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## BJP CMs CORNER KEJRIWAL

SAUMYA SHUKLA ■ NEW DELHI

The star campaigners of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have descended in the national Capital going full throttle against the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) ahead of the high-octane Delhi Assembly elections with its prominent leaders including party president and Union Minister Jagat Prakash Nadda, and three chief ministers—Uttar Pradesh (UP) Chief Minister (CM) Yogi Adityanath, Madhya Pradesh CM Mohanlal Yadav, and Uttarakhand CM Pushkar Singh Dhami—holding multiple rallies, road shows and public meetings across the length and breadth of the city.



New Delhi: Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath with BJP MP Bansuri Swaraj, party candidate Dushyant Gautam, and others during a public meeting for the upcoming Delhi Assembly elections, in New Delhi

## Rahul Gandhi cancels two rallies on consecutive days

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's rally in the national capital on Thursday was canceled due to his poor health and medical advice. He was scheduled to hold the rally in Mustafabad in northeast Delhi, but people familiar with him said he is suffering from chest congestion. The Congress campaign for the Assembly elections was expected to get a big boost from Rahul's three daily rallies on three successive days, starting January 22, but two of these have now been canceled. "As of now, Rahul Gandhi's election rally in Madipur on

Friday is on schedule, and he is likely to address a massive gathering," said Delhi Congress chief Devendra Yadav, a day after the Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha failed to show up for an election rally near Inderlok metro station in the Sadar Assembly constituency on Wednesday. Dismissing speculation that the cancellation of Rahul's rallies was aimed at helping the AAP by preventing a division of Muslim voters—Yadav said, "These are rumors. We are fighting the election independently." "After Republic Day, the party leaders will step up the campaign in Delhi," he said.

infiltrators. "And on the other side you can see New Okhla [NOIDA]. Compare the roads of Delhi to Noida and Ghaziabad in Uttar Pradesh, there is a difference of sky and earth. There are world class educational institutions and medical colleges in UP while the educational institutions run by Delhi government are in a very bad condition," he alleged. Calling it a 'well thought conspiracy,' the firebrand leader said, "They have not just kept the people of Delhi devoid of basic facilities, they have also compromised on national security through their actions. You must have seen the riots in Delhi in 2020 and how the AAP leaders and councillors were engaged in that. They are repeatedly messing with national security."

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## India-China continue border talks

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri will travel to Beijing on a two-day visit starting Sunday to discuss next steps in improving ties between the two nations. This comes after armies of India and China in October last year agreed to disengage from friction points at Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Eastern Ladakh. High level talks between the two countries gathered momentum following the pact. It will be the second top level meeting in the last one and half months between the two neighbours. National Security Advisor (NSA) Ajit Doval travelled to Beijing and held talks with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang under the framework of Special Representatives (SR) dialogue on the boundary dispute. "Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri will be visiting Beijing on January 26 and 27 for a meeting of the Foreign Secretary-Vice Minister mechanism between India and China," Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said on Thursday. "The resumption of this bilateral mechanism flows from the agreement at the leadership level to discuss the next steps for India-China relations, including in the political, economic, and people-to-people domains," it said in a brief statement. The decision to revive the SR dialogue mechanism and other such formats was taken at a meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping in Kazan on October 23. In the nearly 50-minute meeting, Modi underscored



the importance of properly handling differences and disputes and not allowing them to disturb peace and tranquillity in border areas. The Modi-Xi meeting came two days after India and China firmed up a disengagement pact for Depsang and Demchok, the last two friction points in eastern Ladakh. In the SR dialogue, India pressed for a fair, reasonable and mutually acceptable settlement of the overall boundary dispute between the two countries. Doval and Wang also focused on "positive" direction for cross-border cooperation including resuming the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra, river data sharing and border trade. Last week, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar said the India-China relationship is trying to disentangle itself from the complications arising from the post-2020 border situation and more thought needs to be given to the longer-term evolution of the ties. "At a time when most of its relationships are moving forward, India confronts a particular challenge in establishing an equilibrium with China. Much of that arises from the fact that both nations are on the rise," he had

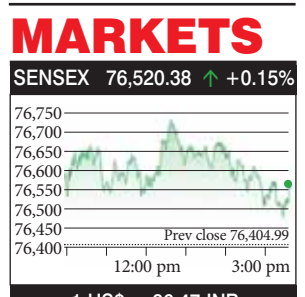
said. The external affairs minister noted that as immediate neighbours and the only two societies with over a billion people, India-China dynamic could never have been easy. "But it has been further sharpened by a boundary dispute, by some baggage of history and by differing socio-political systems. Misreadings by past policy-makers, whether driven by idealism or absence of realpolitik, has actually helped neither cooperation nor competition with China," he said. "That has clearly changed in the last decade. Right now, the relationship is trying to disentangle itself from the complications arising from the post-2020 border situation," he added. These meetings came after the two nations arrived at an agreement to resume patrolling along the LAC "leading to disengagement". The patrolling arrangement came four years after the Galwan Valley clash, signalling de-escalation in a region where both countries stationed tens of thousands of troops. The disengagement agreement has facilitated the Indian military to resume patrolling up to the old stations in Depsang and Demchok -- the two major friction points that were left to be settled between the two nations. The two sides also completed one round of patrolling in November and also agreed to carry out one coordinated patrol every week in the areas where tensions have persisted since 2020. India has maintained that its ties with China cannot be normal unless there is peace in the border areas.

## MEA Jaishankar talks deportation of Indians in US

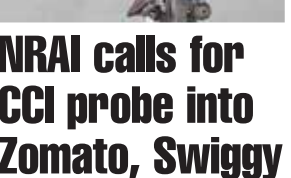
PTI ■ WASHINGTON

India has always been open to legitimate return of undocumented Indians to their country, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar said on Wednesday, noting that New Delhi is still in the process of verifying those from the US who can be deported to India and the number of such individuals cannot be determined yet. "As a government, we are obviously very much supportive of legal mobility because we do believe in a global workplace. We want Indian talent and Indian skills to have the maximum opportunity at the global level. At the same time, we are also very firmly opposed to illegal mobility and illegal migration," Jaishankar told a group of Indian reporters here.

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## Differential pricing: Uber, Ola, Apple under scanner



NRAI calls for CCI probe into Zomato, Swiggy

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Days after a Delhi-based entrepreneur shared his findings on differential pricing by two ride-hailing apps in a series of posts on X, comparing fares across different devices and battery levels, the Consumer Protection Authority (CPA) has issued notices to tech giant Apple Inc. and cab aggregators Ola and Uber, seeking clarification on reports of alleged differential pricing based on the type of mobile device used to book rides. This comes after reports that the two companies appeared to charge different fares for the same service, depending on whether the customer was using an iPhone or an Android device. "As a follow-up to the earlier observation of apparent #DifferentialPricing based on the different models of mobiles (#iPhones/#Android) being used, the Department of Consumer Affairs, through the CPA, has issued notices to major cab aggregators #Ola and #Uber, seeking their responses," Union Minister for Consumers' Affairs Prahlad Joshi said in a social media post. Apple has been asked to respond to technical issues reported by iPhone users after a recent software update. Apple has been releasing updates, including iOS 18.0.1 in October, to address screen and camera freezing issues, and the latest 18.2.1 update for bug fixes. In its notice, the CPA asked the companies to explain their pricing methods and address concerns about potential discrimination. The ministry described the practice as "apparent differential pricing" and sought a detailed response to ensure transparency and fairness in fare calculations.



Recently, a survey by LocalCircles revealed that 60 percent of iPhone users experienced service problems, with call failures being the most significant issue. Nearly 90 percent of surveyed iPhone users attributed their difficulties directly to an iOS update, with no blame placed on Wi-Fi or mobile networks. Last month, the internet was abuzz with speculation that cab aggregators charged different fares - higher for those making bookings on iPhones - for the same ride. However, other social media users soon joined the chorus, alleging they were being charged different fares for identical rides when booking through Android and iOS devices. Joshi had emphasized "zero tolerance for consumer exploitation" and asked the CPA to conduct a thorough inquiry into these allegations. He had described this practice as a "prima facie unfair trade practice" and a "blatant disregard" for consumers' right to transparency.

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## Poll chai-naastha fixed by EC

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

The poll watchdog is closely monitoring the rates of chai, pakora, even chole-kulche, and how much is spent on garlands and drones while campaigning in the assembly polls in the national capital. The Election Commission of India has specified rates such as Rs 35 for a plate of poori-sabzi, Rs 30 for kulche-chole, Rs 19 for a plate of pakoras, Rs 12 for a samosa or bread pakora, Rs 6 for a cup of tea, Rs 12 for a cup of coffee, Rs 20 for a sandwich, Rs 15 for a kachori, Rs 19 for a one-litre water bottle, and Rs 70 for lunch or dinner. According to the rates chart approved by the EC, the rate for the use of drones is fixed at Rs 7,000 per day. A small garland cannot exceed Rs 20, while 10-foot garlands cannot cost more than Rs 1,500. Flowers used for stage decorations are priced at Rs 35 per square foot. A candidate can hire a horse at Rs 3,075 per day and an elephant at Rs 6,150 per day. Candidates need to get the poll panel's approval to hire animals for campaigning. The daily wage rate ranges from Rs 692 for unskilled workers to Rs 913 for graduates and above. The EC has also set rates for accommodations in hotels and



Photo: Ranjan Dimri/The Pioneer

for vehicles. The rates for vehicles like Tata Sumo, Toyota Innova, and Mahindra Scorpio, among others, are Rs 2,421 per day per vehicle. For a normal car, the limit is Rs 1,499 per day. The maximum cost for a two-wheeler is Rs 84 per day. The rate list also specifies the maximum expenditure limit for tents, chairs, tables, podiums, and generators. For gatherings of up to 2,000 people, for example, the maximum rate, including all related expenses, is set at Rs 30,000 per event. For smaller gatherings of fewer than 250 people, the staging rate is Rs 6,150. A broom, the party symbol of the ruling Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), used for maintaining party offices, event venues, or during campaigning, cannot cost more than Rs 25 each. There are also price limits for flags, posters, handbills, hoardings, cut-outs, and stickers. Pens used in party election offices cannot exceed Rs 6 each. Among the musical instruments used at campaign events, drums are priced at Rs 500 per day. According to officials, each returning officer prepares the rate list of services and materials used by the candidates. Officials said the itemized rate list is finalized by a committee, which includes

the electoral officer, in consultation with political parties, candidates, and traders, and is handed over to each person filing nomination papers. Though in a city like Delhi, which has 70 assembly constituencies with an average of 22-25 lakh voters each in an area of 1,483 square kilometers, the prices of most commodities are more or less the same but may vary occasionally. Candidates are required to submit their expenditure report to the poll panel within 30 days of the completion of an election. The expenses are also monitored by the commission through video recording during the campaign. The accounting of expenses is done from the date candidates file their nomination papers until the day of the results. In the event of a violation or incorrect claims, the candidacy of the person is canceled as per Election Commission rules. As a norm, the poll panel tracks candidates' expenses item-wise during election campaigns. The rates are fixed based on feedback from district election officials, market dealers, political parties, and the prevailing Consumer Price Index (CPI).

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## Doubts raised in Saif Ali attack case

TN RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

There is still more than what meets the eye in matters relating to the recent attack on Bollywood actor Saif Ali Khan and the arrest of the accused Shariful Islam Shehzad Mohammad Amin Fakir for his alleged involvement in the incident. Or so it appears, going by the questions being raised in different quarters about the actor's rapid recovery and also the identity of the arrested Bangladeshi national. On his part, Shariful's father Mohammed Ruhul Amin Fakir has questioned the authenticity of the of the CCTV footage used to make the arrest of his son did not match with that of the person in the CCTV footage taken from actor's building on the day of incident, in which the intruder to Saif's house is seen climbing down the stairs. The CCTV-based photograph which initially made it to social media has been featured widely in print and electronic media. Talking to a leading television, the accused's father Mohammed Fakir said:



"The person in the CCTV footage is not my son. But the police have used this footage as the basis to arrest my son (in connection with the Saif Ali Khan attack)". Mohammed Fakir also defended his son by saying his son had never kept his hair long, unlike the person in the video. Shariful was arrested by the Mumbai police from Hiranandani Estate at Thane

(west) on January 19. Police said Shariful hailed from Rajabariya village in Nalchity sub-region of Jhalokati district in southern Bangladesh. When Shariful was produced before a holiday court on the same day, the accused's lawyer Sandeep D. Sherkhane had contested the claim made by the police that his client was a Bangladeshi who came to Mumbai six months ago. "The accused has been living in Mumbai with his family for the past 7 years. I argued in court yesterday very clearly on this. The police are trying to make him a scapegoat as this case involves a Bollywood celebrity," Sherkhane had said. It may be recalled that during the knife attack carried out on him allegedly by Shariful in the small hours of January 16, Saif had had sustained six stab wounds, including the one in his spine while he was grappling an intruder in the actor's 12th floor apartment in posh "Satguru Sharan" building at Bandra (W) in north-west Mumbai.

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## INDONESIA IN INDIA



Band of the Indonesian contingent marches during the full dress rehearsal for the Republic Day Parade on January 25. Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto is the chief guest at India's 76th Republic Day celebrations. Photo: Ranjan Dimri



# Seven Nepalese among 13 dead in Maharashtra train tragedy



People gather after a train mishap, in Jalgaon of Maharashtra on Wednesday.

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

As many as seven of the 13 persons who died in a train accident in Maharashtra's Jalgaon district hailed from Nepal, an official said on Thursday. Yuvaraj Patil, district information officer, said 11 of the 13 victims have been identified, and seven of them belonged to Nepal. The Railway Protection Force and Government Railway Police have jointly initiated an inquiry into the train tragedy. Thirteen passengers of the Mumbai-bound Pushpak Express, who got off the train after an alarm chain-pulling incident, were run over by the Karnataka Express heading from Bengaluru to Delhi on the adjacent tracks in Maharashtra's Jalgaon district on Wednesday evening. "Railway Protection Force (RPF) and Government Railway Police (GRP)

initiated an inquiry after the tragedy on Wednesday to find out what caused passengers to pull the alarm chain and alight the Pushpak Express," Swapnil Dhanraj Nila, Chief Public Relations Officer (CPRO), Central Railway, said. Asked if the Commissioner of Railway Safety (CRS) will also investigate the incident, Nila said, "The order for a CRS enquiry hasn't been issued yet." Initial reports suggested that a rumour of fire caused panic among Pushpak Express' passengers who alighted and waited at the adjacent track for a few minutes when the speeding Karnataka Express mowed many of them down. The Railway Ministry clarified that no spark or smoke emanated from any part of the coach. "We are trying to find out who spread the rumour and what caused the passengers to come out of

the train," a railway official said. Lachchiram Khataru Pasi from Nepal was among those seven persons. His family not only had to bear the grief of his death, but also go through the extremely traumatic process of identifying him from mutilated body parts. The tragedy took place when some passengers of the Mumbai-bound Pushpak Express got off the train after an alarm chain-pulling incident and were run over by the Karnataka Express on the adjacent tracks on Wednesday evening. Pasi's companions, who survived the tragedy, narrated how they remained huddled in the cramped space between the two trains to save themselves. Recounting the horror, Shaikat Ali, a worker from Nepal who was travelling with Lachchiram, said, "A fire rumour was spread in the

train. We saw smoke inside the bogie. When the train slowed, we hastily stepped down and the train got empty." As they stepped down, the other train moving in the opposite direction approached within a couple of minutes. Before they could comprehend what was happening, everyone started running helter-skelter to save their lives while there was no place to escape, he said. Out of the injured persons, 10 were undergoing treatment -- nine at Pachora civil hospital and one at a medical facility in Jalgaon city. The others who suffered minor injuries were discharged, an official said. Dilip Kumar, Executive Director, Information and Publicity, Railway Board, denied that any spark or fire inside the coach caused passengers to pull the alarm chain.

# Local MLA urges faster action over Jammu mystery illness

**MOHIT KANDHARI ■ JAMMU**

A day after the District Administration in Rajouri declared the remote Badhaal village as a 'containment zone,' ruling party MLA from the Budhal Assembly segment, Javed Iqbal Choudhary, on Thursday alleged that critically ill patients are suffering due to a 'dual power centre' and a lack of coordination between different agencies on the ground. The National Conference MLA claimed that the samples collected by the central teams from the remote Badhaal village are yet to be transported out of Rajouri to their final destinations in Pune, Lucknow, and New Delhi. He also demanded a permanent arrangement for Heli-Taxi services in either Jammu or Rajouri to shift critically ill patients without wasting precious time. Raising the issue of shifting three sisters from GMC Jammu to PGI Chandigarh, the National Conference MLA alleged that despite airlifting the three siblings from Rajouri

via a special flight arranged by the office of the Divisional Commissioner Jammu, the office of GMC Principal failed to make the necessary arrangements in time to shift them to PGI Chandigarh late Wednesday evening. He demanded a high-level probe to determine who prevented the timely shifting of patients with severe symptoms of a 'mysterious disease.' So far, 17 villagers, including 13 children, have died due to the mysterious illness in the remote Badhaal village of Rajouri. Meanwhile, the district authorities on Thursday shifted around 200 villagers from the containment zone in Badhaal to an isolation ward at GMC Rajouri. An 11-year-old patient identified as Saima Kousar, with similar symptoms, was also admitted to GMC Rajouri on Thursday evening. Medical Superintendent of GMC Rajouri, Dr. Shamim Choudhary, said that doctors are currently assessing her health condition. "We will start treatment after the team of doctors thoroughly examines

her and monitors her," he said. In another related development, Principal of GMC Jammu, Dr. Ashutosh Gupta, responded to the allegations of NC MLA Javed Iqbal Choudhary, claiming that the patients could not be shifted to PGI Chandigarh late Wednesday night because PGIMER administration conveyed their inability to accept the children due to the unavailability of beds. In a written statement issued on Thursday, Dr. Ashutosh Gupta stated that GMC Jammu was informed about the airlifting of three children with signs and symptoms of the mysterious illness from GMC Rajouri to GMC Jammu at approximately 6:30 PM. The authorities were also notified about the availability of beds at PGIMER Chandigarh. Dr. Gupta further added, "The GMC Jammu authorities immediately readied fully equipped critical care ambulances and dispatched them to the technical airport in Jammu for the immediate transfer of these patients to PGIMER Chandigarh by road."

# Sena seeks Bharat Ratna for Bal Thackeray

**TN RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI**

As both factions of the Shiv Sena celebrated the birth anniversary of the party founder, the late Bal Thackeray, on Thursday, the Uddhav Thackeray-led Sena demanded that the late Thackeray be posthumously awarded the country's highest civilian honor, the Bharat Ratna. On the day when Prime Minister Narendra Modi paid tributes to the late Bal Thackeray on his 99th birth anniversary, Shiv Sena (UBT) MP and chief spokesperson Sanjay Nirupam advocated for the "bestowal" of the Bharat Ratna on the late leader, the supreme of the united Shiv Sena. He said that if the Modi government conferred the country's highest civilian honor on Thackeray, it would be a fitting tribute to the Sena patriarch ahead of his centenary celebrations, which will begin next year (2026). Balasaheb (January 23, 1926 - November 17, 2012) founded the Shiv Sena on June 19, 1966. Along with Thackeray, Raut demanded that freedom fighter Veer Savarkar be honored with the Bharat Ratna as well. "Like Mahatma Gandhi and Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Balasaheb Thackeray never occupied any constitutional office, but he was regarded and respected as a leader in his own right—not only in the country but across the world. On the occasion of the upcoming Republic Day (January 26) celebrations, we demand that the government declare the names of both late Thackeray and Veer Savarkar for the Bharat Ratna," Raut said. "We have never asked for anything for Balasaheb Thackeray... However, this is the desire not only of Shiv Sainiks but of the people of Maharashtra, India, and Hindus around the world. All the party MPs have also made a similar plea today," Raut added. Taking a dig at Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Union Home Minister Amit Shah after they paid homage to Balasaheb on X, Raut said that conferring the Bharat Ratna on the Shiv Sena founder would be the true tribute to the late Shiv Sena chief. "Before late Balasaheb's centenary year begins, it is fitting that he be awarded the Bharat Ratna. You could not give the Bharat Ratna to Veer Savarkar. If you give the Bharat Ratna to Balasaheb, it will also be an honor for Veer Savarkar," Raut stated.

