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IN 2025: MOODY'S RATINGS

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## Bhagwat sparks Cong, BJP row

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI**

A fresh round of war of words began between the BJP and Congress as the Opposition leader Rahul Gandhi hit out at RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat saying that his remark that India got "true independence" after the Ram temple consecration amounts to treason and is an insult to every Indian.

Rahul said his party was fighting the "BJP, RSS and the Indian state itself", triggering a row with the ruling BJP alleging that everything the Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha does or says is in the direction of breaking India and dividing the society.

Rahul's criticism of RSS as well as BJP drew a sharp response from the BJP president JP Nadda and his cabinet colleagues including Nirmala Sitharaman who asked what for the Congress and Rahul Gandhi carry a copy of the Constitution when the Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha is using such a language. Nadda alleged that it is not a secret that Rahul Gandhi and his ecosystem have close links with urban Naxals and the deep state who want to "defame, demean and discredit" India.

"Mohan Bhagwat has the audacity to say this publicly. In any other country, he would be arrested and tried. That is a fact," Rahul Gandhi said at the inauguration of the Indira Gandhi Bhawan. "To say that India did not get independence in 1947 is an insult to every Indian. And it is time to stop listening to this nonsense that these people think they can keep parroting out and shouting," he said.

Rahul said every party worker is fighting this battle of ideologies under difficult circumstances where institutions have been captured by the BJP and the RSS and investigative agencies are being used against opposition leaders.

Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge also condemned Bhagwat's remarks and warned that "it would become difficult for him to move around in the country if he continues to make such statements". The leader of



Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge with Congress Parliamentary Party chairperson Sonia Gandhi during the inauguration of the new All India Congress Committee (AICC) headquarters 'Indira Bhawan', in New Delhi

that grand old party is fighting the BJP, the RSS and the Indian State itself. Sharing a video clip of Rahul's remarks, BJP IT department head Amit Malviya said, "Rahul Gandhi has now declared an open war against the Indian State itself. This is straight out of George Soros's playbook." The BJP president charged that the Congress has a history of encouraging all those forces who want a weak India. "Their greed for power meant compromising the nation's integrity and betraying the trust of the people," Nadda said, adding, people of India are wise, and they have decided they will always reject Rahul Gandhi and his rotten ideology.

At a press conference, BJP spokesperson Gaurav Bhatia said Rahul Gandhi had taken oath to preserve the country's sovereignty and integrity but is now speaking fighting the Indian state.

## Meta apologises over Zuckerberg comment

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI**

Amidst the raging controversy over comments by Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg on the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, the social media giant on Wednesday tendered apology. Meta India vice president Shivnath Thukral apologised for Zuckerberg's remarks and said it was an "inadvertent error".

BJP leader Nishikant Dubey said he treated the matter of Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg's remarks on Indian elections as "closed" after the official of the social networking platform tendered the apology. Zuckerberg, in a podcast, had claimed that the incumbent government in India lost power in the 2024 elections due to its handling of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Union Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw had debunked Zuckerberg's remarks as misinformation, and made it clear that Meta must uphold facts and credibility. "A Meta India official has finally apologised for the mistake. This is a victory of the common citizens of India," Dubey, who chairs the Parliamentary Committee on Information

Technology, said in a social media post. Dubey had on Tuesday said that the panel will summon the firm following its chairman's comments that India's ruling dispensation lost the Lok Sabha election last year.

On Wednesday, Dubey said people elected Narendra Modi as prime minister for the third consecutive term which was a testimony to his strong leadership. "Now the responsibility of our committee ends on this issue. We treat this issue closed. However, we will continue to hold these social platforms to account in the future on other issues," Dubey added.

Earlier, Union Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw had called out the remarks made by Zuckerberg on the Joe Rogan podcast. "Zuckerberg's claim that most incumbent governments, including India in 2024 elections, lost post-COVID is factually incorrect," Vaishnaw had said in a social media post.

"As the world's largest democracy, India conducted the 2024 elections with over 640 million voters. People of India reaffirmed their trust in NDA led by PM Narendra Modi's leadership," said Vaishnaw, who is Minister for Information and Broadcasting as well as IT.



registered BS-IV and older diesel-run heavy goods vehicles are banned, except for essential services, with exceptions for essential services and adapted vehicles for persons with disabilities under Stage IV.

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## Noida parking dispute ends in gun violence

**STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI/NOIDA**

On late Monday night at Radha Sky Gardens, a residential complex in Greater Noida, a parking dispute took a violent turn, resulting in a resident opening fire. The altercation, which had been building for days, finally escalated when Gaurav Sisodia, a resident of the society, fired six shots from his licensed firearm.

Fortunately, none of the security guards, who were the targets of the gunfire, were injured, managing to escape the scene unharmed. The confrontation began when Sisodia, reportedly intoxicated, engaged in a heated verbal and physical altercation with the security personnel.

Tensions between Sisodia and the guards had been rising, with multiple reports indicating that minor disagreements had flared up into serious conflicts. The dispute finally reached its peak on Monday night when Sisodia, feeling provoked, brandished his gun and fired it.

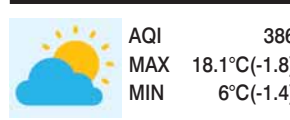
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## GRAP IV implemented

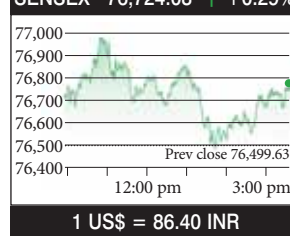
**STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI**

The Centre on Wednesday re-imposed Stage-IV of the Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP) in the Delhi-National Capital Region (NCR) after air quality deteriorated. GRAP Stage IV curbs include a ban on all construction activities, the entry of non-essential polluting trucks into Delhi, and mandatory shifting of school classes, except for classes 10 and 12, to hybrid mode. Non-essential diesel trucks are prohibited from entering Delhi, while Delhi-

## WEATHER



## MARKETS



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Chief of the Naval Staff Admiral Dinesh K. Tripathi during the commissioning ceremony of three Indian Navy warships INS Surat, INS Nilgiri and INS Vaghsheer, at the Naval Dockyard in Mumbai

## Modi commissions three naval warships

**TN RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI**

Stressing the importance of enhancing and modernising India's military capabilities in the 21st century, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said here on Wednesday that "be it land, water, air, the deep sea or infinite space," India was safeguarding its interests well. Speaking at a ceremony after commissioning three frontline naval combatants INS Surat, INS Nilgiri, and INS Vaghsheer on the occasion of Army Day, the Prime Minister said that as part of its continuous reforms in the defence sector, India had established the Chief of Defence Staff and was progressing towards the implementation of theatre commands to make the armed forces more efficient.

Averting that "India is today recognized as a reliable and responsible partner globally, especially in the Global South," the Prime Minister said that "India operates with a spirit of development, not expansionism," and the country had always supported an open, secure, inclusive, and prosperous Indo-Pacific Region. He said that India considered the defence and security of the entire region as its responsibility.

Modi said that when it came to the development of coastal nations, India introduced the mantra of SAGAR (Security And Growth for All in the Region) and advanced with this vision. "During India's leadership during its G20 presidency, we promoted the mantra of 'One Earth, One Family, One Future'. We also implemented India's vision of 'One Earth, One Health' during the global fight against COVID-19, underscoring India's belief in treating the world as one family and its commitment to inclusive development."

**Continued on page 2**

## Kejriwal files nomination, has ₹4.2 Crore in assets



AAP National Convener Arvind Kejriwal file his nomination for Delhi Assembly polls

**RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI**

According to Kejriwal's affidavit submitted to the Election Commission (EC), Kejriwal has a total of Rs 3,46,849 in movable assets, including Rs 50,000 in cash-in-hand. His wife, Sunita Kejriwal, has movable assets worth Rs 1,00,89,655, including Rs 42,000 in cash-in-hand. His immovable assets are worth Rs 1.7 Crore. The affidavit also revealed that Kejriwal owns no house or car. According to the affidavit, Kejriwal's income for the financial year 2023-24 was Rs 7.21 Lakhs. Sunita Kejriwal's total assets are worth Rs 2.5 Crore, with over Rs 1 Crore in movable assets, including 320 grams of gold worth Rs 25 Lakh and one kilogram of silver worth Rs 92,000, and Rs 1.5 Crore in immovable assets.

**Continued on page 2**

## India to take legal action against Ex-RAW Officer over Pannum plot

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI**

A high-powered enquiry committee set up by the Government has recommended legal action against former RAW officer Vikash Yadav, who was named by FBI for engaging persons, caught for attempt to murder Khalistani separatist and designated terrorist Gurpatwant Singh Pannun in New York in 2023. However the official statement did not name him. The statement issued by Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) said after a long enquiry, the committee has recommended legal action against "an individual, whose earlier criminal links and antecedents also came to notice during the enquiry".

The probe was ordered after the US alleged there was an attempt to kill Khalistani separatist Pannun by Indian agents in New York in 2023. US already arrested Nikhil Gupta and facing charges for attempts to murder Pannun, who has dual citizenship of America and Canada. Pannun's outfit Sikhs for Justice (SFJ) is banned by MHA.

The MHA said on receipt of information provided by US authorities regarding activities of some organised criminal groups, terrorist organisations, drug peddlers, etc., who undermined the security interests of both India and the US, a high-powered enquiry committee was set up by the government of India in November 2023. The committee conducted its own investigations, and also pursued leads provided by the US side and it received full cooperation from US authorities and the two sides also exchanged visits.

It further examined a number of officials from different agencies and also scrutinised relevant documents in this connection. "After a long enquiry, the Committee has submitted its



report to the Government and recommended legal action against an individual, whose earlier criminal links and antecedents also came to notice during the enquiry," the statement said. The committee has recommended that the legal action must be completed expeditiously. "The Committee has further recommended functional improvements in systems and procedures as also initiation of steps that could strengthen India's response capability, ensure systematic controls and coordinated action in dealing with matters like this," the statement said. While announcing the constitution of the high-powered committee in November 2023, the External Affairs Ministry had said it will look into all relevant aspects of the matter (security concerns raised by the US). Earlier, the US said it had stopped a plot to kill a Sikh separatist and warned India about concerns about New Delhi's involvement. The US said it was treating the plot with utmost seriousness and raised the issue with the Indian government "at the senior-most levels". In December 2023, Yadav was arrested by Delhi Police in a case of kidnapping and extortion lodged against him. He is currently on bail in this case.

**Continued on page 2**

## Helmet fuels power cut in UP pump

**BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ HAPUR**

A petrol pump in Hapur's Partapur Road faced an unusual disruption when a lineman, angered by the denial of fuel for not wearing a helmet, cut off the pump's power supply. The incident led to a 20-minute shutdown, causing chaos and heated exchanges. The situation intensified after a video of the altercation went viral on social media.

In compliance with government directives, two-wheeler riders without helmets are not allowed to purchase fuel at petrol pumps. This rule was being enforced at the petrol pump on Partapur Road.

According to Golu, a pump employee, the lineman from the local power station arrived at the pump to refuel his vehicle without a helmet.

Upon being informed about the rule, the lineman became irate and demanded fuel, which was denied. In retaliation, he reportedly cut off the pump's power



supply, halting operations and creating disarray among staff and customers. Pump employees rushed to the nearby transformer to confront the lineman about the disconnection. They emphasized that the pump had no outstanding electricity dues, questioning the rationale behind the disruption. After heated discussions, the power supply was restored.

The incident gained traction after a video of the event went viral, sparking widespread criticism. Authorities are now facing scrutiny over the lineman's actions and the lack of accountability in such cases.

Arvind Kushwaha, Sub-Divisional Officer (SDO), stated, "We have not

received any formal complaint about the disruption of supply at the petrol pump. If a complaint is filed, necessary action will be taken. The matter is currently not under official scrutiny." Superintending Engineer S.K. Agrawal added, "Such actions are unacceptable. No establishment's power supply can be cut arbitrarily. We will investigate the matter thoroughly and take appropriate action."

This is not the first time power supply disruptions have occurred without due process. In a previous instance, several officials, including a superintending engineer, were suspended for cutting off power to an industrial unit.

The incident underscores the challenges in enforcing government directives and the potential abuse of authority by officials. With the viral video drawing attention, public pressure on authorities to act decisively has increased. Residents and pump operators now await swift and transparent action to prevent such incidents in the future.

## India Women Break ODI Record with 435 Runs, Sweep

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI/RAJKOT**

Indian women's cricket team on Wednesday scripted history by scoring highest ever total of 435 runs in the third and last one day international (ODI) match against Ireland in Rajkot. It was defeated by a whopping 304 runs and Indian team notched up its biggest ever ODI win and completed a three-nil clean sweep. Indian skipper Smriti Mandhana scored a century in just 70 balls thereby setting the stage for the massive total.

Incidentally, it was highest total by an Indian team - men's or women's - in ODIs. India men's highest ODI total is 418/5 made against the West Indies in Indore in 2011. The result of the match was a mere formality once India set



Ireland a massive target of 436, and Ireland could only garner 131 before getting bundled out in 31.4 overs. India put the first step forward towards a crushing victory through record-breaking Mandhana (135, 80b, 12x4, 7x6) and her opening partner Pratika Rawal (154, 129b, 20x4, 1x6), reaching 435/5.

Mandhana and Rawal added a whopping 233 runs for the first wicket in just 26.4 overs and there was no looking

back. Then spinners Tanuja Kanwar (2/31) and Deepti Sharma (3/27) took over, sharing five wickets among them to decimate the Irish line-up, which was well short on experience.

Orla Prendergast (36) and Sarah Forbes (41) added 64 runs for a fluent third wicket stand that helped Ireland to recover from a shaky 24 for two to reach 88 without further damage. But once Prendergast was cleaned up by Kanwar, India were all over the tourists like a bad rash, claiming the remaining seven wickets for just 33 runs.

