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FAITH, CHARITY, BUSINESS, CONVERGE AT MAHA KUMBH 2025

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ MAHAKUMBH NAGAR

CRORES OF BELIEVERS BATHE IN THE ETERNAL GLORY OF SANGAM

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

with his family for the occasion. The elaborate security arrangements ensured a smooth flow of devotees. Police personnel stood alert at every corner, guiding the crowds and maintaining order. Drones hovered overhead, providing real-time monitoring from the Integrated Command and

Control Center. "We feel safe and cared for. The arrangements this year are truly commendable," said Kavita Joshi, a teacher from Uttarakhand.

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

impromptu performances of bhajans and folk songs, as groups of devotees formed circles and sang in unison. The atmosphere was electric yet peaceful, a blend of human devotion and divine energy. Social media was abuzz with posts, photos, and videos from the event. "I shared a live video of the aarti,

and my friends back in Mumbai were amazed. This is a part of our culture we should all be proud of," said Prerna Mehta, a first-time visitor to the Kumbh.

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

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

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

Ramkumar, a food vendor from Hardoi who arrived two weeks ago, shared his experience: "Here, we are not only feeding devotees but also earning spiritual merit. We are not overcharging anyone, and everything is running smoothly."

Similarly, Sunil from Bhadohi, who is serving tea at the event, expressed gratitude for the opportunity. "I've come here for 45 days to earn a livelihood. On this chilly first day, tea is being served to the devotees without any extra charge," he added.

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

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

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

India summons Bangladesh Deputy High Commissioner

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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

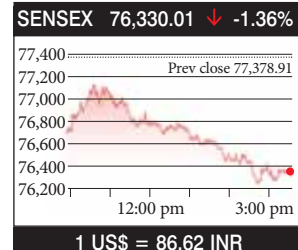
Affairs over the recent activities of the Border Security Force (BSF) of India along the Bangladesh-India Border." The conflicts have surfaced in five areas, including (northwestern) Chapainawabganj, Naogaon, Lalmonirhat, and the Tin Bigha Corridor.

FII's exit, Sensex drops sharply

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ MUMBAI

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

MARKETS



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

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

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

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DEVOTEES EMBRACE DIVINE AURA OF MAHA KUMBH

PNS ■ MAHAKUMBH NAGAR

The grand Maha Kumbh 2025 began with an overwhelming display of faith, devotion, and spiritual unity, creating a spectacle reminiscent of the spiritual grandeur witnessed once in 144 years. The massive congregation, marked by unwavering faith, deep devotion, joy and emotional fervor, transformed the sacred event into a global confluence of spirituality and human connection. A sea of devotees from across the country and the world gathered not just for chanting, meditation and spiritual fulfillment, but also to experience the unparalleled cultural heritage of Maha Kumbh. The overwhelming gathering at permanent and temporary ghats, including Sangam Noj in the holy city of Prayagraj, bore witness to this extraordinary event. Many devotees were seen with teary eyes, overwhelmed by the divine atmosphere, as they immersed themselves in prayers, rituals and the spirit of unity. These devotees were satisfied with the arrangements made by the Yogi Adityanath government for the successful and divine execution of this historic event. Two days before the official bathing day, lakhs of devotees had already begun taking holy dips, indicating that the 45-

day-long Maha Kumbh 2025 might surpass the Uttar Pradesh government's crowd projections. The massive turnout in the initial days suggests that this year's congregation will be larger than ever before. This year, the coincidence of Paus Purnima falling on a Monday, an auspicious day for the worship of Mahadev, made the occasion even more spiritually significant. Devotees were seen chanting "Har Har Mahadev", "Jai Shri Ram", and "Jai Bajrang Bali" while taking the holy dip at all the major ghats, including Sangam Noj. Pilgrims from various states like Bihar, Haryana, Bengal, Odisha, Delhi, Uttarakhand, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh were seen participating in large numbers. The splendor of Maha Kumbh has captivated not only Indian devotees but also visitors from across the world. At Sangam Ghat, a stream of international pilgrims and spiritual seekers joined the festivities. Several YouTubers from South Korea were seen capturing the heavenly experience on their cameras, while tourists from Japan engaged with local guides to understand the cultural and spiritual significance of the event. Sanatani devotees from various countries of Europe including Russia and America also witnessed this great festi-



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

CM extends best wishes

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

The world's largest spiritual and cultural gathering, Maha Kumbh 2025, commenced on Monday in the sacred city of Prayagraj. On this auspicious occasion, Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath extended a warm welcome to devotees, saints, mahatmas, kalpvasis and visitors, wishing them well for the first holy dip of Maha Kumbh. Highlighting the event's significance, the chief minister described Maha Kumbh as a proud symbol of India's spiritual and cultural heritage, embodying the essence of unity in diversity. He expressed his hope that the wishes of all those seeking spiritual fulfillment through meditation and bathing in the sacred waters of the Ganga would be realised.

