent amendments to the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961, will come up for hearing in the apex court on Wednesday. The matter will come up for hearing before the bench headed by Chief Justice of India Sanjiv Khanna on January 15, according to the cause list uploaded on the Supreme Court website. The Congress had filed the writ petition in the Supreme Court last month challenging the recent amendments to the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961 and expressed hope that the apex court will help restore the "fast eroding" integrity of the electoral process. The government has tweaked an election rule to prevent public inspection of certain electronic documents such as CCTV camera and webcasting footage as well as video recordings of candidates to prevent their misuse. AICC general secretary Jairam Ramesh, who has filed the petition, had said, "The integrity of the electoral process is fast eroding. Hopefully the Supreme Court will help restore it."



India signs Hajj agreement with Saudi Arabia, finalises quota of 1,75,025 pilgrims



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

India on Monday signed a Hajj Agreement with Saudi Arabia, finalising a quota of 1,75,025 pilgrims for itself. Ministry of Minority Affairs Minister Kiren Rijiju signed the agreement with Saudi Arabia's Minister for Hajj and Umrah Tawfiq Bin Fawzan Al-Rabiah in Jeddah. "Hajj Agreement 2025 signed with Tawfiq Bin Fawzan Al-Rabiah, Minister for Hajj and Umrah of Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Finalized a quota of 1,75,025 pilgrims from India for Hajj 2025. We are committed to providing the best possible services to all our Haj pilgrims," Rijiju said in a social media post. "In the meeting with Dr Tawfiq bin Fawzan Al Rabiah, Saudi Minister of Hajj and Umrah,

we discussed important matters related to Hajj 2025 and explored steps to further improve the pilgrimage experience for Indian pilgrims. It will also strengthen our bilateral relation," the minister said. Reacting to the development, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said he welcomes this agreement, which is a "wonderful news" for Hajj pilgrims from India. He said, "Our Government is committed to ensuring improved pilgrimage experiences for devotees." In a written reply to a question in the Rajya Sabha last month, Rijiju said that for the year 2025, the quota has been distributed within the same range between HCoI and HGOs, in the ratio of 70:30, which has been communicated vide the Haj Policy-2025 issued on August 5, 2024.

Army Day Parade to see participation of all-girl marching contingent from NCC

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Army Day Parade this year will see participation of an all-girl marching contingent from the National Cadet Corps (NCC) and showcasing of four thematic tableaux, including one based on the force's Mission Olympics Wing. An all-women Agniveer contingent from the Corps of Military Police (CMP), Centre and School at Bengaluru, and a set of marching 'robotic mules' will also register their presence at the prestigious annual parade for the first time, defence sources said. The Army Day Parade will take place at Bombay Engineering Group (BEG) and Centre in Maharashtra's Pune on January 15 which comes under the Army's Southern Command. In the evening, a programme called 'Gaurav Gatha' is planned to be held showcasing

the evolution of welfare from ancient period to the contemporary era. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh is likely to grace this event, the sources said. The theme for the 77th Army Day celebrations is 'Samarth Bharat, Saksham Sena', and the focus this time is to demonstrate the capabilities of the Army contributing to a stronger nation. Some of the platforms that will be showcased during the parade include K9 Vajra self-propelled howitzer, BMP-2 Sarath infantry combat vehicle, T-90 tanks, Swathi weapon locating radar, Sarvatra Bridging System, Multi-Barrel Rocket System, ATOR N1200 all-terrain vehicle, drone jammer systems and mobile communication nodes, sources in the defence establishment said. "This year's parade will include an all-girl contingent of the NCC and an all-women

Agniveer contingent from the Corps of Military Police centre in Bengaluru and both will be taking part in the Army Day Parade for the first time," a defence source said. Besides, "12 robotic mules" standing in two equal rows followed by their handlers will also be taking part in the parade for the very first time. These mules were inducted last year and represent the Army's steps towards modernisation of the force. These nimble-footed machines can carry loads, go to inaccessible areas and engage militants also, they said. "While marching, when they reach in front of the dais, the robotic mules will salute the dignitaries before carrying forward in the parade," the source added. "Also, in line with the theme of the parade, four tableaux akin to the ones seen



at the Republic Day Parade will also be showcased depicting the Indian Army's prowess, green initiatives, the value of the veterans and the force's role in fostering the Olympic spirit to produce winners," the source told PTI. As per the plan, the tableau depicting the Army's Mission Olympics Wing will be the leading tableau and one

themed on technology absorption in the last one decade will be the last in the series, an official said. The Indian Army's Mission Olympics Wing was established in 2001 under which a large number of sportspersons are training at various different sports nodes in the country. Besides, there are total of many Boys Sports companies and

Girls Sports companies for nurturing the talent from young age (9-16 years). Additionally, a Paralympic Node was earlier established to motivate and train soldiers with any disability for paralympic sports. "The Mission Olympics tableau will show moving depiction of athletes doing fencing, wrestling aboard it and some paralympic athletes who have brought laurels for the country, while some members of the Army Sports Institute, Pune, will be walking on ground alongside the tableau," the source said. The next in line will be the veterans' tableau depicting their contribution to nation-building even after they have hung their boots. Paralympic athlete and Army veteran Murlikant Petkar, who had earned a gold medal in swimming (in 1972) and on

whose life the film 'Chandu Champion' was based, will also be part of the parade through the tableau, he added. Another tableau will portray the Army's efforts in adopting green measures to contribute towards achieving net-zero emission, including the achievement by Pune's College of Military Engineering in this field, officials said. The fourth tableau's theme is on technology absorption, the cutting-edge technology inducted by the Army in the last decade such as drones, nano technology, UAVs and tethered drones will be showcased in it, they said. The Army has declared 2024-25 as the 'year of technology absorption'. In the run-up to the Army Day Parade, several events such as display by a dog squad, exhibition of weapons and equipments, and defence companies

putting up stalls were held at various locations falling within the Southern Command area. The Southern Command traces its origin to the erstwhile Bombay Command established on April 1, 1895, the day which marks the raising of the command in Pune (then called Poona). The Southern Command encompasses 11 states and four Union Territories covering nearly 41 per cent of the country's landmass, according to its official website. Traditionally, the annual Army Day Parade had been held in Delhi. This long-standing practice saw a shift in January 2023 when the parade was conducted in Bengaluru, which comes in the Southern Command area. The Army Day Parade 2024 was hosted in Lucknow, which falls in the Central Command area.

MAHAKUMBH 2025: SPECIAL COVERAGE

Unique themed entry gates captivate devotees



BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■
MAHAKUMBH NAGAR

thematic designs. Themed entry gates across the Mela area go beyond being visually stunning, serving as markers of identity, helping pilgrims locate and reach specific organisations. CM Yogi Adityanath's vision of making Mahakumbh more grand and divine than ever is clearly visible in the Akhara area. Various Akharas and organisations have not only enriched their camps spiritually, but have also designed their entry gates with distinctive themes. Located near Jhunsi, these gates come in various designs, including airplane models, Shivlings, and crowns, enhancing the overall grandeur of the camps. The artisans behind these gates have come from all across India, including Kolkata, Varanasi, and South India. According to the artists, it took them 10 to 15 days to construct these gates, with costs running into lakhs of rupees. These gates serve a dual purpose: they enhance the aesthetic appeal of the camps and act as identifiers, helping pilgrims locate specific camps in the sprawling Mela area.

Under the leadership of Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, the Akhara area at Mahakumbh 2025 is a sight to behold. Camps for various organisations, including the Akharas, Khak Chowk, Dandiawada, Acharyawada, and Prayagwal, are fully set up and adorned with vibrant decorations. While the camps are beautifully designed as always, this year, the entry gates are stealing the spotlight with their unique and



PM Modi welcomes Maha Kumbh 2025

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

As Maha Kumbh began in the holy city of Prayagraj on Monday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi described it as a very special day for

those who cherish Indian values and culture, saying the massive religious event embodies India's timeless spiritual heritage. "A very special day for crores of people who cherish Bharatiya values and culture! Maha Kumbh

2025 commences in Prayagraj, bringing together countless people in a sacred confluence of faith, devotion and culture. The Maha Kumbh embodies India's timeless spiritual heritage and celebrates faith and harmony," he said in a

social media post. The prime minister said he was happy to see Prayagraj abuzz, with countless people coming there, taking the holy dip and seeking blessings. He wished the pilgrims and tourists a wonderful stay.



UP Police ensure robust security

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■
MAHAKUMBH NAGAR

On Monday, the Uttar Pradesh Police intensified security and crowd management measures at the 2025 Maha Kumbh Mela in Prayagraj, one of the world's largest human congregations. Police personnel, including mounted units, patrolled the grounds to ensure a seamless and secure experience for devotees flocking to the Triveni Sangam for the auspicious Paus Purnima Snan. Deputy Inspector General (DIG) Vaibhav Krishna said over 10,000 personnel from local police stations, paramilitary forces, and specialized units have been deployed for the event. Speaking to ANI, he noted

that approximately 60 lakh devotees had already taken the holy dip, and final figures would be released later. "The arrangements made by the police are functioning well. Crowd regulations, traffic diversions, and parking accommodations are being efficiently managed. We are fully prepared to address any challenges," DIG Krishna stated. Additional Director General (ADG) Bhanu Bhaskar echoed these sentiments, emphasizing the preparedness of the police force. "The fair administration is fully alert, with all forces deployed since 3 a.m. Bathing ghats are under constant surveillance, and there have been no reported issues so far," he

said. Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP) Rajesh Dwivedi added that devotees continued to arrive in large numbers throughout the day. "The ghats are fully occupied, and the first day of the Maha Kumbh is proceeding peacefully. We are monitoring the influx and ensuring a safe environment for all," he said. In a notable upgrade, five American Warmblood horses were deployed for mounted police patrols. Known for their ability to sense danger from a distance, these horses provide an additional layer of security at the sprawling Mela grounds. Prime Minister Modi Lauds Maha Kumbh 2025

broader audience, including international tourists," he said. The domes city will feature 176 air-conditioned cottages equipped with amenities like geysers and provisions for satvik (pure vegetarian) meals. These 16x16-foot cottages are priced at ₹1.1 lakh per day during peak bathing days and ₹81,000 on other days. Travel agents are already witnessing interest in the bookings. "We have received numerous inquiries, especially from NRIs and tourists looking for a unique way to experience the Kumbh," said Pankaj Sharma, a Prayagraj-based tour operator. "This concept of luxury within a spiritual framework is very appealing to international visitors."