It also helped India eclipse their previous largest margin of victory (by runs) - 249 registered against the same opposition in 2017 at Potchefstroom, South Africa.

**Continued on page 2**



# Former TMC minister Mullick gets bail in Bengal ration scam

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

After more than 13 months of incarceration, powerful Trinamool Congress leader and former Bengal Food and Civil Supplies Minister Jyotipriya Mullick was on Wednesday granted bail in the multi-crore ration scam. The former Food Minister, who was arrested by the Enforcement Directorate in February 2024, was granted bail by a special ED Court on two bail bonds of Rs 25,000 each and a personal bond of Rs 50 lakh, lawyers said, adding that he has also been directed to cooperate in the investigation process and appear before the

investigating officer and the Court whenever called upon to do so. He has also been asked to surrender his passport and refrain from influencing the witnesses. Mullick was arrested for his alleged role as the State Food Minister in an alleged Rs 10,000 crore public distribution system scam. He was arrested under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act after more than 17-18 hours of questioning. He was serving as the Forest Minister at the time of his arrest. Incidentally, Mullick's arrest was linked to the infamous Sandeshkhali incident that hit national headlines,

culminating in the arrest of another TMC leader and strongman, Sheikh Shahjahan, whose name also appeared in the ration scam. In January 2024, when the ED officials went to interrogate Shahjahan at his residence in Sandeshkhali, they were attacked and injured by a mob allegedly at the instance of the TMC leader. In a subsequent development, the women of Sandeshkhali hit the streets demanding his arrest. They accused him and his men of land grabbing, mass molestation, and rape. Subsequently, he was arrested by the CBI. Shahjahan was allegedly a close confidant of Mullick.

The other accused arrested in the case were Bakibur Rehman — a key accused and a relatively less known businessman with massive fortunes, a former TMC municipal chairman Shankar Adhya of Bongaon town in North 24 Parganas bordering Bangladesh, and Biswajit Das. They were earlier granted bail. The TMC leadership maintained a studied silence on whether Mullick would be re-inducted into the Mamata Banerjee Cabinet or would be cast aside, similar to Madan Mitra, a former Transport Minister who too was jailed for his alleged involvement in the Sharada chit fund scam.

# Modi meets MahaYuti MLAs in Mumbai

TN RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI:

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday exhorted the ruling BJP-led MahaYuti to emulate the example of Gujarat where the BJP controls the state from Gram Panchayat level to the State Assembly and Lok Sabha single-handedly, and gain full control of Maharashtra. Addressing the newly elected MLAs of the ruling MahaYuti — comprising BJP, Shiv Sena (Eknath Shinde) and NCP (Ajit Pawar) at a luncheon meeting organised at the INS Angra Auditorium here, Modi said: "In Gujarat, we the BJP have control from the local bodies to the State Assembly and Lok Sabha. You should take a cue from the Gujarat pattern and gain full control over Maharashtra". Alluding to the manner which the Congress held onto power for years on end, Modi took a dig at the grand-old party by saying: "In the first five year, the Congress would announce that it would build roads. In the second five year plan, the Congress would show maps of the roads it was

building. And in the third five year plan, it would announce that work on road building has started. That's how the Congress managed to hold onto power in the country and states for years". Modi asked the newly elected MahaYuti MLAs to take active part in building the party organisation at the grass-root level. "Take time out to visit the party offices and meet the party office bearers at their constituency level," he told the legislators. Modi also advised the MLAs to also take care of their health while taking care of their constituencies. "I also advise you that while speaking to the media, be careful that you will land in controversies," he told the MLAs present at the joint three-party luncheon meeting. The Prime Minister also asked the MLAs of BJP, Shiv Sena (Shinde) and NCP (Ajit Pawar) to ensure that the schemes of the Centre and State government reached the people. Maharashtra chief minister Devendra Fadnis of the BJP, deputy chief ministers

Eknath Shinde of the Shiv Sena (Shinde), Ajit Pawar of the NCP (AP) and state BJP office bearers were among those present at the joint luncheon meeting. Wednesday's joint address by the Prime Minister came six weeks after the BJP-led MahaYuti returned to power in Maharashtra through a spectacular victory in the State Assembly polls -- in which the ruling front won 230 seats out of the total 288 seats, as against 46 seats secured by the Opposition Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA). It may be recalled that in the Assembly polls, the BJP walked away with 132 seats out of the total 288 seats, followed by its allies Eknath Shinde-led Shiv Sena with 57 seats and Ajit Pawar-led NCP with 41 seats. On the other hand, the MVA constituents - Shiv Sena (UBT), Congress, and NCP -- secured 20, 16, and 10 seats, respectively. The joint meeting comes days after BJP's state-level grand convention in Shirdi, which was addressed by Union Home Minister and BJP's chief strategist Amit Shah.

# Puja Khedkar granted interim relief

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Wednesday protected from arrest till February 14 former IAS probationer Puja Khedkar, accused of cheating and wrongly availing OBC and disability quota benefits in the civil services examination. A bench of Justices BV Nagarathna and Satish Chandra Sharma issued notice to the Delhi government and the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) on Khedkar's plea seeking anticipatory bail. "Issue notice returnable on February 14, 2025. Till next date of hearing, no coercive steps to be taken against petitioner," directed the bench. During the hearing, senior advocate Siddharth Luthra, appearing for Khedkar, argued the High Court made strong observations against her while dismissing her anticipatory bail plea. Khedkar is accused of misrepresenting information in her application for the UPSC civil services examination, 2022, for availing reservation benefits.

# SIT formed to investigate Rajouri deaths

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ JAMMU

The Union Territory administration in Jammu and Kashmir on Wednesday constituted a Special Investigation Team (SIT) to probe the mysterious deaths of 14 members belonging to three families in the Badhaal

area of Rajouri. The SIT was formed immediately after Health Minister Sakina Masood clarified that these deaths were not caused by any mysterious disease, as tests conducted both within and outside the Union Territory have returned negative results.

According to an official order, the SIT will be led by Superintendent of Police (Operations), Budhal, Wajahat Hussain. The team includes the Deputy Superintendent of Police Kandi, Station House Officers of Police Station Kandi and Women's Police Station Rajouri, along with

officials and experts from forensic medicine, toxicology, microbiology, pediatrics, and pathology departments. Additionally, the SIT will seek expertise from professionals in food safety, agriculture, the Jal Shakti Department, and the Forensic Science Laboratory (FSL) in Jammu.

# DDA seeks help for water supply delays

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Delhi Development Authority (DDA) has written a letter to the chief secretary of Delhi requesting his intervention in resolving the long-pending water woes caused by the inaction of the Delhi Jal Board (DJB) in the residential colonies of the department. "I would like to draw your kind attention to the non-completion of various schemes of DJB for which infrastructure charges have already been paid by DDA. However, the schemes could

not be completed yet. At some locations, the necessary water connections have not been provided; as a result, water is not being supplied by DJB to the various colonies developed by DDA. Consequently, the DDA has to supply water in those colonies through water tankers, causing an extra financial burden," the letter said. It added, "In addition, there are certain water supply and sewerage schemes of DDA for which infrastructure charges have already been paid, but the schemes are not approved till date, including some schemes

of Narela sub-city which have been pending with DJB since 2013. As a result, DDA is unable to develop such areas." Even as the department has paid a hefty infrastructure charge of Rs 1,059 crore for 23 water supply and sewerage schemes, the Delhi Jal Board (DJB) has neither approved these schemes nor supplied water in areas like Dwarka, Rohini, Kalkaji, Vasant Kunj, Jasola, and Narela, among others, the DDA vice chairman Vijay Kumar Singh said in his communication. "It is kindly informed that the total infrastructure charges

paid by DDA to DJB are to the tune of Rs 1,058.77 crores for 23 schemes of water supply and 11 schemes of sewerage. Details of the same are enclosed herewith for your ready reference as Annexure-'A', the letter said. Singh added, "In view of the above, may I request your kind intervention to give suitable directions to the concerned officers in resolving the above long-pending issues, including providing water connections for the supply of water to DDA colonies and also approving the pending schemes of DDA."

# Kejriwal files nomination, has ₹4.2 Crore in assets

From page 1

Kejriwal's wife owns a house in Gurugram and a small five-seater car, the affidavit said. The election affidavit also revealed that Sunita Kejriwal, wife of the AAP leader, has twice the annual income of Arvind Kejriwal. While Kejriwal declared his annual income at Rs 7.21 Lakh, Sunita has an annual income of Rs 14.10 Lakh. While Kejriwal has listed his profession as MLA/politician, his wife Sunita has declared her profession as a retired government servant and housewife. Sunita has about Rs 20 Lakh in four different bank accounts and Rs 26,47,944 in her public provident fund (PPF) account. While Kejriwal's income comes from his MLA salary, his wife receives a pension for being a retired government official. Sunita also has 320 grams of gold worth Rs 25 Lakh and one kilogram of silver worth Rs 92,000. He is facing 14 cases, including the excise policy scam case, non-compliance of summons, and alleged defamation cases. Before filing his nomination papers, Kejriwal, accompanied by his wife Sunita, offered prayers at the Hanuman and Valmiki temples. He then led a 'padyatra' from the AAP office to the New Delhi

district magistrate's office, where he filed his nomination. Hundreds of AAP workers, carrying party flags, walked with the former chief minister for his nomination. After filing his nomination, Kejriwal exuded confidence that the AAP would return to power in Delhi and urged people to vote based on work and not "abuses". "AAP will form the government with full majority," he said. "I want to request the people of Delhi to vote based on work and not abuses," he added. Attacking the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Kejriwal said the party has no vision, no chief ministerial face, and no narrative. "They are not telling what work they will do in the next five years. The people of Delhi cannot be bought with a pair of shoes; people are seeing what the BJP is doing," he said. On reports about a threat to his life from a pro-Khalistani outfit, the AAP leader said God was with him. "Jako rakhe sayan maar sake na koye (Those protected by God cannot be killed by anyone). God is with me. One lives as long as their lifeline. The day one's lifeline ends, God calls them," he told reporters after offering prayers at the Prachin Hanuman temple. Verma, a former BJP MP and a prominent face in this election, holds an MBA

degree from the Fore School of Management. He has declared movable assets worth Rs 77.89 Crore and immovable assets valued at Rs 12.19 Crore. His wife owns movable assets worth Rs 17.53 Crore and immovable assets worth Rs 6.91 Crore. Verma has listed business and social work as his primary sources of income, while his wife is involved in private service and social work. Verma has shown a cash balance of Rs 2.2 Lakh. He owns three cars -- a Toyota Fortuner (Rs 9 Lakh), a Toyota Innova (Rs 36 Lakh), and an XUV (Rs 11.77 Lakh). In terms of precious metals, Verma owns 200 grams of gold worth Rs 8.25 Lakh, while his wife possesses 1.11 kg of gold valued at Rs 45.75 Lakh. Additionally, his two daughters own 300 grams of gold worth Rs 12.35 Lakh each, and his son holds 150 grams of gold valued at Rs 6.17 Lakh. Verma has a defamation case pending against him, filed by former Delhi Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia concerning allegations of corruption in Delhi's schools, among other legal matters. According to his affidavit, loans/dues on Verma total Rs 62.60 Crore, which includes a personal loan from his brother Siddharth Sahib Singh amounting to Rs 22.59 Crore. His wife has loans and dues amounting to almost Rs 11.45

Crore. He has one agricultural land worth Rs 80,50,000, and his wife has one worth about Rs 4 Crore. He also has non-agricultural land, a commercial building, and residential buildings. Before filing his nomination, Verma first offered prayers at the historic Gauri Shankar Temple in Chandni Chowk and Valmiki Temple. Meanwhile, Ramesh Bidhuri (61) has disclosed movable assets worth Rs 2.57 Crore and immovable assets worth Rs 12.3 Crore. His wife owns movable assets worth Rs 33.19 Lakh and immovable assets valued at Rs 4.73 Crore. Bidhuri, who holds an LLB degree from Uttar Pradesh, has listed business and rental income as his sources of earnings. He has declared a bank balance of Rs 30,000. The BJP candidate from the Kalkaji constituency owns four cars -- two Mahindra Scorpio cars valued at Rs 23.4 Lakh and Rs 16.9 Lakh, a Hyundai Creta worth Rs 18.11 Lakh, and a Toyota Innova worth Rs 23.5 Lakh. Additionally, he has declared 250 grams of gold worth Rs 20 Lakh, while his wife owns 200 grams of gold valued at Rs 16.3 Lakh and two kilograms of silver worth Rs 1.86 Lakh. Voting for the 70-member Delhi Assembly is scheduled to be held on February 5. The counting of votes will take place on February 8.

# Noida parking dispute ends in gun violence

From page 1

Ashutosh Srivastav, another resident of Radha Sky Gardens, shared his account of the incident, explaining that the disagreement between Sisodia and the guards had been ongoing for days. Srivastav, in a video message, described the altercation. "Late at night, a resident opened fire, claiming self-defense. He fired six shots, but thankfully, no security guard was hurt." Several videos of the incident, which have since gone viral on social media, capture the moments leading up to the

gunfire. In one video, Sisodia can be seen arguing with a security guard, challenging him to slap him. The guard, trying to defuse the situation, responds calmly, saying, "Why should I slap you? You are harassing poor guards." Sisodia, visibly agitated, retorts, "I am harassing poor people? You are misbehaving," and continues to provoke the guard. Another video shows a more intense exchange, with Sisodia accusing the guards of molesting women and threatening them. At one point, he grabs a man by the collar, while others attempt to

separate the two. He also said, "I will shoot you." Following the incident, the local police quickly intervened. A case has been registered against Sisodia, and authorities are investigating the matter. Shakti Mohan Avasthy, Deputy Commissioner of Police (Central Noida), confirmed that Sisodia had fired shots during the altercation. "We have filed a case based on the security officer's complaint. The CCTV footage is being reviewed to determine the next steps in the investigation," Avasthy stated.