He further said, "Maha Kumbh is not just a religious gathering but a testament to the global prestige of Sanatan culture and traditions." The chief minister assured that comprehensive arrangements have been made to ensure the event is divine and grand. Special focus has been placed on cleanliness, security, healthcare, traffic management, and accommodation facilities. The banks of the Sangam are witnessing unparalleled spiritual fervor and religious devotion, making Maha Kumbh a transformative experience for visitors from across the country and the world. "Join us in celebrating the glorious tradition of Sanatan culture at Maha Kumbh 2025," the Chief Minister urged. "May the grace of Maa Ganga bring happiness, peace, and prosperity to your lives," he added.

MAJESTIC SPECTACLE

val of faith and unity and took a holy dip. Among the many international visitors was Christina from Spain, who expressed her heartfelt admiration for the grandeur of Maha Kumbh, calling it a "once-in-a-lifetime experience". Foreign devotees were not only drawn to witness the event but were also seen actively participating in the rituals, with several sadhus and sanyasis

from other countries embracing Sanatan Dharma and taking the holy dip as a spiritual blessing. The vibrant energy of Maha Kumbh extended to the market areas near Sangam Mela and the Lete Hanuman Temple. Sellers of puja materials and tilak artists were seen busy attending to the swelling crowd of devotees. Retail vendors selling prasad, chunri, and diya materials mentioned that the influx of

pilgrims this year has surpassed even the 2019 Kumbh Mela. Pradeep Upadhyay, a local tilak artist, who also participated in the 2019 Kumbh, remarked that the enthusiasm and turnout in Maha Kumbh 2025 are much higher, indicating a greater spiritu-

al connection among devotees. Similarly, Santoshi Devi, a vendor from Phulpur selling puja essentials near Sangam, noted that Gangajal storage boxes were among the most purchased items, reflecting the devotees' eagerness to take back the sacred water as a symbol of divine blessings.

Kalpvas begins with bath on Paus Purnima

PNS ■ MAHAKUMBH NAGAR

The sacred tradition of Kalpvas began on Paus Purnima with a holy dip at the sacred confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna, and Saraswati in Prayagraj, where millions of devotees gathered in spiritual unity. As per the Padma Purana and Mahabharata, performing Kalpvas during the Magh month at Sangam bestows virtues equivalent to a hundred years of penance. Following the rituals, thousands of devotees have started their Kalpvas by planting bananas, Tulsi and barley, observing fasting, and adopting a disciplined lifestyle. Performing Kalpvas in the holy city of Prayagraj during Maha Kumbh is considered especially auspicious. Over 10 lakh devotees are estimated to observe Kalpvas this year, dedicating the entire month of Magh to spiritual practices. Tirth Purohit Shyam Sundar Pandey explained its significance: "Kalpvas literally means



Devotees gather to perform rituals at Sangam on Monday

living by the Sangam for a fixed time, typically from Paus Purnima to Magh Purnima. Some devotees also perform Kalpvas for shorter durations of three, five or eleven days, depending on their capacity. Completing 12 years of Kalpvas during Maha Kumbh is consid-

ered highly rewarding and liberating in scriptures. According to Sanatan tradition, Kalpvas is a spiritual gateway, transitioning an individual from the 'Vanaprastha' to the 'Sanyas' ashram. It serves as a profound practice for inner and outer rejuvenation.

The Padma Purana outlines 21 rules of Kalpvas, including thrice-daily bathing in the Ganga, simple meals, abstaining from vices, truthfulness, non-violence, celibacy, compassion and devotion through chanting, meditation and sat-sang. On Paus Purnima, devotees began their Kalpvas by taking a ritualistic dip at Sangam during Brahma muhurta, installing Lord Shaligram and Tulsi, and taking vows with Ganga water and Kusha grass. Devotees planted barley and bananas near their tents as per tradition, with bananas symbolising Lord Vishnu. Throughout the month, the kalpvasis will follow a disciplined routine of bathing, meditation, chanting and worship, detaching from worldly ties to pursue spiritual growth. The Kalpvas tradition, enriched by rituals, satsangs and devotion, represents a journey of self-purification and a profound connection to the divine, highlighting the spiritual essence of Maha Kumbh.