Dome city promises hill-station experience for visitors

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■
MAHAKUMBH NAGAR

This year's Maha Kumbh has an extraordinary addition: the state-of-the-art Dome City in Araiil. Designed to provide an unparalleled blend of luxury and spirituality, this ambitious project by Evo Life Space in collaboration with the Uttar Pradesh Tourism Department promises visitors an experience reminiscent of a hill station. "For the first time, pilgrims will have access to accommodations that combine modern comfort with the serene spirituality of the Kumbh. Dome City is not just a facility; it is an experience that will leave a lasting impression," said Amit Johari, Director of Evo Life Space. A Unique concept Elevated 15 to 18 feet above ground, Dome City comprises 44 uniquely designed domes, each measuring 32x32 feet. Constructed with 360-degree polycarbonate sheets, these domes are bulletproof and fireproof, ensuring safety and comfort. "Visitors can enjoy the panoramic views of the Kumbh from the domes while feeling as if they're in a hill station," Johari explained. "It's an effort to redefine how people experience the Maha Kumbh." Mukesh Meshram, Secretary of the Uttar Pradesh Tourism Department, emphasized the innovative vision behind Dome City. "The Maha Kumbh is not just a religious event; it is a global gathering. This Dome City concept adds a modern dimension to its timeless appeal, making it accessible to a



Government's vision During a visit to Prayagraj on December 23, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath inspected the Dome City and lauded its potential. "This initiative is a testament to our efforts to make the Maha Kumbh a globally renowned event. It sets a new benchmark for hospitality and spiritual tourism," he said. Shishir Singh, a government spokesperson, highlighted the broader vision. "The Dome City is an example of how we are elevating the Maha Kumbh experience. It is not just about accommodations but about redefining tourism standards in India." Tour operators believe this initiative will place Prayagraj firmly on the global tourism map. "Dome City offers a chance for visitors to experience the Kumbh in a way that has never been done before. It will attract both pilgrims and leisure tourists looking for a unique spiritual getaway," said Sunita Verma, a Delhi-based travel consultant. The Future Beckons With its innovative design and luxurious amenities, Dome City is poised to revolutionize the Maha Kumbh experience. "This is not just about luxury; it is about creating memories that resonate with the soul," concluded Johari. As the countdown to Maha Kumbh 2025 begins, Prayagraj is ready to welcome the world to an unforgettable journey of faith, culture, and comfort.

Kumbh becomes a global spiritual hub and symbol of world unity

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■
MAHAKUMBH NAGAR

The Maha Kumbh has emerged as a global epicenter of faith and a symbol of world unity. Pilgrims from across India and countries like the United States, Russia, Germany, Italy, and Ecuador were captivated by the grandeur of Sanatan culture. They took holy dips at the Sangam, donned tilaks, and strolled along the sacred sands. The atmosphere was charged with chants of "Jai Shri Ram" and "Har Har Gange," echoing in Spanish, German, Russian, and French. This year, the Sangam Ghat has transformed into a major spiritual and cultural attraction for the world. Visitors, both Indian and international, described it as a center for profound experiences. Christina from

Germany shared, "Being here brings immense peace to my soul. I had heard about the Maha Kumbh, but experiencing it is unforgettable." Christina, born in Ecuador, later moved to Germany with her parents. Her companions from Ecuador also expressed admiration for India's spirituality, saying, "Taking a dip in the Ganga feels like washing away all sins." **New Yorker Coby Halperin Discovers India's Cultural Depth** Fashion designer Coby Halperin from New York called the Maha Kumbh a life-changing experience. "Witnessing India's culture and traditions in such a grand form is entirely new for me. The Maha Kumbh has given me an opportunity to understand Indian culture deeply. This event is not just



spiritual but also culturally inspiring," he said. **A Life-Changing Experience for Russia's Mikhail** Mikhail and his friends from Russia chanted "Har Har Gange" after taking a holy dip at the Sangam. "I had read about the Maha Kumbh, but witnessing its scale and divinity is the most beautiful experience of my life," said Mikhail. "It's a moment we will never forget." **Pilgrims from Italy and Australia Hail the World's Largest Gathering** Paulo from Italy, along with his 12-member group, bathed at the Sangam and praised the Uttar Pradesh government's arrangements. "An event of this scale is unimaginable anywhere else in the world. It showcases India's greatness. The leadership here (referring to Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath) deserves appreciation," Paulo said. Similarly, Alex from Australia, inspired by his friends in Germany, attended the Maha Kumbh and described it as the most memorable experience of his life. This year's Maha Kumbh has not only drawn Indian devotees but also attracted thousands of international tourists and spiritual seekers. Visitors from around the world came to experience Indian culture, spirituality, and the sacred significance of the Ganga. The event stands as a testament to India's rich traditions and also serves as a convergence point for global unity and spirituality. The Maha Kumbh has captivated the world, firmly establishing itself as a symbol of India's cultural and spiritual heritage.



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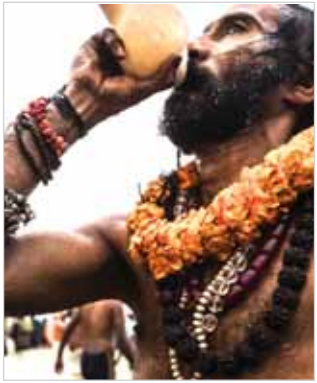
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PAPER WITH PASSION

Confluence of faith

Truly a once-in-a-lifetime experience, the Maha Kumbh celebrates India's unity, diversity and enduring spiritual heritage

There are fairs and festivals but none like Maha Kumbh, a once-in-a-lifetime event that is as spiritual as it is eventful, showcasing tenacity, modernity, culture and human will to endure—all at the same time. The Maha Kumbh Mela 2025, the world's largest religious congregation, began on January 13 in Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh, drawing millions of devotees to the sacred confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna, and the mythical Saraswati rivers. This event is expected to host over 45 crore pilgrims, including 15 lakh from foreign nations, over its 45-day span. The Maha Kumbh is a deeply spiritual event, rooted in ancient Hindu traditions. The ritual of taking a holy dip at the Triveni Sangam is believed to cleanse one of sins and pave the way for salvation (moksha). This grand gathering is a testament to India's enduring spiritual heritage and celebrates the unity and diversity of its cultural fabric. As Prime Minister Narendra Modi noted, the Maha Kumbh is a "sacred confluence of faith, devotion, and culture."



The Uttar Pradesh government, in collaboration with central agencies, has made extensive preparations to accommodate the unprecedented number of pilgrims. The state has allocated a budget of Rs 7,000 crore for the event, focusing on sanitation, security, and technological integration.

Like any mega event Maha Kumbh is also not free from fear of mishaps especially stampedes which have happened in the past. To avoid that, there have to be elaborate security arrangements especially on the designated bathing days. The State government has deployed AI-enabled cameras, underwater drones for 24/7 monitoring, and teams from PAC, NDRF, and SDRF for crowd and water safety are on the watch. A first-of-its-kind initiative featuring digital monitoring systems to streamline crowd management and enhance safety has also been put in place. Besides, this time expansion of ghats, installation of remote life-saving buoys, and a fleet of 700 flagged boats have been made to ensure smooth movement and safety of devotees. Maha Kumbh's appeal lies in its fusion of ancient spirituality with modern infrastructure. This year's 'mela' exemplifies this synergy, blending cutting-edge technology with age-old rituals. The congregation serves as a melting pot for devotees, saints, and tourists, creating a vibrant tapestry of faith and culture. On *Paush Purnima*, the first 'Shahi Snan' witnessed more than 40 lakh devotees taking a holy dip at the Sangam. The ceremonial bath marks the beginning of the 'mela,' symbolising the purification of body and soul. Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath welcomed devotees, emphasizing the event as a celebration of 'unity in diversity' and the blending of faith with modernity. With meticulous planning and unwavering commitment, Maha Kumbh 2025 stands as a shining example of India's ability to honour its spiritual roots while embracing technological advancements. As the Maha Kumbh unfolds, it offers a transformative experience to millions who seek spiritual solace and cultural enrichment.

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PICTALK



Devotees take a holy dip at Sangam on the first day of Maha Kumbh Mela 2025, in Prayagraj

PTI

How to give a golden touch to the silver years

Old age often conjures images of frailty, dependence and withdrawal. But it can be a second bloom—a chance to embrace life with renewed vigour

John and Hazel are a couple in their eighties. They were our neighbours at a mountain resort in Germany and were on a two-week holiday. They had come from the UK, driving nonstop for hours. They went hiking in the woods, drove to nearby places of interest even on snowy and rainy days without cursing the weather, made their own breakfast in their room instead of indulging in the buffet, and seemed to be having the best of their times. When I spoke to them, I saw how enthused they were about their retired lives, looking forward to travelling more, seeing more places on earth, and not once did they mention any discomfort that might be commonplace at their age: creaking knees, waning memory, shivering hands, feeble limbs.



This is the kind of old age I wish for myself and my spouse. Though, truth be told, 'wish' feels more honest than 'envisage' because I am unsure if I will see the world that far ahead. Pushing my mid-fifties, I am already troubled by the thought of a frail old age where my body might fail me, denying me the

chance to drink life to the lees. Health issues have started giving me early warnings. And every time I travel to the West and see people older than me by a few decades living with independence, engagement, and joy, I am overcome not with envy but with wonder—and a quiet determination. Why do we, in India, not envision such a golden old age for ourselves? Why do we resign ourselves so early to physical decline, social withdrawal, and the weight of ailments? Somewhere along the way, we have been conditioned to expect aging as a slow retreat from life rather than an opportunity for a second bloom. Part of it lies in our cultural mindset, perhaps—where old age is often equated with quietude,

dependence, and spiritual pursuits. In contrast, many Western cultures emphasise personal fulfillment and activity well into the later years of life. Retirees continue to travel, explore hobbies, and stay physically active, seeing old age as a continuation of life rather than its decline. We Indians often embrace a more sedentary old age, citing health issues, familial obligations, or even spirituality as reasons to wind down. But does spirituality have to mean withdrawal? The narrative around aging needs to shift—from enduring to embracing, from retiring to thriving. Perhaps, if we break free from the cultural mould of passive aging and take cues from people like John and Hazel, we can look forward to a life where the sunset years are not just endured but truly, deeply lived.

To achieve this, we must adopt a proactive approach. Regular physical activity tailored to our abilities can significantly enhance mobility and reduce age-related health issues. Prioritising balanced nutrition with a focus on protein intake and essential

vitamins is key to maintaining strength and mental clarity. Beyond physical wellness, fostering emotional well-being by staying connected with friends, family, and community can counter isolation and loneliness, which often accompany aging. Moreover, financial planning cannot be overlooked. A secure financial base can empower older adults to pursue passions, travel, and stay engaged in life. Ultimately, aging is a privilege—a phase of life that can be as vibrant and fulfilling as any other if approached with the right mindset. Let us not merely aspire for longer lives but richer ones, where we continue to explore, learn, and inspire generations that follow. The golden years can truly be golden if we choose to make them so. To John, Hazel and dozens others that I come across on my jaunts to the other side of the globe, thank you. For making me see life in a whole new perspective.

(The author is a Dubai-based columnist and children's writing coach. She has published six books. View are personal)



ASHA IYER KUMAR

The calculus behind global invitations

The guest list of Republic day, over the years has reflected India's growing global aspirations, balancing diplomacy with pragmatism



BHOPINDER SINGH

Beyond the obvious suggestions of bilateral bonhomie and relationship, there is an invisible calculus of cold strategy in inviting foreign Heads of State to events like the Republic Day, in the Indian context. This year, the President of Indonesia, Prabowo Subianto, graces the occasion. Last year it was the French President, Emmanuel Macron, who heads what the Hudson Institute has described as "India's new best friend". This is unsurprising, given that France was one of the rare countries to avoid condemning India's nuclear test (later emerged as amongst the foremost nuclear fuel and reactor suppliers), supports Delhi's bid to become a permanent member of the United Nations, besides offering strategic defence platforms like Rafale fighters, Scorpene submarines etc.