# India to take legal...

From page 1

In the case related to the attempt to kill Pannun, Indian national Nikhil Gupta was arrested in Prague in 2023 and later extradited to the US from the Czech Republic. Gupta was arrested at the request of the US government on charges of being involved in a plot to kill Pannun. Canada had also claimed the presence of "credible" accusations connecting Indian operatives to the June killing of Sikh separatist leader Hardeep Singh Nijjar in a Vancouver suburb.

# GRAP IV implemented

From page 1

The maximum temperature was recorded at 18.1 degrees Celsius, while the minimum temperature stood at 6.1 degrees Celsius, two notches below normal on Wednesday. Calm winds, low temperatures, and foggy conditions allowed the accumulation of pollutants in the region, with the air quality index soaring from 275 on Tuesday to 396 at 6 p.m. on Wednesday. Following this, the Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM) subcommittee decided to invoke all actions under Stage-III ('Severe Air Quality of Delhi') and also Stage-IV ('Severe+' Air Quality of Delhi) of the extant Schedule of GRAP, with immediate effect, in addition to the

Stage-I and II actions already in force, the statement read. Unfavourable meteorological conditions, combined with vehicle emissions, paddy-straw burning, and other local pollution sources, have led to hazardous air quality levels in Delhi-NCR during winters. Forecasts by the India Meteorological Department (IMD) and the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology (IITM) suggest the AQI could soon cross the 400 mark. A dense fog lowered visibility to zero in the national capital and surrounding areas early Wednesday morning, delaying dozens of flights and trains. At least 13 flights have been cancelled, and 400 others delayed so far due to dense fog at Indira Gandhi International Airport. As many as 26

trains bound for Delhi are also running late, and the timings have been changed for six trains. Early morning travellers faced difficulties in navigating through the dense fog. Due to zero visibility reported in parts of Delhi-NCR, road traffic also slowed down in Delhi and nearby cities due to the reduced visibility. "All actions of the GRAP schedule shall be implemented, monitored, and reviewed by all the agencies concerned in the entire NCR to ensure that the AQI levels do not slip further. All implementing agencies shall keep strict vigil and intensify measures of the GRAP schedule. Citizens are requested to strictly adhere to the citizen charter under GRAP," the statement added. On January 12, the CAQM revoked

Stage-III restrictions after the AQI in Delhi improved due to rainfall. The Sub-Committee highlighted a significant rise in pollution levels, with the AQI jumping from 275 on January 14 to 393 by 5:00 PM and 396 by 6:00 PM on Wednesday. This surge is attributed to dense fog, low temperatures, and poor atmospheric conditions that hinder the dispersion of pollutants. To tackle the worsening air quality, CAQM has enforced the 9-point action plan under Stage-III and the 7-point action plan under Stage-IV across the NCR. The concerned agencies, including state Pollution Control Boards (PCBs) and the Delhi Pollution Control Committee (DPCC), have been directed to implement these measures promptly and strictly.

# India Women Break ODI Record...

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Mandhana's 10th ODI century came off just 70 deliveries as the left-hander surpassed Harmanpreet Kaur's 87-ball hundred mark against South Africa last year. It also set the tone for India breaching the 400-run mark for the first time, joining Australia and New Zealand in that elite list. Mandhana was in her usual destructive self, and was not afraid to take the aerial route over the 'V' and clear the 30-yard circle. Pratika complemented her captain brilliantly with a measured knock, making the occasion even more special by notching her maiden international century in her sixth innings. Pratika relied on precise

placement and deft touches in the point region and she showed her aggression only after reaching the ton, hitting Freya Sargent for her first six. Demonstrating hunger for a bigger knock, she powered her way to an impressive 150 - a perfect blend of composure and aggression. Their 233-run partnership made them only the fourth Indian pair to record a 200-run stand in Women's ODIs. It was also the third instance of both Indian openers scoring hundreds in ODIs, following Reshma Gandhi and Mithali Raj's feat at Milton Keynes in 1999 and Deepti and Raut's partnership at Potchefstroom in 2017 -- all against Ireland. The duo added 90 runs during the Power Play and 67 in the

subsequent 10 overs, maintaining a brisk scoring rate. Mandhana reached her first century of the calendar year with an exquisite drive off Arlene Kelly. Kelly bore the brunt of her onslaught, conceding successive sixes in one over. Even Kelly's variations, including back-of-the-hand deliveries, were dispatched with ease, with the Indian batter following a six with another boundary in the 24th over. Mandhana also took on Ireland's leading bowler, Prendergast, smashing her for a boundary down the ground and a towering six over long-on. Promoted to number three, Richa Ghosh also returned to form, making a 37-ball fifty, her fifth in ODIs.

# Modi commissions three naval warships

From page 1

Commissioning of warships and a submarine simultaneously marked a big event for India's maritime heritage, the glorious history of the Navy, and the Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan, Modi said. He added that Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj gave new strength and vision to the Navy in India. "We have taken a major step towards empowering the 21st-century Navy of India in the land of Shivaji Maharaj. It is for the first time that the tri-commissioning of a destroyer, frigate, and submarine has

been done. It is also a matter of pride that all the three frontline platforms were made in India. I would like to congratulate the Indian Navy, all the stakeholders involved in the construction work, and the citizens of India for the achievement," the Prime Minister said. Dwelling upon the significant role being played by maritime nations like India in shaping global security, economics, and geopolitical dynamics, the Prime Minister underscored the importance of protecting territorial waters, ensuring freedom of navigation, and securing trade

supply lines and sea routes for economic progress and energy security. While emphasising the need to safeguard the region from terrorism, arms, and drug trafficking, Modi spoke about the importance of becoming global partners in making the seas safe and prosperous, enhancing logistics efficiency, and supporting the shipping industry. He also highlighted the need to prevent the misuse of ocean resources like rare minerals and fish stocks and to develop the capacity to manage them. Noting the importance of investing in new shipping

routes and sea lanes of communication and expressing satisfaction that India is continuously taking steps in this direction, the Prime Minister said: "India has emerged as the first responder in the Indian Ocean Region. In recent months, the Indian Navy has saved hundreds of lives and secured national and international cargo worth thousands of crores, increasing global trust in India, the Indian Navy, and the Coast Guard." Modi said that India's strengthened economic cooperation with ASEAN,

Australia, Gulf countries, and African nations reflected the country's presence and capabilities in the Indian Ocean Region. "Today's event should be seen from both military and economic perspectives," he said. "Today's program links our glorious heritage with our future aspirations. India has a rich history related to long sea voyages, commerce, naval defence, and the ship industry. Today's India is emerging as a major maritime power in the world. The platforms launched today displayed a glimpse of the same. While INS Nilgiri is

dedicated to the maritime prowess of the Chola dynasty, INS Surat warship is reminiscent of the era when Gujarat's ports connected India to West Asia. The commissioning of the Vaghsheer submarine, the sixth in the P75 class, along with our warships Nilgiri and Surat will enhance both India's security and progress," the Prime Minister said. Expressing satisfaction over the Navy's significant contribution to the expansion of the Make in India initiative, the Prime Minister said that the Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders Limited had

played a crucial role in the Navy's expansion programme. "We have added seven submarines to the Navy over the past decade. Of the total 40 naval vessels commissioned into the Navy during the past one decade, 39 were built in Indian shipyards," he said. Congratulating the armed forces for their contribution to the "Make in India" campaign, the Prime Minister said: "India's defence production has surpassed Rs 1.25 lakh crore and that the country is exporting defence equipment to over 100 nations. This reflects a rapid transformation

of India's defence sector." Maintaining that the nation would continue to achieve moments of pride and contribute to making a developed country, Modi said: "While our responsibilities may differ, the goal remains the same-Viksit Bharat." Maharashtra Governor C P Radhakrishnan, Union Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnis, Union Minister of State for Defence Sanjay Seth, Deputy Chief Ministers Eknath Shinde and Ajit Pawar were among those present at the naval ceremony.



# City Assembly polls: More than 50 prominent leaders file nominations

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

More than 50 prominent leaders on Wednesday, who are in the fray for the high-octane Delhi assembly elections, including BJP's Kalkaji candidate Ramesh Bidhuri, BJP's New Delhi candidate Parvesh Saheb Singh Verma, AAP's Jangpura candidate Manish Sisodia and Congress' Badli candidate Devendra Yadav entered the election battle officially as they filed their nomination papers. Many leaders also took part in religious activities and also held roadshows before filing their nominations. Before submitting their nominations, BJP leaders Vjender Gupta, Satish Upadhyay, Parvesh Verma, and Ajay Mahawar stepped up their electoral campaigns with roadshows and rallies.

Verma worshipped at Gauri Shankar temple in Chandni Chowk along with his wife before taking on a foot march to Jangpura House from his Windsor Place residence for filing his nomination papers from New Delhi constituency. Meanwhile, Gupta accompanied by Union Minister Manohar Lal Khattar and the party workers performed a 'havan' and then moved to file his nomination papers from Rohini seat in a procession. Throughout the rally, the crowd chanted slogans such as 'Jai Shri Ram', 'Narendra Modi Zindabad', 'Bharat Mata Ki Jai', and 'Ab Nahi Sahenge, Badalkar Rahenge', creating an enthusiastic atmosphere.

Former Delhi Minister and BJP candidate from Bijwasan seat, Kailash Gahlot, offered prayers at Shri Hari Mandir in Vasant Kunj before going to file his nomination. BJP leader Ramesh Bidhuri joined a march that began from the EWS flats in Kalkaji built for rehabilitated slum dwellers. Satish Upadhyay, BJP candidate running from the Malviya Nagar Assembly seat,



expressed his gratitude and optimism during the rally. He said, "I am grateful that MP Bansuri Swaraj, my family, and my friends are all here in my support as I file my nomination today. Even amid this cold wave and dense fog, as you can see, people and my party workers are here in full

force. This shows and assures that the lotus is blooming, and BJP is coming to Delhi," he said. Bansuri Swaraj shared her support for Upadhyay and said, "On February 5, press the lotus symbol and make Satish Upadhyay the winner. We assure you that we will change

the fate of Malviya Nagar and work toward its development." BJP candidate Dushyant Singh Gautam, contesting from Karol Bagh, also held a roadshow ahead of filing his nomination at the SDM office in Jhandewalan, Delhi. He was accompanied by Haryana Chief Minister Nawab Singh



Saini during his rally ahead of nomination filing. Manoj Tiwari, along with BJP candidate Ajay Mahawar, held a rally in Yamuna Vihar before Mahawar filed his nomination for the upcoming Delhi Assembly elections. Mahawar expressed confidence in the BJP's success, saying,

"This time, the BJP will win with a full majority, and we are receiving complete cooperation from the people." Manoj Tiwari also shared his optimism about the party's prospects, and said, "We are filing nominations for approximately 38 seats, and now I am here with Ajay Mahawar, who

is going to file his nomination. We performed a 'havan' ceremony, seeking the blessings of the gods. This nomination will bring happiness to the people of Delhi, as the city has long been suppressed under corruption. This is the right time for change. In the Gonda constituency, all problems and

issues will be addressed. We want the support and blessings of the people. Press the lotus button." Taking a dig at former Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal, he said, "There is a wave in Delhi, and Arvind Kejriwal continues to lie, despite being ineligible to hold the position of Chief Minister. Delhi is watching all these lies. The people of Delhi will decide their fate, and a BJP's double-engine government will be formed." Several AAP candidates also filed their nomination with senior AAP leader Manish Sisodia visiting a temple and holding a roadshow before filing his nomination for the Jangpura Assembly seat. The former deputy chief minister sought blessings at the Angoori Mata Mandir in Kilokri before starting his roadshow. Under the banner "Bhai Ho To Aisa, Kejriwal Jaisa," Sisodia launched his roadshow. Further, former Delhi Health Minister Satyendra Jain also filed his nomination papers from the Shakur Basti Assembly seat after holding a roadshow with MP Sanjay Singh and former MP Dr. Sushil Gupta. The Congress has pinned its hopes on leaders such as Delhi Congress chief Devender Yadav who will contest from Badli taking on AAP's Ajesh Yadav and BJP's Deepak Chaudhary. The BJP has so far declared the names of 59 candidates for the polls, while the names of 11 candidates are yet to be announced. The nomination process for the Delhi Assembly elections began on January 10, and the last date for submission is January 17, 2025. As of now, 85 nominations have been filed, with 20 submissions made on January 13 alone. Voting for the 70-member Delhi Assembly is scheduled to be held on February 5 and the counting of votes will be taken up on February 8.