Global beacon of faith and unity

PNS ■ MAHAKUMBH NAGAR

Maha Kumbh 2025 has transcended borders, becoming a global hub of faith and spirituality. Pilgrims from across India and nations like the USA, Russia, Germany, Italy, Ecuador, and more have gathered at the sacred Sangam, immersing themselves in Sanatan culture. On the first bathing festival of Maha Kumbh on Paus Purnima on Monday, the atmosphere reverberated with chants of "Jai Shri Ram" and "Har Har Gange", in Hindi as well as in Spanish, German, Russian and French, as the devotees took holy dips and applied tilaks on their foreheads. The Sangam ghat of Maha Kumbh has emerged as a beacon of spiritual magnetism, attracting devotees from all corners of the world. Christina, a German resident from Ecuador, described her visit as an unforgettable spiritual journey, saying, "The soul



A foreign devotee takes a holy dip at Sangam in Prayagraj on Monday. PTI

finds peace here." Her fellow Ecuadorians echoed her sentiment, expressing a sense of purification after bathing in the sacred Ganga. New York-based fashion designer Kobi Halperin marvelled at the grandeur of Indian culture, remarking, "Maha Kumbh is not just a spiritual,

but a cultural revelation. This event has given me a profound understanding of India's traditions and values." Accompanied by friends, Mikhail from Russia described the experience as the most beautiful and divine moment of his life, declaring, "The vastness and divinity of Maha Kumbh

are beyond words." Paulo from Italy, who participated with his 12-member team, commended the arrangements made by the Yogi Adityanath government. "An event of this scale is unparalleled anywhere in the world. It reflects India's greatness, and the leadership here deserves praise for making it possible," he said. Similarly, Alex from Australia, inspired by his German friends, traveled to India to experience Maha Kumbh firsthand. He described it as "the most memorable moment of my life." This year's Maha Kumbh has drawn global attention, bridging cultures and uniting people through the universal essence of spirituality. Foreign devotees marvelled at the depth of Indian traditions, the Ganges' sanctity, and the event's seamless organisation. Maha Kumbh has proven to be more than a religious gathering – it celebrates world unity, cultural richness and spiritual enlightenment.

#Ekta_Ka_Mahakumbh tops social media trends

PNS ■ MAHAKUMBH NAGAR

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath have hailed the Maha Kumbh in Prayagraj as the "Maha Kumbh of Unity", a message that resonated widely on social media, with #Ekta_Ka_Mahakumbh trending during Paus Purnima Snan Parv on Monday, the opening day of Maha Kumbh. Users started sharing posts with #Ekta_Ka_Mahakumbh, celebrating the event's spiritual and cultural significance on social media platforms X and Instagram actively right since morning. By afternoon, the hashtag topped trending charts, showcasing widespread public participation and the collective spirit of unity symbolised by this historic gathering. Thousands of users actively shared photos, videos and information related to the event, sparking widespread engagement. Several hashtags emerged in these

discussions, with #Ekta_Ka_Mahakumbh standing out as the most prominent. By 3:30 pm, nearly 70,000 users had used the hashtag, sharing their experiences of the massive crowd, the Sangam snan, and the deep spiritual significance of Sanatan faith. Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath also joined the conversation, and his use of the hashtag triggered a surge of responses, quickly propelling #Ekta_Ka_Mahakumbh to the top of the trending charts. The hashtag was further amplified by influential figures and institutions, including former Amethi MP and BJP leader Smriti Irani, the Government of India's MyGovIndia handle, Namami Gange, Gorakhpur MP Ravi Kishan, UP Agriculture Minister Surya Pratap Shahi, and Minister Sandeep Singh. The overwhelming social media response aligns with the message of unity emphasised by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath,

who described the Maha Kumbh as a "Maha Kumbh of Unity". Chief Minister Yogi recently reaffirmed in a press conference that those who question Sanatan faith should witness the Maha Kumbh, emphasising that it transcends distinctions of caste, creed, and sect, bringing all together in the spirit of Sanatan harmony. A long side #Ekta_Ka_Mahakumbh, several other hashtags trended throughout the day, capturing the spiritual fervor of the Maha Kumbh. Hashtags such as #MahaKumbh2025, #PausPurnima, #PavitraSangam, #PrathamAmrit and #Sangam saw widespread engagement as social media users expressed their reverence for the sacred event. Many also extended congratulations and best wishes to Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath for his dedicated efforts in ensuring the grandeur and spiritual magnificence of this historic Maha Kumbh.