Before Macron it was the Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi (reviving memories of Nehru-Nasser era) whose visit signified India's increased leverage within Ummah (Islamic world), negating Pakistan's age-old rhetoric. Still earlier were stalwarts from BRICS comity i.e., Brazil and South Africa, which was reflective of India's expanded outreach and ambition to assert its strategic independence, beyond superpower-led 'Bloc'. But one region that has increasingly concerned India in terms of the duality of opportunities and threats, is from the East feeding its 'Act East' (evolved from prior 'Look East') policy.

Part of the opportunities is to stitch alliances and further the latent opportunities of the prosperous ASEAN region, and part of its security concern is the shared fear of China's expansionism which makes these Eastern countries, natural allies with India. Therefore the 2018 guest list for the Republic Day parade was a virtual who's who of Heads of State under the commemorative theme 'Shared Values, Common Destiny' from Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

This year's guest is yet again the President of Indonesia, Prabowo



Subianto, who will be the third Indonesian Head of State to come as the Chief Guest after Joko Widodo in 2018, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono in 2011, and Sukarno in 1950 (who incidentally was the first foreign Head of State in a Republic Day parade).

Beyond the deep civilisation and cultural connection between the two Asian countries, Indonesia as the world's largest Muslim population country with institutionalised tenets of religious tolerance and diversities, has much in common with India. But perhaps the most significant commonality is the wounded history with China as the purge unleashed by Indonesian dictator and strongman, Suharto (killing between 0.5 to 1 million communists, also banning Chinese literature, culture and diplomatic relations) took decades for the Sino-Indonesian diplomatic relations to reopen in 1990.

But it is the brazen Chinese claims of territorial usurpation in the South China Seas that affect Indonesia the most, especially with its sovereignty over the Natuna Islands getting repeatedly punctured by Chinese transgressions. China's infamous nine-dash line formulation has consumed the waters of the Natuna Islands from a cartographical sense, even though the Permanent Court of Arbitration Ruling validated Indonesian claims. But it is an issue that remains testy with Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto



THEREFORE THE 2018 GUEST LIST FOR THE REPUBLIC DAY PARADE WAS A VIRTUAL WHO'S WHO OF HEADS OF STATE UNDER THE COMMEMORATIVE THEME 'SHARED VALUES, COMMON DESTINY'

recently signing a memorandum of understanding with the Chinese for "joint maritime development" whilst acknowledging an "overlapping claim" – it was a move of acknowledgement that was slammed by many international commentators who believe it gave credence and support to Chinese claims.

That said, the usually unconcerned Indonesians who had warmed up to the Chinese with its Belt & Road Initiative (BRI) largesse and other investments are gradually becoming more Sino-wary and concerned. The visit of the Indonesian President to India will be carefully watched in Beijing for what is said or suggested during the visit. Besides the Chinese angularity, there are enough commercial and diplomatic stakes to be tapped bilaterally, which chooses the Indonesian Head of State, very apt and strategic.

However, across the oceans, it is the guest list of invitees for the swearing-in of the 47th President of the United States (20th Jan) that is raising eyebrows, about the unpredictability of the Trump 1.0.2 tenure, that it signifies. Reportedly the Trump-Vance Inaugural Committee has raised an unbelievable \$170 million (compared to \$107 in 2016) from the deep-pocketed donors and corporations who presumably seek to curry favour with him at the jamboree. But it is the personal invite list of Trump (doing away with the traditional

avoidance of Head of State to US Presidential swearing-in) that is extremely disconcerting, for it includes ideological hard right-wingers like Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, Argentinian President Javier Milei, El Salvador President Nayib Bukele, Hungarian President Viktor Orban, ousted Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro and French far-right leader Eric Zemmour! But the strangest invite was to the Chinese President Xi Jinping, onto whom his Presidential campaign diatribe and threats were ostensibly directed. Xi tellingly declined and may instead send some other official.

The much-believed invite to the Indian Prime Minister never came, and it will be left to the External Affairs Minister, S Jaishankar, to represent the Indian government, as per the invite received. Another notable omission has been the Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky who went public in expressing interest to attend the same but hasn't received the invite. Trump's unsaid 'frenemy' Vladimir Putin would be smiling at emerging signals from Washington DC. US Ambassador to India's reassurance given the "crowded swearing-in ceremony" doesn't seem too convincing or reassuring.

(The writer, a military veteran, is a former Lt Governor of Andaman & Nicobar Islands and Puducherry. The views expressed are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

DECODING ANCIENT LANGUAGES

Madam — The Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu MK Stalin has announced a prize of \$1 million for deciphering the script of the Indus Valley Civilisation (IVC), or Harappan Civilisation, aka Dravidian Civilisation, the Bronze Age culture that originated in the Indus River valley around 6000 BCE. For over a century, "the pictographic and logo-syllabic script, probably standing for one or two languages, has been the most vexing problem for epigraphists and archaeologists. However, "Indus script scholars John Marshall, Yuri Kozorov, Nikita Gurov, Kamil Zvebil, Asko Parpola, Iravatham Mahadevan and Bryan Wells agree that the language underlying the Indus script is Dravidian." A science paper pointed out that the Indus Valley people spoke a Dravidian language, while the Vedic people spoke an Indo-European language, Sanskrit. The paper argues, "A possible scenario combining genetic data with archaeology and linguistics is that proto-Dravidian was spread by people of the Indus Valley Civilisation." At an event in Chennai to mark the centenary of the IVC, Stalin said that the discovery of Sir John Marshall, the then Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India, completely changed the understanding of India's past. Stalin added that the discovery debunked the claim that Aryans and Sanskrit originated in India. Marshall's argument that the IVC predated Aryan (Vedic) civilisation and that the language in the Indus Valley could be Dravidian was a turning point in history. Ironically, his statue is being installed in Tamil Nadu, though he is credited with discovering IVC through excavations in Harappa and Mohenjodaro, now in Pakistan.

Haridasan Rajan | Kozhikode

END POST-RETIREMENT POSTINGS

Madam — The suggestions of the Vice President to go on merit while deciding postings are welcome. His suggestion to

India a developed nation by 2047



The ambition of transforming India into a 'Viksit Bharat' by 2047 demands bold and innovative economic strategies. The recent proposal to create an 'Amrit Kaal Fund', inspired by Singapore's GIC model, appears to be a highly promising approach to achieve the financial goals necessary for sustainable growth. India's public sector enterprises have demonstrated significant improvement in earnings and the market value of public sector stocks has nearly tripled

in recent years. By transferring PSU holdings in excess of 51 per cent into this fund, the government can effectively leverage these assets to raise resources, reduce fiscal deficits, retire public debt and improve India's sovereign credit ratings.

The strategic shift away from traditional privatisation toward shared public ownership addresses valid concerns about the concentration of wealth and political sensitivities. Furthermore, listing the fund as an exchange-traded vehicle would allow domestic and international investors to participate in India's growth story, thereby unlocking additional capital. It is imperative that the 2025 budget prioritises this visionary initiative to propel India towards 8+ GDP growth to achieve the goal of a developed nation by 2047.

Vishal Mayur | Tumakuru

do away with post-retirement rehabilitations is also a valid one to avoid decisions being incentivised and inductive to grab posts. But these are happening as policy of the ruling party. The top executives of public service commissions do not decide such political policies. Therefore, he should use his good office and prevail upon the ruling dispensation to do away with the system of taking their favourable judgements to decide their post-retirement rehabilitations.

A blanket ban avoiding posting after retirement for five years may be thought of. Postings lack logic. The governor is selected based on political lenience, and he is expected to appoint apolitical academicians as vice chancellors of universities. It cannot happen so. As such, postings are made on merit, but the merit here means normally the speed and commitment with which the line of the ruling party is toed up. In a system where caste, cash and commitment to policies are predominant, expecting activities meant for Puritans is like

searching for fuel sticks in a desert land. A G Rajmohan | Anantapur

EMPOWERING WOMEN INVESTORS

Madam — The participation of women in India's equity markets is steadily growing, marking a significant shift in financial dynamics. Factors like increased financial independence, digital accessibility through investment platforms, and rising financial literacy have empowered women to actively invest in stocks. Women are adopting a research-driven, long-term approach, contributing to a more balanced and stable market environment. Despite challenges like cultural biases and limited confidence in some cases, the trend is gaining momentum. This rise not only promotes gender inclusivity but also strengthens retail participation in India's equity landscape, heralding a more diverse financial future.

Anushka Bohra | Ujjain

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com



FIRST COLUMN

AN ODE TO MY MOTHER

A woman of immense strength and boundless compassion, she dedicated her life to healing



RAVI VALLURI

Always be associated with people who are good at heart, said Swami Vivekananda. My mother shared her birthday with Swami Vivekananda (12th January). She nurtured strong bonding with spiritually inclined stalwarts. I recall her association with Sathya Sai Baba, Ganapathi Sachchidanda Swamiji, Raghavendra Swami Mutt, Swami Chinmayananda, Jiddu Krishnamurti, Mahesh Yogi and Gurudev Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. She wanted to pursue medicine but life did not take that trajectory. So, she upended the pyramid and became a qualified medical social worker and worked diligently at the Rajan Babu TB (RBTB) Hospital, in Delhi.

Gurudev says, "Open your hands and sky is in your hands." To combat and challenge the disease of tuberculosis she initiated several rehabilitation projects. This included a creche for the children of those afflicted with this malady, a Stitching Centre, candle and match-making units. She used to tell patients and their children that "Fear is only as deep as the mind allows." Thus, patients afflicted with TB, but not bedridden participated in the projects. This was what she called "Diversionary Therapy". Climate changes, civilisations collapse, governments change, political affiliations alter and even the best possible model collapses.

This is inevitable. It was extremely traumatic for my mother and she became a patient of Paroxysmal Atrial Tachycardia (PAT). This is a type of arrhythmia (irregular heartbeat). Paroxysmal means that the episode of arrhythmia originates and terminates abruptly. Atrial implies the arrhythmia starts with atria or in the upper chambers of the heart. The tachycardia results in a significant increase in the heartbeat per minute. It is accompanied by severe sweating, dizziness, palpitations, angina, and



acute breathlessness. Normally a patient suffers from such a condition owing to emotional upheavals, physical exhaustion, deep anxiety, and consumption of caffeine or alcohol. She was administered medication but it worked only to an extent. The real help came in the form of a pentagon-shaped talisman. That is through Siddha Healing, Pranik Healing, the 10-day Vipassana Course and the Part 1 and Part 2 Art of Living courses.

Indisputably it is the infinitesimal and scientific power of breath. Breathing techniques, meditation, medication and proper diet changed the trajectory of the life of the patient and brought back the mojo in her life. The year 2020 A virulent virus that is assumed to have originated in the dragon land of China assumed monstrous proportions and spread like a pandemic across the swathes of the globe. The robust lady, a woman of substance contracted the disease on the 23rd of December that year, a day after I was detected positive with the pestilence.

Six days before when she would have celebrated her eighty-fourth birthday, and despite testing negative for COVID, life was snuffed out and she entered the empyrean. She was on the ventilator, something my mother would have abhorred as the lethal virus had entered her lungs. Strangely at 7:30 a.m. that morning, though enfeebled by the pernicious disease, I was performing Sudarshan Kriya and had a premonition that my mother had entered Vaikuntha. A few minutes later my wife knocked on the door and with misty eyes and a choked voice conveyed the news. We are yet to recover from the body blow. My mother used to get up at twelve in the night and followed a strict regimen that included Vipassana meditation, Pranik Healing, Siddha Healing, Mudra Pranayama and then Sudarshan Kriya. This lasted for almost six hours. She was also religious in taking her short walks... how did she contract the disease and leave for her heavenly abode? Destiny or Karma?