## MHA approves sanction to ED to prosecute Kejriwal, Sisodia | FIR filed against BJP's Parvesh Verma

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Just ahead of Delhi elections, the Centre has thrown yet another curveball at the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) after the Union Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) has approved sanction to the Enforcement Directorate (ED) to prosecute former Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal and his former deputy Manish Sisodia under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act in the excise policy case. The approval came a month after Delhi Lt Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena recommended that ED be granted sanction to prosecute Kejriwal in the excise policy case. Meanwhile, the AAP termed it a "misuse" of power by the BJP and an attempt to defame the ruling party ahead of the Delhi Assembly polls. The Aam Aadmi Party said the excise policy case registered in November 2022 was "unprecedented" as Kejriwal was arrested without any "sanction". "What we are witnessing is an unprecedented case in the country's history where the then chief minister, and convener of a national party ruling in two states, was jailed without a sanction, only to be granted bail by the courts," the



AAP, which is in power in Delhi and Punjab, said in a statement. Kejriwal has been made an accused in his personal capacity as well as in the capacity of being the national convener of his political party, the AAP, it said. "It is now coming to light that all of this was being done without a prosecution sanction. Two years after the case was registered, the ED-CBI acting on BJP's orders illegally jailed Kejriwal, and have only now gotten a sanction to prosecute him," it said. "Now they are seeking sanctions which they didn't have. The BJP's misuse

of agencies is evident to everyone. This shows the extent of power misuse, especially with elections around the corner," the party said. Earlier, the Home Ministry, sources have said, has also okayed the agency's prosecution push in the case against senior AAP leader and former Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia. AAP chief Kejriwal earlier approached the Delhi High Court, saying the probe agency's chargesheet against him and others in the case was illegal because no prior sanction of authorities was taken before filing the prosecution

complaint. The missing prosecution sanction had been cited by the AAP supreme to challenge the PMLA court's decision to take cognizance of the charge sheet against Kejriwal, Sisodia, and others. But now, with the legality being completed, the stage could be set for framing of charges against the accused in the excise policy scam. Granted bail by the Supreme Court last year in separate cases filed by ED and the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) relating to the excise policy, Kejriwal, who leads the ruling AAP in the Capital, has a

plea pending before the Delhi High Court in which he has sought quashing of a trial court order that took cognizance of the ED chargesheet without prior sanction for his prosecution. The two leaders are now campaigning for the February 5 election in the national capital. Kejriwal filed his nomination today to contest the election from the New Delhi constituency. Politically, the fresh development is likely to sharpen the BJP's attacks on the ruling AAP in the run-up to the election. Kejriwal was arrested on March 21, 2024, by ED after he failed to appear before it even after nine summonses. He was questioned by ED and arrested after the central agency found that he was not cooperating in the investigation. He was granted bail by the Supreme Court in the ED case on July 12 and in the CBI case on September 13 of that year. He resigned as the Delhi chief minister on September 17. Sisodia was arrested by CBI on February 26, 2023, and by ED 12 days later. The Supreme Court granted bail to him on August 9, 2024, saying, "There is not even the remotest possibility of the trial being concluded in the near future."

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

An FIR has been filed against BJP's New Delhi candidate Parvesh Sahib Singh Verma following a complaint by Returning Officer of New Delhi Assembly Constituency on Wednesday, who directed Station House Officer (SHO) Mandir Marg Police Station to lodge an FIR and to initiate an immediate investigation on the complaint against the former two-time MP. Earlier, the AAP leaders claimed that the BJP leader was spotted giving out shoes to voters in the New Delhi Assembly Constituency on the Valmiki Temple campus, which prompted the action against the BJP candidate. In the complaint copy to the SHO, the Returning Officer OP Pandey said a video forwarded by a complainant shows Parvesh Sahib Singh Verma distributing shoes to women. "I am to state that Dr. Rajnish Bhaskar, Adv. has made a complaint on whatsapp stating that Parvesh Sahib Singh Verma, prospective BJP candidate is distributing shoes to electors of New Delhi Assembly Constituency in the religious campus of Valmiki Temple near Mandir Marg, Police Station. The com-



plaint has forwarded two videos wherein Shri Praveesh Sahib Singh Verma is seen distributing shoes to women," it said. He added that the video and complaint was already sent to him at 10:36 am on his official Whatsapp number. "As per Section 123 of the Representation of People Act, 1951 (1) (A), any gift, offer or promise by a candidate or his agent or by any other person with the consent of a candidate or his election agent of any gratification, to any person, comes under Corrupt practices," the poll official said. "It is, therefore, directed that immediate investigation into the matter may be conducted and appropriate action for violation of MCC and action under Section 123 of RP Act, 1951 may be initiated, and action taken report to be sub-

mitted to the undersigned at the earliest," the returning officer said in the letter. This comes on the same day Verma filed his nomination ahead of the Delhi assembly elections following his visit to the Valmiki Temple and seeking the blessings of Maharshi Valmiki. Verma, in a social media post, "Today, at the Valmiki Temple on Mandir Marg, I offered prayers and received the blessings of Maharshi Valmiki Ji. I also honored the NDMC sanitation workers, who, through their tireless efforts, keep Delhi clean and beautiful. As a gesture of respect, I personally presented them with shoes and sought their blessings. On this significant occasion of filing my nomination from New Delhi, I humbly recognized and appreciated their dedication and hard work." AAP national convener Arvind Kejriwal on Monday alleged that his opponent in the New Delhi constituency, BJP's Parvesh Sahib Singh, has been "distributing cash, liquor, as well as bed sheets, shoes and glasses, to voters". However, the BJP leader denied the charge and said the money was distributed as part of a drive by an NGO founded by his late father.

## Bidhuri likens Atishi to 'hirni', stirs up controversy

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

BJP candidate from Kalkaji Assembly seat, Ramesh Bidhuri has stirred up controversy again on Wednesday with a comment about his competitor for the seat, AAP nominee and Delhi Chief Minister Atishi. During a public address, Bidhuri likened Atishi to a hirni (doe). The two-time former MP and three-time former MLA has recently made controversial remarks about her, stating that she changed her father. He made the comments minutes before Prime Minister Narendra Modi arrived at Rohini's Japanese Park for a pre-election rally. He also said that he will build the roads of Kalkaji as smooth as Lok Sabha Congress MP Priyanka Gandhi's cheeks. During a public address, Bidhuri said, "Chaar saal se log nark bhog rahe hai. Ab jab chaar mahine



chunav main reh gaye, toh Atishiji in galiyon main jaise jungle main hirni bhaagti phirti hai, vaise bhaagti phir rahi hai. (For four years, people have been living in hellish conditions. When there were four months to go for the elections, Atishi ji has been running around like a doe runs in the jungle.)" The BJP MLA candidate filed his nomination papers from the Kalkaji assembly constituency on Wednesday in the presence of Union Minister Hardeep Singh Puri. The ruling party

reacted sharply to the statement, calling his statement 'anti-women'. In a post on X, the party said, "Abusive party leader Ramesh Bidhuri once again showed his anti-women thinking! BJP candidate Ramesh Bidhuri again made derogatory remarks on Delhi's female Chief Minister @AtishiAAP. Delhiites will not forgive such abusive leaders and parties." Bidhuri, who served as a Lok Sabha MP from South Delhi from 2014 to 2024, has now been fielded as the BJP candidate from Kalkaji against Atishi. The Delhi assembly polls will be held in a single phase on February 5 and the counting of votes will take place on February 8. The last date for filing nominations is January 17. The date for scrutiny of nominations is January 18. The last date for withdrawal of candidature is January 20.

## BJP releases list of star campaigners for upcoming polls

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

As the Delhi Assembly elections approach, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has released a list of its star campaigners for the upcoming polls. The list features prominent leaders, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Union Home Minister Amit Shah, and other senior party figures. The BJP's strategy hinges on leveraging the influence of these leaders to connect with voters across the capital. Sources in the party said that Prime Minister Narendra Modi is likely to address two-three rallies in the city while Union Home Minister Amit Shah will address seven poll rallies in each of the Lok Sabha constituencies of the city. "There is also demand for roadshows by the prime minister in Delhi, but a final decision is yet to be taken by the top party leadership," a BJP functionary said. Key figures in the campaign include BJP President Jagat



Prakash Nadda, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, and Transport Minister Nitin Gadkari. Other heavyweights such as Shivraj Singh Chouhan, Manohar Lal Khattar, Dharmendra Pradhan, and Yogi Adityanath will also play pivotal roles. Additionally, Union ministers like Giriraj Singh, Hardeep Singh Puri, and Devendra Fadnavis are set

to participate in the campaign. The list also features prominent leaders such as Himanta Biswa Sarma, Keshav Prasad Maurya, Smriti Irani, and Anurag Thakur, among others. The seven chief ministers, who will campaign in Delhi as BJP's star campaigners, are Devendra Fadnavis, Himanta Biswa Sarma, Pushkar Singh Dhami, Yogi Adityanath, Bhajan Lal

Sharma, Nayab Singh Saini and Mohan Yadav. To woo purvanchali voters, the list also includes Purvanchali leaders, including Bhojpuri stars and MPs Manoj Tiwari and Ravi Kishan, and Dinesh Lal Yadav Nirahua. Purvanchalis -- people from eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar -- constitute a sizeable vote bank in the national cap-

ital. All the seven MPs from Delhi are also part of the list. Delhi BJP in-charge Baijayant Panda, co-in-charge Alka Gurjar, and the party's state unit chief Virendra Sachdeva will also be star campaigners for the polls. The inclusion of top brass reflects the party's intent to make significant inroads in a state where regional parties have held sway in recent years. The BJP aims to break its 26-year drought of power in Delhi, while the Congress is looking to regain a foothold after being wiped out in the past two elections. The national capital will witness a triangular fight between the Bharatiya Janata Party, Congress and the ruling Aam Aadmi Party has intensified against each other. With freebies, law and order, education and governance dominating campaign agendas, the capital is bracing for an intense electoral showdown with results on February 8.



# President Murmu, PM Modi extend wishes on 77th Army Day

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

President Droupadi Murmu and Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday greeted the Indian Army personnel, veterans and their families on the Army Day. "The nation remembers with gratitude, the countless sacrifices you have made in service of the motherland," President Murmu said in a social media post. The Army Day is observed on January 15 to commemorate the occasion when General K M Cariappa, who later became Field Marshal, took charge as the Commander-in-Chief of the Indian Army, replacing his British predecessor in 1949. "On Army Day, I extend my

greetings to the Indian Army personnel, veterans and their families. Your unwavering commitment to safeguarding sovereignty of the nation and ensuring national security is an inspiration for all," President Murmu said. She said the humanitarian work done by the Army during crises and disasters is a testament to their kindness and compassion. "May your extraordinary valour and courage continue to inspire generations to come!" she added. Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his message lauded the Indian Army for its determination, professionalism and dedication, and underlined his government's commitment to the welfare of armed forces and

their families. In social media posts, he said, "Today, on Army Day, we salute the unwavering courage of the Indian Army, which stands as the sentinel of our nation's security. We also remember the sacrifices made by the bravehearts who ensure the safety of crores of Indians every day." The Indian Army, he said, epitomises determination, professionalism and dedication. In addition to safeguarding our borders, it has made a mark in providing humanitarian help during natural disasters, he added. He said, "Our government is committed to the welfare of the armed forces and their families. Over the years, we have introduced several reforms and focused on modernisation.



This will continue in the times to come."

Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) General Anil Chauhan extended his greetings and best wishes to all ranks of the Indian Army on the occasion of the 77th Army Day. In his message, the CDS

said, the day is a celebration of the unwavering dedication, courage, indomitable spirit and professionalism that define the Indian Army, an institution that continues to stand as the bedrock of India's security and unity. General Chauhan stated that the

Indian Army's legacy is built on its credible ability to adapt to challenges, uphold sovereignty and serve the nation selflessly. "The relentless efforts of the personnel of Indian Army in maintaining a high state of readiness, excelling in operational domains and ensuring safety and well-being of our citizens, under all circumstances are commendable," he underscored. Highlighting the changing dynamics of warfare and the growing use of technology, CDS said modern warfare is evolving rapidly, driven by advancements in technology, and shifting geo-political dynamics. Conflicts are increasingly expanding into new domains, including Cyber, Space and

Cognitive arenas. He further said, "New age technologies and concepts such as Automation powered by Artificial Intelligence and Data Centric Architecture, Celerity Centric Warfare bolstered by Stealth and Hypersonic technologies, and Robotics driven by Autonomous Vehicles are transforming how future wars will be fought." Stressing that no wars in the future would be fought like the last one, and the very raison-d'être for any Army is to win wars, General Chauhan said Indian Army will need to adapt and equip technologically and continually upgrade its Tactics, Techniques and Procedures to remain ahead of the adversaries.

Empowering men with higher technical acumen with infusion of improved Information and Communications Technology is the need of the hour, he added. The CDS concluded his message by paying homage and expressing his gratitude to the brave hearts, who made the supreme sacrifice and laid down their lives in the Line of Duty. "As we mark this special day, every soldier must resolve to uphold the glorious traditions of the Army, while embracing the challenges of the future with determination and pride. May the Army continue to bring greater success and glory to our motherland and contribute indefatigably towards Nation Building," he said.

## DG level border talks between India and Bangladesh expected to be held February 16 onwards

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The twice postponed Director General (DG) level border talks between India and Bangladesh are now expected to be held here from February 16 with the issue of fencing and rise in infiltration attempts post the regime change in that country being a major subject of discussion, official sources said Wednesday. A delegation of the Border Guard Bangladesh is scheduled to hold discussions with their counterparts Border Security Force (BSF) between February 16 and 19 as part of the 55th edition of these bi-annual talks. This will be the first top-level discussion between the two forces post the fall of the Sheikh Hasina government on August 5, 2024. The engagements of the two sides are being worked upon, sources said. The dates for these talks were twice postponed last year, they said. The issues related to objections raised by Bangladesh over the construction of "agreed upon" single-row fence at about 92



identified patches covering about 95.8 km of the overall 4,096 km international border between the two neighbours is expected to be taken up during this meeting with "prominence", the sources said. Obstruction to the work of fence construction on this border was underlined last week after India followed by Bangladesh summoned the High Commissioners of the either country in their national capitals. Bangladesh expressed "deep concern" over the "activities" of

the BSF vis-a-vis fence erection and border killings when they called Indian High Commissioner Pranay Verma in Dhaka over the weekend. The next day, India made it clear to the acting Bangladeshi High Commissioner Nural Islam in Delhi that all laid down protocols were being followed while constructing the fence as it conveyed its expectation that "all earlier understandings will be implemented by Bangladesh and that there will be a cooperative approach to combating cross-border

crimes." The Indian side, during the border talks, is expected to put across the instances of spiked up infiltration attempts by Bangladeshi nationals across this front post August last year as these instances are linked to human trafficking and cross-border smuggling. According to the data, as many as 1,956 Bangladeshi nationals were apprehended by BSF troops between August and December last year. This five-month period accounted for more than 50 per cent of the interdictions of Bangladeshi nationals on this front as the entire year saw 3,474 such apprehensions. During 2023, 4,342 Bangladeshi nationals were caught by the BSF along this front. The DG-level border talks were held annually between 1975 and 1992 but made bi-annual in 1993 with either side alternatively travelling to the national capitals of New Delhi and Dhaka. The last edition was held in Dhaka in March when the Indian delegation travelled to that country.