Modi-Yogi cutouts hot selfies points

PNS ■ MAHAKUMBH NAGAR

On the occasion of the first bathing festival of the Maha Kumbh in Prayagraj, the Sangam bank on Monday became a hotspot for a selfie competition, as crowds flocked to capture moments with the cutouts of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath. Visitors, including a sizeable number of women and youths, gathered in large numbers at Nandi Dwar to snap photos and selfies with the prominent images of the leaders, demonstrating their craze for Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath. Brajesh Sharma, a visitor from Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh, expressed his admiration for Modi and Yogi, sharing that the cutouts attracted him. His entire family joined in for selfies, praising the arrangements

at the Maha Kumbh Mela. Suganna Dhippo, who traveled from Pune, Maharashtra, for the sacred bath, praised the excellent arrangements at the event. She shared that the captivating images of Modi and Yogi at Nandi Dwar prompted her and her family, fans of the leaders, to take selfies. Sunita Swami, who arrived from Delhi, shared her experience of unexpectedly encountering the cutouts of Modi and Yogi. Impressed by their attractive visuals, she and her family took selfies, noting their admiration for the leaders' work. Manoj Kumar Singh, a visitor from Kaushambi, Uttar Pradesh, also joined the selfie trend, capturing moments with the cutouts. He praised the fair arrangements and the bathing facilities, highlighting the excellent efforts by Prime Minister Modi and Chief Minister Yogi in organising the Kumbh.

Ex-soldier in US Army embraces Sanatan Dharma, becomes Baba Mokshpuri

PNS ■ MAHAKUMBH NAGAR

The Maha Kumbh 2025 has drawn saints and spiritual gurus of profound inspiration from across the globe, including Baba Mokshpuri, formerly Michael, an ex-soldier in the US Army, who has embraced Sanatan Dharma. Hailing from New Mexico, Michael became Baba Mokshpuri (a beacon of spirituality), captivating attention at the sacred confluence in Prayagraj following his transformative journey spurred by his son's tragic demise. Reflecting on his life-changing journey into Sanatan Dharma, Baba Mokshpuri shared, "I was once an ordinary person who valued time with my family, my wife, and traveling. But my life changed when I realised the impermanence of worldly pursuits, leading me to embark on a quest for salvation."

Today, as a dedicated member of Juna Akhara, Baba Mokshpuri has devoted his life to promoting Sanatan Dharma. His journey began in 2000 when he first visited India with his family. "That trip was a turning point, I discovered meditation, Yoga, and the essence of Sanatan Dharma. The richness of Indian culture and traditions deeply moved me, igniting my spiritual awakening, which I now see as a divine calling," he recalls. A pivotal moment came with the untimely loss of his son, a tragedy that profoundly shaped his perspective. "This heartbreaking event taught me the transient nature of life. Meditation and Yoga became my solace, guiding me through this challenging time," he explains. Since then, Baba Mokshpuri has immersed himself in Yoga, meditation and spiritual enlightenment. He travels the

world to share the wisdom of Indian culture and the teachings of Sanatan Dharma. Starting with his participation in the Ujjain Kumbh in 2016, he has vowed to attend every Maha Kumbh, celebrating India's unparalleled spiritual heritage. Baba Mokshpuri also credits Neem Karoli Baba as a cornerstone of his spiritual evolution. "The energy at Neem Karoli Baba's ashram was transformative. It felt as if Baba embodied the spirit of Lord Hanuman, deepening my devotion and commitment to meditation and Yoga," he recounts. Renouncing his Western lifestyle, Baba Mokshpuri has embraced the path of self-realisation and spiritual service. He plans to establish an ashram in New Mexico to promote Indian philosophy, Yoga, and the universal values of Sanatan Dharma.