(The writer is the CEO of Chhattisgarh East Railway Ltd. and Chhattisgarh East West Railway Ltd. He is a faculty of the Art of Living; views are personal)

Deciphering the concerns in State of Forests Report 2023



V K BAHUGUNA

While the total forest and tree cover rose by 1,445.81 sq km since 2021, the findings reveal deeper concerns about the health and sustainability of India's natural forests



The Forest Survey of India (FSI) has a few weeks ago released its 2023 state of Forest report which shows an increasing trend in forest and tree cover in the country. The current assessment has shown a very meagre increase in forest cover by 156.41 sq km compared to the past assessment of 2021. However, the total forest and tree cover of the country has increased by 1,445.81 sq km compared to the last assessment of 2021.

The results are good to show to the nation that its forest machinery is doing a good job in maintaining and also increasing the resources it is managing and controlling. This also is a good political tool in the hands of the Central government to show its success in conserving the forest resources and the overall environment. However, as the saying goes 'the proof of the pudding is in the eating'. The benchmark of any such professionally well-prepared report can be judged only if it shows the correct picture.

This year the team of the FSI brought out several key features like decadal changes in the various forest parameters and tree cover/ agro-forestry by preparing a change matrix, growing stock calculations both inside and outside the forest cover, information on canopy density of different classes of forests, carbon stock calculation, changes in western ghat eco-sensitive zone, fires and grazing status and status of natural regeneration, division wise forest cover for 16 states etc. The FSI officers have put up the data collected and analysed in the public domain and it is necessary that as professional administrators people like me bring some of the urgent issues that need the attention of the Prime Minister who is keen to see the success of conservation in the country, because the health of the forest of the country is not good rather the natural forests are in bad shape and



THE CONDITION OF FORESTS SHOULD NOT BE ASSESSED BY CARBON GROWTH OR TREE NUMBERS BUT BY THE CONDITION OF RESERVE AND PROTECTED FORESTS WHICH ARE THE SOURCE OF MORE THAN 450 RIVERS AND RIVULETS OF OUR COUNTRY AND SOURCE OF RECHARGING THE AQUIFERS, BINDING THE SOIL AND CONTROLLING THE HYDROLOGY

overall scenario demand a serious rethink on the way we manage our forest bio-diversity, even though India is ranked 3rd in top ten countries for an average net gain in the forest area. Let us discuss some of the points for action by the professionals/ administrators as well as the political leaders. Before I flag the issues let us accept the fact that Trees outside the recorded forests are to the tune of 30.7 million ha which is 37.11 per cent of the total forest and tree cover of the country. All kinds of plantations like rubber, coconut, palm, areca nut etc are also included in it have saved the foresters from criticism with around 1289.40 sq km increase in tree cover between 2021 and 2023 and 20,286.57 sq km almost a 20 per cent increase since 2013.

On Paris's commitment to carbon stock India had compared to 2005 had already reached 2.29 billion tonnes of carbon capture. One of the issues of serious concern is the fact that the canopy density of over 40,709.28 sq km has shifted from high-density (70 per cent) and medium (40 per cent and above) density forests to open-category forests (10 per cent or less canopy density).

A major portion of this must be in recorded forests and catchments of major rivers and the habitat of Tigers. Apart from this 5573 sq km of good or open forest forests have become scrub and refractive wastelands. Thus almost 46707 sq km of forests have become non-forest inside the recorded forests as per page 73 of the report. Apart from this glaring forest /tree cover losses are in major forested states like Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Andhra

Pradesh, Assam, Gujarat, Tripura, Telangana, Ladakh and Nagaland, North-eastern states and Himalayas.

However, some states reported an increase also and among them are Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh but the question today is how healthy is our forests. Now let us take the condition of regeneration. Only 48 per cent of the recorded forests have adequate natural regeneration 24 per cent have inadequate regeneration and another 9 per cent have no regeneration at all and for the last 10 years, there has been a severe loss of regeneration.

The condition of forests should not be assessed by carbon growth or tree numbers but by the condition of reserve and protected forests which are the source of more than 450 rivers and rivulets of our country and source of recharging the aquifers, binding the soil and controlling the hydrology so vital for sustaining the food, nutritional, climate, livelihoods and water security of millions of people of the country. So in a nutshell, we may feel happy to have a figure of 82 million ha of forest and tree cover (25.17 per cent of geographic area) which covers 71 million ha of forest cover (21.76 per cent) and 3.4 per cent Tree cover.

But the fact is we have only 9 million ha of very dense forests with 70 per cent canopy density and 24.35 million ha of forest with 40 per cent and above density. Another 18.5 million ha is with 10 per cent density or above and this includes the Green Wash area outside the recorded forests on private lands adjacent to recorded forests. Thus only 33 million ha of forest

cover is worth good density in the recorded forests compared to 30 million ha of trees outside the forests. Thus the real good forest is only around 10 to 11 per cent of the geographic area and it must give a wakeup call to foresters and political leaders. One of the reasons is the poor implementation of the Forest Right Act 2006 which has become an apolitical tool in the hands of competitive politics.

The Director General of Forests who is the Chief Technical Advisor of the government of India must tell the Prime Minister and Forest minister of the real situation in natural forest management as a professional like the then Army Chief Gen Vij told Prime Minister Manmohan Singh when he asked him to make adjustments in Siachin area and do not be hawkish. He told him firmly that being a professional he would never agree and after his presentation the Prime Minister supported him.

The IFS lobby should propose immediate remedial measures and one of the measures should be to change the format of the future State of Forest Report of FSI. The first part should only deal with the assessment of forests in recorded forests, the second part should deal with Trees outside forests and the third part should deal with fire management, carbon and change matrix etc. Hope the powers that be will notice the suggestion given here and stop the hotchpotch reporting.

(The writer is former Director-General of ICFRE in the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change; views are personal)

India and Afghanistan: Navigating a complex diplomatic landscape

The Taliban's return to power and Pakistan's enduring influence have created a multifaceted challenge for India

The evolving relationship between India and Afghanistan presents a multifaceted diplomatic challenge. India's engagement with Afghanistan, particularly after the Taliban's return to power, is closely linked to its broader strategic interests in the region, especially its rivalry with Pakistan.



K S TOMAR

The Taliban's close ties with Pakistan and its association with terrorism pose a serious security threat, making India's diplomatic engagement a complex but necessary endeavor. While seeking to safeguard its regional influence and counter Pakistan's dominance in Afghanistan, India must carefully navigate the Taliban's authoritarian rule, human rights concerns, and the risk of further destabilizing the region.

India's Diplomatic and Developmental Footprint India's involvement with Afghanistan extends beyond diplomatic posturing and is driven by long-term strategic and developmental goals. Through substantial investments in infrastructure, education, and humanitarian aid, India has positioned itself as an important partner to Afghanistan. Projects such as the construction of the Afghan Parliament, the Salma Dam, and educational scholarships for Afghan students have significantly enhanced Afghanistan's infrastructure while fostering goodwill between the two nations.

India's developmental efforts have had a direct positive impact on Afghanistan's stability and growth, providing a counterbalance to Pakistan's attempts to exert control over Afghan affairs. Strengthening ties with Afghanistan offers India significant strategic benefits, including access to Central Asia.

By bypassing Pakistan, India secures a direct route to Central Asia's markets and resources, reducing Pakistan's monopoly over Afghanistan's trade routes. This economic advantage is coupled with enhanced counterterrorism cooperation, as both nations share concerns about the proliferation of extremist groups. This collaboration not only bolsters India's position as a responsible regional power but also contributes to regional stability.



Pakistan's Strategic Setback: India's strengthened relationship with Afghanistan poses a significant challenge to Pakistan's strategic objectives. Historically, Pakistan has viewed Afghanistan as a strategic depth, crucial for its security and regional influence. Any shift in Afghanistan's alliances toward India directly undermines this narrative. The development of an India-Afghanistan trade corridor, particularly through Iran's Chabahar Port, bypasses Pakistan entirely, diminishing its leverage over Afghanistan's trade routes. This economic shift erodes Pakistan's ability to influence Afghan policy, further isolating it in the region. Security concerns compound Pakistan's challenges. The increasing Indian presence in Afghanistan is perceived as a potential avenue for intelligence-gathering and support

for nationalist movements within Pakistan, particularly in its Pashtun and Baloch regions. The Taliban's Role: Despite Pakistan's close ties with the Taliban, India's diplomatic engagement with Afghanistan has the potential to empower elements within the country that resist Pakistan's control. This could shift power dynamics within the Taliban or exacerbate internal divisions.

The Taliban's governance and its approach to extremism remain critical factors in shaping the future of India-Afghanistan relations. India's diplomatic strategy hinges on the Taliban's willingness to adopt inclusive governance and curb extremism, which could open avenues for constructive engagement.

Regional Stability Regional stability remains precarious as tensions between India and Pakistan persist, coupled with the Taliban's uncertain governance. Proxy conflicts could spill over into Afghanistan, exacerbating instability.

The Road Ahead: India's long-standing commitment to Afghanistan's reconstruction, particularly through investments in infrastructure and humanitarian aid, has been central to its regional strategy. India has invested over \$3 billion in Afghanistan, supporting projects such as the Zaranj-Delaram Highway, the Afghan Parliament building, and the Salma Dam. These initiatives have directly contributed to Afghanistan's economic and social develop-

ment. Other contributions include power transmission lines, healthcare programs, educational scholarships, and food aid, reflecting India's commitment to Afghanistan's well-being and stability. The Taliban's return to power in 2021 cast uncertainty over the future of these projects. Despite the political upheaval, India has maintained a humanitarian approach, continuing to provide support where possible. However, the Taliban's restrictive policies and authoritarian rule complicate these initiatives. India's cautious engagement seeks to balance its strategic interests with the need to uphold humanitarian values.

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

Growing complexity widening cyber inequity: World Economic Forum report

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Growing complexity in the cyber landscape is further exacerbating cyber inequity, deepening the divide between developed and emerging economies, and widening the gap between large and small organisations, the World Economic Forum said on Monday.

In its Global Cybersecurity Outlook 2025, the WEF said nearly 54 per cent of large organisations have identified supply chain interdependencies as the greatest barrier to achieving cyber resilience.

About 45 per cent of cyber leaders were also found to be concerned about disruption of operations and business processes. It further found



that geopolitical turmoil has affected the perception of risks, with one in three CEOs citing cyber espionage and loss of sensitive information

or intellectual property theft as their top concern. The WEF report said that the rising complexity in cyber space arises from the rapid

growth of emerging technologies, prevailing geopolitical uncertainty, the evolution of threats, regulatory challenges,

vulnerabilities in supply chain interdependencies and the growing cyber skills gap. "Cyberspace is more complex and challenging than ever due to rapid technological advancements, growing cybercriminal sophistication and deeply interconnected supply chains," WEF Managing Director Jeremy Jurgens said, calling for collaborations between public and private sector stakeholders to secure the benefits of digitalisation for all.