## BJP slams Sharad Pawar for his remarks on Shah

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The BJP on Wednesday slammed NCP (SP) supremo Sharad Pawar for his "tadipaar" remark on Amit Shah and asked the veteran leader to stop spreading "wrong information" about the Union home minister. This came a day after Pawar attacked Shah for his comments that the BJP's victory in the Maharashtra assembly polls ended "the politics of betrayal and treachery started by him (Pawar) in 1978". Bemoaning the lack of communication among current political leaders, Pawar also asked the Union home minister to maintain the decorum of the post he holds. In an apparent reference to Shah being externed in 2010 from Gujarat for two years in connection with the Sohrabuddin Sheikh fake encounter case, the NCP (SP) chief had told a press conference in Marathi in Mumbai, "This country has seen many excellent home ministers, but none of them was a 'tadipaar' from his own state (externed)." Shah was acquitted of all the



charges in 2014. Hitting back at Pawar, BJP national general secretary Vinod Tawde said in a statement, "NCP (SP) leader Sharad Pawar has called Amit Shah a 'tadipaar' home minister. Do you know why he was externed from the state?" Shah was externed from Gujarat by a court in the state not because he committed "any robbery or theft", but in connection with a case of alleged

fake encounter of Sohrabuddin Sheikh, who was a "Lashkar-e-Taiba-linked smuggler". "The Gujarat court had said the state home minister (Amit Shah) should not live in the state if an impartial inquiry has to happen in the case. Later, he (Shah) was proved innocent in the case in the Supreme Court," Tawde added. He said Shah has called Pawar a "betrayer because he betrayed in 1978".

"So, if someone makes a political comment, it should be accepted with sportsman's spirit instead of spreading wrong information," the BJP leader said. Both Tawde and Shah described Pawar as a "betrayer" in an apparent reference to his walking out of the Vasantdada Patil-led government in 1978 with 40 MLAs and becoming the chief minister of Maharashtra. "During your (Sharad Pawar) term, there were talks that people associated with (gangster) Dawood (Ibrahimji) travelled in your helicopter. Dawood was running Mumbai when you were the chief minister," Tawde charged. The BJP leader asked Pawar if he would have made "such remarks" against V D Savarkar if he had been appointed a minister in the Union government. "Atal Bihari Vajpayee and L K Advani were in jail (during the Emergency) and later they became prime minister and the home minister of the country, respectively. Will you say such things about them also?" he added.

## Sonia Gandhi inaugurates Cong's new Kotla Road headquarters

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Congress Parliamentary Party chief Sonia Gandhi inaugurated the party's new headquarters located at 9A, Kotla Road here on Wednesday, marking a key moment in the history of the grand old party which has operated from the 24, Akbar Road premises for the last 47 years. Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge, former party chief Rahul Gandhi, Congress general secretaries Priyanka Gandhi Vadra and K C Venugopal, among other senior party leaders, were present on the occasion. The event saw party leaders hoist the party flag at the new headquarters and the singing of Vande Matram and the

national anthem. Sonia Gandhi then inaugurated the building, asking Kharge to join her in cutting the ribbon at the entry of the building. The new state-of-the-art AICC headquarters -- Indira Gandhi Bhawan -- symbolises the Congress party's continuing mission to uphold the vision of its stalwarts, the party had earlier said. "It is time for us to move ahead with the times and embrace the new," AICC general secretary, organisation, Venugopal had said. The construction of Indira Gandhi Bhawan was started during Sonia Gandhi's tenure as Congress chief. "Situated at 9A, Kotla Road, New Delhi, the Indira Gandhi



Bhawan is designed to meet the evolving needs of the party and its leaders, featuring modern facilities to support administrative, organi-

sational, and strategic activities. "This iconic building reflects the Congress party's forward-looking vision while paying

homage to its extraordinary past, which has shaped the political and social fabric of India," he had said. Sources have said the party will not vacate its present 24, Akbar Road office, which has been its headquarters since 1978 after the Congress (I) was formed, and it will continue to house some of its cells. The construction of the new AICC headquarters was delayed by several years owing to "paucity of funds" ever since the Congress lost its government at the Centre. The BJP has also not vacated its old party headquarters at 11, Ashoka Road, even after shifting to its new headquarters at Deendayal Upadhyay Marg. Congress old-timers and

romantics agree that modern amenities and a larger area are the need of the hour but the emotional connect and unfolding of history associated with the 24, Akbar Road address will always stay strong. The Akbar Road bungalow once housed Sir Reginald Maxwell, who was a member of Viceroy Lord Linlithgow's executive council. It was also home to a teen Aung San Suu Kyi in 1961 when her mother was appointed ambassador to India. The Congress has been its mainstay though. More than just an office for the party, the premises set in expansive lawns was witness to the tenure of seven Congress presidents.

## Pradhan announces third edition of KTS to be held from February 15



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan on Wednesday announced the third edition of cultural-exchange programme Kashi Tamil Sangamam will be held from February 15 to February 24. "The programme aims to celebrate, reaffirm and rediscover the age-old links between Tamil Nadu and Kashi -- two of the country's most important and ancient seats of learning. The 10-day initiative will begin from February 15," Pradhan said at a Press conference in the national Capital. The first month-long Kashi Tamil Sangamam was held in 2022 to revive the living bonds between Varanasi and Tamil Nadu. The second edition was organised from December 17 to December 30 in 2023. "A total of 1,000 participants from Tamil Nadu, split in five groups of equal numbers, will be taking part in the event. They will be from different walks of life, including students, teachers, farmers, artisans, professionals and small entrepreneurs, besides women and researchers. Further, a batch of 200 Tamil students from all the central universities will also be part of this event and get to undertake local visits to Varanasi, Prayagraj and Ayodhya," said IIT-Madras Director V Kamakoti. A highlight of the third edition is that the event will coincide with the Maha Kumbh Mela, which is being held from January 13 to February 26. The delegates will have the opportunity for "Shahi Snan" or a holy dip during the Maha Kumbh Mela and a visit to the Ram temple in Ayodhya. The main theme of this edition of Kashi Tamil Sangamam will

highlight the significant contributions of Sage Agasthyar to the Siddha System of Medicine (Bharatiya Chikitsa), classical Tamil literature and the cultural unity of the country. Pradhan encouraged people of Tamil Nadu to participate in Kashi Tamil Sangamam 3.0 wholeheartedly. An exhibition on the different facets of Sage Agasthyar and his contributions to world of Health, Philosophy, Science, Linguistics, Literature, Polity, Culture, Art, particularly to Tamil and Tamil Nadu, etc. and Seminars, workshops, book release, etc. will be organised at Kashi during KTS 3. Kashi Tamil Sangamam is being organized by the Union Ministry of Education in collaboration with other ministries including Culture, Textiles, Railways, Tourism, Food Processing, I&B etc. and the Uttar Pradesh Government. The programme aims to provide an opportunity for scholars, students, philosophers, traders, artisans, artists and people from other walks of life from the two regions to come together, share their knowledge, culture and best practices and learn from each other's experience. It also aims to make the youth aware and experience cultural oneness. The endeavour is in sync with NEP 2020's emphasis on integrating the wealth of Indian Knowledge Systems with modern systems of knowledge. IIT Madras and BHU are the two implementing agencies for the programme. KTS 2.0 was inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi at Varanasi in December 2023, with the first-ever real-time, app-based translation of a part of the Prime Minister's speech in Tamil for the benefit of visiting Tamil delegates.

## Election rules row: SC seeks Centre, EC reply on Ramesh's plea

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Wednesday sought responses from the Centre and the Election Commission on Congress general secretary Jairam Ramesh's plea against the recent amendments, including no public access to CCTV, to the 1961 election rules. A bench comprising Chief Justice Sanjiv Khanna and Justice Sanjay Kumar took note of the submissions of senior advocates Kapil Sibal and Abhishek Manu Singhvi, appearing for Ramesh, and issued notices on the plea. The bench said it would hear the plea in the week commencing March 17. Singhvi said amendments to the 1961 Conduct of Election Rules were made "very cleverly" and barred any access to CCTV footage claiming it would reveal the identity of the voter. He said voting choices were never revealed and the CCTV footage could not reveal votes. Senior lawyers urged the bench to ask the Election Commission of India (ECI) and the Centre to file their responses before the next date of hearing else they would come and say "reply is needed



to be filed" on that day. "They will file the responses," the CJI said. The Congress leader filed the writ petition in December challenging the recent amendments to the 1961 rules and expressed "hope" that the apex court would 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 besides video recordings of candidates to prevent their misuse. Ramesh said the ECI, a con-

stitutional body charged with the conduct of free and fair elections, couldn't be allowed to unilaterally, and without public consultation, amend such a vital law in such a brazen manner. "This is especially true when that amendment does away with public access to essential information that makes the electoral process more transparent and accountable," he said. Based on ECI's recommendation, the Union Law Ministry in December amended Rule 93(2)(a) of the 1961 rules, to restrict the type of "papers" or documents open to public inspection.

## NSUI holds protest march against Bhagwat's 'true independence' remark

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Congress's student wing on Wednesday staged a protest march, demanding a ban on the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and action against its chief, Mohan Bhagwat. Protesters of the National Students' Union of India (NSUI), who plan to march to Union Home Minister Amit Shah's residence, said Bhagwat's recent remarks that India got true independence after the consecration of Ram mandir in 2024 was "anti-national". The march, led by NSUI national president Varun Choudhary, began from the organisation's headquarters in New Delhi. On Wednesday, Bhagwat said the date Ram temple was inaugurated in Ayodhya should be celebrated as "Pratishtha Dvadashi" -- the "true independence" day of the country that faced "enemy attacks for several centuries". He was speaking at an event in Indore where he presented the 'National Devi Ahilya Award' to Champat Rai, general secretary of Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust -- which was tasked



with the construction and management of the temple in Ayodhya. The Congress reacted sharply to Bhagwat's remarks, with party leader Rahul Gandhi saying it amounts to treason and is an insult to every Indian. Speaking at the inauguration of the new Congress headquarters in Delhi, Gandhi also said that the fight against the RSS and the BJP was a "civilisational war". "Do not think that we are fighting a fair fight. There is no fairness in this. If you believe that we are fighting like BJP or RSS, you have not understood what is going on. The BJP and RSS have captured every single institution

in this country and we are now fighting the BJP, the RSS and the Indian state itself," he said. Gandhi's remarks triggered another row, with the BJP hitting out at the Congress leader for saying that he is "fighting the BJP, RSS and the Indian state". BJP president JP Nadda alleged on X that it is not a secret that Gandhi and his ecosystem have close links with "urban naxals" and the "deep state" who want to "defame, demean and discredit" India. "I compliment Mr. Rahul Gandhi for saying clearly what the nation knows - that he is fighting the Indian state!" he said.



# MAHAKUMBH 2025: SPECIAL COVERAGE

## 'Sanskriti ka Mahakumbh' set to begin on January 16

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■**  
LUCKNOW/MAHAKUMBH  
NAGAR

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

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



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

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

**Main events on January 16:**  
- Prof. Ritwik Sanyal (Varanasi) - Classical/Light Classical Singing  
- Vichitrnanda Sween (Bhubaneswar) - Odissi Dance  
- Kushal Das (Kolkata) - Sitar  
- Shankar Mahadevan (Mumbai) & Ravi Shankar (Uttar Pradesh) - Bhajans/Light Music  
- Yamuna Pandal:  
- Children from Sanskrit

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

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

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



## UP CM orders arrangement for Mauni Amavasya

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■**  
LUCKNOW

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

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

## UP deploys mobile labs to check food quality

**PTI ■ MAHAKUMBH NAGAR**

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



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

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

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

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

**BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■**  
MAHAKUMBH NAGAR

In a unique initiative, the Uttar Pradesh government has established five "Vidya Kumbh" primary schools within the sprawling Mahakumbh mela ground in Prayagraj. These schools are dedicated to providing free, high-quality education to the children of the 15,000 sanitation workers tirelessly maintaining cleanliness during the grand event. The project, spearheaded by the state's basic education department, aims to ensure that the education of these children is not disrupted while their families work at the Mahakumbh. The schools, located in sectors 1, 2, 7, 10, and 13, are equipped with digital classrooms, playgrounds, and a host of amenities, creating a vibrant learning environment. Basic education minister Sandeep Singh hailed the effort as an example of the government's commitment to



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

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

said, "Through Vidya Kumbh, we are ensuring that the education of children belonging to labor families continues uninterrupted, even in the midst of this massive event." For Sunita, a sanitation worker from Varanasi, the initiative has been life-changing. "I was worried about my daughter Rajkumari missing her studies while I worked here. Now, she's not only learning but also enjoying her time with new friends," Sunita shared with a smile. Eight-year-old Arjun, a student at Vidya Kumbh Primary School in Sector-10, expressed his delight, saying, "I love studying here! We get to play in the big playground, and the teachers are very kind. The best part is that we also get tasty food every day." Another student, 10-year-old Meena, added, "The school gave us new books, sweaters, and even shoes. I'm happy to come here every day." The schools emphasize digital

and game-based learning, with lessons taught using audio-video content, whiteboards, and interactive activities. For nursery students, playful methods have been adopted to spark their interest in education. Akanksha Rana, officer on special duty for the Kumbh Mela Authority, highlighted the broader vision: "We plan to establish Vidya Kumbh schools in all 25 sectors of Mahakumbh Nagar. This initiative not only ensures education but also builds a sense of community and care." The children also receive nutritious mid-day meals, with a dedicated dining area ensuring they remain healthy and energized throughout the day. The Vidya Kumbh initiative reflects the state government's focus on inclusive development during Mahakumbh 2025, which is expected to witness millions of devotees from across the globe.