# SC to address lawyer appearance regulations

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI**

The Supreme Court on Thursday raised concern over a large number of lawyers marking their appearance in cases, and their names running into several pages, whereas an order was only a few pages. A bench comprising Justices Bela M Trivedi and Satish Chandra Sharma said if a lawyer was assisting the court 'effectively' it had no problem in adding the appearance. "Names of lawyers go into 10 pages and the order will go into only a few pages. We are not passing any orders on how the names of advocates should be included in the order. Since

you are representing the Bar, we are hearing out," it said. The top court said though many lawyers appeared with the arguing counsel, nobody argued when asked to. "Or we would have clearly said you have no locus. Whoever is attached with the lawyer, their names are there. It cannot be done like that. When we see they are assisting you effectively, their names are there. We will pass the orders," the bench told senior advocate Kapil Sibal, appearing for the Supreme Court Bar Association (SCBA). Sibal submitted the SCBA and the Supreme Court Advocates-on-Record Association would submit a proposal to regulate the issue.

"You are right; 30-40 names cannot be given. But some reasonable, fair procedure to ensure that genuine people who are here and their names should be added," he said. The top court was hearing a plea by the associations seeking a direction to its administration regarding uniform guidelines to allow all advocates present and appearing in a particular case to mark their appearances. In an order passed on September 20 last year, the top court said advocates-on-record could mark the appearances of only those lawyers who were authorised to appear in the court and argue on a particular day of hearing.

# MEA Jaishankar talks deportation of Indians in US

**From page 1**

"Because you also know that when something illegal happens, many other illegal activities get joined onto it, which is not desirable. It is certainly not good reputationally. So, with every country, and the US is no exception, we have always maintained that if any of our citizens are there illegally, and if we are sure that they are our citizens, we have always been

open to their legitimate return to India," Jaishankar said. The minister was responding to a query on news reports that India is working with the Trump administration for the deportation of some 1,80,000 Indians in the US who are either undocumented, or have overstayed their visas. "This position is not unique to the United States. I do understand that right now there is a certain debate going

on, and a resulting sensitivity which is there, but we have been consistent, we have been very principled about it and that remains our position. I conveyed that clearly to Secretary (of State, Marco) Rubio," he said. "At the same time, I also told him that, while we understand all of this, and I also accept that these are autonomous processes, it is in our mutual interest to facilitate legal and mutually

beneficial mobility. "If it takes 400-odd days of waiting period to get a visa, I don't think the relationship is well served by this. He (Rubio) also noted that point," he said. "But while I've seen some numbers... I caution you about them because for us, a number is operative when we can actually validate the fact that the individual concerned is of Indian origin," Jaishankar added.

# Poll chai-naastha fixed by EC

**From page 1**

"We take the itemized list from the previous election and calculate the new prices using the consumer price index. The list cannot be exhaustive, and the rates of various miscellaneous items, which are not mentioned in it, are accounted for as per the bill, the maximum retail price mentioned on it, or the fair market price, whichever is higher," said an election official. While the candidates maintain their own expense registers, expenditure observers, appointed by the EC, prepare a "shadow" register, and both are required to be updated

regularly. Sometimes, there is an informal arrangement where the candidate compares their daily register with the expenditure observers' shadow register and corrects any anomalies. Overall, the EC's maximum limit on election expenditure for assembly seats for each candidate is Rs 40 lakh. For Lok Sabha elections, the limit is Rs 95 lakh. The expenditure limit has increased over the years. In 2019, the limit was Rs 70 lakh per candidate for the Lok Sabha election and Rs 28 lakh per candidate for assembly elections. As many as 699 candidates have filed nominations for the 70 seats of the Delhi Assembly. The results will be announced on February 8.

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# Differential pricing: Uber, Ola, Apple under scanner

**From page 1**

This intervention was not the first of its kind; the department had previously issued a notice to Apple due to complaints registered on the National Consumer Helpline. Consumers had reported performance issues with iPhones following updates to iOS 18 and later versions. The department examined these grievances and requested a response from Apple to address the concerns raised by users. The notices issued to Ola, Uber, and Apple highlighted a

broader effort to ensure that companies adopt fair practices and do not exploit consumers. The actions taken by the CCPA were expected to bring clarity and resolution to these issues while reinforcing consumer trust in digital platforms and technology services. India is one of Uber's biggest markets outside the United States and Canada, where it is locked in a fierce battle with SoftBank-backed Ola, local rival Rapido, as well as all-electric ride-hailing app BluSmart.

# Doubts raised in Saif Ali attack case

**From page 1**

The knife attack on the actor had taken place between 2 am and 2.30 am on Thursday, after a failed attempt of a burglary. After his admission to the Lilavati Hospital, the actor had undergone a surgery for removal of a knife stuck in his spine and also plugging the leakage of spinal fluid. During a surgery carried out on him immediately afterwards, the doctors attending on Saif removed a 2.5-inch piece of knife from Saif's spine. Meanwhile, the Opposition Congress on Thursday jumped into the raging controversy over the identities of the person seen in Saif

building-related footage and the person arrested in connection with the crime. "The media is claiming that the person seen in the Saif-attack related CCTV footage and the person arrested for the crime are not the same. The Mumbai police should come clean and issue a clarification in the matter. They should present the truth to the public," Maharashtra Congress chief Nana Patole said. In a related development, two ruling MahaYuti leaders - Sanjay Nirupam of the Shinde Shiv Sena and BJP Minister Nitesh Rane - have questioned as how the Bollywood actor, who had sustained six bullet wounds including the one in

his spine, had managed to recover from the grievous injuries so fast. Nirupam, who is the deputy leader of Shiv Sena led by Eknath Shinde, said that though he had full sympathies for Saif Ali Khan and his family, he had had sincere doubts as to how the actor could recover so fast. "The way Saif Ali Khan came out of the hospital, it appeared as if nothing had happened four days ago... I want to ask the doctors, can a person whose operation lasted for 6 hours come out in such good shape within 4 days?," Nirupam asked. "It should be revealed how deadly the attack was and how badly the actor was injured.

The family should come forward and disclose this because, after this incident, such an atmosphere was created in Mumbai that the law and order of Mumbai has collapsed, the Home Ministry has failed, the Maharashtra government has been ruined, and every citizen in Mumbai is unsafe," Nirupam said. Echoing the doubts expressed by Nirupam, Rane -- Rane, who is the Ports and Fisheries Minister in the BJP-led MahaYuti Cabinet, said: "When I saw Saif Ali Khan coming out of the hospital, I doubted whether he had been stabbed six days ago or was he acting. He was dancing while walking."

# Rahul Gandhi cancels two rallies on consecutive days

**From page 1**

On Wednesday, Gandhi was scheduled to hold a campaign rally near Inderlok Metro Station in the Sadar Bazar constituency, but he canceled it. The Congress maintained until the last minute that Gandhi would be addressing the rally, but later announced, towards the end of the public meeting held near the Inderlok metro station, that he would not be able to attend. His message was read at the campaign event, in which he urged voters to choose Congress in the February 5 elections. Rahul had skipped the 'Jai Babu, Jai Bhim, Jai Samvidhan' rally in Karnataka's Belagavi on Tuesday. He was also scheduled to hold a padayatra on Monday in the New Delhi constituency in support of party candidate Sandeep Dikshit, who is contesting against AAP national convener Arvind Kejriwal. Meanwhile, Rahul shared a video montage on Facebook highlighting issues such as inflation, unemployment, pollution, and corruption. He said Delhi now wants the "real development model" of former chief minister Sheila Dikshit and not the "false propaganda and PR model" of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and AAP convener Arvind Kejriwal. "Bad construction, dirt, inflation, unemployment, pollution, and corruption—the truth of Delhi is in front of the public," the former Congress chief said in his Facebook post in Hindi. "Delhi now wants the same real development model of

Sheila Dikshit ji, not the false propaganda and PR model of Modi and Kejriwal," Rahul said ahead of the Assembly polls. Rahul could not address a public meeting in the Sadar Bazar Assembly constituency on Wednesday due to his ill health and appealed to people via a message read out at the rally to ensure the party's victory in the polls. Due to his ill health, Gandhi also could not travel to Karnataka's Belagavi for the 'Jai Babu, Jai Bhim, Jai Samvidhan' rally on Tuesday. Earlier, his political program in the New Delhi constituency was also called off. Earlier this month, Rahul launched a blistering attack on Prime Minister Narendra Modi and former Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal, saying there is no difference between the two leaders and that they do not want backward classes, Dalits, tribals, and minorities to get their due share. Specifically targeting Kejriwal at his first public meeting for the Delhi Assembly polls, Rahul said that the AAP convener was following "Modi's strategy of propaganda and false promises," despite rising pollution, corruption, and inflation in the national capital. He also promised a caste survey in Delhi if Congress formed the government in the national capital. Rahul had praised the work done under three successive Sheila Dikshit-led governments and asserted that neither Kejriwal nor the BJP could match the Congress' track record.

# BJP CMs corner AAP

**From page 1**

"Near the Jamia Millia in Delhi, acres of land belong to the irrigation department of UP. AAP leaders have settled illegal Bangladeshis there. I requested the Delhi government to stop the illegal occupation but when they did not cooperate I had to send bulldozers from UP," Yogi said, in a public address in Janakpuri. Hitting out at the AAP over Yamuna river, he asked the AAP supremo Arvind Kejriwal to take a bath in Yamuna river with his ministers like he took a dip in Sangam with his cabinet ministers and blamed him for changing the river into a dirty sewer. He added that the dirty Yamuna river flows from Delhi to Mathura and Vrindavan, causing trouble to the saints there.

He also called the AAP an 'ATM' of lies. "They do not want to work for the betterment of people. They only have one job: to tell lies through social media, tweets and press conferences. The time they waste by becoming an ATM of lies, if they had utilized this time to do the work for the people then the face of Delhi would have changed. They have kudded Delhi into a 'kudaghar' (garbage dump)," the UP CM said. "If he can betray his guru Anna Hazare, he can also betray the people and the country. I can confidently say that the people of Delhi will no longer fall for his statements anymore," he added. On AAP's 'Pujari Granthi Samman Yojana' scheme, Yogi attacked the AAP for not undertaking any work for the

beautification of temples in Delhi. "They forgot the Valmiki priests. AAP does not have Ravidas temple priests in their agenda. Even today, they are playing their divide and rule policy. People have already decided that they will make BJP win since the Lok Sabha election when they gave us their 100 per cent support," he said. He also addressed two more public meetings in Karol Bagh and Janakpuri assembly constituency. Nadda also held two rallies in Delhi at Uttam Nagar and Shakur Basti. Addressing a public meeting in west Delhi's Uttam Nagar, Nadda launched a blistering attack on the AAP, alleging that the party broke all records of corruption during its 10-year rule in Delhi. The Union minister listed the excise policy case among

'scams' that allegedly took place during the AAP's two consecutive terms. The party cut the pockets of everyone in Delhi during its tenure, he charged. The AAP government broke all records of corruption during its 10-year rule in Delhi, Nadda told the gathering. "The one who becomes the darling of the Muslim community while indulging in corruption in every department, has also committed a scam of 100 crores in the Waqf Board," he said. Nadda called AAP national convener and former chief minister Arvind Kejriwal a 'liar'. "He lies with so much innocence on his face that if a competition of lying is organised at the national level, he will come first. But the people of Delhi will give a befitting reply to the AAP in

the assembly polls," the BJP leader said. Nadda said this election is for the future of Delhi and the voters should keep that in mind. Meanwhile, Yadav also addressed two rallies at Madipur and Rohini. In his address at Madipur, the Chief Minister said that the AAP supreme keeps lying. "He said he will not form any political party, take any bungalow or security. He has a skin thicker than that of a buffalo," he said. Attacking the former Chief Minister, Yadav accused Kejriwal of being so hungry for power that he did not even resign even though he was arrested. Spearheading the BJP's campaign in Delhi, Dhama held two road shows in Palam and Delhi Cantt constituencies with several supporters coming out to

support him. During the road show in Delhi Cantt, Dhama accused the AAP government of failing to deliver on key issues. "The AAP government has not worked in the last 10 years. They failed to provide clean water, engaged in corruption in every scheme, and built their Sheesh Mahal with public money," he said. He asserted that the BJP would form a "double-engine government" in Delhi, ensuring the effective implementation of central government's schemes like Ayushman Bharat. Delhi will vote on February 5 and the counting of votes will take place on February 8. While AAP seeks a third consecutive term, the BJP is aiming to return to power in the national capital after more than 25 years.





BJP President and Union Minister J P Nadda campaigning in Uttam Nagar and Shakur Basti



Uttarakhand Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami holds a roadshow in Palam



AAP leader Raghav Chadha during a roadshow in support of party candidate Mukesh Kumar Goyal

# Kejriwal pledges to eradicate unemployment if re-elected

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

With the Delhi assembly elections less than two weeks away, AAP national convener Arvind Kejriwal on Thursday pledged to eradicate unemployment in the national capital within five years if re-elected. In a video message, the former Delhi chief minister stressed that creating jobs for the youth would be his top priority. "Our team is drafting a detailed plan to address the issue of unemployment," Kejriwal said. The AAP faces a tight contest from the BJP this poll.

Highlighting past successes, the AAP Chief revealed that his team had facilitated employment for 12 lakh youth during the pandemic and is now working on a comprehensive plan to secure jobs for Delhi's children. Arvind Kejriwal also reaffirmed his commitment to bolstering key sectors like education, health, and infrastructure. Meanwhile, terming it another political gimmick, South Delhi BJP MP and Chairman of the BJP Assembly election manifesto committee, Ramvir Singh Bidhuri said the Kejriwal government had to provide 20 lakh jobs in 5 years, but they have not even given 20 jobs.



"On the contrary, Kejriwal took away the jobs of 10 thousand volunteers of Civil Defence. Guest teachers and contractual employees working in Delhi government departments were also not made permanent," said Bidhuri adding that the people of Delhi has realised that Kejriwal is unfit to rule the national capital. On the other hand, touting his government's achievements in

Punjab, Kejriwal claimed that the AAP government there provided 48,000 government jobs and facilitated over three lakh private-sector jobs for youth in less than two years. "We know how to create employment, and our intentions are honest. With the people's support, we will eliminate unemployment in Delhi in the next five years," he stated confidently. The BJP said it was shocking that Kejriwal, instead

of offering his vision for the middle class, has tried to mislead them by posing "populist demands" before the Centre. Kejriwal said that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Delhi government had created employment opportunities for 12 lakh youth. He also cited the performance of the AAP government in Punjab, saying that 48,000 government jobs and three lakh employments in the private sector were given in the

state in just two years. "We are capable of providing employment to youth, and our intentions are clear," he said. Kejriwal announced the seven-point charter aimed at addressing the concerns of the middle class and demanded the BJP-led Centre to address them. Delhi has recorded a sharp drop in unemployment rate—from 6.3 percent in 2020-21 to 2.1 percent in 2023-24, data from its Economic Survey 2023-24 as well as the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2023-24 shows. Unemployment rate is defined as the number of people unemployed as a percentage of the total workforce. In Delhi, 2.1 percent of the total workforce in the 15 to 59 years was unemployed in 2023-24, which is lower than the national average of 3.5 percent. As far as joblessness among youth (15-29 years age group) is concerned, Delhi has recorded an unemployment rate of 4.6 percent in 2023-24, a drop from 6.1 percent in the previous year. PLFS data shows that a little over half (56.1%) of Delhi's workforce comprises the regular-waged, while 37.8% are self-employed and 6.1% are casual labour.

# Central Government's 1,200 electric buses running in city, says PM Modi

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on Thursday that over 1,200 electric buses provided by the Central government are running in the national capital as part of the wider efforts to reduce carbon footprint. He cited the programme to promote rooftop solar panels as another initiative to this effect. Modi made the remarks during an interaction with students at the Central Hall of Samvidhan Sadan (old Parliament building) where dignitaries, including Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge besides the prime minister, paid tributes to iconic freedom fighter Subhas Chandra Bose on his birth anniversary. When Modi asked a student which slogan of Bose motivates her most, she cited "Give me blood and I promise you freedom," according to an official statement. She said Bose demonstrated true leadership by prioritising his country above all else and this dedication continues to inspire the students greatly. It motivates her to reduce the



carbon footprint of the nation, which is a part of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), she added. Asked about the initiatives taken to do so, she said electric vehicles and buses were introduced, it said. "The prime minister emphasised that over 1,200 electric buses provided by the Union government were operating in Delhi and more would be introduced," the statement said. He also explained to the students about the 'PM Suryagarh Yojana' as a tool to tackle climate change. As part of the scheme, solar panels were installed on house rooftops to produce electricity, eliminating the need to pay electricity bills. The electricity generated could be used to charge e-vehicles, cutting down on the spending on fossil fuels and curbing pollution, he added. Modi told students that any surplus electricity generated at home could be sold to the government, which would provide monetary compensation, the statement said.

# BJP's Malviya demands investigation into absence of established distilleries in city

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The BJP on Thursday demanded an investigation into the absence of established liquor brands from the national Capital while residents are forced to buy whiskey from lesser-known distilleries in Punjab accusing the ruling party of receiving money to fund the upcoming Delhi assembly elections. In a post on X, the BJP's Information Technology Cell chief Amit Malviya claimed another Liquor Scam in Delhi via Punjab. "While the rest of India enjoys premium whiskey brands like Blenders Pride, Black Dog, Royal Stag, Sterling Reserve, Imperial Blue and Antiquity Blue, people in Delhi are being forced to look elsewhere for such choices—often driving to Noida or Gurgaon to buy them," he said. "Why is this happening? Delhi residents are instead compelled to buy: Royal Green Rich, Dennies Special, Bottoms UP Premium, Old Habbit Premium and Soulmate Blu. Shockingly, 85.4 per cent of the total whiskey sold in Delhi comes from a lesser-known distillery in Punjab."



He accused the Delhi government of pressuring its agencies to procure liquor from distilleries in the AAP ruled state of Punjab. "The Reason: The Delhi government is reportedly pressuring its agencies to procure liquor from Punjab-based distilleries," he said. The senior BJP leader posed four questions to the AAP including if it is getting any kickbacks to promote the liquors of Punjab, and receiving funding for the upcoming Delhi elections, slated to be held on February 5.

"Questions: Could this be a potential scam? Is the AAP government receiving kickbacks to promote liquor from Punjab manufacturers? Why are Delhi consumers being denied access to established brands? Are Punjab distilleries

funding Delhi government elections?" Malviya questioned. He asserted that this calls for a thorough investigation. According to the Excise department data, of the top 10 whiskey brands being sold in Delhi, 85.4 per cent of the sales are of Punjab-based distillers. The national Capital has reverted to its old excise policy on September 1, 2022 after the money laundering linked excise scam, which later saw the arrest of several AAP leaders including its supreme and former Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal. Under this policy, the excise department gives out L-1 licenses for wholesale supply of Indian liquor to a company which has a license for manufacturing of liquor. This L-1 license holder supplies liquor to vendors, which are managed by Delhi government's agencies including Delhi State Industrial and Infrastructure Development Corporation (DSIIDC), Delhi Tourism and Transportation Development Corporation (DTTDC), Delhi Consumer's Cooperative Wholesale Store and Delhi State Civil Supplies Corporation Ltd.

# Party turncoats may decide who comes to power

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The performance of party-thoppers will count this time in government formation in Delhi as the three major players in the Assembly polls -- AAP, BJP and Congress -- have fielded around 20 foot-candle-friends in the electoral battle. However, it won't be a smooth sailing for these candidates who are now trying to prove themselves in a new setup that has thrown at them multiple challenges including the unease among workers and leaders of their adopted parties. With elections close by, several prominent leaders of the AAP, Congress and BJP switched sides, seeking to redirect -- and in some cases resurrect -- their political careers. Amid uncertainty over getting tickets for the Assembly polls, around half a dozen BJP leaders crossed over to the AAP which promptly fielded them from different constituencies. These leaders had contested Assembly polls as BJP candidates in 2020. One of them is Praveesh Ratan whom the AAP has fielded from the Patel Nagar (SC) seat against former minister and BJP candidate Raaj Kumar Anand. In 2020 also, they were



rivals, but from different parties -- Anand from AAP and Ratan from BJP. Jitender Singh Shunty and Surinder Pal Bittu joined the AAP and got tickets from Shahdara and Timarpur constituencies, respectively. Three other BJP leaders -- Brahm Singh Tanwar, BB Tyagi and Anil Jha -- joined the AAP and were given tickets to contest these polls. Tyagi is contesting the polls from Laxmi Nagar, Jha from Kirari and Tanwar from Chhatarpur. Kartar Singh Tanwar who defeated Brahm Singh Tanwar

in the 2020 polls is now a BJP candidate from Chhatarpur. Jha was fielded by the AAP from Kirari seat by denying ticket to outgoing party MLA Rituraj Jha. Anil was defeated by Rituraj in 2020, with a small margin. The Arvind Kejriwal-led party has also fielded Congress leaders who switched over to the AAP in recent months. Within days of joining, the AAP fielded Veer Singh Dhangra from Seemapuri, Sumesh Shokeen from Matiala and Zubair Ahmed from Seelampur.