Prayagraj witnesses global influx of pilgrims

PNS ■ MAHAKUMBH NAGAR

As Maha Kumbh 2025 unfolds, the sacred city of Prayagraj is witnessing a global influx of pilgrims and visitors converging at the Sangam for a holy dip. This year's Maha Kumbh not only celebrates India's unity in diversity but also showcases a remarkable blend of spirituality, charity and thriving commerce. On the auspicious occasion of Paus Purnima, the first bathing festival of Maha Kumbh, generosity was on full display as akharas and various organisations offered free tea,

breakfast and meals to devotees. Simultaneously, the event has become a hub for entrepreneurial activity, with stalls allocated by the fair administration and countless cart vendors contributing to the bustling economy. Vendors from Prayagraj and across Uttar Pradesh are selling everything from tea and snacks to puja essentials and beauty products, turning the spiritual gathering into a source of livelihood for many. During his recent visit to Prayagraj, Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath emphasised that

Maha Kumbh 2025 would significantly boost the economy of both Prayagraj and Uttar Pradesh, potentially contributing an additional Rs 2 lakh crore. The first day of Maha Kumbh saw a bustling market atmosphere, with devotees enthusiastically shopping for food, puja items, and other essentials from both established stores and small vendors. Ramkumar, a food vendor from Hardoi who arrived two weeks ago, shared his experience: "Here, we are not only feeding devotees but also earning spiritual merit. We are not

overcharging anyone, and everything is running smoothly." Similarly, Sunil from Bhadohi, who is serving tea at the event, expressed gratitude for the opportunity. "I've come here for 45 days to earn a livelihood. On this chilly first day, tea is being served to the devotees without any extra charge," he added. Maha Kumbh 2025 is a unique confluence of commerce and charity, as the first day witnessed both thriving business and widespread acts of generosity. Various organisations set up 'bhandaras' across the fairgrounds, distributing food

and tea in abundance to the countless devotees present. From piping hot khichdi to puri sabzi, devotees were treated to a variety of meals, while tea was served at numerous stalls throughout the day. Renowned saints, including Satua Baba, have also extended hospitality by organising 'bhandaras' and making arrangements for devotees to stay in their camps, ensuring that no one leaves without being cared for. This seamless blend of spiritual service and economic activity highlights the inclusive spirit of Maha Kumbh.

Never witnessed such grand arrangements before: Uma

PNS ■ MAHAKUMBH NAGAR

Senior Bharatiya Janata Party leader Sadhvi Uma Bharti, who arrived in Prayagraj on Monday to take part in the grand Maha Kumbh 2025, has congratulated Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath for the grand arrangements for the event. Taking to her official X handle, the former Member of Parliament praised the Yogi Adityanath-led government for their exceptional efforts to

ensure seamless facilities and enhanced security measures for the devotees. Uma Bharti further said: "I have been attending the Maha Kumbh at Shri Prayagraj since 1977, but I have never witnessed such excellent arrangements, security, facilities and the remarkably polite demeanor of the administration and police towards pilgrims. Blessed is India, blessed is Shri Prayagraj, and blessed is this divine Maha Kumbh." Uma Bharti expressed her admiration for the seamless

facilities and enhanced security measures provided for pilgrims, from the railway and bus stations to the route leading to the Kumbh. She also praised the Yogi government for making excellent arrangements to help visitors stay warm in the cold weather. Concluding her message, Uma Bharti wrote, "On behalf of bhotes of Indians, I congratulate Yogi Adityanathji for these outstanding preparations and successful management of this grand spiritual event."

Temporary bus stand for Maha Kumbh pilgrims inaugurated



ADG (Zone) Piyush Mordia along with DM and ACP, inaugurating Harhua temporary bus stand in Varanasi on Monday.

fire system etc created for the emergency help of the devotees.

Meanwhile, for smooth traffic arrangements of devotees/pilgrims coming in view of Maha Kumbh, DM S Rajalingam and ACP Dr S Chinnappa conducted a surprise inspection of the temporary bus stand built near Mohansarai underpass and reviewed the arrangements and gave necessary instructions to the officials.

The DM directed the DPRO to deploy sanitation workers for mobile toilets and cleanliness. He also directed the RTO to install signage, display board/flex of rate list and route chart of vehicles. He also talked to the Secretary/ GM of Jalkal over phone to ensure availability of water tankers.