The study found that 66 per cent of organisations expect AI to have a major impact on cybersecurity in 2025, but only 37 per cent reported having processes in place to assess the security of AI tools before deployment.

Retail inflation eases to four month low of 5.22 per cent in December



PTI ■ NEW DELHI

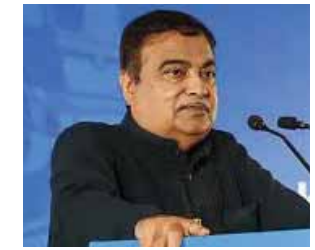
Retail inflation slowed to a four-month low of 5.22 per cent in December compared to 5.48 pc in November, mainly due to easing of prices in food basket, according to government data released on Monday.

The inflation based on Consumer Price Index (CPI) was 5.48 per cent in November and 5.69 per cent in December 2023.

According to CPI data released by the National Statistics Office (NSO), the inflation in the food basket reduced to 8.39 per cent in December. It was 9.04 per

cent in November and 9.53 per cent in December 2023. "The CPI (General) and food inflation in December 2024 is the lowest in the last four months," the NSO said. Last month, the Reserve Bank of India raised the inflation projection for the current fiscal year to 4.8 per cent from 4.5 per cent.

Infra development imperative to achieve Viksit Bharat goal: Gadkari



PTI ■ SONAMARG

Union Minister Nitin Gadkari on Monday said infrastructure development is imperative to achieve the goal of Viksit Bharat, as the economy depends on good transport and communication facilities. "The Prime Minister has given us a mission of developed and prosperous India. If we have to achieve a Viksit Bharat, we will have to improve the country's infrastructure. "Until water, power, and

communication do not develop, industry, business, and tourism will not get a boost," Gadkari said, addressing a rally after Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the Sonamarg tunnel here.

The Union Minister said Modi has taken a pledge to develop J-K along with the country. "He has given us the task of developing this infrastructure. Good roads make a country developed and prosperous. We are working on a mission to make J-K developed and prosperous so that industries are established here, tourism increases, employment opportunities are created for the youth and poverty is eradicated. With that view, we are developing the infrastructure in J-K," he added. Gadkari said the inauguration of the Sonamarg tunnel, which was

previously known as the Z-Morh tunnel, was historic and would provide all-weather connectivity to the tourist resort town. "Today is a historic day that the Sonamarg tunnel is being inaugurated by the Prime Minister. Due to the closure of this road (due to heavy snowfall), some areas remained closed for five to six months per year. "It was started in 2012, but there were several difficulties. Today, I am happy that the work has been completed. By the opening of this tunnel -- Srinagar to Ladakh, Leh highway will especially be connected, which used to remain shut for 5-6 months," he noted.

He said the work on the nearby Zojila tunnel was going on and once open, it will reduce the travel time from Srinagar to Leh by 3.5 hours and keep the road open throughout the year.

Gold maintains rising streak for fifth straight session, silver remains flat



PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Gold prices rallied for a fifth straight session, rising Rs 110 to Rs 80,660 per 10 grams in the national capital on Monday, according to the All India Sarafa Association. The precious metal had settled at Rs 80,550 per 10 grams in the previous session on Friday. In the past five trading sessions, gold prices

appreciated Rs 1,660, or 2.1 per cent, to Rs 80,660 per 10 grams. The price of gold of 99.5 per cent purity rose Rs 110 to Rs 80,260 per 10 grams against the previous close of Rs 80,150 per 10 grams on Friday. "Gold prices advanced as the rupee weakened by touching 86.61, driven by elevated crude oil prices. The rise in crude prices came on the back of fresh sanctions imposed on

Russia by US President Joe Biden, escalating geopolitical tensions," Jateen Trivedi, VP Research Analyst of Commodity and Currency at LKP Securities, said.

The rupee logged its steepest single-day fall in nearly two years and ended the session 58 paise down at its historic low of 86.62 (provisional) against the US dollar on Monday, weighed down by a stronger American currency and surging crude oil prices. "This rupee depreciation supported gold prices in the domestic market, amplifying the impact of global cues," Trivedi added.

However, silver traded flat in the second straight session at Rs 93,000 per kg on Monday. Meanwhile, gold contracts for February delivery on the MCX increased Rs 227, or 0.29 per cent, to Rs 78,650 per 10 grams in futures trade on Monday.

Rupee sinks to record low, settles 58 paise down at 86.62 against US Dollar



PTI ■ MUMBAI

The rupee logged its steepest single-day fall in nearly two years and ended the session 58 paise down at its historic low of 86.62 (provisional) against the US dollar on Monday, weighed down by a stronger American currency and surging crude oil prices. At the interbank foreign exchange, the rupee opened at 86.12, and moved 1 paise during intraday to 86.11 before closing the session with a loss of a staggering 58 paise at its lowest-ever level of 86.62 (provisional) against the greenback. The fall of 58 paise, or 0.67 per cent, in one session was the steepest since February 6, 2023 when the unit had lost 68 paise.

The Indian currency has witnessed the deepest plunge of more than Re 1 in the past two weeks from the closing level of 85.52 on December 30. Rupee had breached the 85-paise-dollar mark for the first time on December 19, 2024. On Friday, the local currency had declined 18 paise to settle at 86.04 against the US dollar, a day after registering a marginal gain of 5 paise. In the

preceding back-to-back sessions on Tuesday and Wednesday, it had plunged 6 paise and 17 paise, respectively. The unprecedented fall was attributed to the relentless chase of the US dollar by investors, which also led to a massive withdrawal of foreign capital from Indian equities.

Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth Rs 2,254.68 crore on Friday. So far this month foreign investors have withdrawn Rs 22,194 crore from Indian equities, according to exchange data. According to analysts, the Reserve Bank of India has allowed the fall in rupee's exchange rate versus US dollar amid dwindling forex reserves and declining emerging market currencies. "RBI will allow the weakness as demand keeps moving up and supplies dwindle," said Anil Kumar Bhansali, Head of Treasury and Executive Director, Finrex Treasury Advisors LLP. The Reserve Bank of India on Friday said the country's forex reserves dropped by USD 5.693 billion to USD 634.585 billion in the week ended January 3.

Mutual funds collect ₹1.18 Lakh Crore via NFO in 2024; thematic funds dominates space

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Asset management companies launched 239 new fund offerings (NFOs) mobilising Rs 1.18 lakh crore in 2024, with sectoral or thematic equity funds emerging as the top choice of investors, according to a report by Germinate Investor Services Research. This was higher than 212 NFOs collecting Rs 63,854 crore in 2023 and 228 NFOs garnering Rs 62,187 crore in 2022.

The NFO landscape expanded from 81 offerings in 2020 to 239 in 2024, besides, the funds raised through the space more



than doubled from Rs 53,703 crore in 2020. The trend suggests a strong growth trajectory and heightened investor

confidence. Usually, NFOs come during a surging market when investor sentiments are high and optimistic. The NFOs

were floated to capitalise on the mood of investors and attract their investment as they were willing to invest at that time.

Industry experts said the stock market performance along with the positive investor sentiments led to higher fund mobilisation through NFOs in 2024.

In the entire 2024, Sensex jumped 5,898.75 points or 8.16 per cent, and the Nifty surged 1,913.4 points or 8.80 per cent. Overall, thematic/sectoral funds, index funds and exchange traded funds (ETFs) captured significant investor interest. "With 53 NFOs raising Rs 79,109 crore, these funds

emerged as the top choice for investors," the report said.

Tailored to specific sectors or themes, sectoral or thematic equity funds resonated with investors for their focused approach and alignment with market trends. Notable examples include funds targeting sectors like manufacturing, technology, and ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) themes.

Individually, HDFC Manufacturing Fund NFO led the pack, with a record inflow of Rs 12,500 crore in April 2024. In terms of month, the highest number of NFO launches was recorded in December,

marking a strong year-end momentum. Going ahead, the report said the mutual fund industry is likely to face a recalibration in 2025 after the strong gains of recent years.

"While extraordinary returns may not sustain, the focus will shift to ensuring stability, maintaining liquidity, and achieving reasonable returns in line with market trends. Investors must adapt to a more balanced approach, safeguarding capital while managing expectations. This calls for strategies that align with changing market dynamics and ensure a steady performance even in uncertain times," it added.

India ranks third globally in fintech funding despite 33 per cent lower infusion in 2024

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India ranked third globally in terms of funding received in the fintech segment despite a decline of 33 per cent on a year-over-year basis to USD 1.9 billion in 2024, market intelligence firm Tracxn said in a report on Monday.

The sector witnessed a decline in funding, driven by a broader slowdown in demand and geopolitical headwinds, Tracxn's Annual India fintech report 2024 said.

"The fintech sector experienced a notable decline in funding in 2024, with a total of USD 1.9 billion raised. This represents a 33 per cent decrease from the USD 2.8 billion secured in 2023.

The Indian fintech ecosystem has solidified its position as one of the top three globally funded fintech ecosystems in 2024, trailing only the US and the UK," the report said.

The sector had raised USD 5.6 billion in 2022. The highest funding of USD 805 during 2024



was received by the sector in the third quarter which was 61 per cent higher on a year-over-year (Y-o-Y) basis. Additionally, 59 per cent of the total funding in 2024 was secured during the second half of the year, indicating a late-year recovery while August emerged as the most robust month for funding, contributing USD 434 million to the annual total. "Despite the global

funding slowdown, India's fintech ecosystem continues to demonstrate remarkable resilience and adaptability. The emergence of two new unicorns and a record eight IPOs in 2024 underscore the sector's ability to thrive amidst challenges," Tracxn, Co-Founder, Neha Singh said. "As we look to the future, the sector is poised to build on these successes, driving

financial inclusion and innovation while solidifying its position as a global leader in the fintech space," Singh said. The year 2024 witnessed the emergence of two unicorns, Money View and Perfios, compared to a single unicorn in 2023 though there were only three USD 100 million-plus funding rounds recorded, marking a 50 per cent decline from the six

such rounds in 2023. The digital lending solutions dominated the funding received by accounting for 64 per cent of the total funding raised during the year.

The notable deals in 2024 included DMI Finance raising USD 334 million funding led by MUFG and Credit Saison raising USD 144 million during the year. The late-stage rounds are the most affected. Late-stage funding amounted to USD 1.1

billion, marking a 42 per cent reduction compared to the USD 1.9 billion raised in 2023, the report said. The late-stage funding was USD 3.1 billion in 2022.

Early-stage funding rounds recorded a 16 per cent Y-o-Y drop to USD 562 million in 2024 from USD 667 million raised in 2023 and a 70 per cent decline compared to USD 1.9 billion in 2022.

Seed-stage funding declined 19 per cent Y-o-Y to USD 178 million in 2024 from USD 219 million in 2023 and 66 per cent from USD 529 million in 2022. "Mergers and acquisition activity saw a slight dip, with 26 acquisitions recorded in 2024, down 16 per cent from 31 in 2023.

Notable transactions included the USD 94.5 million acquisition of PureSoftware by Happiest Minds, and the USD 44 million acquisition of ET Money by 360 One," the report said.