The BJP's big catch included former Delhi Congress president Arvinder Singh Lovely and former transport minister in the AAP government Kailash Gahlot. Lovely is contesting on BJP ticket from Gandhi Nagar seat while Gahlot is party candidate from Bijwasan constituency. The party also gave tickets to former Congress leaders including Raj Kumar Chauhan from Mangolpuri, former MLAs Neeraj Basoya from Kasturba Nagar, and Tarvinder Marwah from Jangpura. As for the Congress also, it managed

to wean away outgoing AAP MLAs Dharam Pal Lakra (Mundka) and Abdul Rahman (Seelampur), and gave them tickets soon after joining the party. Lakra, who joined the Congress earlier this month, is now seeking a reelection as the Congress candidate from Mundka. AAP councillor Rajesh Gupta, who joined the Congress along with Lakra, is now a Congress candidate from Kirari. Rehman joined the Congress in December last year and was rewarded with ticket from Seelampur. Further, former AAP MLAs Devender Sehrawat and Haji Ishraq got tickets from Bijwasan and Babarpur seats, respectively, after joining the Congress in recent months. Political leaders said several new entrants have good chances of winning the elections. Sehrawat, Haji Ishraq and Abdul Rehman are capable of springing up surprises, claimed a Congress leader. Delhi is slated for a triangular contest among the ruling AAP and opposition BJP and Congress, for the 70 Assembly seats going to polls on February 5. The results will be declared after counting of votes on February 8.

# Congress launches new anthem for Assembly polls

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Coining a new term "Alcohol Affected Party" for the ruling AAP, the Delhi Congress on Thursday launched its 'anthem' with the theme of "Har jarurat hogi puri, Delhi me hai Congress jaruri", for the upcoming Delhi assembly elections, encompassing key schemes and promises for the people of the capital. The song -- "AAP ke paap pardafansh (uncovering the AAP's sins)" -- was unveiled in the presence of senior Delhi Congress leaders and AICC's chairman of the media and publicity department Pawan Khera. Addressing the media during the launch event, Khera accused the AAP government and former chief minister Arvind Kejriwal of corruption in the now-scrapped Delhi



excise policy "Kejriwal came to power raising the slogan of clean politics, but his reality is now evident," said Khera. "It is unprecedented in Indian history for a chief minister to be accused of a scam on such a scale -- both nationally and internationally." Hitting out at Sisodia, Khera said

Delhi voters now do not want a "manager" of liquor scam to provide education to their children. Khera also played an audio clip of sitting AAP MLA Sharad Chauhan, who is again contesting the elections in which the latter is purportedly heard opposing the contro-

versial excise policy during a discussion with the then Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia. In the purported conversation, AAP's Narela MLA Sharad Chauhan is heard saying that he objected to the excise policy but Sisodia tells him that it was needed to generate party funds for fighting elections in Gujarat, Goa and Punjab. At present, the money for the Delhi election is coming from Punjab," said Chauhan in the audio recording. "We all know that alcohol is harmful for health and its addiction destroys the entire family. We all have seen that how the addiction to earn money from alcohol destroyed an entire state. They have destroyed the world class infrastructure of Delhi (and turned it) into a pile of garbage," Khera alleged. "This is the sitting

MLA of Narela Sharad Chauhan, who was talking to someone and said that he was with Manish (Sisodia) when (Vijay) Nair brought the liquor policy. And he asked Manish don't do this, there will be a big mess as the liquor shops will open in every area. "Manish said that if he does not do this then how the money will come to contest the elections. Then, Chauhan further stated that the money came from this for the elections of Gujarat and Goa. Now it is coming from Punjab," Khera said, adding that these were Chauhan's words. "Manish told me that you also settle with two companies. I also made a plan, but I did not do it and I got saved, otherwise I would have also been in jail today," Khera said that Chauhan was saying so, citing the audio clip.

# Police introduce two chatbots to assist personnel with election related duties

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

As the Delhi Assembly polls draw nearer, the police have introduced two AI-driven chatbots, 'Chunav Mitra' and 'Cyber Sarthi', to assist their personnel and paramilitary forces with their election-related duties. A senior police official said that these bilingual chatbots, available in Hindi and English, will ensure effective management of the upcoming Delhi Assembly polls. Highlighting the features of these AI-based chatbots, the official explained that these applications will ensure the timely dissemination of critical instructions and guidelines issued by the Election Commission of India (ECI) and the Delhi Police. 'Chunav Mitra' provides real-time access to rules, directives

and field instructions, while 'Cyber Sarthi' focuses on cyber-security. "Chunav Mitra" promptly disseminates key instructions and guidelines issued by the Election Commission of India (ECI) and the Delhi Police, for the smooth and peaceful conduct of the election process. It provides quick and easy access to important guidelines, rules and directives. It acts as a vital tool for field officers, requiring immediate reference on real time basis, while on duty," an officer said. "Cyber Sarthi" focuses on providing robust cyber security guidelines, ensuring the safe use of digital platforms and tools by police personnel during their assignment," he said. Special Commissioner of Police (Crime) Devesh Chandra Srivastva informed that both chatbots are built on an exten-

sive database of election-related information. He added that the AI Chatbot can be accessed easily through a dedicated link and QR code, ensuring swift and seamless usage, by police personnel on the ground. "Designed to be user-friendly, the AI Chatbot simplify complex instructions and provide practical support to officer/ personnel of all ranks, in need of quick and accurate information, while performing their duties," he said. It is intuitive and efficient, providing real-time responses to queries and enabling officer or personnel to access crucial relevant data or information without any delay. These applications were developed under the guidance of Delhi Police Commissioner Sanjay Arora to ensure seamless election management, said the Special CP.



# CEC sounds note of caution against fake narratives

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Rajiv Kumar on Thursday sounded a note of caution against fake narratives, saying they erode trust in electoral processes, and noted that the misinformation is typically timed to target the vitals of poll process.

Making this assertion at an international conference of election management bodies organised by Election Commission of India, he said while technology offers significant opportunities, it also brings challenges like cybersecurity threats and misinformation. He urged Election Management Bodies to streamline strategies for addressing these technological challenges to effectively mitigate the risks. Sounding a note of caution against fake narratives which erode trust in electoral processes,

he said that such fake narratives are typically timed at crucial junctures of the election process to target its very vitals. In his address, CEC Kumar also outlined key trends shaping the future of elections, including AI-driven processes, online and remote voting, biometric authentication and increased global collaboration. He urged the participating poll management bodies to explore the opportunities with technological advancements in making elections more transparent, inclusive and accessible. He underscored the role of election management bodies in not only safeguarding electoral processes globally but also expanding their reach and impact. Poll organisations from Uzbekistan, Sri Lanka, Mauritius, Indonesia and Kazakhstan placed their concerns on disinformation, misinformation and fake narratives on social media affecting elec-

toral integrity while making their presentations on their electoral experience in 2024. CEC of Mauritius Abdool Rahman also stressed on the menace of fake news, saying it undermines voters' trust in the poll bodies. Highlighting a particular case of fake online applications for recruitment of election staff, Rahman expressed concern over the use of technology and social media in intensifying the menace of misinformation and disinformation during elections. A representative of the Electoral Commission of Namibia, while expressing concern over the rising trend of fake news, sought suggestions on tackling fake news on social media. Commissioner, General Election Commission of Indonesia, Idhan Holik spoke about their experience of using a dedicated WhatsApp channel to tackle misinformation in real



time. The ECI is hosting the two-day international conference. It brings together representatives from Election Management Bodies (EMBs) of nearly 13 countries and international organisations for discussions on key issues of contemporary election management. The conference on the theme 'Global Election Year 2024: Reiteration of Democratic Spaces, Takeaway for EMBs' is hosted by the ECI based on the varied experiences of EMBs in conducting elections in 2024, in India and the other countries. Nearly 30 representatives from the Election Management Bodies (EMBs) of 13 countries including Bhutan, Georgia, Namibia, Uzbekistan, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Ireland, Mauritius, Philippines, Russian Federation, Tunisia, and Nepal are attending. In his address, CEC Kumar also reflected that 2024 was a defining year as a test for EMBs for

reaffirmation of democratic values amidst challenging and complexities. He emphasized on the critical role of technology and digital innovations in enhancing efficiency, transparency and voter confidence. He underscored the role of EMBs in not only safeguarding electoral processes globally but also expanding their reach and impact. Highlighting India's historic general elections with a record participation of 647 million voters and over one million polling stations, CEC Kumar said the elections were also more inclusive with greater participation especially among women, elderly aged 85+, Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) and the third gender. CEC Kumar underscored the importance of collaborative efforts in capacity building and global cooperation as vital to safeguarding democratic processes and strengthening election management world-

wide. Bhutan's Chief election commissioner Dashi Sonam Topgay said the electronic voting machines provided by India have brought process efficiencies during polls in his country. He said the EVMs have won the trust of the people in Bhutan. Thanking India for providing the EVMs, he lauded the process efficiencies brought in by the machines since their use in the elections in that country. Speaking on digital IDs, Topgay said Bhutan has a biometric Unified National ID which is used for voter authentication. Bhutan is exploring the possibility of online voting in future elections, he told the gathering. Besides Bhutan, a limited number of Indian EVMs are used in Nepal and Namibia, EC functionaries said. Public undertakings BEL and ECIL produce EVMs for the Election Commission.

## Keen on finding solution over disparity in High Court judges pension, says SC

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Thursday said it was keen on finding a solution over the issue of disparity in pension to retired high court judges. A bench of Justices B R Gavai, Augustine George Masih and K Vinod Chandran said it wanted to settle the issue once and for all. "We have been telling it since the beginning that we are keen on finding a solution, not laying down a law," it said. The top court was hearing arguments on a batch of pleas raising the issue of different pension being payable to retired high court judges. "One of the key reasons highlighted before the top court was that the high court judges, who were elevated from the district judiciary, were covered under the New Pension Scheme. However, those elevated to



the high court from the Bar were the beneficiaries of the Old Pension Scheme leading to a mismatch in the pension payable to two sets of high court judges. "We know that when you are there, it will all be resolved," the bench told attorney general R Venkataramani on Thursday. The bench deliberated over uniformity in the pension to

retired high court judges for parity. "We want to settle these issues once and for all," it observed. The arguments in the matter would continue on January 28. In December 2024, the top court said it was "pitiable" that some retired high court judges were getting a pension ranging between Rs 10,000 and Rs 15,000. It asked authorities to have a

"humane approach" instead of adopting a "legal approach". The bench observed the matter would not be decided on individual cases and whatever the top court might lay down would be applicable to all the high court judges. The top court had also expressed "shock" that some retired high court judges were getting a meagre pension ranging between Rs 6,000 and Rs 15,000. While hearing a separate plea in March last year, the apex court said there cannot be any discrimination in computing the pensionary benefits of retired judges of high courts based on whether they were elevated from the bar or the district judiciary. Pensionary benefits of a retired high court judge, elevated from the district judiciary, should be computed based on his or her last drawn salary as a high court judge, it said.

## Egyptian Foreign Minister to visit India

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Egyptian Foreign Minister Badr Abdelatty is set to visit India in the first week of next month to review the overall trajectory of bilateral ties and explore ways to expand cooperation in areas of trade, investment, shipping and agriculture. Abdelatty will hold wide-ranging talks with External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar covering the entire gamut of bilateral ties as well as the evolving situation in the Middle East following the Israel-Hamas ceasefire deal. The two ministers are also set to take stock of implementation of the decisions firmed up during talks between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi in 2023, sources said here on Thursday. The two sides will look at shoring up cooperation in a number of areas including trade, investment and agriculture, they said. While the Egyptian President visited India in January 2023 to grace the Republic Day cele-



brations as the Chief Guest, Modi travelled to Egypt in June that year, reflecting growing intensity in the bilateral ties. India and Egypt elevated their ties to the level of strategic partnership and resolved to significantly broaden the bilateral engagement in areas of defence, security and trade during El-Sisi's visit to India. The two leaders also decided to take the volume of bilateral trade to USD 12 billion in the next five years from around USD seven billion recorded that year.

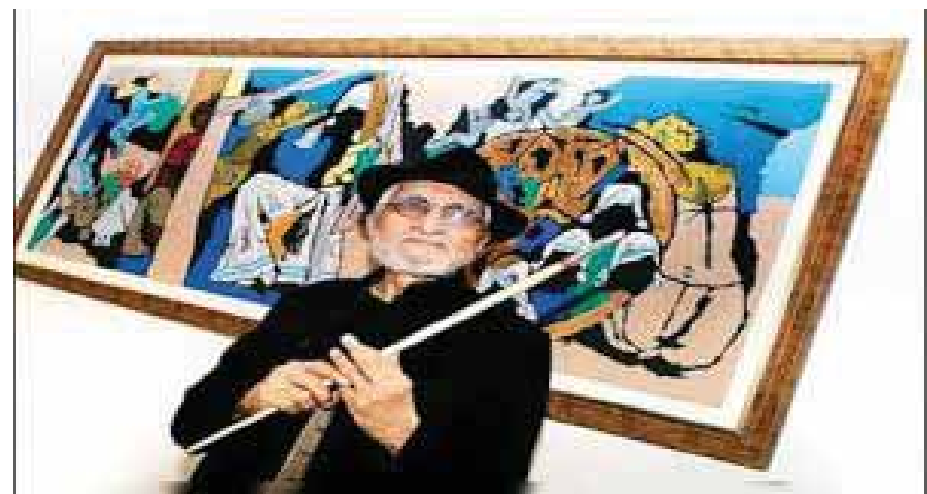
Egypt has traditionally been one of India's most important trading partners in the African continent. The India-Egypt bilateral trade agreement has been in operation since March 1978. The bilateral trade has increased more than five times in last 10 years. Around 50 Indian companies have invested in various sectors in Egypt with a combined investment exceeding USD 3.25 billion. A joint statement issued during El-Sisi's visit to India two years back mentioned that the Egyptian side is considering

the possibility of allocating a special area of land for the Indian industries in the Suez Canal Economic Zone (SCEZ). The Suez Canal, connecting the Mediterranean Sea with the Red Sea, is one of the world's busiest trade routes. About 12 percent of global trade passes through the canal each day. India and Egypt are also looking at deepening cooperation in the field of agriculture and allied services besides strengthening the supply chain of food articles. The defence and strategic cooperation between India and Egypt has been on an upswing in the last few years. The Indian and Egyptian Armies conducted the first ever joint exercise in January this year. Egypt had already shown interest in procuring Tejas light combat aircraft, radars, military helicopters and other platforms from India. In July 2022, the IAF participated in a month-long tactical leadership programme in Egypt with three Su-30 MKI jets and two C-17 transport aircraft.

## Court refuses FIR over M F Husain paintings

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi court has refused to direct an FIR on a plea alleging two paintings of late artist and Padma awardee M F Husain hurt religious sentiments and said no further probe was required. Judicial magistrate first class Sahil Monga said all the facts and circumstances of the case were within the knowledge of the complainant, the CCTV footage of Delhi Art Gallery, and the paintings in question have already been seized. "No further investigation and collection of evidences is required on the part of investigating agency at this stage, as all the evidences are in the possession of complainant as well as on record," said the court. The matter, it went on, could proceed before the court as a complaint case and issued notice to Delhi Art Gallery Pvt. Ltd., its CEO and MD Ashish Anand, and Director Ashwani Anand for February 12.



The judge observed police in its action taken report said the paintings in question were seized. The report further said the commission of cognisable offence could not be ascertained, the judge noted. The judge on January 20 ordered the seizure of the paintings displayed at the art gallery and reserved the order

on FIR after hearing arguments. The paintings feature Hindu deities Hanuman and Ganesh. During the hearing on the plea, complainant and advocate Amita Sachdeva, said the most revered entities of Sanatan Dharma -- Hanuman and Ganesh -- were insulted in Husain's paintings.

"This is obscenity. Depicted most revered deities in obscene manner a deliberate and malicious insult. Husain may be the greatest artist in the world, but he has no right to insult my deities," she argued. She claimed there was an advertisement and thousands of people saw the painting of "deities being ridiculed".

"Prima facie case is made out for exhibiting such offensive paintings for public viewing and hurting religious sentiments," added Sachdeva. Ordering the seizure, Monga cited the police's action taken report, which said the investigating officer seized the security camera footage and the network video recorder of the art gallery. The report said the art exhibition was held privately and the paintings, including the two in question, were only to display the original work of Husain. "At this stage an application has been moved by complainant for direction to the IO to seize the painting in question. In light of the facts and circumstances mentioned in the said application, the said application is allowed and IO is directed to seize the said painting," the January 20 order said. Husain, a recipient of Padma Vibhushan, India's second-highest civilian award, died in 2011.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, Union Minister Piyush Goyal, MoS Jitendra Singh, and Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge during a ceremony to pay tribute to Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose on his birth anniversary, at Central Hall of Samvidhan Sadan in New Delhi on Thursday

## CBI closes case against DHFL in 'fake accounts' case

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The CBI has closed the case against the DHFL and its directors pertaining to 2.60 lakh allegedly fictitious home loan accounts, some of which were used to claim interest subsidies under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojna, officials said. After over three years of probe, the agency could not find evidence suggesting a criminal conspiracy which could have led to the creation of such accounts, they said. The irregularities were pointed out in the report of auditor Grant Thornton, appointed by the new board of the scam-hit Dewan Housing Finance Limited (DHFL), they said. The agency has now submitted its final report before a special court in Delhi, which would take a call on whether to accept the closure report or order further



investigation into the matter. The CBI had booked promoters Kapil and Dheeraj Wadhawan along with the company. It was alleged that DHFL had opened a fictitious branch in Bandra and fake accounts worth Rs 14,046 crore of home-loan borrowers, who had already repaid their loans, were entered in the database, they said. A total of 2.60 lakh 'fake and fictitious' home loan accounts were created in the non-existent branch from 2007-19 for a total loan worth Rs 14,046 crore, out of which Rs 11,755.79 crore were deposited or routed to several fictitious firms known as Bandra Book firms, the CBI had alleged in the FIR.

ing other routes to channelise funds. "Email communication found during IT (income tax) survey by the CBDT shows that Oxfam India has been planning to pressure Indian government for renewal of FCRA through foreign governments and foreign institutions," it had alleged. "Oxfam India has the reach and influence to request multilateral foreign organisations to intervene on its behalf with the Government of India," it had alleged.

## CBI chargesheets Oxfam

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The CBI has filed a charge sheet against research and advocacy group Oxfam India and its former CEO Amitabh Behar in connection with alleged violations of rules and regulations related to foreign funds, officials said. In its chargesheet filed before a special court here, the CBI has named the group and Behar, who is now executive director of Oxfam International as accused. The FIR against the Indian arm of the global NGO Oxfam was registered in April 2023 based on a complaint from the Ministry of Home Affairs. An email seeking reaction of Oxfam India remained unanswered till writing of this story. The complaint, which is now part of the FIR, has alleged that though Oxfam India's FCRA registration ceased, it planned to circumvent the law by tak-

## Indian Navy to showcase three frontline combatants in Republic Day parade tableau

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Indian Navy will showcase its three newly commissioned frontline combatants -- warships INS Surat and INS Nilgiri, and submarine INS Vaghsheer -- in the tableau at the 76th Republic Day Parade on the Kartavya Path in Delhi. At a press conference held here at Kota House on Wednesday, the Navy unveiled a model of the tableau featuring the thematic tagline, 'Atmanirbhar Nausena se Rashtra Nirman' (Nation Building through a Self Reliant Navy). Officials said the Navy's mixed marching contingent and a band will also participate in the ceremonial parade. Vice Admiral Vineet McCarty, the Controller Personnel Services, highlighted that the tableau will depict the three



platforms commissioned just a week ago in Mumbai, symbolising India's naval prowess and the spirit of 'Atmanirbharta'. On January 15, Prime Minister Narendra Modi dedicated the three frontline naval combatants to the nation during their commissioning at the Naval Dockyard in Mumbai, Maharashtra. The commissioning of three major naval combatants

marks a significant leap forward in realising India's vision of becoming a global leader in defence manufacturing and maritime security, the defence ministry had earlier said. INS Surat, the fourth and final ship of the P15B Guided Missile Destroyer Project, ranks among the largest and most sophisticated destroyers in the world.



# Historic: 10-crore pilgrims take a dip at Triveni Sangam



**BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ MAHAKUMBH NAGAR**

In a historic moment, the Mahakumbh 2025 in Prayagraj recorded an unprecedented turnout as the number of devotees taking a holy dip in the sacred Triveni Sangam surpassed the 10-crore mark on Thursday afternoon.

This extraordinary milestone highlights the spiritual significance of the confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna, and the mythical Saraswati rivers, drawing pilgrims, sadhus, and Kalpvasis from across the globe.