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

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■**  
NEW DELHI

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

population -- and communicating with them through a host of special initiatives over 45-day-long events, in which about 40 crore people are estimated to attend. Reliance Consumer Products Ltd (RCPL), the FMCG arm of billionaire Mukesh Ambani-led Reliance Industries retail empire, is offering services and product availability of its consumer products to enhance the pilgrim journey. "This will include providing essential refreshments to ensure pilgrims remain hydrated and energised during their spiritual quest. Signage and directional boards are also being installed to assist pilgrims with clear, easy-to-read signages and branding to navigate the vast expanse of the event smoothly," said RCPL Chief Operating Officer Ketan Mody. It will also operate 'aaram sthal' (resting areas), designated comfortable rest zones to offer pilgrims a moment to relax during their

long and often arduous journeys, he added. FMCG brand Reckitt through its flagship hygiene brand Dettol will support nearly 15,000 sanitation workers by providing training programmes and making soaps accessible to them at Kumbh. It is also deploying health and hygiene volunteers across all

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

2025 provides a unique opportunity to embed hygiene practices into one of India's most culturally significant events. We are delighted to take ahead our long-standing partnership with the Government of Uttar Pradesh and GIWA," said Reckitt -- South Asia Executive Vice President Gaurav Jain. Home-grown FMCG firm Dabur said it has also planned a series of consumer engaging activities to strengthen connect with people during the Kumbh Mela. "We feel direct engagement with consumers during such traditional melas that helps us strengthen our bond with consumers. They, in turn, get the opportunity to touch, feel and experience our products. This reinforces their long-standing trust in the brand Dabur," Dabur India CEO Mohit Malhotra said. In rural markets, success depends highly on how a brand is positioned and promoted. The greater the strategic attention to a unique demand, the greater the

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

initiatives at the event that showcase the potential of repurposed packaging and raise awareness about recycling to inspire collective action," said Coca-Cola India and South West Asia Vice President Marketing Greishma Singh. Multi-conglomerate ITC sees the Mahakumbh as a unique spiritual, economic and cultural confluence, offering unparalleled opportunities for brands to engage with consumers. It has activated its Mangaldeep agarbatti (incense sticks) and packaged food brand Bingo. "ITC's FMCG brands, including Bingo! and Mangaldeep, are leveraging this opportunity to connect with the masses through experiential initiatives at the mega event. Through its consumer connect initiative, Bingo will bring the local culture of Uttar Pradesh to life at the brand's activity booth with initiatives such as creating reels on famous local songs using traditional props and offering fusion dishes," said an ITC spokesperson.







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PAPER WITH PASSION

## Wildfires: A call for action

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

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

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

### PICTALK



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

PTI

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

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

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

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



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

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

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



SANJAY CHANDRA

# Women breaking the glass ceiling

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



KALYANI SHANKAR

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

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

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



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



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

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

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

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

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### BORDER FENCING DISPUTE

Madam — Apropos to the article "India summons Bangladesh Deputy High Commissioner." The escalation of tensions along the India-Bangladesh border is yet another reflection of the low point in bilateral ties between two neighbouring countries. Bangladesh's concern over India's efforts to fence the international boundary to stem smuggling and other transnational crimes is misplaced, especially since there have been several attempts by smugglers and traffickers from the Bangladeshi side to transgress the border. But India is well within its rights to construct fencing in porous sections of the border to prevent transnational crimes in the wake of stray incidents of violence, including firing reported from along the border, especially in West Bengal. The key aim of fencing the India-Bangladesh border is cracking down on smuggling and streamlining the legitimate movement of goods and people. However, there are mechanisms in place to address these issues, and if necessary, these can be revisited to make them work more effectively. Meanwhile, it would be foolish to undo all the achievements of the past and create another point of dispute in a relationship that is already weighed down because of the new political dynamics in Dhaka. More than addressing the immediate irritants on the border, the two sides need to take further steps to arrest the slide in the overall relationship and prevent new areas of divergence.

N Sadasiva Reddy | Bengaluru

### CEASEFIRE IN SIGHT

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

### BCCI disallows spouse travel with team



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

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

R K Jain | Barwani

### INDIA ENGAGES WITH AFGHANISTAN

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

Priya Thakur | Ujjain

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Dattaprasad Shirodkar | Mumbai





## FIRST COLUMN THE POWER OF POSITIVE SELF-TALK

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



RAJYOGI BRAHMA KUMAR NIKUNJ JI

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

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



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

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

There is no doubt that it takes a lot of effort and time, but with persistence, asseverations can become a strong tool to make our outlook and life healthier and happier. We can either create or maintain a powerful state of mind with positive asseverations or use them to counter our negative self-talk. Let's say you are running for a half marathon. Despite all the preparations, you tend to lose rhythm and get into some snag. All of a sudden your confidence sags and you catch yourself thinking "I can't do this. I shouldn't have registered for a half marathon. My capacity is too low. I am too weak as compared to others." All this negative thinking, if allowed to persist, will guarantee that you fail. You can make up some positive asseverations to counter this thinking. Like, you might think, "I feel confident. I can do this, Slow and Steady wins the Race." If you repeat this several times, you will soon start feeling better & achieve your desired goal. While using this self-motivation technique of asseveration, we become more conscious of our thoughts, feelings and behaviour, and start feeling better about ourselves. The only thing that we need to remember is "Never to give up", because however slow the results may seem to be coming, these techniques give us greater control of our thoughts, feelings and behaviour, putting us in charge of our lives.

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

# The communication crossroads of 2025



CHAITANYA K PRASAD

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



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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

The country's influence has expanded far beyond its borders, particularly through its active participation in multilateral forums like the G20, BRICS, and the United Nations. India's emphasis on South-South cooperation and its role as a leader in digital innovation makes it a fertile ground for reshaping global communication paradigms. By championing inclusive narratives and fostering dialogue on issues critical to the Global South—such as climate justice, sustainable development, equitable access to technology, and strengthening the education system—India leverages its communication landscape to promote solidarity and shared growth among developing nations. As a

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

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

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

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

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

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

This disaster has left homes, places of worship, and critical infrastructure in ruins, forcing many into shelters and leaving thousands without electricity. The financial toll of these fires is staggering, estimated between \$135 billion and \$150 billion, making this one of the most economically destructive



SATENDRA

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Authorities take impeached Prez Yoon to detention centre

South Korea's impeached President, Yoon Suk Yeol, was sent to a detention centre near Seoul on Wednesday night, after being questioned by anti-corruption officials who took him into custody over his imposition of martial law last month.

tion of martial law December 3 as a legitimate act of governance against an "anti-state" opposition employing its legislative majority to thwart his agenda.



Investigators from the state anti-corruption agency and police officers make their way to the residence of impeached President Yoon Suk Yeol to execute a warrant to detain Yoon in Seoul, South Korea on Wednesday.

After he was questioned for more than 10 hours, a vehicle carrying Yoon arrived at a detention center in Uiwang, near Seoul, escorted by police and presidential security vehicles.

the death penalty or life imprisonment, if convicted. "If the first court hands down a prison sentence, the detention simply continues," Park said. "If they sentence him to life imprisonment, for example, he continues serving that sentence straight through."

crime", saying his declaration was necessary to raise awareness about an opposition that was exercising "legislative dictatorship by blocking laws and budgets" and "paralyzing state affairs."

lawyers and his chief of staff, before Yoon was driven out. South Korea's acting leader, Deputy Prime Minister Choi Sang-mok, issued a statement early Wednesday urging law enforcement and the presidential security service to ensure there were no "physical clashes".

GOVERNMENT OF ODISHA DEPARTMENT OF WATER RESOURCES OFFICE OF THE ADDITIONAL CHIEF ENGINEER, EASTERN CIRCLE-II, CHANDIKHOLE

Dire fire warning for LA area pushed back as winds ease

Easing winds delivered a brief but much-needed reprieve to firefighters Tuesday as they battled two massive blazes burning in the Los Angeles area, and the National Weather Service pushed back its unusually dire warning of critical fire weather until early the following day.



Trucks drive through a neighborhood destroyed by the Eaton Fire, Tuesday, in Altadena, Calif.

happen earlier in the day. Still the danger was not over, officials said. "Key message: We are not out of the woods yet," the National Weather Service in Los Angeles said in a post on social media.

most stubborn blaze. CalFire Operations Section Chief Christian Litz said he took a helicopter ride around the perimeter and saw no active flames, though it was far from over.

Table with columns for S.No., Account Name, Client ID, No. of Ac., Bal. Outstanding as on 14/01/2025, Weight (grams). Includes sections for ASHOK VIHAR - DELHI, GREATER KAILASH - II, KAROL BAGH, OKHLA, MAYUR VIHAR - NEW DELHI, BHAIJANPURA - NEW DELHI, KRISHNA NAGAR, NEW DELHI.

Japan, Philippines to urge Trump on US engagement in Asia

Japan and the Philippines will convey to President-elect Donald Trump the urgent need for the US to remain committed to help uphold the rule of law in an Asian region where security concerns have become "increasingly severe," Japan's top diplomat said Wednesday.

guration as one of Washington's closest treaty allies in Asia along with the Philippines. "Amid the increasingly severe strategic environment in the region, Japan places importance on our bilateral cooperation as well as on maintaining and strengthening trilateral cooperation between Japan, the Philippines and the United States," Iwaya said.

eral of the National Security Council in the Philippines, a top government body, said Tuesday that China was "pushing us to the wall" and warned that "all options are on the table" for Manila's response, including new international lawsuits.

2 pvt lunar landers head toward moon in roundabout journey

In a two-for-one moonshot, SpaceX launched a pair of lunar landers Wednesday for US and Japanese companies looking to jumpstart business on Earth's dusty sidekick.

future explorers. Lunar newcomer Texas-based Firefly Aerospace is flying 10 experiments for NASA, including a vacuum to gather dirt, a drill to measure the temperature below the surface and a device that could be used by future moonwalkers to keep the sharp, abrasive particles off their spacesuits and equipment.



Dhaka (PTI): Bangladesh Supreme Court on Wednesday acquitted former prime minister and BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia in a corruption case, overturning the High Court's earlier 10-year prison sentence.

The Supreme Court acquitted Zia, the party's Acting Chairman Tariqul Rahman, and all other suspects in their appeal over the Zia Orphanage Trust graft case, the report added.

Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar SHORT TERM E-TENDER NOTICE FOR SOPHISTICATED EQUIPMENTS

BEFORE DEBTS RECOVERY TRIBUNAL-II, DELHI 14TH FLOOR JEEVAN TARA BUILDING

CHANGE OF NAME I, Muskan D/o No.16011814F Hav Amar Singh, R/o- Vill-PO- Paigaon, Teh- Chhata, Dist- Mathura, U.P.- 281401, have changed my name from Muskan to Muskan Kumari, vide affidavit dated 15/01/2025 before Notary Public Delhi.

PUBLIC NOTICE I, Suman Mittal W/o Shri Rajesh Mittal R/o Plot No. 30-31 Kh. No. 74/23, K Block Amar Colony, Opposite Pillar No-453, Mundka, PO: Nangloi, North West Delhi-110041 declare that name of mine has been wrongly written as Suman Rani Mittal in Passport No.- M8536036. The actual name of mine Suman Mittal.

PUBLIC NOTICE This is to inform general public that M/s. S. R. Developers GreenCity India Pvt. Ltd. has acquired (Property ID No. 226C682U7, Zone 4, Ward 23) Plot of Land measuring 780.00 sq. yds. (Land measuring 280.00 sq. yds. out of Khewat/Khata No. 10441312 Khewat/Khata No. 337 (5-1/2) Land measuring 500.00 sq. yds. Khewat/Khata No. 952/232 Khewat/Khata No. 337 (5-3/4), situated at Vikas Swarna Jhans, Toli & Distt- Gurugram, Haryana by way of Sale Deed dated 23.10.2018 as Document No. 8559

THE PIONEER CLASSIFIEDS CHANGE OF NAME

PUBLIC NOTICE The Public Notice at large is hereby notified that I, Poonam Kapoor wife of Shri Ramesh Kapoor R/o A-9/1, Gali No. 6, Near Gulati Tailor, South Anarkali, Krishna Nagar Delhi-110051 jointly with my mother in law Varsha Rani wife of Late Pawan Jeet Kapoor had purchased Entire Upper Ground Floor and First Floor upto ceiling level, Measuring Area 100 Sq.Yards each floor, of Property No. 87, Situated in the abadi of South Anarkali Extension, Delhi-110051 from Smt. Prashant Kumar Shukla son of Late S. C. Shukla who became the owner of the said property after the death of his mother Smt. Savitri Shukla wife of Shri S. C. Shukla on the basis of Will Deed Book No. 3 Regd. as Document No. 2522 Deed No. 3 Volume No. 810 on pages 167-168 dated 17/8/2007 in the Office of SR-VII-Delhi.

PUBLIC NOTICE This is inform all of you that Sh. Prakash S/o Sh. Mom Raj is missing since 30/10/2015, and the case is pending for his civil death declaration and mandatory injunction before the Honble court of Sh. Gaurav Sharma LD. SCJ (East) Karkardooma Courts Delhi, bearing suit no.904/2024, any interested person or party can join the proceeding on the NODD 27.02.2025.