The sector recorded eight IPOs in 2024 which was a 300 per cent increase compared to the two IPOs in 2023. "Bengaluru maintained its leadership as the top hub for fintech funding in 2024, followed by Mumbai and Delhi. Among investors, Peak XV Partners, LetsVenture, and Y Combinator emerged as the top contributors overall. Venture Catalysts, Y Combinator, and Antler led in seed investments, while Elevation Capital, GMO Venture Partners, and Peak XV Partners dominated early-stage funding," the report said. Late-stage investments were spearheaded by Creaeigis, The Rise Fund, and Amara Partners. The Investment Tech segment garnered USD 320 million in funding in 2024, reflecting an 11 per cent decline from the USD 358 million raised in 2023. The Payments segment, however, experienced a sharper decline, attracting USD 194 million, a 77 per cent drop from USD 836 million in 2023 and an 81 per cent decrease from USD 1.01 billion in 2022.

INBRIEF

SURJIT PATAR MEMORIAL FUNCTION-2025 ON 14TH JANUARY

AMRITSAR: "Surjit Patar Memorial Function-2025" will be organised by Guru Nanak Dev University in collaboration with Punjab Kala Parishad, Chandigarh, and the Department of Languages, Punjab, Patiala on January 14th, Tuesday, at the Golden Jubilee Convention Centre of the University, at 10 am.

PVUNL HOSTS FIRST ASH USER MEET 2025 AT RANCHI

Patratu Vidyut Utpadan Nigam Limited (PVUNL) successfully organized its inaugural Ash User Meet 2025 at Chanakya BNR Hotel, Ranchi, emphasizing innovative and sustainable applications of fly and bottom ash.

PONGAL FESTIVAL OBSERVED AT NARUVI HOSPITALS

The annual Pongal celebrations at Naruvi Hospitals, Vellore, were celebrated with fervour, with enthusiastic participation from people cutting across age, gender, religion, and community.

REC LIMITED COMMITS ₹8.44 CRORE UNDER CSR TO SUPPORT 1MW SOLAR PHOTOVOLTAIC POWER PLANT

REC Limited, a Maharatna CPSE under the Ministry of Power and a leading NBFC, has signed a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with the Gandhigram Rural Institute under its Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiative.

Jannik Sinner starts his Australian Open title defence with a straight set win

PTI ■ MELBOURNE

After wasting a set point in the second tiebreaker with an ill-conceived drop shot, Jannik Sinner quickly reverted to what's been working for him and finished off a straight-set win over Nicolas Jarry to begin his Australian Open title defense. The 7-6 (2), 7-6 (5), 6-1 victory on Rod Laver Arena extended Sinner's winning streaks to 15 on both the tour and on hard courts in Grand Slams. After all the pre-tournament attention on the 2024 doping cases of Sinner and long-time women's No. 1 Iga Swiatek, both started the year's first Grand Slam tournament about the same time on nearby courts on Day 2. "Yeah, I was curious to see how it was," Sinner said of the reception at Rod Laver, where he became a fan favorite last year. "You never know what's happening. I was happy about the crowd. It was a nice atmosphere."

for two long, tiebreak sets against No. 35-ranked Jarry, a 29-year-old from Chile, before finding his touch. "It was a very close one because the first sets, they can go both ways," Sinner said. "In the third set when I broke it the first time, that gave me a little bit of room to breathe. "I'm happy how I handled the very tough situation." Sinner has got a good record at Melbourne Park in that department. He rallied from two sets down in last year's final to beat Daniil Medvedev for his first Grand Slam title, coming off a semifinal upset of 10-time champion Novak Djokovic. While Sinner was deep into his match against Jarry, Swiatek, a five-time major winner from Poland, fended off top-ranked doubles player Katerina Siniakova 6-3, 6-4 on John Cain Arena.



victory at the United Cup last week, against beating No. 2 Swiatek in the final. Gauff, the 2023 U.S. Open champion is wearing a Marvel-inspired bodysuit and skirt at Melbourne Park and she's radiating confidence and calm. "I knew going in it was going to be difficult, but you know I'm happy with how I played," she said of the 1-hour, 20-minute win over Kenin, who at No. 81 is a much tougher opponent than her ranking suggests. "I mean (I) could serve better, but like on that side I was struggling to see the ball," Gauff said, pointing to one baseline on the main show court that was bathed in sun. "So I'm just happy that I was able to manage through that." Another 20-year-old American, Alex Michelsen, produced the biggest win of his young career with a 7-5, 6-3, 2-6, 6-4 first-round upset of 2023 Australian runner-up Stefanos Tsitsipas. Michelsen's three booming service returns in the ninth game

Coco Gauff had a little difficulty adjusting to the sun at one end of Rod Laver Arena in Monday's

first marquee match and dropped an early service game before quickly settling into a rhythm in a 6-3, 6-3 win over 2020 champion Sofia Kenin. Third-seeded Gauff beat Swiatek to win the title at the WTA Finals last November and started this season by helping the U.S. To

of the fourth set helped him earn a vital break against the 11th-seeded Tsitsipas and, after shaking off jitters on his own serve, he closed out for his first victory over a player ranked in the top 20 at a Grand Slam. No. 17 Frances Tiafoe advanced in five sets over Arthur Rinderknech of France. Gauff went into her opening round on a streak of winning 33 matches against players ranked outside the Top 50, dating to a loss to Kenin at Wimbledon 2023. The draw presented another tough trip to Australia for Kenin. It was the third straight year Kenin faced a Grand Slam champion in the first round in Australia, and her fourth consecutive first-round exit here. Gauff will next play Jodie Burrage of Britain. No. 7 Jessica Pegula also advanced along with No. 12 Diana Shnaider, No. 28 Elna Svitolina, and Belinda Bencic, who ousted No. 16 Jelena Ostapenko.



Nick Taylor wins another playoff with clutch play

PTI ■ HONOLULU

Nick Taylor in a playoff is tough to beat. Getting there was hardest part for the Canadian, who delivered another highlight reel of clutch moments in the Sony Open. Down to his last shot, Taylor chipped in from 60 feet for eagle on the par-5 closing hole at Waialae for a 5-under 65 to get into a playoff with Nico Echavarria. He holed a 10-foot birdie putt on the first extra hole. And then he hit a wedge from 46 yards that was close to perfect to set up a 3-foot birdie putt for the win. The last shot might have been the easiest shot he had in the final hour. "I'm a bit stunned this worked out this way," Taylor said. That was true for so many others, starting with Echavarria, the 30-year-old Chilean who delivered some big moments of his own with a 15-foot par save, a 12-foot birdie, and twice getting up-and-down from the bunker at the end for a 65 to join Taylor at 16-under 264. Behind them were Stephan Jaeger and J.J. Spaun, and the Sony Open looked to come down to them along the back nine until Jaeger piped a drive out-of-bounds on the 16th and Spaun bogeyed from a bunker on the 17th. Both failed to birdie the par-5 18th to join the playoff. Echavarria was surprised it was only a two-man playoff. "If Nick doesn't chip in, I win

the tournament," he said. Echavarria didn't miss a beat in his bid for a third straight year with a PGA Tour title. The bunker shot on the 18th was creative and bold for a tap-in birdie. On the 18th in the first playoff hole, his second shot looked to be about 20 feet away on the fringe for an eagle putt when the wind nudged it down the hill into the rough, forcing him to get up-and-down. He had 40 feet on the collar for eagle on the second playoff hole at No. 18, and the first putt came out soft and was 7 feet short. He missed the birdie putt to extend the playoff. "I misjudged the lag putt on the last hole. I didn't think it was going to be that slow. Didn't consider the wind," Echavarria said. "The wind kind of held it and my lag putting today was a little off, which is a strength of mine. But, I mean, just one bad putt can't define a great week." Taylor never looked like a winner — especially after missing a pair of 4-foot birdie putts on the 15th and 16th holes — until he had a lei around his neck and the trophy in his hand. It was his fifth PGA Tour title, the last three in a playoff. He beat Charley Hoffman in Phoenix last year with clutch putting in a playoff. And it was the Canadian Open in 2023 when Taylor famously holed that 70-foot eagle putt to win his national open before a delirious, rain-

soaked crowd. The victory sends Taylor to the Masters again, a big perk after a dismal end to last season. He moved back to No. 29 in the world and will be in all the signature events this year. None of this seemed possible when he was two behind with two to play coming off two short misses. "It was just one of those where you try to get until they don't let you play anymore," Taylor said. "I was 1 over through seven, get on a birdie streak here. It's always so bunched here, but I did a really good job every day really of just hanging in there. "Fortunate for me, really good things happened at the end." Jaeger and Spaun both left Waialae with plenty of regrets. From the time they made the turn, it looked like a duel between them to decide the winner, and they put on a great show until the final three holes. Jaeger holed a 30-foot birdie putt on the 14th to catch Spaun, who then followed by making a par putt from just inside 30 feet to stay tied for the lead. Jaeger didn't hit a fairway on the back nine except for an iron off the 15th tee, and it finally caught up with him at the end. He hit driver to cut off the dogleg on the 16th but it went so far left that it was never found, presumed to be out-of-bounds. "The one on 16 I would like to have back. Wrong hole to hit that shot," Jaeger said.

Paris Saint-Germain remains unbeaten in French league

PTI ■ PARIS

Paris Saint-Germain remained unbeaten and seven points clear at the top of the French league — halfway through the season — after Ousmane Dembélé scored twice in a 2-1 win over Saint-Etienne. Marseille is in second place after 17 rounds, with third-place Monaco 12 points adrift of defending champion PSG, which has beaten both sides. Dembélé scored in the 13th minute and the France winger netted from the penalty spot 10 minutes later after a video review spotted a handball from Léo Pétrot on Achraf Hakimi's cross. The decision seemed harsh as the ball grazed Pétrot's hand without him knowing. Dembélé moved to 10 league goals, level with teammate Bradley Barcola and one behind co-top scorers Jonathan David (Lille) and Mason Greenwood (Marseille). Barcola thought he had his 11th goal of the season close to halftime but, on a day of video reviews, the goal was ruled out for a foul by the player himself. PSG has been linked with a move for Georgia winger Khvicha Kvaratskhelia from Napoli, but it was another Georgian who scored for 16th-place Saint-Etienne as Zuriko Davitashvili neatly curled in a free kick midway through the second half. Despite its unbeaten league record, PSG again looked nervous and came



close to conceding an equalizer. Earlier, Deiver Machado scored late as seventh-place Lens won 2-1 at struggling Le Havre to move one point behind Lyon in sixth. The Colombia defender headed powerfully home from Poland winger Przemyslaw Frankowski's cross in the 77th minute. Central defender Abdulkodir Khusanov was left out of the Lens squad amid reports of an imminent big-money transfer to Premier League defending champion Manchester City reportedly worth 50 million euros (\$51 million). The 20-year-old joined Lens on a four-year contract last season, becoming the

first Uzbek to play in Ligue 1. Lens paid just 100,000 euros (\$110,000) to sign him from Belarus club Energetik-BGU Minsk. Veteran winger Andre Ayew put Le Havre ahead in the eighth minute, scoring for the second straight game following his goal against Marseille last weekend. Striker Goduine Koyalipou equalized in the 28th with a header on debut after joining on Thursday. Le Havre has lost five straight league games and is in 17th spot. Elsewhere, improving Strasbourg climbed into ninth place with a 2-1 win at Toulouse in a match where video reviews affected both sides, and rock-

bottom Montpellier had two players sent off near the end of a 3-1 home loss to Angers. Dutch striker Emanuel Emegha scored two first-half goals for Strasbourg and then had a third ruled out for offside in the 38th minute. Toulouse scored from Ismaël Doukouré's own-goal in the 35th and, in the 75th, striker Zakaria Aboukhail prepared to take a penalty to make it 2-2 after being fouled. However, the referee changed his mind following a video review and instead awarded Toulouse a free kick right on the edge of the area. More frustration followed for the home side moments later. Toulouse thought it had equalized when Frank Magri side-footed in Aboukhail's pinpoint cross from the left. But VAR intervened again to rule the goal out because United States defender Mark McKenzie was narrowly offside. Forward Esteban Lepaul netted twice as Angers moved up to 13th place. He scored in each half, either side of a penalty from Montpellier midfielder Téji Savanier. Montpellier lost its composure in the closing stages when defender Boubakar Kouyaté and captain Jordan Ferri were sent off within one minute of each other. Midfielder Zinedine Ferhat added the third goal for Angers in the ninth minute of stoppage time.