According to the Yogi Adityanath-led government, this Mahakumbh is projected to welcome over 45 crore visitors. The early milestone of 10 crore bathers reflects the immense faith and enthusiasm surrounding the event.

Thursday alone saw 30 lakh devotees participating in the holy ritual, including 10 lakh Kalpvasis who have taken up temporary residence in Mahakumbh Nagar to dedicate themselves to spirituality during the event. Major bathing festivals have witnessed record-breaking crowds, with 3.5 crore devotees performing the Amrit Snan on Makar Sankranti and 1.7 crore on Paush Purnima.

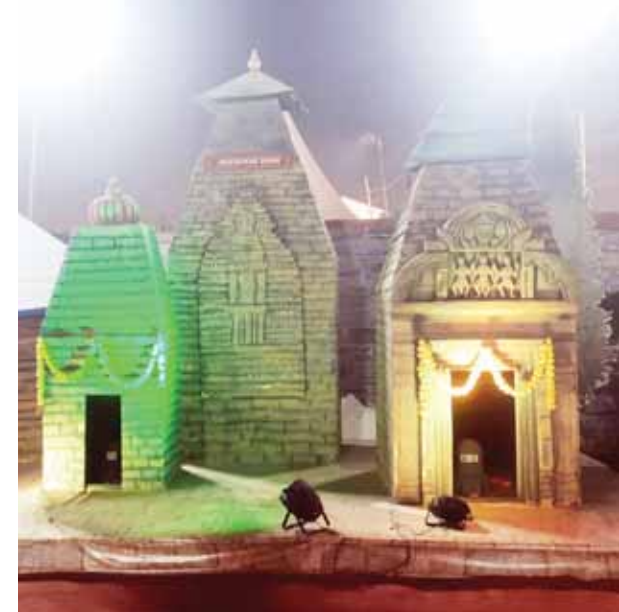
The Triveni Sangam, bustling with activity, serves as a vibrant reflection of India's cultural diversity, bringing people of different castes, communities, and even nationalities together in an act of shared faith. The Mahakumbh's overarching theme of unity is evident in the harmony among the millions of devotees.

Despite the staggering influx of pilgrims, everyday life in Prayagraj remains unaffected, thanks to meticulous planning and management by the district administration. Schools, offices, and businesses continue to function smoothly, with restrictions imposed only during peak bathing days.

This seamless coordination has won appreciation from residents and enhanced the prestige of the Mahakumbh as a global spiritual and cultural spectacle.

With an estimated 35 crore visitors yet to arrive, Prayagraj is gearing up for an unforgettable culmination of this massive event, reaffirming its status as the spiritual heart of India.

## Prayagraj transforms into a magnificent city of temples



**BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ MAHAKUMBH NAGAR**

Under the visionary leadership of Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, Prayagraj has been transformed into a magnificent city of temples, offering devotees a unique spiritual experience.

Pilgrims visiting the Mahakumbh have the rare opportunity to witness replicas of some of India's most revered temples all in one place.

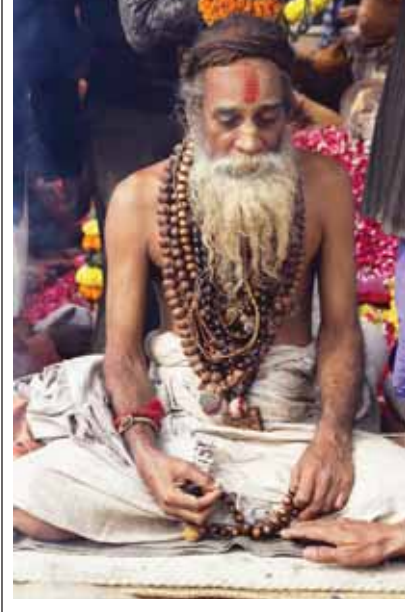
Among the highlights is the newly constructed replica of the Tirupati Balaji temple, which is ready to welcome worshippers. Additionally, the grand replicas of the Ram

Temple and Mehndipur Balaji temple are already drawing long queues of devotees.

Adding to the spiritual allure are replicas of Akshardham, the sacred Char Dham, Khatu Shyam, Maa Kamakhya Devi temple, and the ISKCON temple. These iconic structures are captivating the hearts of pilgrims and making the Mahakumbh a hub of religious and cultural significance.

Every day, millions of devotees gather in Prayagraj, not only for spiritual fulfillment but also to enjoy delicious offerings and traditional dishes. From creamy rabri to tea, halwa, and poori-sabzi, a wide variety of

## Babas and their spiritual hacks steal the show at Sangam



**BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ MAHAKUMBH NAGAR**

The Mahakumbh 2025 has transformed the sacred banks of the Sangam into a vibrant spiritual hub, attracting millions of devotees and saints from across India. This once-in-a-lifetime celestial event is a testament to faith, tradition, and the grandeur of Sanatan culture.

From the mystical chants of Har Har Gange and Jai Shri Ram echoing through the air to the unique offerings of saints like Rabri Baba and Gaadiwale Baba, the Kumbh is a kaleidoscope of devotion and divinity.

According to Swami Tanmayanand Puri from Madhya Pradesh, this Kumbh marks a rare alignment that occurs once every 144 years. "The meticulous arrangements by CM Yogi Adityanath's government have made it possible for saints to engage in uninterrupted spiritual practices along the sacred banks," he said.

**Unique Experiences at the Kumbh**

The Kumbh is home to many remarkable figures. Rabri Baba, for instance, distributes 120 kilograms of rabri daily as prasad, continuing a tradition he began during the 2019 Kumbh. Devotees flock to him, drawn by his sweet offerings and spiritual aura.

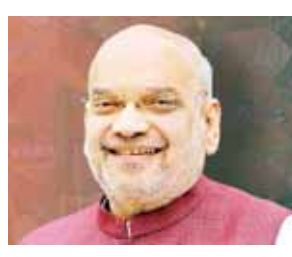
Meanwhile, Gaadiwale Baba offers solutions for those unable to attend the Kumbh. "If you cannot come to the Sangam, pour holy Ganga water into a bucket and bathe with it. This will grant you the same spiritual benefits," he advised.

Bade Baba, known for his nationwide efforts to strengthen Sanatan traditions, hailed the event as a shining example of faith and governance. "CM Yogi Adityanath is a leader like no other. The grand scale of the Kumbh, with tireless support from officials and volunteers, reflects his commitment to Sanatan Dharma," he said, awarding the Chief Minister a symbolic "102 out of 100."

With chants of Bam Bam Bhole and Har Har Gange reverberating through the air, the Maha Kumbh 2025 is not just a religious gathering but a celebration of India's rich spiritual heritage. Saints and devotees alike see it as a divine opportunity to connect with their faith and culture, making this Kumbh a truly extraordinary event.

## Kumbh a message of unity and harmony: Amit Shah

**PTI ■ AHMEDABAD**



Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Thursday said no other event in the world conveys a more powerful message of harmony and unity than Maha Kumbh where anyone can take a dip in the Ganga irrespective of identity.

People across the world are in awe after watching the scale on which the Maha Kumbh at Prayagraj has been organised, he said, speaking after inaugurating the Hindu Spiritual & Service Fair, also known as Hindu Adhyatmik Seva Mela, at the Gujarat University grounds here.

Ambassadors of various countries requested him for "invitation cards," said the senior BJP leader. "I told them there is no formal invitation for this mega gathering, because crores of people converge here on their own at a specific time as per the alignment of the planets," Shah added. They could not believe that 40 crore

## Chinar trees of Jammu and Kashmir to be geo-tagged

**PTI ■ SRINAGAR**

A "Digital Tree Aadhaar" programme has been launched by the Jammu and Kashmir government for conservation of the majestic Chinars which will see creation of a comprehensive database of the tree facing threats due to rapid urbanisation.

Under the initiative, the chinar trees – a cultural and ecological symbol of J-K – are being geo-tagged and equipped with QR codes that record information, including its geographical location, health, and growing patterns, enabling conservationists to track changes and address risk factors.

The campaign involves use of modern technology, including Geographical Information System (GIS), to create a comprehensive database for conservation of the chinar trees.

The initiative aims to safeguard chinar trees from threats such as urbanisation, deforestation, and habitat degradation. The project is being spearheaded by J-K Forest Research Institute (FRI) of J-K Forest Department.

The QR-based digital plate is affixed to each surveyed Chinar tree using a specialised spring-enabled metal. Each tree is given a unique id like Aadhaar specifying the year the tree is surveyed, the district it is located and a serial number for easy identification.

"Chinar is a part of our culture. We are doing a survey to know the total number of chinars, their status, their height, girth, etc. So, we have taken this initiative of tree geo-tagging," Project Coordinator, FRI, Syed Tariq, told PTI here.

He said so far, around 28,500 chinar trees have been identified, surveyed and their data updated, and the process is going on.

"We are preserving that data in the heritage registers of each district. Each district will have its own heritage register



girth," he said.

The official said the project has been named as "Digital Tree Aadhaar" with each tree having a tree number.

"There is complete information about the specific chinar tree in the QR code. When the code is scanned, it will give instant information about the tree.

"A person can get required information about the tree including its location with coordinates, physical characters, health status, height, girth, tree shape, number of main branches, whether the tree is a seed bearer or not, and whether the tree is diseased or not" he said.

The district specific codes in the unique code have been taken from the RTO codes. Each tree is photographed and those are uploaded so that they are readily available at the click of a mouse.

The official said the department lacked credible data about the number of chinar trees in the valley before this survey.

"We had a rough estimate of 40,000 or 45,000 trees, but there was no exact number. The idea of a unique code came because once we go for a census, there is always an apprehension of duplication. To avoid this, we came up with this unique ID," Tariq said.

He said the chinar tree, a symbol of cultural heritage, faces threats like urbanisation, deforestation and habitat loss. To ensure its survival, the J-K Forest Department and J-K FRI are leveraging digital tools, including geo-tagging and QR codes, for effective monitoring and conservation. These efforts aim to preserve chinars and their habitats, he said.

The campaign has revealed that the highest number of chinar trees in the valley are found in Srinagar, followed by Ganderbal, Anantnag and Baramulla districts.

The official said in the top 20 series of chinars in the World Monumental Trees, 11 are in from Kashmir.

## AI-chatbot to enhance experience of devotees

**BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ MAHAKUMBH NAGAR**



Pilgrims attending the Mahakumbh will no longer need to wander in search of essential facilities and information as a revamped chatbot has been introduced for their convenience.

Equipped with three new features, the AI-based chatbot aims to enhance the experience of devotees.

The chatbot will provide accurate details about parking spaces, food courts, and hospitals within a 1-kilometer radius of the user. It will not only provide pilgrims with a complete mapping of the Mahakumbh but also offer detailed information about each sector along with Google

Map links for easy navigation.

Additional Mela Officer Vivek Chaturvedi announced that the AI chatbot is

enabling pilgrims to access vital information about parking, transportation, banking, public water ATMs, and other services within seconds.

The chatbot also allows users to download real-time PDFs tailored to their needs, containing details about toilets, lost-and-found centers, exhibitions, and other essential locations. By simply scanning a QR code, pilgrims can instantly receive key information directly on their mobile devices.

Millions of pilgrims have already benefited from this innovative AI chatbot. Its effective and user-friendly features are providing unparalleled convenience, making the world's largest religious gathering smoother and more organized. By integrating technology with faith, the chatbot is enhancing the overall experience of devotees.





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PAPER WITH PASSION

## Trump's ultimatum

Trump's plain talk on the Ukraine war—'end it or face sanctions'—could mark a turning point in the conflict

In a dramatic intervention, US President Donald Trump has asked Russian President Vladimir Putin to bring an immediate end to the ongoing Ukraine war. Labeling the conflict 'ridiculous,' Trump warned of severe economic sanctions and tariffs against Russia if Putin failed to negotiate peace. The threat marks a sharp escalation in Trump's rhetoric on a war that has already claimed the lives of over a million soldiers on both sides. Speaking on Truth Social platform, Trump reaffirmed his affinity for the Russian people and his respect for Putin but did not shy away from criticising the Russian leader for prolonging the bloody conflict. "We must never forget that Russia helped us win the Second World War, losing almost 60 million lives in the process," Trump said, highlighting historical ties while urging an end to the ongoing devastation. Trump's approach combines a mix of hardline economic threats and diplomatic overtures. In his straightforward message he suggested that the economic repercussions of prolonged conflict would be catastrophic for Russia. He emphasised that his preference was for a peaceful resolution.

The Ukraine war, which began with Russia's invasion in February 2022, has dragged on for nearly three years. The conflict has claimed the lives of nearly a million Russian soldiers and 700,000 Ukrainian troops. These staggering figures underscore the war's devastating impact, making it one of the deadliest conflicts of the 21st century. Economic consequences have also been severe, particularly for Russia. International sanctions, coupled with the strain of prolonged military operations, have left the Russian economy struggling with inflation and stagnation. Trump pointed to these economic pressures as a potential leverage point, suggesting that a peace deal is in Russia's best interest. Trump's ultimatum reflects a marked departure from his earlier, more ambiguous stance on the conflict. Trump administration is in direct talks with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and Trump himself plans to engage with Putin directly. He appears intent on delivering on that promise with a mix of economic coercion and diplomatic engagement. Despite the grim reality of the war, Trump's comments offers a glimmer of hope for an early resolution. He has emphasised that both Zelensky and Putin should pursue a deal, suggesting that the leaders' willingness would be pivotal in ending the conflict. Trump's ultimatum to Putin could signal a turning point in the Ukraine war, but the path forward remains fraught with uncertainty. While the economic pressure could incentivise Russia to negotiate, the deep-seated political and territorial disputes fueling the conflict may prove challenging to resolve. As the world watches, Trump's next moves—whether imposing sanctions, brokering a deal, or recalibrating military aid—will shape not only the future of the Ukraine war but also the broader geopolitical landscape. For now, one thing is clear: Trump is determined to make his mark on history by ending a war that has caused untold suffering and reshaped global politics.

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### PICTALK



Tourists pose for pictures at the Taj Mahal, in Agra

## Can suspending commodity derivatives rein in food price



SANJAY RAWAL

The debate over whether speculative trading in futures commodity markets drives food price inflation remains unresolved in India and across Asia

While there are several concerns in India and across Asia, certain policy and key opinion circles that food price inflation is catalysed or influenced somehow by speculative trading in the futures commodity markets. Even while opinions are divided in policy circles and among economists who have studied and examined the nature of the relationship between food inflation and commodity and derivative futures trading contracts, and no empirical evidence hitherto seems to have been found despite numerous studies undertaken in India. It would be worth mentioning that a detailed empirical research study conducted by leading researchers from the Indian Institute of Management Udaipur specifically studied three suspension events in India of futures traded commodities, which led the researchers to firmly state that the counterfactual for each of the examined episodes confirms that even in the absence of trading suspensions, food prices or inflationary trends would have followed their dynamic path. Any upward price volatility could ostensibly be the effects or counter-effects of various extraneous domestic or global (especially geopolitical) factors. It is also equally understandable and natural for any governing policy institution to be both fully cognisant and mindful of food price inflationary trends, and the fact that rising food prices can have a cataclysmic effect on food security and thus, by extension could have substantive socio-economic impact.

Successive policy establishments and ecosystems have always been overly cautious, ever since futures trading commodity derivatives exchanges were established in the early 2000s. Despite the mandate of such commodity exchanges that futures trading contracts encourage effective and fair price discovery and risk hedging, which consequently safeguards the commodity value chain from price risk which is a result of a fundamental play between demand and supply the apprehensions concerning these market-driven tools continued to remain, manifesting itself the way of multiple instances of suspensions on certain commodity derivative contracts. While trading suspensions have been a constant feature since 2007-2008, under the advisement of the price monitoring mechanisms and agencies within the government policy ecosystem, there never has been an occasion when suspensions of commodity trading exceeded more than a year in a single stretch, barring the odd 'sensitive' food commodity. So as a commodity markets expert, with a domestic and world view of ongoing trading in global commodity markets, one begs to specifically ask - Do derivatives trading suspensions really rein in food price inflation? Researchers have constantly alluded to synthetic control methodologies to apply to their studies for studying specific suspensions, their findings fairly and comprehensively conclude and determine that there is no empirical evidence that derivatives suspension had any impact whatsoever on food prices. On the contrary, from specific instances studied, such as those of Bengal Gram (Chana)



in August 2021 and Mustard Seed Derivatives in October 2021, analysis from the said report from IIM Udaipur shows that prices of both commodities, Chana and mustard oil, would have continued on the same price trend path even without the suspension. To specifically quote a potent segment of the said study - it clearly articulates that the conducted research does not find any role of futures market trading on price changes, nor does it find any empirical evidence of the impact of suspension of trade on price behaviour in the period after suspension. Rather, the analysis shows that prices of commodities such as mustard oil would have had a similar trend even without the suspension. Furthermore, the study finds that before the suspension futures market had a dominant share of 64 per cent in discovering the true and fair price of the mustard seed commodity derivative. The study goes on further to articulate that commodity derivative suspensions hurt genuine participants discourage the growth of domestic agri-derivatives markets and resultantly impact the growth of price hedging prospects of the commodity value chain including CBBOs (Cluster Business Organisations) and FPOs (Farmer Producer Organisations), while consequently hurting the value realisation and income levels of farmers. It also adversely impacts India's position in providing a global price benchmark, despite the country being a major producer and consumer of several agricultural commodities. Needless to say, as an active observer of the Indian agri-based commodity trading ecosystem, it behove advocacy and argument that summary commodity suspensions as a method to arrest or contain food price inflation should not be adopted and further the suspension of futures trading contracts of agricultural commodity derivatives must be revoked. In closure, one must say emphatically that the development of the agri-derivatives market is supported in India, which in turn will lead to fair price discovery and transparent hedging of price risks, eventually creating a positive socio-economic impact for farmers and the agri-ecosystem in India. (The writer is national president of Commodity Participants Association of India; views are personal)



SUCCESSIVE POLICY ESTABLISHMENTS AND ECOSYSTEMS HAVE ALWAYS BEEN OVERLY CAUTIOUS, EVER SINCE FUTURES TRADING COMMODITY DERIVATIVES EXCHANGES WERE ESTABLISHED IN THE EARLY 2000S

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

#### PANIC KILLS PASSENGERS

Madam — Twelve passengers on the Pushpak Express were killed and 55 injured after jumping from the tight-packed unreserved coaches onto the track in panic, fearing a fire (they don't even notice or hear approaching trains), only to be run over by the Karnataka Express near Pachora railway station in Jalgaon district of Maharashtra. Unable to understand when the public will get some sense. Why do they need to wander on tracks even if they had jumped out of a train that they thought was on fire? Though for this sad mishap we definitely cannot blame the railways from any angle. Even though people may have agreed with me that Indians have lost trust and faith in the railway administration to such an extent that without verifying the rumour, they believe it (smoke that perhaps sparked rumours of a fire) and act accordingly. This shows total distrust of the railways. This is not the first instance; the Jalgaon tragedy revives the painful memory of a similar accident in which 21 women and a boy lost their lives in Mumbai's Goregaon. On October 13, 1993, passengers on Western Railway's 'ladies special' local between Borivali and Kandivali jumped off a first-class compartment onto the tracks after seeing smoke rise from the undercarriage of their stationary train. Whatever, we all know how our system works. It's the responsibility of people who travel to take care of themselves, not the railway. Yes, it is really tragic for people to lose their lives. It is a big loss to their families. A moment of profound grief and sorrow. May God give strength to all the deceased family members at this difficult time. May their souls rest in peace. Om Shanti. Bidyut Kumar Chatterjee | Faridabad

#### FREEBIES HURT ECONOMY

Madam—The growing trend of offering freebies during elections, such as in the Delhi Assembly polls, poses significant challenges to both the economy and democracy. Economically, these promis-

## US withdraws from WHO



In a tearing hurry to make America great again, Trump bombarded his country and the rest of the world with a slew of executive orders. He withdrew the US from the World Health Organisation, alleging that the global agency had mishandled the COVID-19 pandemic. His own handling of the coronavirus catastrophe was dreadful—over 3,50,000 deaths were reported in the US in 2020, the final year of his first term—but those glaring lapses are of no con-

sequence to him now. He has washed his hands of international collaboration to combat any future pandemic. Trump also signed America's withdrawal from the Paris climate agreement, whose main goal is to limit global warming to 1.5 C above pre-industrial levels. Last year ended as the planet's hottest on record, and the target looks even more improbable now with the US jumping ship. In an irrational way, the President pardoned 1,500-odd protesters who stormed the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, in a bid to prevent lawmakers from certifying his election defeat. The incident was a big blow to American democracy. In stark contrast, there is bad news for those desperate to sneak into the US, as Trump has declared illegal immigration at the US-Mexico border a "national emergency." It's America First for him—and the world must brace itself for the worst. N Sadhasiva Reddy | Bengaluru

es strain public finances, divert resources from critical sectors, and create an unsustainable dependency culture. Over time, this undermines fiscal discipline and hampers long-term development. In the democratic sphere, freebies erode accountability, manipulate voter choices, and shift focus away from systemic reforms. They often favour immediate political gains over addressing structural inequalities, weakening institutions, and fostering inequity. While welfare measures are essential for uplifting marginalised groups, they must be carefully balanced with sustainable policies. Policymakers should prioritise structural reforms, economic growth, and targeted welfare instead of indulging in competitive populism. Ultimately, a balanced approach is key to safeguarding both fiscal health and the integrity of democratic processes. Gopalaswamy J | Chennai