The ACP directed the police officers to coordinate and ensure smooth running of traffic system. After this, both the officers inspected the temporary bus stand built in front of Aryan International School (in Chitapur). He said they should talk to the local four-wheeler drivers, tempo and e-rickshaw operators and inform them about the entire process. He directed to level the ground and get necessary barricading done for parking the vehicles. After this, he also inspected Banaras railway station and stressed on better crowd management and strengthening the traffic system. During the inspection, the police station in charge of the area concerned and other police officers were present.



Security personnel patrol at Sangam on Monday on the first day of Maha Kumbh Mela 2025 in Prayagraj.

PTI

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ VARANASI

The temporary bus stand built at Krishak Inter College, Harhua for the stoppage of vehicles of devotees/pilgrims coming during Maha Kumbh was formally inaugurated by Additional Director General (ADG), Varanasi Zone, Piyush Mordia, District Magistrate (DM) S Rajalingam and Additional Commissioner of Police, Varanasi Commissionerate, Dr S Chinnappa here on Monday by cutting the ribbon. In the programme, the three officers were welcomed by Deputy

Transport Commissioner and Regional Transport Officer (RTO) Shikhar Ojha by giving a memento. Later, ADG, DM and ACP flagged off the bus, tempo and e-rickshaw with devotees by showing green flags. Addressing the people present the ADG said whether it is a tea seller in the bus or a driver, conductor, traffic department personnel or police department officer or employee etc all should maintain should maintain respectful behaviour towards the devotees/pilgrims. "All the devotees coming here will go to take bath in the festi-

tival of Maha Kumbh so the Satvik (pure) environment should start from here. Everyone has to take care that no one's sentiments are hurt by one's behaviour and conduct", he said. Expressing full confidence, he appealed everyone to work with full service spirit. The RTO said this model bus stand has been built for the devotees. "All other necessary arrangements, including route chart and rate list of vehicles have been ensured for the convenience of all pilgrims" he said. The ADG and other officers also observed the help centre, medical team area and

Mahana distributes blankets to poor



Assembly Speaker Satish Mahana visited Targaon in Ghatampur on Monday.

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ KANPUR

Assembly Speaker Satish Mahana on Monday visited Targaon in Ghatampur tehsil for a private programme. Ghatampur legislator Saroj Kureel of Apna Dal (S) was also present. Mahana distributed blankets to poor and needy

people and performed puja at the Ardhanarishwar temple in Gangaganj. He said that Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) is working for the benefit of the people.

He said there has been rapid development in the state due to projects and policies of the government. Commenting on the ongoing Maha Kumbh in

Prayagraj, he said the event was being discussed in foreign countries also and lot of people from there were coming to India to witness this grand Mela. Praising the role of legislator Saroj Kureel, he said she hears people's grievances and forwards them to the assembly speaker.

MISHAP: A container driver was killed and a bike-borne couple was seriously injured in a road mishap on Unnao-Hardoi road near a dhaba in Unnao on Sunday night. After identifying the body, police sent it for an autopsy. Rajesh (33) of Barhaul, Aligarh, after parking his container on the roadside near Safipur on Hardoi-Unnao road was going towards a dhaba. Meanwhile, a mason Sandeep (24) of Utsah village, Asiwan, Unnao, along with wife Mamta (22) and son Aryan (2) was also passing from there. Suddenly, on being hit by the bike the container driver Rajesh and bike-borne couple were seriously injured.

With the help of local residents, all the injured were taken to the community health centre (CHC) where Rajesh was declared dead by the doctors. However, Sandeep and his wife Mamta were referred to the district hospital while their son Arya narrowly escaped the mishap.

According to Safipur Kotwali in charge Shyam Narain Singh, eyewitness informed that the container was going towards Unnao from Aligarh. Police have impounded the container and will examine the goods contained in it. On hearing about the incident, kin of the deceased had proceeded from Aligarh. The process for autopsy started on their arrival on Monday, kotwali in charge said. Meanwhile an electrician of a solid waste plant in Baduwapur under Panki police station area allegedly committed suicide by hanging himself in the switch room of the plant on Sunday.