Alex Michelsen upsets Tsitsipas at the Australian Open

PTI ■ MELBOURNE

Alex Michelsen produced the biggest win so far of his fledgling career to upset 2023 runner-up Stefanos Tsitsipas in the first round of the Australian Open, and he knew instinctively where credit was due. The 20-year-old American overcame nerves on his serve in the fourth set before clinching a 7-5, 6-3, 2-6, 6-4 win Monday over Tsitsipas, a 26-year-old from Greece who has a career-high No. 3 ranking and has contested two Grand Slam finals. Michelsen started playing tennis around age 3 and hit most days as a kid with his mother, Sondra, a school teacher who played college tennis. "Yeah, I'm sure she's watching right now," Michelsen told the crowd on John Cain Arena, one of the three main show courts at Melbourne Park. "Yeah, we hit a million



balls from the baseline every day. We'd go like 30 minutes up the middle, then we go across each way for like an hour and a half. "I mean we would just go out there and she would never miss a ball — she's incredible. But no chance I'd be here without without her, so thanks Mom. Love you." The No. 42-ranked Michelsen reached the third round last year on his Australia debut before losing in the first

rounds at Roland Garros and Wimbledon and in the second round at the U.S. Open. His win over Tsitsipas was Michelsen's first against a player ranked in the top 20 at a Grand Slam. He played with freedom against Tsitsipas, taking big swipes with his service returns — including three in the ninth game of the fourth set that helped earn him a vital break.

He got a bit tense on serve, surrendering two hard-earned breaks in the fourth set, but stayed composed in the last game. "Yeah, I didn't take the most direct path, that's for sure. Shouldn't have got broken twice in the fourth. My serve let me down. Served double faulting way too much," he said. "But I was also returning really, really well. I felt like I was winning most of the baseline rallies when I was inside the baseline and controlling the point. "So I was thinking at 4-all, after I got broken twice, saying, 'You're still in this, just play every point for what it is.' I played a great 4-all game and got it done at 5-4." He finished the match with eight aces and eight double-faults, but hit 46 winners to only 40 unforced errors. "First of all, I was just trying to stay super composed out there. I knew it was going to be a battle in the end," he said.

Denmark captain Simon Kjaer retires from football

PTI ■ COPENHAGEN

Former Denmark captain Simon Kjaer formally retired from soccer Monday despite offers to continue playing since he left AC Milan as a free agent last year. Kjaer will perhaps be best remembered as the captain who rushed to Christian Eriksen's aid and then led teammates in shielding him from view on the field after the star playmaker collapsed because of cardiac arrest during a European Championship game in June 2021. Kjaer also consoled Eriksen's partner on the field. Kjaer, along with the Denmark team and medical staff, later won the FIFA Fair Play Award for their actions in Copenhagen.

Regularly peeping into past glory keeps Sindhu hungry for more success

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

When the going gets tough for P.V. Sindhu, the star badminton player dives into her highly successful past to seek inspiration to keep going in her quest for more glory. The 29-year-old has in her cabinet every trophy and medal that is there to be won. She is one of the only three Indians to win two Olympic medals, and is also a world champion besides claiming medals at Asian Games and Commonwealth Games. But Sindhu struggled to repeat her international success last season, the medal-less show at the Paris Olympics raising doubts about her future in the sport she dominated for so long. For Sindhu however, speculations don't matter. She still steps on the court with the same passion that has catapulted her to the zenith of world badminton.

"Of course yes," Sindhu told PTI in an interview when asked if she still has the hunger to keep going. "I am saying this because when you see those wins, how happy it makes you and how much confidence it gives you, that itself will take you to another level. Seeing wins again and again keeps that hunger going, so definitely yes. "There are some clips when you are really young when you look at it, it feels like wow, you know, you have done so much and you know why can't I do it more? You question yourself, and that's when it all starts, so yes," Sindhu said during an interaction facilitated by sports brand PUMA, which has signed her as an ambassador. Sindhu understands that she will have to endure plenty of struggles but she can't afford to lose hope. "I have seen a lot through sport, it was important for me to believe in myself when there

were days where I was injured and I didn't know if I can come back and I can be my 100 per cent, which happened in 2015, when I had an injury, but then I bounced back, and I got a silver at Rio. "My life has changed a lot since the time I started and till now I have had a lot of awards, rewards which has given me a lot of confidence. I am very grateful for whatever I have achieved and when I look back, I can tell that yes I have done whatever I could." Wins and losses are part of the learning curves. So what has been the biggest learning for Sindhu? "Being patient. That has taught me a lot in life, being patient and wait for the right time because sometimes game teaches you to be patient no matter what. "You have to keep waiting till you get whether it is success or whether it is the right time or whether it is the right shot...



You have to wait for the right time to do the right thing," Sindhu said self-belief is something an athlete can't do without, indicating that she is trying to overcome the ongoing tough phase with the same virtue. "It hits you when you are actually not able to win or not able to get that success or when you are actually at your lows.

That is when it is important for an athlete to stay there and keep believing in yourself. There were days when I lost matches which were very very close. "There were days where I was like why am I losing, what is happening, can I bounce back, can I come back stronger and especially lowest is when it hits you really hard. I was doubting

myself but people around me were very very supportive in terms of they were like it's okay, believe in yourself, you can do it. "I am very lucky to say that I have parents who are sports persons and they know what it is and what it takes because they have experienced so much that they tell me that this is what happens and you need to be stronger and you need to come back stronger." Sindhu was candid in admitting that digesting defeats is still difficult for her despite so much success in her career. "It does hurt, it does hurt at any point of time even though let's say if you don't have to prove anything, or if you have achieved everything and what is left you might ask me what else is left? "For me I feel that there is a lot of time left and I can win a lot of tournaments and I can play for so many more years

because if you are fit and if you are injury free I think passion towards the sport itself will take you much more longer." She also emphasized that the relationship between a coach and an athlete needs to be very clear in terms of what is going in your head and on off court. "A coach needs to understand even if I am not able to say what is happening in the court. As a coach you know he understands what you feel. So it is very important to also have that trust between a coach and an athlete." Sindhu has a clear plan for the 2025 season when she will compete in select tournaments to avoid injuries. "There are a lot of tournaments every month. We are out for like 15 days, 20 days. Definitely I will pick and choose a tournament because as you said I need to stay injury free. That is very important. If you stay injury free that's when you go and give your 100 per cent.

"There are some tournaments where BWF says that you have to play, but apart from that, the players are also smart enough to pick and choose tournaments." Sindhu said she is still evolving as a player, working on her skills because "the game has been changing so much." "People have become really strong in their defense so to break that, you have to work on that. You have to also work on defense. Not everyone gives you chance to attack. Because I'm a tall player and I have a good reach, so not everyone will give you a chance to attack, so accordingly you have to make changes." Sindhu also hoped that the gulf between her and the next generation will be bridged sooner than later. "I am hoping that the gap closes soon. There are a lot of youngsters I have seen in the Syed Modi (recent tournament she won) doing really well.

Barcelona thrashes Real Madrid 5-2 to win Spanish Super Cup final

PTI ■ MADRID
Real Madrid came out looking for some payback in the latest "clasico" against Barcelona but ended up being embarrassed again. Madrid lost 5-2 to Barcelona in the Spanish Super Cup final at Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, on Sunday. That followed a 4-0 loss at home to Barcelona in the Spanish league in October. Kylian Mbappé put Madrid ahead early in his second clasico, but Barcelona then ran away with goals by Lamine Yamal, Robert Lewandowski, Raphinha — who scored twice — and Alejandro Balde. Rodrygo scored for Madrid on the hour mark after Barcelona goalkeeper Wojciech Szczesny was sent off early in the second half. It was the third straight win for Barcelona in 2025 after it

lost two games in a row to end last year. "The Christmas break helped us reflect on what we had done wrong," Lewandowski said. "Now we can look forward to the run of games that we have until the end of the season." Madrid lost for the first time after a run of five consecutive victories. "It was a bad night," Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti said. "It's a disappointment, we won't hide it, but it's soccer... You have to try to learn from the losses. We have to look forward to what's ahead." Mbappé had been contained when the rivals met in October but scored a superb goal five minutes into the match at King Abdullah Sports City stadium after picking up the ball just inside Madrid's half, running at the defense and then finding the net with a clever finish. But Yamal evened the match with



a nice run in the 22nd and Lewandowski, who scored twice in the earlier clasico, put the Catalans ahead in the 36th. Raphinha added goals in the 39th and 48th minutes, while Balde scored in first-half stoppage time. Rodrygo scored from a free kick in the 60th after Szczesny was sent off for a

foul outside the area to stop a breakthrough. Lewandowski has 26 goals in 27 appearances across all competitions for Barcelona, while Raphinha has scored 19 times and Yamal eight. Barcelona was able to count on Spain midfielder Dani Olmo after the Spanish government stepped in to provisionally allow the club to register him with the league. The final came after Mallorca fans said they were harassed by local men who support Madrid after Thursday's semifinal. Two wives of Mallorca players said they were groped. The Spanish Super Cup has become a moneymaker for the federation and competing clubs since the federation struck a deal in 2019 to hold it in Saudi Arabia. ATLETICO'S RECORD Atletico Madrid set a club all-time record of 14 straight victories with a 1-0 win over Osasuna on Sunday and went top of the Spanish league at the halfway stage. Julián Álvarez scored in the 55th minute at the Metropolitan stadium to give Atletico the milestone victory and a one-point lead over second-place Madrid. Diego Simeone's team has a six-point gap to third-place Barcelona. Atletico has won all of its matches across all competitions since October. Its last setback was a 1-0 loss at Real Betis in the Spanish league on Oct. 27. Eight of the victories have come in the league. "It's an important streak to show the growth of this club," Simeone said. "We have been working really hard." It was the seventh consecutive league game without a win for Osasuna, which is in 11th place.