#### RUPEE'S FURTHER DECLINE EXPECTED

Madam — India's Weakening Rupee and its expected Impact on the Indian Stock

Market and on Companies with Large USD Borrowings and other relevant issues. Rupee's further decline cannot be avoided. RBI's own calculations indicate a large overvaluation of the rupee, so a lot more decline of the rupee against the dollar must happen, especially if the US imposes tariffs. In case of a large and rapid rupee decline, the economy and stock markets could be disrupted. Therefore, economic turmoil is unavoidable. If the rupee becomes significantly weaker against the dollar, the debt and interest repayment burden of these Indian companies will go up. If the rupee is strong, then dollar debt becomes cheaper. So, nobody gained from this RBI pivot of 2022. Short-term strategies can sometimes have long-term consequences. India got into this mess by betting on high GDP growth, which can be the only saviour in this situation. But now the GDP growth itself has slowed. Jayanthi Subramanian | Mumbai

## AI and defence dynamics: Global trends and India's adaptation

India is harnessing AI to enhance national security, counter threats and establish itself at the forefront of the defence innovation landscape

Cross-border terrorism and geopolitical tensions, such as the Russia-Ukraine conflict and Israel-Iran hostilities, have driven unprecedented defence spending since World War II. To counter these threats, nations are leveraging artificial intelligence (AI) to build resilient defence systems. AI enhances national security by enabling robust decision-making to detect, analyse, and address complex threats across multiple fronts. The Shift Towards AI in Defence AI is transforming defence strategies, reducing reliance on human personnel. The US military's active-duty personnel are at their lowest levels in eight decades, while the U.K. has seen a 30 per cent reduction since 2000, largely due to AI-driven tools replacing soldiers in high-risk operations. With advancements in IoT and data analytics, experts predict a significant increase in AI-based defence systems globally. India's AI-Driven Defence Evolution



India, a leading G20 nation, is actively integrating AI into its defence framework to counter internal and external threats. Initiatives like the 2022 launch of 75 AI-enabled defence products highlight India's focus on cybersecurity, automation, and autonomous systems. The Ministry of Defence (MoD) allocates \$12.6 million annually for AI projects, including the establishment of an AI center at the Military College of Telecommunication Engineering (MCTE). Additionally, the 2024 launch of India's first AI Data Bank aims to enhance national security through real-time analytics and predictive capabilities. AI in Security and Surveillance AI aids investigation agencies in video surveillance and threat detection, analysing behaviour, communications and psychological patterns to identify risks. Using both Strong AI (mimicking human cognition) and Weak AI

(focused tasks), intelligence agencies enhance security, mitigate breaches and safeguard civilians and public institutions. Challenges and Future Prospects Despite promising advancements, AI adoption in India's defence faces challenges, including data privacy, cybersecurity and ethical concerns surrounding autonomous systems. To remain competitive, India must increase investments in research, collaborate internationally and address accountability issues tied to AI-driven military operations. Conclusion By adopting a risk-based regulatory framework, India can ensure the ethical and effective deployment of AI in defence. While challenges persist, the ongoing innovations and strategic initiatives signal a future where India's defence capabilities transcend traditional methods, embracing AI as a cornerstone of national security. (The writer is Co-founder & CEO, Innefu Labs; views are personal)



TARUN VIG





## FIRST COLUMN

### INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY: CHAMPIONING THE GLOBAL SOUTH

India's approach balances national priorities with global responsibilities



KUMARDEEP BANERJEE

India's External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar attended the US presidential inauguration earlier this week. President Trump's inauguration by itself is an epochal moment for global international relations. India outlined its foreign policy approach a few days ago, during EAM's address at Nani Palkivala's memorial lecture. He mentioned that India's foreign policy in 2025 reflects a deepening commitment to multilateralism, but also recognises the competitive realities of a shifting global order. The nation has embraced issue-based partnerships with major groupings like the Quad, BRICS, and the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). India's ability to balance multiple memberships and partnerships underscores its evolving diplomatic strategy, driven by a pragmatic approach to international relations.

At the heart of India's foreign policy is a strong solidarity with the Global South, rooted in post-colonial values of independence, sovereignty and resistance to external pressures. This unique perspective sets India apart from traditional alliance structures, as it champions the rights of developing nations while pursuing its strategic interests. While India continues to engage in global dialogues, it maintains its core principle of non-alignment and the freedom to choose partners based on national priorities. Recent shifts in India's domestic policies—across politics, economics and security—have influenced its foreign relations.



Notably, India's relationship with the United States has transformed, moving past historical hostilities to embrace a deeper strategic partnership. This cooperation spans security, technology, trade, and science, benefiting both nations. India's diaspora also plays a crucial role, acting as a living bridge to enhance bilateral ties. Despite occasional policy shifts in the US, the foundation for a robust relationship is now firmly established. However, India's engagement with China remains a complex challenge. As the two largest Asian nations with over a billion people each, their dynamic is shaped by historical disputes and differing political systems. The boundary issue, exacerbated by tensions since 2020, continues to complicate bilateral relations. The guiding principles for India's approach to China are mutual respect, sensitivity, and shared interests, with an emphasis on long-term stability and a multi-polar Asia. In the Indo-Pacific, India has extended its Act East policy, fostering deeper relationships with Japan, Australia and ASEAN countries, and strengthening the Quad alliance.

This partnership has progressed in areas such as climate action, maritime security, and digital connectivity. Similarly, India's collaboration with Russia remains a pillar of its foreign policy, with growing economic ties and shared strategic interests. India advocates for diplomacy in addressing global challenges, such as the Ukraine conflict, and seeks to provide solutions to global problems, including food security and climate change.

It has assisted smaller neighbours during crises, including the 2023 financial support to Sri Lanka, reinforcing its role as a regional leader. However, India's relationship with Pakistan remains strained due to ongoing cross-border terrorism. India is also engaged in strengthening ties with Myanmar and Afghanistan, maintaining its people-to-people connections despite political complexities. India's global ambitions are reflected in its increasing role in international organisations. As a proponent of multilateral reform, India has pushed for changes in the United Nations, advocating for greater representation of the Global South. It also leads initiatives such as the International Solar Alliance and Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure. These efforts highlight India's growing responsibility as a global power, dedicated to addressing pressing issues like climate change, digital governance, and humanitarian crises.

(The writer is a policy analyst; views are personal)

## Budget 2025: A roadmap to empower farmers and reignite rural India



A S MITTAL

The Budget must go beyond promises—it must deliver feasible solutions to secure livelihoods, strengthen rural demand and bridge the rural-urban divide

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman gears up to present the Union Budget 2025-26 on February 1, the nation stands at a pivotal crossroads. With GDP growth projected to dip to a four-year low of 6.4 per cent in FY 2024-25, the spotlight turns to revitalising the rural economy, a cornerstone of the country's consumption-driven progress.

The urgent call for agricultural reforms has grown louder, fueled by ongoing farmer protests, including the fast-unto-death by 70-year-old farmer leader Jagjit Singh Dallewal at Punjab's Khanauri border, which has captured national attention, demanding a legal guarantee for Minimum Support Price (MSP). Agriculture, which employs nearly 45 per cent of the country's workforce and sustains over 60 per cent of its rural population, is at a breaking point. Stagnant productivity, declining incomes, and policy neglect have left farmers in crisis. This Budget cannot be limited to lofty promises—it must deliver practical solutions to secure livelihoods, strengthen rural demand, and narrow the rural-urban divide. Revitalising agriculture is not just an economic necessity but a moral obligation to foster inclusive growth. Here's how Budget 2025 can introduce transformative measures to bolster the agricultural sector and ensure rural spending—currently contributing 60 per cent of total consumption—fuels India's economic resurgence.

### 1. Boost Agriculture Budget and Research

The allocation for agriculture and allied sectors constitutes only 3 per cent of the Union Budget, which needs to be raised to at least 7.5%. Unspent funds in this category should be carried forward to address critical gaps in research, education, and infrastructure for crop storage and processing. Investing in agricultural research institutions to develop climate-resilient crop varieties and sustainable farming techniques can enhance productivity. Encouraging public-private partnerships in agrarian innovation can further drive the sector's growth.

### 2. Provide Legal Backing to MSP

The persistent demand for Minimum Support Price (MSP) with legal guarantees highlights the sector's vulnerabilities. Implementing the MS Swaminathan Commission's recommendation of setting MSP at C2 (comprehensive cost of production) +50 per cent and granting it legal status can ensure private buyers do not exploit farmers. This reform would not put a significant financial strain on the government but could protect farmers from distress sales. Furthermore, creating a robust monitoring mechanism to enforce MSP and extending its coverage to more crops can improve farmers' incomes. Enhancing the transparency of procurement processes through digital platforms and integrating MSP enforcement with local market committees can also make the system more reliable.

### 3. Enhance PM-KISAN Support

The Rs 6,000 annual support to around 10 crore small and marginal farmers under PM-KISAN to help meet their working capital needs, unchanged since its launch in 2018, has not kept pace with inflation. However, with inflation averaging 6 per cent over the past six years. The government should consider doubling this support to Rs 12,000 annually to address farmers' growing financial needs. This increase could significantly impact



small-marginal farmers, who struggle to meet their expenses amid rising input costs for seeds, fertilisers, and irrigation.

### 4. Transform the Kisan Credit Card (KCC)

The KCC scheme provides short-term loans with an interest subsidy for up to Rs 3 lakh. However, the rigid repayment schedule often forces farmers to rely on private moneylenders to meet short-term cash requirements.

A more farmer-friendly approach would be to convert KCCs into running overdraft accounts, increase the credit limit to Rs 10 lakh, and cap interest rates at 4 per cent. Removing usage restrictions on loans would further empower farmers to make long-term agricultural investments. Additionally, simplifying the KCC application process and enhancing awareness through rural outreach programs can improve access to credit. Expanding the scheme to include sharecroppers, tenant farmers, and farm labourers can promote financial inclusion in agriculture.

### 5. Introduce a Pension Scheme for Small Farmers

India's farmers lack a robust social security net. A non-contributory pension of Rs3,000 per month for small and marginal farmers aged 60 and above, owning up to 2 hectares of land, could provide much-needed financial security. Contributions from state governments could further augment this scheme. Implementing such a pension system can alleviate poverty among elderly farmers and reduce their dependence on family support.

### 6. Strengthen Animal Husbandry and Dairy Sectors:

Livestock contributes over 25 per cent to agricultural GDP but suffers from fluctuating milk prices and restrictive cattle rearing and trade policies. A simple yet impactful step would

be legally mandating private dairies to match or exceed the milk procurement prices set by cooperatives like Amul. Additionally, incorporating milk and eggs into the mid-day meal scheme can improve farm incomes while tackling malnutrition among children. Promoting cattle insurance schemes and increasing budgetary allocation for veterinary services can enhance livestock productivity. Encouraging the adoption of modern technologies like artificial insemination and genetic improvement can further boost the sector's contribution to rural livelihoods.

### 7. Reform Fertiliser Subsidy Policies

The current system treats fertiliser subsidies as farmer benefits but deducts the subsidised amount while calculating MSP. This practice lowers farmers' actual remuneration. MSP calculations should instead consider the market price of inputs, ensuring fairer returns for farmers. The government could also promote balanced fertiliser use by incentivising organic farming practices and providing subsidies for bio-fertilisers. A shift towards a direct benefit transfer system for fertiliser subsidies can reduce leakages and ensure benefits reach the intended beneficiaries.

### 8. Simplify Crop Insurance

The PM Fasal Bima Yojana requires farmers to navigate complex procedures to claim compensation. The government should shoulder the entire premium initially, including the state's share, and simplify the claim process. This would reduce the administrative burden on farmers while ensuring timely compensation for crop losses.

Leveraging technology like satellite imagery and AI-driven risk assessment models can streamline the verification process and minimise disputes. Expanding insurance coverage to include post-har-

vest losses and natural calamities can make the scheme more comprehensive and farmer-friendly.

### 9. Reassess Inflation Control Policies

Policies like export bans, stock limits on agricultural produce, and the Food Corporation of India (FCI) dumping grains at below-market prices undermine farmers' profitability. These interventions should be re-evaluated to balance inflation control with fair returns for farmers. Encouraging exports of surplus produce and ensuring better storage infrastructure can reduce post-harvest losses. Developing a decentralised agricultural pricing system driven by real-time market data can align domestic policies with global demand trends. A Vision for Fairness and Growth India's agricultural sector has long been the backbone of its economy, yet farmers have faced systemic neglect and economic disparity.

Over the last decade, the government has written off Rs12.30 lakh crore in big corporate loans, while farmers continue to struggle under mounting debt (Rs 18 lakh crore) and policies that fail to guarantee fair prices for their produce. The 2025 Budget presents an opportunity to correct these imbalances. By addressing these critical issues, the government can improve farmers' lives, spur rural demand, catalyse GDP growth and lay the foundation for a more equitable and sustainable agricultural future. It's time to honour the farmers who feed the nation by delivering the support they deserve.

(The Author is Vice-Chairman of Sonalika IITL Group, Vice-Chairman of the Punjab Economic Policy and Planning Board, Chairman of ASSOCHAM Northern Region Development Council. Views expressed are personal)



INDIA'S FARMERS LACK A ROBUST SOCIAL SECURITY NET. A NON-CONTRIBUTORY PENSION OF RS3,000 PER MONTH FOR SMALL AND MARGINAL FARMERS AGED 60 AND ABOVE, OWNING UP TO 2 HECTARES OF LAND, COULD PROVIDE MUCH-NEEDED FINANCIAL SECURITY

## Pioneering community-led groundwater management for a sustainable future

The Atal Bhujal Yojana, designed to address India's growing groundwater crisis, shifts the focus to a community-driven approach

The Atal Bhujal Yojana, or Atal Jal, is a pioneering government initiative spearheaded by the Ministry of Jal Shakti, in collaboration with the World Bank. This innovative program marks a significant departure from traditional top-down approaches to water management, instead empowering communities to take the lead in sustainable groundwater management. A Bottom-Up Approach to Water Security Atal Jal has been implemented across 8,203 Gram Panchayats, 229 blocks, and 80 districts in seven states: Gujarat, Haryana, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh.

By directly engaging with marginalised farmers, the poor, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, minorities, and other vulnerable groups, the scheme promotes inclusive development and social equity. The core objective of Atal Jal is to increase groundwater availability and ensure its long-term sustainability. By bolstering groundwater resources, the programme aims to enhance agricultural productivity and build resilience against the growing threats of climate change. Atal Jal is more than just a water management programme; it is a catalyst for social and economic transformation. By empowering communities and prioritising gender equity, the



SHANTANU GARG

scheme is paving the way for a more prosperous and sustainable rural India. As this groundbreaking initiative continues to unfold, it offers a beacon of hope, illuminating a future where water security and equitable development go hand-in-hand. With its transformative impact reverberating through every layer of soci-

ety, this groundbreaking initiative is a harbinger of hope, fortifying the future through equitable resource management and fostering prosperity among those it touches.

The Atal Bhujal Yojana (Atal Jal) is a comprehensive initiative that goes beyond technical solutions to address the pressing issue of groundwater depletion. It is a multifaceted programme that combines technical interventions with social and behavioural change strategies.

### Empowering Communities

A key aspect of Atal Jal is its focus on gender equality and community empowerment. By involving women in decision-making processes and capacity-building



programmes, the scheme empowers them to play a crucial role in sustainable water use. Women are encouraged to participate in meetings, training and leadership roles, ensuring that their perspectives and needs are

considered. Atal Jal employs innovative approaches to engage with communities. Through a variety of activities, including rallies, community meetings, competitions, and social media campaigns, the scheme raises awareness about groundwa-

ter issues and promotes sustainable practices.

The programme also recognises the importance of educating the next generation and conducts essay and drawing competitions in schools.

To further enhance its impact, Atal Jal utilises technology to monitor groundwater levels and disseminate information. The Atal Jal mobile app provides stakeholders and the general public with access to information about groundwater resources and management practices.

### A Sustainable Future

Atal Jal's well-defined sustainable strategy involves training community resource persons and preparing water budgets in

collaboration with the Ministry of Panchayati Raj. This systematic approach ensures the long-term sustainability of the program and empowers communities to make informed decisions about water use.

The success of Atal Jal is a testament to the dedication and hard work of the team behind the initiative. By combining technical expertise with a strong focus on social and behavioural change, Atal Jal is poised to become a model for future groundwater management programmes.

(The writer is Programme Coordinator, the Green Evolution, India, Nepal, Bangladesh & Coalition for Food Systems Transformation in India; views are personal)



# Trump threatens Russia with tariffs, sanctions

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

US President Donald Trump has warned his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin to end the 'ridiculous war' in Ukraine or face high tariffs and further sanctions. Trump, who was sworn in as the 47th President of the United States on January 20, said this on Truth Social on Wednesday, a social media platform owned by him. Trump called out Russian President Putin by name in the social media post, arguing that he always had a good relationship with the leader, but that it was time to settle "this ridiculous war!" Asserting that he is looking to hurt Russia, Trump said he wants no more lives to be lost in the war. "Let's get this war, which never would have started if I were President, over with! We can do it the easy way, or the hard way - and the easy way is always better. It's time to 'MAKE A DEAL.' NO MORE LIVES SHOULD BE LOST!!!" Trump said. "I love the Russian people, and always had a very good relationship with President Putin - and this despite the Radical Left's Russia, Russia, Russia HOAX. We must never forget

that Russia helped us win the Second World War, losing almost 60,000,000 lives in the process," he said. He also warned that if there was not a ceasefire deal soon, he would "have no other choice" but to impose tariffs, taxes and sanctions on "anything being sold by Russia to the United States, and various other participating countries." "All of that being said, I'm going to do Russia, whose Economy is failing, and President Putin, a very big FAVOUR. Settle now, and STOP this ridiculous War! IT'S ONLY GOING TO GET WORSE. If we don't make a "deal," and soon, I have no other choice but to put high levels of Taxes, Tariffs, and Sanctions on anything being sold by Russia to the United States, and various other participating countries," Trump said making an open appeal to the Russian leader. The Biden administration has already imposed numerous sanctions on various Russian economic sectors, including its oil and energy sectors earlier this month, in an effort to cut off its revenues to fund the war in Ukraine. Trump has for months called for a ceasefire in Ukraine, urging both sides to negotiate.

Russian forces invaded Ukraine in early 2022, and both sides have sustained heavy losses in the nearly three years of fighting since. During his campaign, Trump repeatedly said he could settle the war between Russia and Ukraine in one day if he was elected president. He would go on to claim that Putin would never have invaded had Trump been president, the National Public Radio reported. On Tuesday, Trump said he is ready to meet Putin anytime, but at the same time, he warned that he would likely impose sanctions on Russia if the latter does not come to the negotiations table on the issue of Ukraine. "It sounds likely," Trump told reporters when asked if the US will impose additional sanctions on Russia if Putin doesn't come to the negotiation table. Trump also said that Ukraine's President Zelensky told him that he would like to have peace. "He's told me that he wants to have peace very strongly, but it takes two to tango. We'll see what happens. Anytime they want, I'll meet. I'd like to see that end. Millions of people are being killed. It's a vicious situation," he said.