PUBLIC NOTICE General Public is hereby informed that I, Gulshan Lal son of Late Shri Mukesh Raj, Gulshan Resident of 17/166, Subhash Nagar, New Delhi-110027, filing an application in L&DO Nirman Bhawan, New Delhi, for Substitution/mutation of Property No. 17/166, Subhash Nagar, Tehar-I, New Delhi-110027 in the name of Gulshan Lal on the Ground of Reimbursement Deed. If there are any objections/claims from the General Public on this application, the same shall be communicated to L&DO with supporting documents through registered post OR by visiting L&DO, at Nirman Bhawan, New Delhi, or through an email at do@nic.in within 30 days of the Publication of this Notice.

PUBLIC NOTICE MY CLIENTS MANJU TYAGI W/O SH. ANIL KUMAR TYAGI & HER HUSBAND ANIL KUMAR TYAGI BOTH RESIDENTS OF 39, GROUND FLOOR AND FIRST FLOOR POKKETA-3 SECTOR -4, ROHINI, DELHI sever all Relations & disowned their SON ASHISH KUMAR TYAGI AND DAUGHTER- IN-LAW PRIYANKA TYAGI from all movable/ immovable property due to their misbehavior/ disobedient. Anybody dealing with them shall do at their own risk.

PUBLIC NOTICE The public at large is hereby informed that late. Smt. Sunita Verma W/o Sh. Pramod Kumar Verma R/o 83-B Pocket A-14, Kalkaji Extension New Delhi-110019 is having Commercial property in Joint ownership along with her husband Shri Pramod Kumar Verma in our project "VATIKA MINDSCAPES" Flat No.217A admeasuring 500 sq.ft. which her legal heirs Pramod Kumar Verma, Vaibhav Verma & Rahul Verma requested the company to be transferred to Shri Pramod Kumar Verma, her husband.

PUBLIC NOTICE Transfer of Ownership in respect of Entire Ground Floor, of House No. 401/8, Measuring 45 Sq. Yards Jaccimpora, Gurugram (Haryana), consequent upon the intestate death of Late Sh. Bhim San Sachdeva Son of Late Sh. Chandro Ram Resident of House No. 401/8, Jaccimpora, Gurugram (Haryana)-120001. As per record Late Sh. Bhim San Sachdeva has died on 22-08-2023 leaving behind following legal heirs: 1. Deepak Sachdeva (Son), 2. Mr. RAMAN KUMAR (Son), Mr. Deepak Sachdeva & Mr. Raman Kumar (Sons), Mr. Deepak Sachdeva & Mr. Raman Kumar in the process of mortgaging the said property with SIFG India Home Finance Co. Ltd. (Formerly Fullerton India Home Finance Co. Ltd.) Any objections or concerns regarding this transaction should be raised within a period of 07 days from the date of this public notice.

KIND ATTENTION RAIL PASSENGERS! MORE KUMBH MELA SPECIAL TRAINS In continuation to already announced Special Trains for Maha Kumbh-2025, Railways have planned to run following additional Special trains as per schedule given below:-

02275/02276 Subedarganj - Delhi Jn. - Subedarganj Kumbh Special Train (Weekly) 14 Trips

07081/07082 Guntur Jn. - Azamgarh - Vijayawada Kumbh Special Train 02 Trips

07083/07084 Machilipatnam - Azamgarh - Machilipatnam Kumbh Special Train 02 Trips

07085/07086 Kakinada Town - Azamgarh - Vijayawada Kumbh Special Train 02 Trips

07087/07088 Moula Ali - Banaras - Moula Ali Kumbh Special Train 02 Trips

07107/07108 Tirupati - Banaras - Vijayawada Kumbh Special Train 08 Trips

07109/07110 Narasapur - Banaras - Narasapur Kumbh Special Train 04 Trips

07087/07088 Moula Ali - Banaras - Moula Ali Kumbh Special Train 02 Trips

07107/07108 Tirupati - Banaras - Vijayawada Kumbh Special Train 08 Trips

07109/07110 Narasapur - Banaras - Narasapur Kumbh Special Train 04 Trips

07109/07110 Narasapur - Banaras - Narasapur Kumbh Special Train 04 Trips

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07109/07110 Narasapur - Banaras - Narasapur Kumbh Special Train 04 Trips

07109/07110 Narasapur - Banaras - Narasapur Kumbh Special Train 04 Trips

NORTHERN RAILWAY Always at your service SERVING CUSTOMERS WITH A SMILE

BSES BSES Rajdhani Power Limited, New Delhi TENDER NOTICE Date: 16.01.2025 Sealed tenders under two Bid System (Un-priced & Priced) is invited for following jobs from all bidders.

OFFICE OF THE MUNICIPAL CORPORATION, BHOPAL Water Work Department Municipal Corporation Rest House, Shyamli Hills, Bhopal Ph No 0755-2701669 NOTICE INVITING e-TENDER Online tenders are being invited for the following works. The bidder can obtain detailed information and tender documents on website http://mptenders.gov.in

THE PUNJAB STATE COOPERATIVE MILK PRODUCERS FEDERATION LTD. SCO 153-155, SECTOR 34-A, CHANDIGARH-160022. EPABX No. 0172-5041812,66 Notice Inviting Tender www.verka.coop

Indiabulls Enterprises Limited (CIN: U71290HR2019PLC077579) Extract of Consolidated Unaudited Financial Results for the quarter and nine months ended 31 December 2024 (Rs. in Crores)



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

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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

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



than the Baa-rated peer median of around 57 per cent," Moody's said. "Despite gains in revenue in recent years, we also expect

debt affordability to remain much weaker than rated peers," it added. It said politics and social unrest pose significant

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

regional hotspots. Moody's assesses a low likelihood of military conflict in the Taiwan Strait or Korean Peninsula, and tensions will remain elevated, particularly driven by US-China relations. "These tensions are shaping trade and investment flows, which may be further diverted away from China as the US tightens investment in strategic sectors, further weakening China's economy and dampening regional growth. However, this shift could benefit India and Southeast Asian economies," Moody's said. A range of geopolitical and domestic political risks persist, it said, adding after elections in key economies, governments may need to make choices whether to fulfill pledges or to focus on fiscal consolidation.

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

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

# Vedanta Resources raises USD 1.1 Billion through dual tranche bond issuance

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# Markets log gain for second day, Sensex climbs over 200 points



PTI ■ MUMBAI

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

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

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

As many as 2,150 stocks advanced while 1,806 declined and 108 remained unchanged on the BSE. The NSE Nifty advanced 37.15 points or 0.16 per cent to 23,213.20.

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

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

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

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

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

The BSE smallcap gauge climbed 0.34 per cent, and the midcap index went up by 0.11 per cent. Among BSE sectoral indices, utilities jumped 2.45 per cent, power (1.75 per cent), realty (1.58 per cent), services (0.98 per cent), BSE Focused IT (0.74 per cent) and consumer discretionary (0.62 per cent).

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

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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



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

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

commercial wings of Indian Missions in 20 countries to deliberate on issues impacting exports and ways to resolve them. These 20 countries account for about 60 per cent of India's exports. In December last year, Barthwal said sectors which have registered healthy growth in exports included electronics, engineering and pharmaceuticals. When asked about the revision of gold and silver import data for November 2024, the secretary said a committee has been set up to create a robust mechanism for publishing consistent data.

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

# Bank of Maharashtra Q3 profit rises 36 per cent to ₹1,406 Crore

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

State-owned Bank of Maharashtra (BoM) on Wednesday posted a 36 per cent rise in net profit to Rs 1,406 crore in the third quarter ended December 2024 with rising interest income.

The Pune-based lender had posted a net profit of Rs 1,036 crore in the October-December period a year ago. Total income increased to Rs 7,112 crore during the quarter under review against Rs 5,851 crore in the same period previous year, BoM said in a regulatory filing.

The bank earned an interest income of Rs 6,325 crore during the quarter compared to Rs 5,171 crore a year ago.



The bank was able to reduce gross Non-Performing Assets (NPAs) to 1.80 per cent of the gross loans by the end of December 2024 from 2.04 per cent in the year-ago period. Similarly, net NPAs or bad loans came down to 0.2 per cent from 0.22 per cent at the end of the third quarter of the previous fiscal. The Provision Coverage Ratio (PCR) as of December 31, 2024, is 98.28 per cent.

The bank has raised Rs 3,500 crore through Qualified Institutional Placements on October 5, 2024.

The bank has issued and allotted 61,01,81,311 equity shares of Rs 10 each at a premium of 47.36 per share. Accordingly, the shareholding of the Government of India in the bank has been reduced to 79.60 per cent as of December 31, 2024.

During three quarters, the bank reported a net profit of Rs 4,027 crore compared to Rs 2,837 crore in the nine-month period of the previous year.

Total income also increased to Rs 7,112 crore from Rs 5,851 crore in the nine-month period of the last financial year.

# Rupee extends gains, settles 13 paise higher at 86.40 against US Dollar



PTI ■ MUMBAI

The rupee extended its recovery for the second straight session and settled with a gain of 13 paise at 86.53 against the dollar. Anuj Choudhary, Research Analyst at Mirae Asset Sharekhan, said the rupee gained for the second consecutive session on weak US dollar and soft US 10-year treasury yields. A pullback in the domestic equities and overnight decline in crude oil prices also favoured the rupee. However, FII outflows capped sharp gains.

Analysts attributed the weakening dollar to lower-than-expected producer price index, as per the latest data released in the US. Going ahead, Choudhary said the US inflation is expected to remain elevated and it may lead to a recovery in the US dollar, which is likely to put pressure on the rupee.

On Tuesday, the rupee rebounded from its lowest-ever level and settled with a gain of 17 paise at 86.53 against the dollar.

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Going ahead, Choudhary said the US inflation is expected to remain elevated and it may lead to a recovery in the US dollar, which is likely to put pressure on the rupee.

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

PTI ■ KOLKATA

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

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



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

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

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

The Darjeeling tea industry faces problems of climate change, low productivity due to very old bushes and less profitability making operations enviable.

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

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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



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

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

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

11-12 per cent over the number that we think is feasible for FY25," Nayar told PTI in an interview. She said putting in a larger capex number may not be "prudent" as a larger borrowing and fiscal deficit would push up yields.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nayar also said that GDP growth has bottomed out in the September quarter and going forward, it is expected to recover. The ratings agency projects GDP growth of 6.5 per cent for both the current and next fiscal years. She said rural consumption is expected to be steady, while urban consumption would be uneven. Once food inflation

starts to recede, urban consumption may begin to see a bit of an uptick, she said. On her expectations from the Budget, Nayar said some tinkering with income tax slabs and rates would give a "mood upliftment" for urban taxpayers. That is what the budget can bring in without too much revenue loss.

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



# Juventus the draw specialists, AC Milan the comeback kings

PTI ■ MILAN

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

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



injury and the league's top scorer headed Atalanta level 13 minutes later with his 13th league goal of the season. Historic Hernández goal A historic Theo Hernández goal saw Milan earn a comeback victory for the third time in four matches under Sérgio Conceição, who got his first Serie A win as coach. Conceição, who replaced the fired Paulo Fonseca at the end of last year, had got his reign off to the perfect start as he steered Milan to the Italian Super Cup trophy with two comeback wins after just over a week at the helm. That was followed by a disappointing 1-1 draw against relegation-threatened Cagliari on Saturday, however. Milan again went behind on Tuesday, when Como's new

signing Assane Diao — on the teenager's first start — ran down the right flank and cut inside before firing into the near bottom corner. Hernández had perhaps been at fault for backing off Diao too much but he atoned for that error with a fine equalizer in the 71st minute. It was his 30th goal in Serie A, overtaking Paolo Maldini as the most goals in the Italian league. Milan turned the match around completely five minutes later when Rafael Leão ran onto Tammy Abraham's through ball and dinked it over Como goalkeeper Jean Butez. Leão and Hernández are two of Milan's key players but they have both had a difficult first half of the season as they often clashed with Fonseca.