Cummins, Hazlewood in Australia CT squad despite injury concerns

PTI ■ SYDNEY
Pat Cummins was on Monday named captain of Australia for next month's Champions Trophy while fellow pacer Josh Hazlewood too was included in the squad despite lingering injury concerns surrounding both players. Cummins was managing an ankle injury throughout the recent Border-Gavaskar Trophy against India, which played a part in him missing the upcoming tour to Sri Lanka along with the pacer wanting to stay back at home to welcome his second baby. "I don't really have any more information than what I shared when we announced the Test squad (for Sri Lanka series) a few days ago," said Chair of Selectors George Bailey. "I believe he's had the scan, I have no idea what the scan said. But we want to give him a little bit of space at the back end of the Border-Gavaskar; obviously baby pending. "We'll work through that with Pat and obviously the selection panel and the medical team... But I know he's very keen," he added. Hazlewood, side lined from the Melbourne and Sydney Tests due to a calf niggle, was similarly not picked for the Sri Lanka series but has been named in the preliminary 15-player Champions Trophy squad.

Under ICC guidelines, Australia needed to name a squad by Monday, but can change it for injuries at any time before the tournament starts. The Aussies, a two-time winners in the event and the reigning ODI world champions, also picked all-rounder Mitchell Marsh, who was dropped for the fifth Test at SCG against India after mediocre outings in the first four matches. "This is a balanced and experienced squad with the core having been involved in the previous one-day World Cup, the West Indies series, last year's successful tour of the UK and the more recent Pakistan home series," Bailey said. "It offers a variety of options for touring management depending on opposition and the conditions that may present in Pakistan," he added. The squad will assemble, prepare and play a one-off ODI against Sri Lanka following the Test series before heading to Pakistan for the group stage matches of the ICC showpiece. Australia gave prominence to all-rounders in the squad selection as Matthew Short and Aaron Hardie were drafted in ahead of out-of-form Jake Fraser-McGurk. Adam Zampa is the lone specialist spinner in the squad. He will be supported by part-timers Short and Glenn Maxwell.

You cannot compare one generation of cricketers with another, says Kapil Dev

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
It is needless to compare two generations of players and pass a judgement on who was better, legendary cricketer Kapil Dev said on Monday and refused to get into a debate if BCCI selectors were right in excluding Yashasvi Jaiswal and Rishabh Pant from the T20I squad for the five-match series against England. Kapil bowled nearly 300 overs during the 1991-92 Test series against Australia and in the same rubber he became the first Indian to take 400 wickets in the traditional format apart from contributing with the bat in the team's cause. India pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah could not bowl in the second innings of the fifth Border-Gavaskar Test recently because of back spasms. India lost the five-match series 1-3. The 31-year-old Bumrah bowled



more than 150 overs and emerged the highest wicket-taker on both sides with 32 scalps. "Please don't compare. You cannot compare one generation with another. That is not required. Today, players are scoring 300 runs in a day. It didn't happen during our time. So don't compare the two (generations)," said Kapil during an event hosted by the Professional Golf Tour of India (PGTI) of which he is the president. The 1983 World Cup-winning skipper also added that one should not question the judgement of the selectors as they would have arrived at the decision to not play Jaiswal and Pant after giving it a thought. The two cricketers played all five Tests during the gruelling Australia series, with Jaiswal (391) emerging the second-highest run-getter, second only to Travis Head (448).

Asked if it was the right decision to drop two for the home series, Kapil said, "How can I comment on the judgement of others? I think the selectors would have thought about it." "So, if I say something it would be criticising them. I don't want to criticise them. They (selectors) are a group of people who must have planned and thought about that." With batting stalwarts Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli dishing out below-par performances in Australia, and talks of whether it's time for them to retire swirling, Kapil said the decision should be left to them. "They are very big players. Let's hope when they think it's the right time to play, when they think it's not, they will call it off," said Kapil, in response to a question whether they should be there for the Test series in England later this year.

SA include Ngidi, Nortje in CT squad

PTI ■ JOHANNESBURG
South Africa on Monday included Lungi Ngidi and Anrich Nortje in the Temba Bavuma-led squad for next month's Champions Trophy after the pacers recovered sufficiently from their respective injuries. Nortje sustained an injury on his big toe last month which ruled him out of the series against Pakistan while a groin strain in November forced Ngidi to miss the series against Sri Lanka and Pakistan. South Africa, the semifinalists of the 2023 ODI World Cup, are placed in group B of the Champions Trophy. They will start their campaign against Afghanistan in Karachi on February 21 before meeting Australia in Rawalpindi on February 25 and their final group game is against England on March 1. However, frontline pacer Gerald Coetzee was not picked because of the groin injury that he suffered during the first Test against Sri Lanka in Durban last year. Subsequently, he missed the second Test at Gqeberha and the entire home



rubber against Pakistan. Pacer Nandre Burger, who suffered a lumbar stress reaction, ahead of the ODI series against Ireland in early October too was not considered for selection. However, the Proteas trusted the improving fitness of all-rounder Wiaan Mulder, who broke his middle finger in the series against Sri Lanka, but he played in the second Test against Pakistan after the physios gave the green signal. Keshav Maharaj and Tabraiz Shamsi are the specialist spinners, who will be assisted by Aiden Markram's part-time off-spin. South Africa squad: Temba Bavuma (captain), Tony de Zorzi, Marco Jansen, Heinrich Klaasen, Keshav Maharaj, Aiden Markram, David Miller, Wiaan Mulder, Lungi Ngidi, Anrich Nortje, Kagiso Rabada, Ryan Rickelton, Tabraiz Shamsi, Tristan Stubbs, Rassie van der Dussen.



Gauff starts her Australian Open with a straight-sets win over Sofia Kenin

PTI ■ MELBOURNE
Coco Gauff had a little difficulty adjusting to the sun at one end of Rod Laver Arena and dropped an early service game but quickly settled into a rhythm to start her Australian Open with a 6-3, 6-3 win Monday over 2020 champion Sofia Kenin. Third-seeded Gauff won the title at the WTA Finals last November and started this season by helping the U.S. to victory at the United Cup last week, a run that gives her a chance to move atop the rankings. The 2023 U.S. Open champion is wearing a Marvel-inspired bodysuit and skirt at Melbourne Park and she's radiating confidence and calm. "I knew going in it was going to be difficult, but you know I'm happy with how I played," she said of the 1-hour, 20-minute win over Kenin, who at No. 81 is a much tougher opponent than her ranking suggests. "I mean (I) could serve better, but like on that side I was struggling to see the ball," Gauff said, pointing to one baseline on the main show court that was bathed in sun. "So I'm just happy that I was able to manage through that." Another 20-year-old American, Alex Michelsen, produced the biggest win of his young career with a 7-5, 6-3, 2-6, 6-4 first-round upset of 2023 Australian runner-up

Stefanos Tsitsipas. Michelsen's three booming service returns in the ninth game of the fourth set helped him earn a vital break against the 11th-seeded Tsitsipas and, after shaking off jitters on his own serve, he closed out for his first ever victory over a player ranked in the top 20. Gauff went into her opening round on a streak of winning 33 matches against players ranked outside the Top 50, dating to a loss to Kenin at Wimbledon 2023. It was tough going early, with Gauff converting an early break before Kenin got back on serve at 2-2, hitting deep ground strokes and getting good bounce off the hard court. But Gauff, who had five aces and four double-faults in her first two service games, lifted her tempo, started taking the ball earlier and won four of the next five games. She finished the match with 12 aces and nine double-faults, and saved seven of the eight breakpoints she faced. She also had 28 winners, including two rifling backhands on key points in the second set, and 13 unforced errors. The draw presented another tough trip to Australia for Kenin. It was the third straight year Kenin faced a Grand Slam champion in the first round in Australia, and her fourth consecutive first-round exit here.

India Open: Spotlight on Satwik-Chirag as jumbo Indian contingent eyes end to two-year title drought

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
The contingent is the biggest ever but focus would be on a handful of tried-and-tested names, especially the men's doubles team of Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty, when Indian shuttlers go up against a world-class field in the India Open Super 750 tournament beginning here on Tuesday. Despite the name, Indian success at the tournament hasn't been particularly regular with none from the host nation winning any title in the past two editions. The 21-strong group that will take the court this week would be desperate to change that statistic and make some amends after an ordinary Olympic campaign six months ago.

The expectations would be especially high from Satwik and Chirag, who claimed the doubles title in 2022, the same year in which the currently erratic Lakshya Sen notched the men's singles top honour. The tournament will feature 18 of the world's top-20 men's singles players and 14 of the top-20 women's singles shuttlers. Chirag and Satwik, who are former world number ones, have made a good start to the season by reaching the semifinals of the Malaysia Super 1000 last week. Despite the Paris Games disappointment, they have emerged as India's most reliable performers over the last two years by regularly making the deep end of the draws. They would be expected to

do the same in the USD 950,000 event to be held at the KD Jadhav Indoor Stadium here. Satwik and Chirag, semifinalists at the 2024 China Masters, will face Malaysia's Wei Chong Man and Kai Wun Tee in their opening round. While the Indians have shown impressive form, they will be seeking improvement in quick rallies and service variations in a bid to better their runners-up position in the tournament last year. However, the Indian pair will face stiff competition from top names such as China's Olympic silver-medallists Liang Weikeng and Wang Chang. Also there in the field are Paris bronze-medallists Aaron Chia and Soh Wooi Yik of Malaysia, Denmark's



Kim Astrup and Anders Rasmussen, and the Indonesian combination of Fajar Alfian and Muhammad Rian Ardianto. Sindhu back in action Despite an underwhelming 2024, one can never discount two-time Olympic medallist PV Sindhu, who would be back in action after missing the season-opener in Kuala Lumpur due to her wedding. The 29-year-old Hyderabad returned to winning ways, lifting the Syed Modi International title, although it was against a predominantly Indian field. Sindhu will begin her campaign against compatriot Anupama Upadhyaya and is

drawn to face Japan's rising star Tomoka Miyazaki in a potentially intriguing second round. MKiyazaki is a 2022 world junior champion and Sindhu's conqueror at last year's Swiss Open. Sindhu last won this event in 2017. The very exciting but equally inconsistent Lakshya Sen would be aiming to replicate his 2022 success at the event. He can draw confidence from his Syed Modi title win and a third-place finish at the Kings Cup a few days ago. He faces a tough opening test against Chinese left-hander Hong Yang Weng. HS Prannoy, returning after a five-month break following a pre-quarterfinal exit at the Paris Olympics, stumbled in the second round in Malaysia last week.

However, the 32-year-old veteran showed signs of his vintage form during the short campaign. He will look to build on that when he faces Chinese Taipei's Li Yang Su in the first round. A victory could set up a showdown with second seed Jonatan Christie of Indonesia. With marquee players like Olympic champions Viktor Axelsen (men) and An Se Young (women), and world No. 1 Shi Yuqi leading the competition, it would be no stroll in the park for the Indians in fray. But being on home turf could prove to be the morale-booster that helps them go over the line in difficult situations. Young names eye glory Some promising youngsters will also be eager to make a

mark. Among them is Priyanshu Rajawat, who faces a tough challenge in his opening round against sixth-seeded Japanese Kodai Naraoka. Malvika Bansod will take on third seed Chinese Yue Han, and Aakarshi Kashyap will face eighth-seeded Thai Pornpavee Chochuwong. In women's doubles, India's hopes will rest on fifth-seeded team of Treesa Jolly and Gayatri Gopichand, who will face Japan's Arisa Igarashi and Ayako Sakuramoto in the first round. Meanwhile, Guwahati Masters-winning pair of Tanisha Crasto and Ashwini Ponnapa, will take on the British duo of Chloe Coney and Estelle Van Leeuwen. The Indians are seeded seventh here.