# House passes immigrant detention bill

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

The Republican-led House on Wednesday gave its final approval to a bill that requires the detention of unauthorised immigrants accused of theft and violent crimes, marking the first legislation that US President Donald Trump can sign as Congress, with some bipartisan support, swiftly moved in line with his plans to crackdown on illegal immigration. Passage of the Laken Riley Act, named after a Georgia nursing student who was murdered last year by a Venezuelan man, shows just how sharply the political debate over immigration has shifted to the right following Trump's election victory. Immigration policy has often been one of the most entrenched issues in Congress, but a crucial faction of 46 politically vulnerable Democrats joined with Republicans to lift the strict proposal to passage on a 263-156 vote tally. "For decades, it has been almost impossible for our government to agree on solutions

for the problems at our border and within our country," Senator Katie Britt, an Alabama Republican, said. She called the legislation "perhaps the most significant immigration enforcement bill" to be passed by Congress in nearly three decades. Still, the bill would require a massive ramp-up in US Immigration and Customs Enforcement's capabilities, but it does not include any new funding. Meanwhile, the new president has launched a slew of executive orders intended to seal off the border of Mexico to immigration and ultimately deport millions of immigrants without permanent legal status in the US. On Wednesday, Trump also cancelled refugee resettlement while his administration signalled intentions to prosecute local law enforcement officials who do not enforce his new immigration policies. Republican congressional leaders have made it clear they intend to follow suit, though their toughest challenge will be finding a way to approve the funding to actually implement

Trump's hard-line plans. "What he's doing is kick-starting what will ultimately be our legislative agenda," said House Speaker Mike Johnson. House Republicans initially passed the legislation last year with support from 37 Democrats in a move that was intended to deliver a political rebuke to then-President Joe Biden's handling of the southern border. It then languished in the Democratic-controlled Senate. This year, Republicans, now with control of both congressional chambers, have made it their top priority. When it came before the Senate, 12 Democrats voted in favour of passage, and when the House voted on a version of the bill earlier this month, 48 Democrats supported it. The vast majority of US adults favour deporting immigrants convicted of violent crimes, according to a recent survey by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. However, only about 37 per cent of US adults are in favour of deporting immigrants who have not been convicted of a

crime. "While the bill is not perfect, it sends a clear message that we think that criminals should be deported," said Rep Tom Suozzi, a New York Democrat who has called on his party to support tougher immigration enforcement. Under the legislation, federal authorities would be required to detain any migrant arrested or charged with crimes like shoplifting. The scope of the proposal was widened in the Senate to also include those accused of assaulting a police officer or crimes that injure or kill someone. The bill also gives legal standing to state attorneys general to sue the federal government for harm caused by federal immigration decisions. That gives states new power in setting immigration policy when they have already been trying to push back against presidential decisions under both the Trump and Biden administrations. Democrats unsuccessfully pushed to have that provision stripped from the bill in the Senate, saying it would inject even more uncertainty and

partisanship into immigration policy. Ultimately, even the Trump administration is likely to struggle to implement the new requirements unless Congress follows up later this year with funding. Republicans are currently strategising how to push their priorities through Congress through a party-line process known as budget reconciliation. They have put the cost of funding Trump's border and deportation priorities at roughly USD 100 billion. Trump has "laid out the largest domestic logistical undertaking of our lifetimes — that being the deportation of the vast majority of illegal aliens present in the United States", Ken Cuccinelli, who directed US Citizenship and Immigration Services during Trump's first presidency, recently told a Senate panel. Cuccinelli said it would require a surge of immigration judges, prosecutors and other staff, but Trump has also paved the way to use military troops, bases and other resources to carry out the mass deportations.

# Firefighters struggle to control massive blaze north of LA

PTI ■ CASTAIC

Firefighters fought to maintain the upper hand on a huge and rapidly moving wildfire that swept through rugged mountains north of Los Angeles and resulted in more than 50,000 people being put under evacuation orders or warnings. The Hughes Fire broke out late Wednesday morning and in less than a day had charred nearly 16 square miles (41 square kilometers) of trees and brush near Lake Castaic, a popular recreation area about 40 miles (64 kilometers) from the devastating Eaton and Palisades fires that are burning for a third week. Though the region was under a red flag warning for critical fire risk, winds were not as fast as they had been when those fires broke out, allowing for firefighting aircraft to dump tens of thousands of gallons of fire retardant on the latest blaze. By Wednesday night, about



A helicopter drops water on the Hughes Fire along Castaic Lake in Castaic, Calif., Wednesday. AP/PTI

14% of the Hughes Fire had been contained. "The situation that we're in today is very different from the situation we were in 16 days ago," Los

Angeles County Fire Chief Anthony Marrone said Wednesday evening. Red flag warnings were extended through 10 a.m. Friday in LA

and Ventura counties. Officials remained concerned that the Palisades and Eaton fires could break their containment lines as firefighters continue watching for hot spots. More than 31,000 people have been ordered to evacuate from the Hughes Fire, and another 23,000 are under evacuation warnings, LA County Sheriff Robert Luna said. There were no reports of homes or other structures burned. Parts of Interstate 5 near the Hughes Fire that had been closed reopened Wednesday evening. A 30-mile (48-kilometer) stretch of the major north-south artery had been closed for emergency vehicles, to move equipment and to prevent accidents due to smoke billowing across it. Crews on the ground and in water-dropping aircraft tried to prevent the wind-driven fire from moving across the interstate and toward Castaic.

# Bid to block Trump's cancellation of birthright citizenship in federal court

Washington (PTI): A federal judge in Seattle is set to hear the first arguments on Thursday in a multi-state lawsuit seeking to block President Donald Trump's executive order ending the constitutional guarantee of birthright citizenship regardless of the parents' immigration status. US District Judge John Coughenour scheduled the session to consider the request from Arizona, Illinois, Oregon and Washington. The case is one of five lawsuits being brought by 22 states and a number of immigrants rights groups across the country. The suits include personal testimonies from attorneys general who are US citizens by birthright, and names pregnant women who are afraid their children won't become US citizens. The order, signed by Trump on Inauguration Day, is slated to take effect on February 19. It could impact hundreds of

thousands of people born in the country, according to one of the lawsuits. In 2022, there were about 255,000 births of citizen children to mothers living in the country illegally and about 153,000 births to two such parents, according to the four-state suit filed in Seattle. The US is among about 30 countries where birthright citizenship — the principle of jus soli or "right of the soil" — is applied. Most are in the Americas, and Canada and Mexico are among them. The lawsuits argue that the 14th Amendment to the US Constitution guarantees citizenship for people born and naturalised in the US, and states have been interpreting the amendment that way for a century. Ratified in 1868 in the aftermath of the Civil War, the amendment says: "All persons born or naturalised in the United States and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the

State wherein they reside." Trump's order asserts that the children of noncitizens are not subject to the jurisdiction of the United States, and orders federal agencies to not recognise citizenship for children who don't have at least one parent who is a citizen. A key case involving birthright citizenship unfolded in 1898. The Supreme Court held that Wong Kim Ark, who was born in San Francisco to Chinese immigrants, was a US citizen because he was born in the country. After a trip abroad, he faced being denied reentry by the federal government on the grounds that he wasn't a citizen under the Chinese Exclusion Act. But some advocates of immigration restrictions have argued that case clearly applied to children born to parents who were both legal immigrants. They say it's less clear whether it applies to children born to parents living in the country illegally.

# Pentagon sending active duty troops to help secure US-Mexico border

Washington (PTI): The Pentagon on Wednesday said it has begun deploying 1,500 active duty troops to help secure the southern border in the coming days, putting in motion plans US President Donald Trump laid out in executive orders shortly after he took office to crack down on immigration. Acting Defence Secretary Robert Salesses said the Pentagon will provide military aircraft to support Department of Homeland Security deportation flights for more than 5,000 detained migrants and the troops will assist in the construction of barriers. The number of troops and their mission may soon change, Salesses said in a statement. It remains to be seen if they will end up doing law enforcement, which would put American troops in a dramatically different role for the first time in decades. The active duty forces will join the roughly 2,500 US National Guard and Reserve forces already there. There are currently no active duty troops working along the roughly 3,219-km border. Personnel started moving to the border earlier Wednesday, according to a military official briefing reporters on the condition of anonymity to provide additional details on the deployment. The troops will include 500 Marines from Camp Pendleton in California, and the remainder will be army personnel. "Troops have done similar duties in support of Border Patrol agents in the past, when both Trump and former president Joe Biden sent active duty troops to the border. Troops are prohibited by law from doing law enforcement duties under the Posse Comitatus Act, but that may change. Trump has directed through executive order that the incoming secretary of defence and incoming homeland security chief report back within 90 days if they think an 1807 law called the Insurrection Act should be invoked.

# Elon Musk clashes with OpenAI CEO

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

Elon Musk is clashing with OpenAI CEO Sam Altman over the Stargate artificial intelligence infrastructure project touted by President Donald Trump, the latest in a feud between the two tech billionaires that started on OpenAI's board and is now testing Musk's influence with the new president.

Trump on Tuesday had talked up a joint venture investing up to \$500 billion through a new partnership formed by OpenAI, the maker of ChatGPT, alongside Oracle and SoftBank. The new entity, Stargate, is already starting to build out data centres and the electricity generation needed for the further development of fast-evolving AI technology. Trump declared it "a

resounding declaration of confidence in America's potential" under his new administration, with an initial private investment of \$100 billion that could reach five times that sum. But Musk, a close Trump adviser who helped bankroll his campaign and now leads a government cost-cutting initiative, questioned the value of the investment hours later.

# Teen fatally shoots female student, self at Nashville high school: Police

PTI ■ NASHVILLE

A female student was killed and another student was wounded on Wednesday in a shooting in a Nashville high school cafeteria, police said. The 17-year-old shooter, who was also a student at Antioch High School, later shot and killed himself with a handgun, Metro Nashville Police spokesperson Don Aaron said during a news conference. Police identified him as Solomon Henderson. Police chief John Drake said the shooter "confronted" a 16-year-old female student in the cafeteria and opened fire, killing her. Police identified her as Josselin Corea Escalante. Drake said police are looking into a motive and whether the students who were shot were targeted. The male student who was



Students wait to get off a bus at a unification site following a shooting at the Antioch High School in Nashville, Tenn., Wednesday. AP/PTI

wounded suffered a graze, and was treated and released from the hospital, Drake said. Another student was taken to a hospital for treatment of a facial injury that happened during a fall, Aaron said. There were two school resource officers in the building when the shooting happened around 11 am (local time), Aaron said. They were not in the immediate vicinity of the cafeteria and by the time they got down there the shooting was over and the gunman had killed himself, Aaron said. The school has about 2,000 students and is located in Antioch, a neighbourhood about 16 km southeast of downtown Nashville. At a family safety centre close to a hospital, officials were helping shocked parents to reunite with their children. Dajuan Bernard was waiting at a Mapco service station to reunite with his son, a 10th grader, who was being held in the auditorium with other students on Wednesday afternoon. He first heard of the shooting from his son who "was a little startled", Bernard said. His son was upstairs from the cafeteria but said he heard the gunfire.

**EXTENSION OF PERIODICITY OF SPECIAL TRAIN**

It is notified for the information of rail passengers that Northern Railway has decided to extend the Periodicity of the run of Train No. 04066/04065 Delhi Jn.-Phaphamau Jn.-Delhi Jn. Kumbh Special Train as per the details given below:-

Train No.	From	To	Days to Run	Additional Trip on	Trips
04066	Delhi Jn.	Phaphamau Jn.	Saturday	25.01.2025	01
04065	Phaphamau Jn.	Delhi Jn.	Sunday	26.01.2025	01

\* Rest all information will hold good.

For detailed information, please call RailMadad Helpline No. 139 or visit enquiry website: [www.enquiry.indianrail.gov.in](http://www.enquiry.indianrail.gov.in)

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26/07/2025

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S. No.	NIT No.	Tender ID.	Details of Work	Estimated Cost (INR)	Earnest Money (EMD)	Bid Submission End Date
1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1.	74/T.Sec/EE/W.W.D./2024-25 First Call	2025_UAD_397511_1	Providing Laying and Jointing of DI Pipeline at Pul Patra Area under Zone 09 WWD	35,22,810/-	26,421.00	20.02.2025
2	75/T.Sec/EE/W.W.D./2024-25 First Call	2025_UAD_397524_1	Providing Laying and Jointing of HOPE Pipeline at Ankur Complex, Shivaji Nagar, Shankar Nagar Under Zone 10 WWD	1,15,60,060/-	57,800.00	20.02.2025
3	76/T.Sec/EE/W.W.D./2024-25 First Call	2025_UAD_397528_1	Providing Laying and Jointing of DI Pipeline at Rachna Nagar, Kasturba Nagar, Gautam Nagar Under Zone 12 WWD	35,22,810/-	26,421.00	20.02.2025
4	77/T.Sec/EE/W.W.D./2024-25 First Call	2025_UAD_397805_1	Providing Laying and Jointing of HOPE Pipeline at Devki Nagar, Navab Colony, Shiv Nagar Under Zone 17 WWD	1,92,15,282/-	96,076.00	20.02.2025

Executive Engineer (WWD)  
Municipal Corporation, Bhopal

T.N.1172/024/025

# Thousands line up for whiff of flower smelling like gym socks

PTI ■ SYDNEY

The rare unfurling of an endangered plant that emits the smell of decaying flesh drew hundreds of devoted fans to a greenhouse in Sydney on Thursday where they joined three-hour lines to experience a momentous bloom -- and a fragrance evoking gym socks and rotting garbage. Tall, pointed and smelly, the corpse flower is scientifically known as amorphophallus titanum -- or bunga bangkai in Indonesia, where the plants are found in the Sumatran rainforest. But to fans of this specimen, she's Patricia -- a portmanteau of "putrid" and "Patricia" eagerly adopted by her followers who, naturally, call themselves

Putricians. For a week, she has graced a stately and gothic display in front of a purple curtain and wreathed in mist from a humidifier at the Royal Sydney Botanic Garden. Her rise to fame since has been rapid, with up to 20,000 admirers filing past for a moment in her increasingly pungent presence. No corpse flower has bloomed at the garden for 15 years. "The fact that they open very rarely, so they flower rarely, is obviously something that puts them at a little bit of a disadvantage in the wild," said garden spokesperson Sophie Daniel, who designed Patricia's kooky and funereal display. "When they open, they have to hope that another flower is open nearby, because they can't

self-pollinate." There are thought to be only 300 of the plants in the wild and fewer than 1,000 worldwide -- including those in cultivation. Among them is Patricia, which arrived at the garden seven years ago. When her flower was spotted in December she was just 25 centimeters (10 inches) high. By Thursday, she was 1.6 metres (5 feet 3 inches) tall -- and her flower spike was slowly opening like a pleated skirt around a majestic central tuber, the yellow-green outer curling to reveal a burgundy centre. As excitement grew in Sydney after the moment of her bloom, garden staff erected crowd barriers, giving the Victorian greenhouse the air of a rock concert. Fans trod a red

carpet to view Patricia from behind velvet ropes in a display inspired by Queen Victoria's funeral, the Rocky Horror Picture Show and the oeuvre of the late director David Lynch. Inside, fans took selfies and leaned in for a sniff -- an increasingly perilous prospect as Patricia's odor developed. One young woman raised her hands and bowed as though in worship. On social media, garden staff performed a viral dance to Chappell Roan's summer hit HOT TO GO! against a backdrop of the stately plant. It was difficult to say why the regal, mysterious and stinky flower had attracted such a following -- but perhaps the answer lay in the "reverence" viewers felt in the presence of "such an amazing living being,"

Daniel said. Along with her real-life visitors, Patricia's online fandom has been rapid, global and deeply strange -- if much less smelly. A 24/7 live stream established by the botanic garden drew close to a million views in less than a week and a shared language of memes and inside jokes sprang up. Frequently deployed acronyms included WWTF, or we watch the flower, WDRNP -- we do not rush Patricia -- and BBTB, or blessed be the bloom. "Patricia is a metaphor for my life," wrote one poster, who did not elaborate. Commenters on social media made plans to hurry to the garden as the plant opened. In just 24 hours, Patricia's bloom -- and her stench -- would be gone.



Russian victory in Ukraine will hurt NATO's credibility'

PTI ■ BRUSSELS

NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte warned on Thursday that a Russian victory over Ukraine would undermine the dissuasive force of the world's biggest military alliance and that its credibility could cost trillions to restore.



NATO has been ramping up its forces along its eastern flank with Russia, Belarus and Ukraine, deploying thousands of troops and equipment to deter Moscow from expanding its war into the territory of any of the organisation's 32 member countries.

Dutch prime minister said. "That would be geopolitically a big, big mistake. Polish Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski welcomed Trump's acknowledgement that it must be Russia which should make the first peace moves, but he cautioned that "this is not the Putin that President Trump knew in his first term".

On Wednesday, Trump threatened to impose stiff taxes, tariffs and sanctions on Moscow if an agreement isn't reached to end the war, but that warning will probably fall on deaf ears in the Kremlin. Russia's economy is already weighed down by a multitude of US and European sanctions.

S Korean investigators call for indictment of President Yoon

Seoul (PTI)

South Korean investigators asked prosecutors to indict the country's detained President Yoon Suk Yeol over his short-lived imposition of martial law last month, as it accused him of rebellion, abuse of power and obstruction of parliament on Thursday.

I was trying to appeal to the people to draw their strict supervision and criticism of the opposition," Yoon told a hearing at the Constitutional Court. "No matter how many warnings I would issue to the opposition, they would have been

useless." Yoon was impeached and suspended by the assembly on December 14. The Constitutional Court is now deliberating to determine whether to formally throw Yoon out of office or reinstate him.

CONSTRUCTION OF HYBRID PLATFORM WITH DRAIN AND BOUNDARY WALL

E-Tender Notice No. SCL-ENG-06 of 2025 Dated: 20-01-2025. E-Tenders are invited by the undersigned for the following works: Brief Description of Item: Construction of Hybrid (BG- MG) Platform with drain and boundary wall at Nischintpur (NCTP) near Agartala under the jurisdiction of DEN-V/Lumding.

Public Notice

This is to inform the general public that Smt. Neeru is the G.P.A. holder of First floor, without roof right, Plot Bearing No. A-54 land area measuring 54 Sq. Yds. out of Kharsa No. 143, situated in the area of Village Choviyana Khurd alias Tigr Paragana & Tehsil Dacin, Distt. Gurgaon, Haryana through Conveyance Deed dated 20/12/2023 regd. as doc. No. 25059 executed by Smt. Neeru in favour of Smt. Neeru in favour of Mr. Sunil in respect of area measuring 70 Sq. Yds.

Public Notice

This is to inform the general public that Mr. Sunil is the owner of Plot No. 23/1, 23/2, 23/3, 23/4, 23/5, 23/6, 23/7, 23/8, 23/9, 23/10, 23/11, 23/12, 23/13, 23/14, 23/15, 23/16, 23/17, 23/18, 23/19, 23/20, 23/21, 23/22, 23/23, 23/24, 23/25, 23/26, 23/27, 23/28, 23/29, 23/30, 23/31, 23/32, 23/33, 23/34, 23/35, 23/36, 23/37, 23/38, 23/39, 23/40, 23/41, 23/42, 23/43, 23/44, 23/45, 23/46, 23/47, 23/48, 23/49, 23/50, 23/51, 23/52, 23/53, 23/54, 23/55, 23/56, 23/57, 23/58, 23/59, 23/60, 23/61, 23/62, 23/63, 23/64, 23/65, 23/66, 23/67, 23/68, 23/69, 23/70, 23/71, 23/72, 23/73, 23/74, 23/75, 23/76, 23/77, 23/78, 23/79, 23/80, 23/81, 23/82, 23/83, 23/84, 23/85, 23/86, 23/87, 23/88, 23/89, 23/90, 23/91, 23/92, 23/93, 23/94, 23/95, 23/96, 23/97, 23/98, 23/99, 23/100, 23/101, 23/102, 23/103, 23/104, 23/105, 23/106, 23/107, 23/108, 23/109, 23/110, 23/111, 23/112, 23/113, 23/114, 23/115, 23/116, 23/117, 23/118, 23/119, 23/120, 23/121, 23/122, 23/123, 23/124, 23/125, 23/126, 23/127, 23/128, 23/129, 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# Growing geo-economic fragmentation can decrease global GDP: WEF report

PTI ■ DAVOS

Growing geo-economic fragmentation can decrease global GDP by up to \$5.7 trillion, giving it a bigger blow than the financial crisis of 2008 or the COVID-19 pandemic, a new study showed on Thursday. India and some other emerging economies can bear the biggest burden in the most extreme fragmentation scenario, it cautioned. Countries are increasingly using the global financial and trading systems to advance geopolitical objectives through sanctions, industrial policies, and other economic measures, the World Economic Forum said while releasing the report here during its Annual Meeting 2025. The Navigating Global Financial System Fragmentation report estimated that fragmentation resulting from statecraft policies could cost the global economy \$0.6 trillion to \$5.7 trillion – up to 5 per cent of global GDP – due to reduced trade and cross-border capital flows as well as lost economic



efficiencies. It could also increase global inflation by more than 5 per cent in a very high fragmentation scenario, it added. The report, developed in collaboration with Oliver Wyman, showed that the economic impact of rising geo-economic fragmentation could surpass the disruptions caused by the 2008 financial crisis or the COVID-19 pandemic. Countries have been increasingly using the financial system to advance their geopolitical objectives –

With a principled approach, policymakers can advance appropriate policies for their economies and societies while mitigating unintended effects on areas like cost of living and GDP growth, it added. In the most extreme fragmentation scenario, a full economic decoupling between Eastern and Western blocs would force unaligned countries to trade exclusively with their most significant economic partner, it cautioned. These nations could see GDP growth drop by over 10 per cent – nearly double the global average – with India, Brazil, Turkey, and emerging economies in Latin America, Africa and South-East Asia bearing the greatest burden. “Fragmentation not only fuels inflation but also negatively impacts economic growth prospects, particularly in emerging markets and developing economies that depend on an integrated financial system for their continued development,” said Matt Strahan, Private Markets Lead, World Economic Forum.