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

PTI ■ MELBOURNE

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



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

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

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

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

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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



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

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

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

## Koneru Humpy to compete in Norway Chess Women 2025

PTI ■ STAVANGER

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



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

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

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

PTI ■ MILAN

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



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

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

PTI ■ ROME

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



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

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

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

PTI ■ MELBOURNE

Distracted by a time penalty and unable to counteract No. 97-ranked Laura Siegemund's aggressive approach, Zheng Qinwen's loss in the second round Wednesday fell a long way short of last year's run to the Australian Open final. Zheng lost the 2024 decider at Melbourne Park to Aryna Sabalenka and went on to win the Olympic gold medal in Paris and finish runner-up at the WTA Finals in a breakout season. But her first tournament of the year ended in a 7-6 (3), 6-3 loss on John Cain Arena against 36-year-old Siegemund, who attacked from the first point and put Zheng off her game. Zheng needed a change of shoes early in the second set, got a time warning on her

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

**PTI ■ MELBOURNE**  
Naomi Osaka's second-round match at the Australian Open could not possibly have started in a worse way. All of 21 minutes in, she sailed a forehand service return well long and, just like that, trailed 5-0.  
Osaka strode to the sideline for the changeover, plopped herself down and draped a white towel over her head, blocking out all sights and leaving her with just her thoughts. She stayed like that throughout the break between games, even maneuvering a water bottle under that towel to take a drink.  
This was not a match against some unknown opponent, someone Osaka knew for sure she could beat. It was against 20th-seeded Karolina Muchova, the runner-up at the 2023 French Open and a three-time semifinalist at other majors, including at Melbourne Park in 2021. Muchova also had defeated Osaka in their two most recent matchups. None of that mattered on this afternoon, though: Osaka

forgot about that disappointing start and came all the way back to win 1-6, 6-1, 6-3 on Wednesday. What was her mindset? "Just be aware and try not to get so negative on yourself. I think, for me, the score in the first set was very dramatic, but there was key points that I could have maybe won a game here or there," Osaka explained afterward. "So I kept trying to tell myself that."  
This was, in some ways, a significant moment for Osaka, who once reigned atop women's tennis, winning four Grand Slam titles — two at the Australian Open, two at the U.S. Open — and ascending to No. 1 in the WTA rankings. The victory allowed her to reach the third round at a major tournament for the first time since the 2022 season.  
Getting to that stage was not considered a big deal at one point for her. But time off because of mental health breaks and then a pregnancy — Osaka's daughter, Shai, was born in July 2023 — changed things.  
Since returning to action a year ago, Osaka has shown signs of



getting her game back together, including a memorable and narrow loss to then-No. 1 Iga Swiatek at the French Open. This, though, followed a win against 2022 U.S. Open semifinalist Caroline Garcia in Melbourne and meant the progress is real. "It definitely was something that is a goal of mine, especially after last year; I wasn't able to beat a seed in a Grand Slam," Osaka

said. "I'm obviously very thankful that that happened so early this year."  
She also joked about gaining a measure of "revenge" by defeating Garcia — who eliminated Osaka in Melbourne a year ago — and Muchova in consecutive matches. Next for Osaka is a matchup against Tokyo Olympics gold medalist Belinda Bencic, who is also a mother; her daughter, Bella, was born last year. Both Osaka and Bencic are big hitters.  
"It's going to be a fun match," Bencic said.  
Muchova wasn't the highest-seeded player to exit Wednesday. That was No. 5 Zheng Qinwen, the runner-up to Aryna Sabalenka at the 2024 Australian Open and the gold medalist at the Paris Games last August. Zheng lost a bit of focus after being called for a time violation and never managed to counter 97th-ranked Laura Siegemund's strokes, bowing out 7-6 (3), 6-3, 6-3 at John Cain Arena.  
After the chair umpire cited her for taking too long to serve, Zheng hit her next offering so poorly it bounced way before reaching the net.  
"I knew," the 36-year-old Siegemund said, "I just had to play more than my best tennis."  
The player who beat Zheng in the final 12 months ago, No. 1-ranked Aryna Sabalenka, stretched her Melbourne Park winning streak to 16 matches as she eyes a third consecutive title, beating No. 54 Jessica Bouzas Maneiro 6-3, 7-5 at Rod Laver Arena.  
Other women's winners included No. 7 Jessica Pegula, No. 14 Mirra Andreeva and No. 30 Leylah Fernandez, with 2023 U.S. Open champion Coco Gauff in action during the night session.  
Novak Djokovic added to his record collection by playing in his 430th career Grand Slam match — one more than Roger Federer — and, though he dropped a set for the second outing in a row, moved into the third round with a 6-1, 6-7 (4), 6-3, 6-2 win over Jaime Faria.  
Other men who advanced included No. 3 Carlos Alcaraz, who joked that he is now a "serve bot" after hitting 14 aces while dismissing Yoshihito Nishikita 6-0, 6-1, 6-4.



## SA20: Joburg Super Kings, Pretoria Capitals register convincing wins

**PTI ■ DURBAN**  
Joburg Super Kings and Pretoria Capitals claimed crucial victories over Durban's Super Giants and Sunrisers Eastern Cape respectively in the Betway SA20.  
The JSK spin trio of Tabraiz Shamsi, Donovan Ferreira and Imran Tahir combined in perfect tandem to propel the visitors to a 28-run victory at Kingsmead, while the Capitals seamers were influential in their six-wicket bonus point win over the defending champions.  
Super Giants' middle-order batter Quinton de Kock played a lone hand of 55 (45 balls, 5x4, 2x6) to keep his team afloat in pursuit of JSK's 169/4.  
But Shamsi, Ferreira and Tahir snared five wickets between them to bowl out the Super Giants for 141. Tahir also produced a moment of brilliance in the field which proved to be hugely inspirational for the visitors.  
The 45-year-old displayed the athleticism of a teenager to snare a brilliant two-handed diving catch at point off a Wiaan Mulder reverse-sweep. JSK were certainly galvanised by the veteran to squeeze the Super Giants middle-order after the home team seemed well set at 99/4 with the dangerous pair of De Kock and Heinrich Klaasen at the crease.  
Klaasen (29 of 17 balls) was

building up momentum by striking Matheesha Pathirana for a couple of boundaries and a six, but the Sri Lankan exacted revenge by having him caught down the leg side with the final ball of the 12th over to set in the collapse.  
Earlier, the Super Kings rallied to a competitive total through contributions from Leus du Plooy (38), Jonny Bairstow (26) and Ferreira (26) before Gerald Coetzee smashed the final two balls of the innings for six for the visitors to seize the momentum.  
At Centurion, the Capitals benefited from winning the toss with captain Rilee Rossouw having no hesitation in electing to bowl. It immediately proved to be the correct decision on a surface that had been under the covers for a lengthy period of time with the home team's fast bowlers gaining significant seam movement early on.  
Eathan Bosch (2/18) landed the first blow when he removed opener Zak Crawley. Bosch was well supported by Daryn Dupavillion (3/32), who struck with successive deliveries to send both David Bedingham and Sunrisers captain Aiden Markram back to the pavilion to leave the defending champions in tatters at 3 for 4.  
The visitors slipped deeper into trouble when Tom Abell and Tristan Stubbs also departed within two runs of each other.

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

**PTI ■ LONDON**  
England batter James Vince on Wednesday quit First-Class cricket to play for Karachi Kings in the upcoming Pakistan Super League, defying ECB's decision not to grant NOCs for its cricketers to appear in the T20 competition.  
The England board had decided in November, 2024, to refrain from issuing NOCs to all-format players to play in the PSL, scheduled for April-May this season, because the league clashes with the early rounds of the County Championship.  
Vince, who has played 13 Tests, was expected to lead Hampshire this season as well, but he was retained by the Kings ahead of the PSL draft.  
"I love Hampshire. It's been



my club and home for 16 years, so I want to be able to maintain my best to keep delivering for Hampshire in T20 cricket, and hopefully even further our success in the competition [the Blast]," Vince said in a statement. "I also need to understand what is best for my family,

and combine that with the stage of my career I am at," he added. The 33-year-old, who has been leading Hampshire since 2015, is currently playing for Gulf Giants in the ILT20 tournament in the UAE.  
Giles White, Hampshire's director of cricket, said they respected Vince's decision. "James has been at the heart of the club for the best part of 20 years, showing absolute commitment on and off the field as the team's leading batter and captain," said White.  
"We recognise that this announcement will be tinged with disappointment for many fans but hope everyone will join us in celebrating what he has given to our club over many years."  
From 216 First-Class matches, Vince has scored 13340 runs at an average of 40 with 30 hundreds.  
The ESPNcricinfo has, meanwhile, reported that England batter Tom Kohler-Cadmore too quit County cricket to play in the PSL for Peshawar Zalmi, and he is in talks with Somerset in this regard.

## Yashasvi Jaiswal joins Mumbai Ranji camp

**PTI ■ MUMBAI**  
India opener Yashasvi Jaiswal on Wednesday joined the Mumbai camp after confirming his availability for the next round of Ranji Trophy but skipper Rohit Sharma was not to be seen after turning up for a couple of practice on the opening day of training.  
Rohit, who batted alongside Mumbai captain Ajinkya Rahane on Tuesday here at the Wankhede Stadium, is expected to resume training in a day or two.  
However, it remains to be seen if the incumbent Indian skipper would play in the domestic giant's next Ranji Trophy fixture. Rohit is yet to confirm his availability for the Elite Group A contest against Jammu and Kashmir starting on January 23 but so far, no formal discussions have been taken place.



"The selectors are expected to announce the squad on January 20, during which they will follow the due process of checking for the availability of every player. Rohit will also be approached around the time for selection," a Mumbai Cricket Association (MCA) official told PTI.  
The 37-year-old is looking to put an end to his poor run with the bat after he managed a mere 31 runs in three Tests that he played against Australia in the Border-Gavaskar Trophy.

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

**PTI ■ LAHORE**  
The opening ceremony of the Champions Trophy will be held either on February 16 or 17 and the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) is confident that India captain Rohit Sharma will be in attendance at the event.  
The PCB source also said that it is awaiting communication from the ICC on the schedule of the customary captains' photo-shoot and the pre-event press conference.  
The eight-team tournament will get underway on February 19 in Karachi. However, India will play all their matches in Dubai, starting with the clash against Bangladesh on February 20, after refusing to travel to Pakistan owing to the security concerns.  
The source said PCB has procured all relevant clearances from its government to promptly



opening match is on 19th the opening ceremony can be expected either on the 16th or 17th," the source added. He said the schedule of the opening ceremony would depend on the warm-up matches list.  
The source said that recently three Indian nationals, who were a part of the ICC delegation which came to Pakistan, were promptly issued visas once the world body sent their names to the PCB.

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

**PTI ■ KOLKATA**  
Alleging "step-motherly treatment" by the Indian Super League organizers, century-old East Bengal club has sought Union Sports Minister Mansukh Mandaviya's intervention, claiming that systemic bias, the outdated "refugees club" tag, and refereeing controversies have stalled their progress in the top-tier football competition.  
The incident occurred during the "Kolkata Derby" in Guwahati on Saturday where East Bengal lost to arch-rivals Mohun Bagan by a solitary goal.  
The club claimed the match was marred by biased officiating, including the denial of a clear penalty and a controversial yellow card issued to midfielder Souvik Chakrabarti, which led to his red card and team being



reduced 10 players. In an emotional plea to the sports minister, East Bengal highlighted how the "refugees club" tag has led to their ongoing marginalisation in Indian football.  
"Fight, Fight and Fight -- this has been the perennial motto of East Bengal club for the last 150 years. This club and its supporters have endured the tumultuous period pre and post-partition only through its fighting spirit.  
"While the displaced people fought tooth and nail for their substance, the club had to

fight the stigma and the tag of a 'Refugees Club' to establish itself as the leading football club of the country," East Bengal general secretary Rupak Saha wrote in a statement.  
"We are surprised that even 75 years after independence, we are in a situation where East Bengal Club has been victimised in almost every match of the ISL.  
"We are forced to think why all this is happening to us it is because we are still considered the 'Refugees Club'. Throughout the last 10-12 years, we had to bear the brunt of biased refereeing, be it in the I-League and more so in the ISL.  
"During this period, we must have sent close to 50 complaint letters to all the concerned authorities but to no avail and the standard of refereeing has only gone from bad to worse to the worst.

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

**PTI ■ NEW DELHI**  
When Priyansh Arya hit six sixes in an over last year, he mainly targeted the straight boundary. But when he joins the Punjab Kings IPL camp, it's the pull shot that he wants to perfect with some help from head coach Ricky Ponting, who patented the stroke in his playing days.  
Those half a dozen sixes off left-arm spinner Manan Bhardwaj's one over in the inaugural Delhi Premier League put Arya under the spotlight and eventually led to the left-hander drawing a potentially life-changing Rs 3.8 crore winning bid from Punjab Kings, more than 12 times his base price of Rs 30 lakh.

It was as if the stars aligned for the 23-year-old at the mega auction as he made a belligerent hundred against UP in the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy days before the high-profile event in Saudi Arabia.  
Having been part of Punjab Kings' first pre-season camp in Mumbai last week, Arya has already got the taste of the higher level and says he is bound to become a better player after his maiden season in the IPL, which begins on March 21.  
Has life changed for the Delhi lad since the auction day? "Life has not changed much since the auction. Yes, there is more interest from people and my expectations from myself have increased. The pre-season camp gave me a fair

idea where I need to be come the IPL as I got to do things I have never done in training before."  
Arya got to chat with his IPL skipper Shreyas Iyer briefly during the Mumbai camp and apart from him, he is equally excited about spending time with Ponting.  
"I have not had the chance to speak to Ricky sir. But when I get to meet him, the first thing I want to ask him is about the pull shot," he said referring to one of the best exponents of the pull shot.  
"I am also really excited about spending time with Iyer. I love the attitude of Iyer and Ricky sir, both on and off the field. I would also like to ask them about their mindset in highs and lows.



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

and if he does get to open alongside Prabhsimran Singh, there will be immense pressure and scrutiny. Will his price tag also play on his mind?  
"I am not thinking on those lines. For me it is just about learning from the best minds in the game."  
And what does he plan to do with the money?  
"That (is something) my parents will decide," pat came the response from Arya.  
Growing up, he closely tracked the career of now India head coach Gautam Gambhir as they both came to the same academy in Delhi.  
Arya loves Gambhir's play against spin and he too has gone on to become a decent batter against the turning ball. No wonder those six sixes came off a spinner.  
Besides Gambhir, Arya also draws inspiration from Sri Lankan great Kumar Sangakkara.  
"Right from the beginning, I

like to play down the ground. That is what I was thinking at that time (when he hit six sixes). I have followed Gautam bhैया a lot. I loved how he used to play spin and that is what I tried to pick from him.  
"Among overseas players, I like Kumar Sangakkara. I love his cover drive a lot though personally I like pull shot the most."  
The moment when his name came under the hammer will remain fresh in Arya's memory forever.  
"We were playing the domestic T20 (SMAT) and I was sitting in the hotel with my teammates. I could not express myself after Punjab made that winning bid.  
"I did not know what do. My phone stopped working. I

would have been happy at just being picked but to get this bid made me feel really good," Arya recollected.  
Arya made his T20 debut for Delhi in 2023 and List A in 2021, long before he achieved the memorable feat in the DPL last year. The southpaw looked back at his journey thus far.  
"There were challenges. The year I made my debut I got to play only two games and was on the bench the rest of time. The year after I was dropped from the senior team. When I got the DPL stage, I told myself I have to be the best batter in the competition and that happened."  
He is yet to play first-class cricket and that his next target. However, the ultimate aim is to play Test cricket.