# Sensex rises for second day on gains in IT

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Stock markets extended gains for the second day on Thursday helped by buying in IT, consumer durables and commodity stocks amid a largely positive trend in global markets. In a volatile trade, the 30-share index rose by 115.39 points or 0.15 per cent to settle at 76,520.38. The barometer started on a negative note dropping by 202 points to a low of 76,202.12. The index pared losses later and climbed 338.55 points or 0.44 per cent to hit a high of 76,743.54. The broader NSE Nifty rose by 50 points or 0.22 per cent to end at 23,205.35. From the Sensex pack, UltraTech Cement, Mahindra & Mahindra, Sun Pharmaceutical, Zomato, Tech Mahindra, Tata Steel, Tata Motors, Titan, ITC and Bajaj Finance were the major gainers. In contrast, Kotak Mahindra Bank, HCL Technologies, PowerGrid, Reliance Industries, State Bank of India, Hindustan Unilever, IndusInd Bank, Nestle India and Axis Bank were among the laggards. “Uncertainty lingers whether the trade tariff measures will affect global trade, instigate



higher inflation, and currencies volatility. The trend holds a declining momentum YTD with a pause today contemplating the upcoming 2025 budget, which has a muted expectation,” Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services, said. Meanwhile in-line Q3 results showcasing QoQ growth to the indices suggesting that Q4 will be much better, Nair said. In broader markets, the BSE smallcap index rose 0.67 per cent and midcap gauge jumped 1.78 per cent. Among BSE sectoral indices, Consumer Durables rose the most by 1.95 per cent, Commodities by 1.86 per cent, Focused IT by 1.79 per cent, Information Technology by 1.51 per cent, Services 1.42 per cent and Consumer

“However, the gains experienced a holdback driven by concerns over moderation in earnings,” Ameya Ranadive, Chartered Market Technician, CFTe, Sr Technical Analyst, StoxBox, said. An overall positive trend was also seen throughout the broader market. Sectorally, IT remained the key gainer, led by a positive earnings outlook and optimistic sectoral view, Ranadive added. On the stock-specific front, UltraTech Cement gained approximately 6 per cent during the latter part of the trading session, led by positive earnings. In Asian markets, Tokyo, Shanghai and Hong Kong were trading in positive territory while Seoul was quoting in the negative. US markets ended higher in overnight deals on Wednesday. Global oil benchmark Brent crude fell 0.34 per cent to \$78.73 a barrel. Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth ₹4,026.25 crore on Wednesday, according to exchange data. On Wednesday, the 30-share BSE Sensex surged 566.63 points to close at 76,404.99 and the NSE Nifty climbed 130.70 points to settle at 23,155.35.

# Indian Energy Exchange net profit rises nearly 17 per cent in Q3

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Indian Energy Exchange (IEX) on Thursday posted a nearly 17 per cent rise in its consolidated net profit to Rs 107.29 crore, mainly driven by higher revenues. The company had reported a consolidated net profit of ₹91.80 crore for the quarter ended December 31, 2023, a BSE filing showed. Its total income rose to ₹160.53 crore in the quarter from ₹141.21 crore a year ago. The Board of Directors has also approved the payment of an interim dividend of ₹1.50 per equity share, having a face value of ₹1 each for 2024-25. The record date for ascertaining the name of members/beneficial owners entitled to receive the interim dividend is Friday, January 31, 2025. IEX, in a statement, said that during the quarter, IEX achieved an electricity traded volume of 30.5 billion units (BU), marking a 15.9 per cent year-on-year rise and traded 26.52 lakh Renewable Energy Certificates (RECs), recording a 31 per cent growth.



According to the statement, adequate availability of fuel in this quarter led to higher liquidity on the exchange platform, as the sell quantum increased by 62 per cent (year-on-year) in the day-ahead market, leading to softening prices. For Q3 FY25 (October-December 2024), prices in the day ahead market averaged ₹3.71/unit, a decline of nearly 26 per cent year-on-year. These prices presented an opportunity for discoms and commercial and industrial consumers to meet their demand at a competitive price and replace their costlier power by procuring through exchanges, it stated. The company said its consolidated profit after tax (net profit) for 9M FY25 (April to December 2024) increased by 22.8 per cent to ₹312.1 crore from ₹254.1 crore in the year-ago period. On the gas market front, the Indian Gas Exchange (IGX) traded a total volume of 162 lakh MMBtu for Q3 FY25 compared to 84 lakh MMBtu in Q3 FY24, a growth of 93 per cent. The profit after tax for IGX for Q3 FY25 was ₹ 8.3 crore compared to ₹7.4 crore in Q3 FY24, a rise of 13 per cent. For the nine months till December FY25, IGX PAT rose 18 per cent year-on-year to ₹22 crore.

# Significant progress in talks on India-EU FTA: Official

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

There is a significant progress in the negotiations for the proposed free trade agreement (FTA) between India and European Union (EU), an official said on Thursday. Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal was in Brussels last week to meet European Commissioner for Trade Maros Sefcovic to take stock of the progress of the negotiations. “Good progress is there on India-EU FTA. There is a significant progress in talks,” the official said, without divulging more details. During the meeting between Goyal and Sefcovic, the two sides agreed to build a commercially meaningful trade agenda and work towards a mutually beneficial trade pact. The two leaders have also outlined political directions for both the teams to develop a mutually beneficial agenda for trade and investment and a robust FTA in an expedited manner to meet global challenges. The meeting came ahead of the



10th round of talks between India and the EU, which is scheduled from March 10-14 in Brussels. In the ninth round, both sides discussed trade issues covering goods, services, investment and government procurement along with necessary rules such as rules of origin, SPS (sanitary and phytosanitary), and technical barriers to trade. In June 2022, India and the 27-nation EU bloc resumed the negotiations after a gap of over eight years. It was stalled in 2013 due to differences over several issues. The total trade stood at \$180 billion in 2023-24. India exported \$75.18 billion in goods and \$31.13 billion in services to the EU, while the EU exported \$63.44 billion in goods and \$31.35 billion in services to India.

# Budget should announce tax cuts for individuals: Barclays

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The government in FY26 Budget should announce an “effective” personal income tax cut to support consumption and demand, Barclays said on Thursday. In its FY25-26 Union Budget review, Barclays said the key ask from the Budget, to be presented on February 1, is to support growth while adhering to fiscal consolidation path. Barclays, India Chief Economist, Aastha Gudwani said in a quest to support consumption, the finance minister should provide an effective personal income tax rate cut by further tweaking the tax slabs. This is unlikely to have a sizable fiscal cost. “That said, improved tax buoyancy will likely make up for revenue foregone under this announcement. We think a boost to consumption is needed, especially with private investment also now awaiting the increase in demand growth,” Gudwani said. Barclays expects Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman to announce changes to the new tax regime, making it



lucrative for more and more taxpayers. In the last Budget, the government had increased standard deduction for salaried taxpayer to ₹75,000, and deduction on family pension for pensioners to Rs 25,000 under the new tax regime, which offers lower rate of taxes. The new tax regime exempts income up to ₹3 lakh. Those earning annually between ₹3-7 lakh pay 5 per cent tax, Rs 7-10 lakh (10 per cent), ₹10-12 lakh (15 per cent), ₹12-15 lakh (20 per cent) and above ₹15 lakh (30 per cent). Barclays said another potential option to boost disposable income and purchasing power while containing inflation, could be a reduction in excise duty for fuel. Retail prices for fuel have remained almost constant

since 2022 despite lower global crude prices. Barclays said customs duty announcements in Budget will be pivotal to understand government’s response to tariffs under Trump 2.0. Given the uncertainty that Trump 2.0 brings along with, slower global trade and a fragmented world order is a reality India needs to prepare for. “We thus expect multiple tweaks in customs duty structure, especially on items where dumping concerns from China are rising (eg, steel, glass, basic metals). We expect a modest increase in customs duty collections in FY25-26 vs FY24-25,” Gudwani said. Barclays expects the government to overachieve the fiscal deficit target for current fiscal by 20 basis points, at 4.7 per cent of GDP and 2025-26 deficit to be pegged at 4.5 per cent of GDP or about ₹16.3 lakh crore. Barclays said it awaits the debt consolidation roadmap from FY26-27 onwards to see by when the finance minister sees general government debt-to-GDP fall to the 60 per cent target.



# Rupee falls 12 paise to settle at 86.47 against US dollar

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The rupee declined 12 paise to settle at 86.47 (provisional) against the US dollar on Thursday amid the strengthening American currency and continuous outflow of foreign funds. However, positive domestic equity markets and lower crude oil prices supported the Indian currency at lower level, forex traders said. At the interbank foreign exchange, the rupee opened at 86.46 and moved between high of 86.38 and low of 86.52 against the greenback during the session. The local unit settled at 86.47 (provisional) against the US dollar, registering a loss of 12 paise from its previous close. On Wednesday, the rupee appreciated 23 paise to close at 86.35 against the dollar. Anuj Choudhary, Research Analyst at Mirae Asset Sharekhan, said the rupee declined on a strong US dollar and recovery in the US treasury yields. FII outflows too weighed down the local unit. However,

weak crude oil prices and positive domestic markets cushioned the downside. “Investors may remain cautious ahead of Bank of Japan’s monetary policy tomorrow. BoJ is expected to hike interest rates by 25 bps. USD-INR spot price is expected to trade in a range of ₹86.20-86.80,” he said. Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback’s strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading 0.07 per cent higher at 108.04. Brent crude, the global oil benchmark, was down 0.16 per cent to \$78.87 per barrel in futures trade. In the domestic equity market, the 30-share BSE Sensex climbed 115.39 points, or 0.15 per cent, to settle at 76,520.38, while the Nifty rose 50 points, or 0.22 per cent, to 23,205.35. Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) remained net sellers in the capital markets on Wednesday, offloading shares worth ₹4,026.25 crore, according to exchange data.

# US sanctions hit Russian oil supply to India

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The wide-ranging sanctions imposed by the US on the Russian oil sector have started to dent near-term oil flows to India with state-owned Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd (BPCL) saying not enough cargoes are available for March. The US on January 10 issued sweeping sanctions targeting the Russian energy sector. The measures include sanctions on Russian oil producers Gazprom Neft and Surgutneftegas, the blacklisting of 183 vessels involved in Russian energy exports, and curbs on dozens of oil traders, oilfield service providers, tanker owners and managers, insurance companies and energy officials. The sanctions were announced at a time when Indian refiners had started to negotiate for March cargoes. BPCL Director (Finance) Vetsa Ramakrishna Gupta told in an analyst call on Thursday that Russian oil had been booked for January and February in the previous two months but for March “we are not getting sufficient cargoes”. The company saw Russian oil in the overall basket of crude oil it processes into fuels like petrol and diesel, falling to 20 per cent in March from 31 per cent in the October-December quarter, he said. Russian oil made up for 34-35 per cent of all oil that BPCL processed at the start of the current financial year in April 2024. He said there is enough oil



available in the market and the company would look at alternatives such as the Middle East to replace the lost volumes from Russia. Russia made up for just 0.2 per cent of all oil imported by India in the year ended on March 31, 2022. India, however, became the second biggest buyer of Russian crude oil since Moscow invaded Ukraine in February 2022, with purchases rising to almost 40 per cent of the country’s total oil purchases. The rise was primarily because Russian crude oil was available at a discount to other internationally traded oil due to the price cap and the European nations shunning purchases from Moscow. In 2024, Russian crude imports to India averaged 1.7 million barrels per day, making the OPEC+ producer its largest supplier. Gupta said the discounts on Russian oil have shrunk to \$3-3.2 per barrel from \$3.5-4 at the start of the fiscal and \$8.5 in fiscal year 2023-24. This month, India has

decided to shun deliveries made by tankers that have been sanctioned by the US in the latest round. Russia used these tankers to ship oil to countries like India and China after the Group of Seven (G7) countries in 2022 imposed a \$60 a barrel price cap on exports by the Kremlin. This cap, introduced to limit Moscow’s revenues to fund its war in Ukraine, meant that Western shipping and insurance services were not available for any oil cargo that was priced more than \$60 per barrel. To circumvent that, Russia used the so-called shadow fleet, insured by its own companies. This fleet has now been sanctioned. There is a wind-down period until March 12, which will allow for existing contracts to finish. “For the first two months, there will be no disruption. Within two months we will probably see new arrangements emerging in terms of oil coming to India,” a senior government source

said. Sanctioned Russian tankers will not be allowed to dock at Indian ports, the source said, adding that the only exception would be for Russian oil cargoes booked before January 10, provided they unload by March 12. The sanctions sent global oil prices to \$83-84 a barrel but Gupta saw this as a temporary phenomenon and oil should settle in the \$75-80 range soon. In the worst-case scenario, Russian crude, which India was getting at a discount, will not be available at a discount, he added. In an attempt to restrict funds for Russia’s war machine, The Group of Seven rich nations, the European Union and Australia put an embargo on Russian crude and introduced a \$60 per barrel price cap in December 2022. Over the next 12 months, the price cap and embargo had a significant impact on revenues and forced Russia to find new markets and ways to transport its oil. Russia did this by offering deep discounts on its Urals grade crude. In the first year of the sanctions, Russia was losing, on an average, 23 per cent of its Urals crude export revenues every month due to the price cap and embargo. This figure has fallen sharply to a mere monthly average of 9 per cent in the second year of the cap. This is because Russia built a network of ‘shadow’ tankers, which could trade its oil above the cap to new markets in non-sanctioning countries.

# Gold hits fresh all-time high of ₹82,900 per 10 grams

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Gold prices rose ₹170 to hit a fresh record high of ₹82,900 per 10 grams in the national capital on Thursday amid a positive global trend, according to the All India Sarafa Association. The precious metal had closed at ₹82,730 per 10 grams on Wednesday. In about one year, the precious metal surged ₹20,180 or 32.17 per cent to ₹82,900 per 10 grams from ₹62,720 per 10 grams on February 23, 2024. Extending the gains for the seventh straight session, gold of 99.5 per cent purity appreciated by ₹170 to hit an all-time high level of ₹82,500 per 10 grams. The metal had finished at Rs 82,330 per 10 grams in the previous trading session. Gold of 99.9 and 99.5 per cent purity grew ₹2,320 each in the last seven trading sessions. However, silver prices declined ₹500 to ₹93,500 per kg from the previous close of ₹94,000 per kg on Wednesday. Bullion traders attributed the rise in precious metal prices to heightened demand by jewellers and retailers, along with a strong trend in the international markets. In futures trade on Thursday, gold contracts for February delivery rose ₹19 or 0.02 per cent to trade at ₹79,583 per 10 grams on the Multi Commodity Exchange (MCX). However, silver futures declined ₹222 or 0.46 per cent to ₹91,522 per kg from the previous close of ₹91,944 per



kg on Wednesday. In the overseas markets, Comex gold futures fell \$13.20 per ounce or 0.48 per cent to \$2,757.70 per ounce. “Gold prices traded flat-to-negative on Thursday, weighed down by a recovery in the US dollar and Treasury yields,” Saumil Gandhi, Senior Analyst - Commodities at HDFC Securities, said. The US Dollar index and Treasury yields traded up after the positive close in the previous session, which caps the further upside in gold and prompts some selling in the gold price on Thursday, Gandhi added. According to Augmont’s Head of Research, Renisha Chainani, Gold is on the verge of hitting record highs and could do so within the next day or two. The remarks made by newly elected US President Donald Trump on tariffs are driving the bullish momentum. Silver Comex futures quoted 1.03 per cent lower in the Asian market hours at \$31.10 per ounce. Further, Chainani, said, “Trump announced that his government was considering levying a 25 per cent tax on Canada and Mexico”.





NEW LAUNCH



STRENGTH OF POETRY

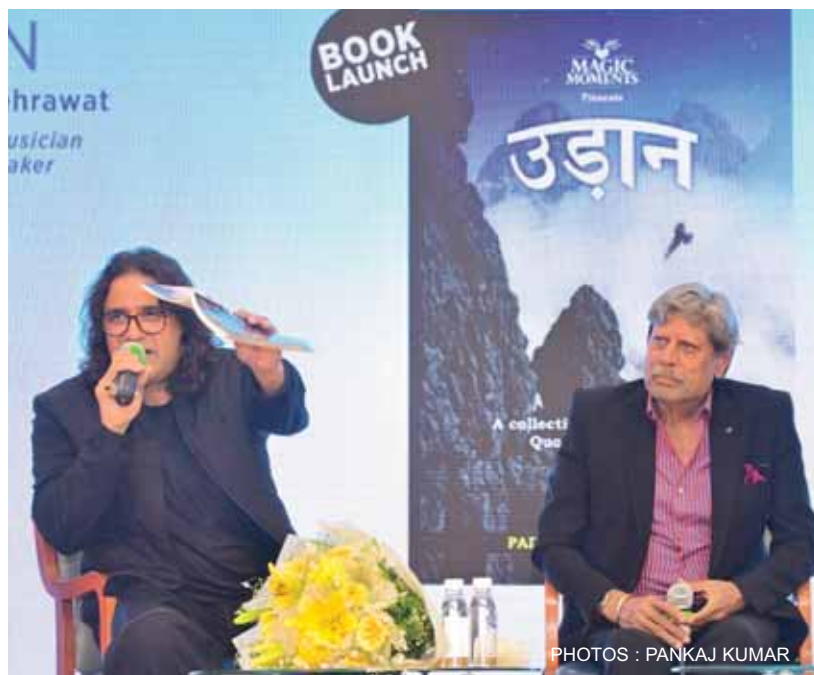
Udaan, a poetry collection by Padamjit Sehrawat, was launched by Kapil Dev, inspiring hope and resilience through uplifting verses and life lessons, says SAKSHI PRIYA

"A book is a doorway to countless worlds, and poetry is the rhythm that brings those worlds to life." This sentiment was at the heart of an event at the India International Centre in New Delhi, where Padamjit Sehrawat's poetry collection, Udaan, was launched.

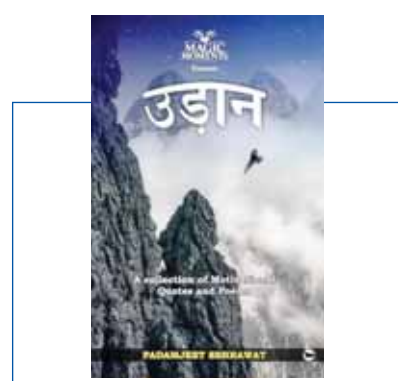
"When passion becomes your profession, the concept of struggle disappears. Passion brings joy, not hardship," said Kapil Dev at the event. He emphasised the importance of self-awareness, adding, "True success lies in recognising yourself before seeking to impress others."

The title Udaan, meaning "flight," beautifully encapsulates the core message of Sehrawat's poetry. It urges readers to rise above challenges, embrace courage, and view life with optimism. The collection consists of poems that delve into themes of hope, personal growth, and inner strength.

Padamjit Sehrawat is a man of many talents, which enriches his work. A former cricketer who competed in prestigious tournaments like the Ranji Trophy and Deodhar Trophy, he has also built a reputation as a cricket commentator for international sports



PHOTOS : PANKAJ KUMAR



ABOUT THE BOOK

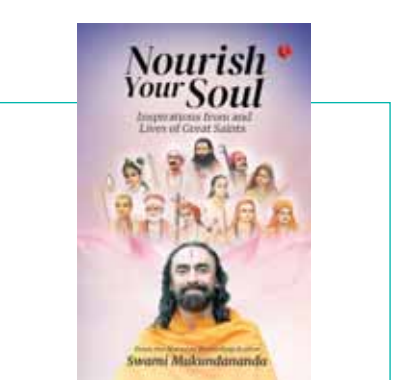
Book: Udaan

Author: Padamjit Sehrawat

channels. Beyond sports, he is a singer, musician, and motivational speaker. These diverse experiences infuse his poetry with unique perspectives, blending creativity and depth to connect with readers on a personal level.

Kapil Dev brought his characteristic humour to the launch, remarking, "There's no bigger thief than a cricketer, they steal runs! But even this is a positive theft." He compared this light-hearted analogy to the uplifting nature of Sehrawat's poetry, which encourages readers to focus on life's brighter side.

It was during the 2020-2021 hospitalisation due to the Covid-19 pandemic I read Death - An Inside Story, authored by Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev of Isha Foundation. I was in the ICU of Kochi Medical College and had the unfortunate experience of watching other patients being rolled out after they succumbed to the pandemic.



ABOUT THE BOOK

Book: Nourishing Your Soul
Author: Swami Mukundananda
Publisher: Rupa
Price: ₹395

as a corporate chieftain for a few years before renouncing materialistic life to become a disciple of Jagadguru Kripaluji Maharaj, a renowned spiritual leader. What makes Swami Mukundananda different from other authors is the ease and élan with which he communicates his thoughts to the readers without hurting anybody and taunting any religions.

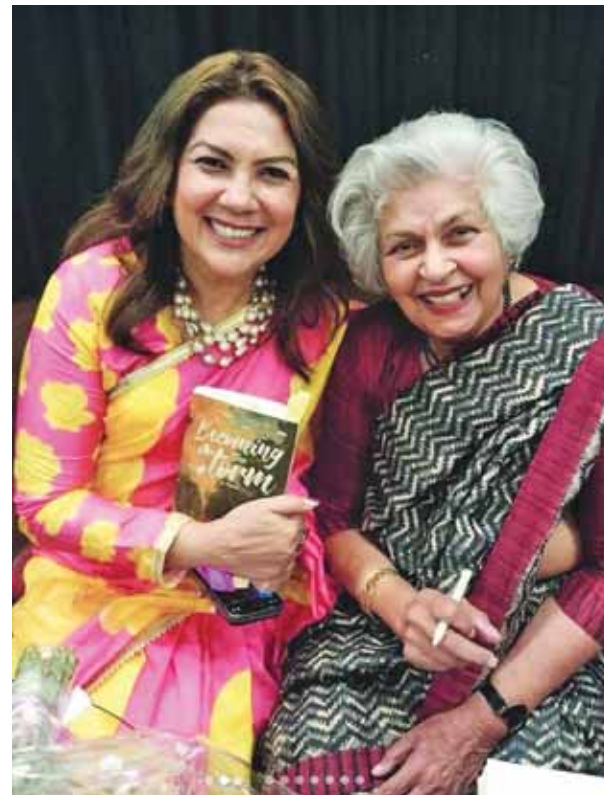
other than peace and prosperity throughout the universe. He has carefully selected the sages and monks who attained spirituality through their prayers, deeds, words and commitment. The chances of the present generation of Indians having heard about them are quite remote, as our 'ace' historians successfully succeeded in wiping out even the last vestiges of these great men and women from our academic curricula for obvious reasons like national integration and communal harmony.

WOMEN'S FIGHT FOR IDENTITY

'Becoming the Storm' Stands Witness to India's Tryst with Modernity, writes DEEPAK KUMAR JHA

At the age of 86 years, veteran journalist Rami Chhabra made a debut in novel writing with her book 'Becoming the Storm'. She had been India's one of the first few women journalists who broke the glass ceiling to straddle the media space in the national capital.

Importantly, Chhabra's accounts of India's fight for identity are set in the backdrop of India also gaining strength in the early years since Independence. Yet, the backdrop to India's tales is also set by India's three wars in quick succession - 1962 with China, 1965 with Pakistan, and the 1971 War of Independence of Bangladesh.



passing away of Nehru and the subsequent scenes at his residence as the people queued up to pay their last respects to the departed leader. Chhabra recalls in the book Indira Gandhi "holding herself steadily while her eyes had turned red as she stood in one corner when the people paid their respects to the late Nehru".

The people also rushed to partake in the industrialisation of India with the stock market tales also finding space in the novels of the veteran journalist. In essence, the conflict between tradition and modernity has never ceased.



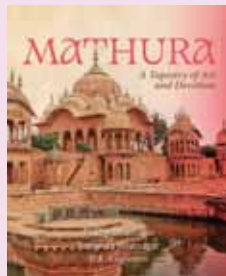
ABOUT THE BOOK

Book: Becoming the Storm
Author: Rami Chhabra
Publisher: Occam
Price: ₹899

JANUARY READS



Book: Job Charnock and The Potter's Boy
Author: Madhurima Vidyarthi
Publisher: Niyogi Books
Price: ₹595



Book: Mathura: A Tapestry of Art and Devotion
Author: Goswami, Sangeeta Bhatnagar, Pradip Bhatnagar
Publisher: Niyogi Books
Price: ₹850



Book: Timeline India: Rediscovery of the Chronology of A Ten Millennia Civilization
Author: Rajnish Karki
Publisher: Rupa Publication
Price: ₹795



Book: Around Varanasi in Assi days
Author: Raja Venkateswara
Publisher: Rupa Publication
Price: ₹395



Book: The Diamond That Cuts Through Illusion
Author: Thich Nhat Hanh
Publisher: Aleph Book Company
Price: ₹399

INDIA'S SPIRITUAL ICONS

Swami Mukundananda's Nourish Your Soul beautifully explores the inspiring lives and journeys of eleven Indian sages, says KUMAR CHELLAPPAN



as a corporate chieftain for a few years before renouncing materialistic life to become a disciple of Jagadguru Kripaluji Maharaj, a renowned spiritual leader. What makes Swami Mukundananda different from other authors is the ease and élan with which he communicates his thoughts to the readers without hurting anybody and taunting any religions.

them in their path to eternal sainthood. According to Mukundananda, saints are the embodiment of purity and goodness, being endowed with God's infinite love and grace. "Their mere presence makes a place holy. Elevated devotees transform wherever they go into a pilgrimage site, for they hold God in their heart," says the author in the introduction to the book.

master and lover in human form. Despite this truth, she was committed in her devotion and love and she wrote hundreds of poems like Payo Ji Maine Ram Ratan Dhan Payo... a bhajan/hymn which retains its charm and lyrical beauty even today.

listeners on a one-way flight to heaven. The lyrics by the mystic get life and emotion when they are rendered by the likes of M.S. Subbulakshmi and M.L. Vasanthakumari. The debate between Shankaracharya and Mandan Misra on the relative merits of Mimamsa and Advaita viewpoints, in which the former demolished the concept of the so-called Dravidian philosophy, is enthralling.



# Gukesh becomes highest-ranked Indian in FIDE rankings, displaces Erigaisi

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Continuing his rapid rise, world champion D Gukesh dethroned compatriot Arjun Erigaisi to become the highest-ranked Indian chess player, at fourth, in the latest FIDE rankings on Thursday. Gukesh, 18, achieved the feat when he logged his second victory in the Tata Steel Tournament in Wijk Aan Zee (Netherlands) defeating Vincent Keymer of Germany. Gukesh, who was awarded the Dhyan Chand Khel Ratna recently, has amassed 2784 rating points, while Erigaisi, who was the highest-ranked Indian for a long time, has slipped to fifth with 2779.5 rating points.

Norway's Magnus Carlsen continues to be the undisputed world No.1 with 2832.5 points, followed by United States' Grandmaster Hikaru Nakamura (2802) and



country-mate Fabiano Caruana (2798). Gukesh has been in sublime form ever since he beat China's Ding Liren to clinch

the world title in Singapore in December last year. He took a break from the game to attend to functions and festivities back home and

skipped the World Rapid and Blitz Championship in New York. On his return to the board, Gukesh has not lost a single

game in Wijk Aan Zee. He has two victories and three draws so far in the tournament with eight rounds still to go.

Erigaisi had become India's top-rated player in September last year and in December achieved his peak rating of 2801, which had made him the 15th-highest rated player in history and only the second Indian after five-time world champion Viswanathan Anand to breach the 2800 threshold.

Erigaisi, who was a part of India's triumphant journey in the Chess Olympiad in Budapest last year, had gone to the World Rapid and Blitz Championship in New York hoping to secure a Candidates berth but returned home disappointed.

The 21 year old is struggling in the ongoing Tata Steel Tournament, having garnered just one point so far, while Gukesh has 3.5.

# U19 T20 Women's World Cup: India outclass Sri Lanka, enter Super Six

PTI ■ KUALA LUMPUR

Opener G Trisha's composed 49 and pacers' excellent new ball spell fashioned India's lopsided 60-run win over Sri Lanka and their entry into the Super Six of the ICC U19 T20 Women's World Cup as Group A toppers here on Thursday.

On a spiteful pitch, Trisha's 44-ball knock (5x4, 1x6) was worth its weight in gold as it guided India to a competitive 118 for nine.

Pacers VJ Joshitha and Shabnam then tore through the Lankan top-order to reduce them to nine for four in 3.2 overs, and run out of skipper Manudi Nanayakkara an over later had them reeling at 12 for five.

Sri Lanka were eventually restricted to 58 for nine in 20 overs as India finished the group engagements with all-win record in three matches. There was not much life left



in Sri Lanka's chase once the spinners were introduced, and India's assortment of left-arm orthodox tweakers did the mopping up job to perfection.

Rashmika Sewwandi (15, 12b, 2x4) looked in good touch for the while she lasted, but mounting asking rate forced her to take chances against Parunika Sisodia, and got caught in the deep.

It was also the only double digit score in the Lankan

innings.

Sisodia (2/7) was the pick among spinners as she and her colleagues Ayushi Shukla and Vaishnavi Sharma, who picked up stunning figures of 5/5 against Malaysia in the previous match, dismantled the lower order without much ado.

Earlier, India's batting too went through stormy seas but Player of the Match Trisha held together the defending champions with exemplary maturity.

# Irfan Pathan backs Shami's delayed return, says team will make right call



PTI ■ KOLKATA

Former pace bowling all-rounder Irfan Pathan believes India made the right decision by delaying Mohammed Shami's international return following a prolonged injury lay-off by not fielding him in the first T20I against England here. Shami was not included in

India's playing XI for the first T20I against England here on Wednesday, despite proving his fitness in practice sessions and domestic cricket for Bengal.

All eyes were on Shami's return after a 14-month injury lay-off, but India opted for a three-pronged spin attack instead, a decision that paid off as they bowled out England for a

meagre 132 before cruising to the target in 12.5 overs with seven wickets in hand.

Irfan said Shami is experienced enough to take an honest assessment of his body.

"When you've been such a seasoned campaigner and are among India's top 10 bowlers, you understand your body's limits well," said Irfan at a promotional event here.

"Shami always provides honest feedback to the team management, and decisions are made through mutual communication. Recovery at the highest level takes time, especially after playing consistently. I believe he and the team management will make the right call at the right time."

Having undergone surgery and rehab following an ankle injury sustained during the 2023 ODI World Cup, where he finished as India's top wicket-taker, Shami had made an impressive

return in domestic cricket, representing Bengal across all three formats.

Shami has been chosen in India's white-ball rubber squad against England consisting five T20Is and three ODIs which will act as a build up to the Champions Trophy next month, where the team's pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah's inclusion is subject to fitness. Bumrah suffered a back niggle in the gruelling five-match Test series in Australia and could not bowl in the second innings of the fifth Test in Sydney, and in this context Shami's availability for the Champions Trophy is crucial to India's prospects.

Irfan also expressed concerns over the lack of a pace-bowling backup in the Champions Trophy-bound squad, suggesting that Mohammed Siraj could have been included given Bumrah's uncertain fitness.

# Young guns prove PSG can deliver in Champions League without Mbappé

PTI ■ PARIS

Paris Saint-Germain finally showed it can shine in the Champions League without star Kylian Mbappé, rallying from 2-0 down in the second half to beat Manchester City 4-2 for a crucial victory Wednesday.

The win moved PSG out of the elimination zone in the competition's new-look format and dumped City in it with one game to play. PSG needs only a draw at Stuttgart next week to advance.

"I feel pride this evening, against such a team, against such a manager, against such good players," PSG coach Luis Enrique said. "It was a complete performance today."

PSG's re-designed attack finally clicked with four different scorers rather than relying too heavily on one to make the difference. Bradley Barcola, a 22-year-old winger, scored one goal and set up another for France

teammate Ousmane Dembélé, and 20-year-old midfielder Joao Neves headed in the third before striker Gonçalo Ramos rammed in the fourth in stoppage time.

"The more competition we have, the happier I am," Enrique said. "That means that no player can think of their position as untouchable."

A far cry from the Galacticos era when PSG was top-heavy with stars like Neymar, Lionel Messi and Mbappé but still fell short on the big stage. Still, the French team has struggled for goals in the competition since Mbappé's offseason departure for Real Madrid, netting just six in six games before City's visit and being blanked in defeats to Arsenal and Bayern Munich. Enrique said before facing City that the solution up front would come from more teamwork rather than hoping another player can emulate Mbappé, who scored 44 goals last season and helped PSG

reach the Champions League semifinals.

City manager Pep Guardiola acknowledged his team was outplayed.

"We have to accept it. In transitions we could not cope with them, they were faster," he said. "I give credit to PSG. When one team is better I have no problem to accept it. All of them they played really good. It's not a specific (player)."

Mbappé's move to Madrid forced Enrique to improvise with his lineups all season. This time, 19-year-old winger Désiré Doué played as a makeshift striker even though center forward Ramos was available for this game where both wealthy state-backed teams - the United Arab Emirates (City) and Qatar (PSG) - were at risk of failing to advance to the knockout stage. City led 2-0 after 53 minutes but PSG were level by the hour mark after some inspirational play down the left from Barcola.

# Champions League: Ban on Feyenoord fans in France

PTI ■ PARIS

Feyenoord supporters have been banned by French authorities from traveling to Lille for next week's final Champions League group game between the two clubs.

In an order published Wednesday, France's interior ministry said there was a "real and serious risk of confrontation" between fans of the two teams.

Lille hosts Feyenoord on January 29 at the Stade Pierre-Mauroy. The French authorities said Feyenoord's travels are often marred by "public order disturbances due to the violent behavior of certain supporters or individuals claiming to be supporters of this team," and they cited several examples of fan violence.

Justifying its decision, the ministry added that 3,600 fans - 500 of whom were identified as being dangerous - had planned to travel to Lille, although only 2,600 seats had been allocated to the Dutch club.

"Of the 1,000 supporters who have nevertheless planned to travel without a stadium admission ticket, it is feared that some will try to force their way into the stadium," it said. Later Wednesday, Feyenoord's match against Bayern Munich was stopped for seven minutes after kickoff because of poor visibility from clouds of smoke after fans lit flares and fireworks behind one of the goals.

In May 2022, there were violent clashes in France between Marseille and Feyenoord fans outside the Stade Velodrome stadium before the return leg of their Europa Conference League semifinal. One video showed a Marseille supporter apparently unconscious on the ground as he was helped by fellow fans, while another showed two groups charging at each other shortly before kickoff just outside the stadium.

# India's batting stars disappoint on Ranji return, Jadeja shines

PTI ■ MUMBAI

The high-profile return of India's stars in Ranji Trophy ended up as a damp squib with the likes of Rohit Sharma, Rishabh Pant and Shubman Gill falling cheaply on Thursday, unable to click in the face of some hostile bowling on the opening day of their respective matches across different venues.

Veteran all-rounder Ravindra Jadeja was the only one who stood out among the battery of Indian stars as he took a five-wicket haul for Saurashtra to dismiss Pant's Delhi for 188 on a Rajkot turner.

However, it was a forgettable outing for the rest as they made the slow walk back to the hut following early dismissals.

Following a dismal run in Australia, Rohit returned to Ranji Trophy for defending champions Mumbai after a

decade, hoping to get some runs under his belt ahead of next month's Champions Trophy.

But it was not to be at least in Mumbai's first innings against Jammu and Kashmir at the BKC ground here.

Going for his trademark pull off Umar Nazir, Rohit (3) got a leading edge which was caught by J&K skipper Paras Dogra at mid-off.

His India opening partner Yashasvi Jaiswal (4) too fell cheaply for Mumbai.

The southpaw was pinned in front of the wicket by Auqib Nabi, who made the most of the fresh wicket to move the new ball dangerously off the surface.

Named in the squad for the Champions Trophy, Shreyas Iyer (11) was caught at mid on off pacer Yudhvir Singh.

While the turnout to watch the India cricketing stars at the stadium was low, those in nearby buildings, who



were watching the action from their office floors, returned to work soon after the 37-year-old Rohit was dismissed.

Anticipating fan interest, the Mumbai Cricket Association had made temporary seating

arrangements for about 500 people at the BKC. The turnout, however, was not too high and some empty chairs could be seen.

Mumbai were eventually bowled out for a paltry 120 in 33.2 overs. The team left

out their in-form teenage opener Ayush Mhatre to accommodate the stars.

The 17-year-old Mhatre has struck two hundreds and a half century this season, including a 93-ball 148 in their previous game against

Saurashtra which Mumbai won by five wickets earlier this month.

This is the only Ranji game that Rohit, Jaiswal and Iyer are expected to play given the ODI series against England is due to start early next month and they would be joining the Indian ranks for it.

Pant fizzles; Jadeja shines In Rajkot, Pant showed up for Delhi in a first-class game for the first time since the 2017-2018 season and his stay in the middle did not last long.

The flamboyant left-hander was dismissed for 1 off 10 balls by veteran Saurashtra left-arm spinner Dharmendrasingh Jadeja. He attempted a sweep only to be caught at deep square leg.

India all-rounder Jadeja took no time to be in thick of things as he accounted for five of Delhi's batters in his

first Ranji game since 2023. No fireworks from Gill either

In Bengaluru, Punjab captain Shubman Gill (4) was caught behind in the game against Karnataka.

The team was skittled out for a mere 55 with the pace duo of Abhilash Shetty and Vasuki Koushik sharing seven wickets between them to destroy the visitors.

Gill fell to Shetty in the fourth over of the innings. The India stars made themselves available for Ranji Trophy after the BCCI made the contracted players' participation in domestic cricket mandatory, following the 1-3 series loss in Australia that opened a debate on the players' conduct and commitment to red-ball cricket. The Board had to issue a 10-point disciplinary diktat, urging all cricketers to spare time for domestic cricket.

# Man City takes spending this week to \$150 Million by signing Egypt's Omar Marmoush

PTI ■ MANCHESTER

Reeling from a damaging loss in the Champions League, Manchester City took its spending this week to around \$150 million by signing Egypt forward Omar Marmoush from Eintracht Frankfurt on Thursday in a move that provides some belated back-up to star striker Erling Haaland.

The 25-year-old Marmoush joined City for a reported 70 million euros (\$73 million), following the arrivals of young defenders Abdou Diallo from Lens and Vitor Reis from Palmeiras for a combined \$77 million. City will hope the new signings can ignite its season, which was thrown

back into turmoil when the team collapsed to a 4-2 loss at Paris Saint-Germain in the Champions League on Wednesday to plunge to the brink of elimination with one game left in the revamped first stage.

Marmoush is second to Bayern Munich's Harry Kane in the list of top scorers in the German league this season, with 15 goals from 17 games for Frankfurt. He was not in the squad for the 2-0 win over Borussia Dortmund amid negotiations with City, and went on the field after the game for an apparent farewell in front of Frankfurt's fans.

The move to City caps a rapid rise to stardom for



Marmoush, who signed transfer in 2023 from Frankfurt on a free

Wolfsburg, where he'd only

scored five goals the season before.

It's not yet clear how Marmoush would fit into Pep Guardiola's tactics. His best performances this season have come as part of a two-striker formation alongside former Paris Saint-Germain forward Hugo Ekitike, but Guardiola prefers a lone striker in Haaland.

Marmoush can play in wide roles and has generally done so for Egypt's national team, but less successfully than in a central role. He has six goals and three assists in 35 games for his country. In that sense, Marmoush seems a like-for-like replacement for Julian Alvarez, the versatile Argentina forward who left City for Atletico Madrid in

August in a deal reportedly worth more than 103 million dollar after largely being in the shadow of Haaland over the last two years.

Marmoush is the latest in a string of Frankfurt strikers to make lucrative moves to top European clubs, but they haven't always settled. Frankfurt sold Luka Jovic to Real Madrid in 2019 but he was back on loan just 18 months later and is now at Milan. Randal Kolo Muani left Frankfurt in 2023 for PSG, where he is mostly a central player and might move this month.

Guardiola has said the club is looking to bring forward future signings to this current transfer window because of injury problems

this season that have rocked his team's campaign.

The biggest of those is Rodri, the Spain midfielder and Ballon d'Or winner who is out for the season with an ACL injury. City also has been hit with injury issues at centre back, with Ruben Dias, John Stones and Nathan Ake all having time out of action. That explains the moves for Khusanov and Reis, who Guardiola says are ready to come into the team immediately if required. Not only is City struggling in the Champions League, the team is in fifth place in its Premier League title defense - 12 points behind leader Liverpool having played one game more.