BJP team of Kashi region sets up camp at Maha Kumbh site

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ VARANASI

The team of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Kashi region, has made extensive preparations for the comfort and hospitality of saints, litterateurs, intellectuals and dignitaries decorated with Padma awards going to Prayagraj Maha Kumbh from Kashi. A huge camp has been set up near Nag Vasuki police station in Sector 6 of Prayagraj Maha Kumbh site. Adequate arrangements have been made for food, water, medical services and other necessary facilities in this camp. Regional BJP president Dilip Patel said Maha Kumbh is the biggest religious and cultural event of India, which is organised every 12 years at four holy places—Prayagraj, Haridwar, Ujjain and Nashik. "Crores of devotees bathe in the rivers

Ganga, Yamuna, Saraswati, Godavari and Kshipra and seek liberation from sins and salvation. Maha Kumbh is not only a religious festival, but also a symbol of Indian culture, spirituality and unity", he said, adding that more than 40 crore devotees are expected to come to Maha Kumbh from the country and abroad. Keeping this in mind, the BJP organisation along with the government and administration has made preparations in this direction. Patel said complete arrangements have been made for the stay and food of the workers and devotees coming from other states in the BJP camp. "As many as 100 dormitories, toilets, 1,000 chairs and a stage of 20x60 square feet have been built in the camp. Also, canteen, office, VIP and VVIP

tents have also been prepared. A team of 150 trained workers has been deployed to serve and assist the devotees", he said, and added that for the operation of the camp other arrangements, including camp construction, food/refreshments, vehicle service, publicity, security, social media etc have been divided into different departments. Patel said for the convenience of the devotees, BJP camps have also been set up at five railway stations and airport of Prayagraj where special arrangements have been made for welcoming the visitors apart from arrangements for refreshments, assistance to the elderly and disabled people and help to the lost people. "On the call of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, cleanliness

has also been made a mega campaign. Cleanliness work will be done on a priority before and after the main baths", he said adding that BJP workers will also coordinate for the devotees going from Kashi to Prayagraj and Ayodhya and it will be ensured that no visitor faced any problem. Regional BJP media in charge Navratan Rathi said to make this historic festival of Maha Kumbh a success, all the workers of BJP Kashi region are engaged in the service of devotees with full devotion and dedication. "This event will make its mark across the world as a symbol of Indian culture, spirituality and unity", he said and added that the regional party president will himself monitor the camp arrangements while coordinating with the state BJP headquarters.

Woman found dead at roadside

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ KANPUR

An unidentified 55-year-old woman was found dead on the roadside near Harnu village under Shivrajpur police station area of Bilhaur on Monday morning. On the basis of abrasion marks on her throat, it appeared to be a murder. On getting information hundreds of villagers assembled on the spot. Police also reached the spot and started investigation as well as efforts to ascertain the identity of the deceased. The forensic team collected crucial

evidence from there. The station house officer (SHO) said the body has been sent to the mortuary. Police are collecting information about the missing women in nearby areas and examining the CCTV footages. Locals believe that the woman was murdered elsewhere and the body was dumped in the village. However, a probe is on into the matter keeping all aspects into mind.

In another incident an elderly man, missing since December 15, died of drowning in a pond in Tejpur village

under Ghatampur police circle. His granddaughter had lodged a missing report to the police. When his body was found floating in the pond on Sunday evening, his kin suspected murder. But on receipt of post-mortem examination report, it was confirmed that he died due to drowning. Reports said that farmer Gulab Singh (65) of Dharmangadpur, Ghatampur, had gone to see the Kewadia Mela on December 15 and went missing. After failing to trace him, his granddaughter had lodged

a missing report at the Ghatampur police station. Late on Sunday evening, he was found floating in a pond near Tejpur village. Police got the body out from the pond with the help of a JCB machine and sent it for an autopsy after getting it identified by kin. Inspector Dhananjay Kumar Pandey said the autopsy report confirmed that the man died due to drowning and his kin had also been informed about it. Gulab Singh was a bachelor and earned a living through farming.

ASI revises facts about freedom fighter, installs new stone plaque at Sarnath

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ VARANASI

Following tireless efforts of freedom fighter Babu Jagat Singh Research Committee and letters written by eminent personalities of the academic world from different states of the country, the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), New Delhi, has revised the incorrect facts mentioned by British government regarding Babu Jagat Singh on the Dharmarajika Stupa stone plaque located in Sarnath and installed a new stone plaque. This stone plaque is not only a tribute to Babu Jagat Singh but also to all the martyrs involved in the freedom struggle. Patron of the committee Babu

Pradeep Narayan Singh while addressing a press conference at Jagatganj Kothi here recently said it is a tribute to the people of Kashi and an honour for the struggle of the research committee.

Research committee member Dr (Major) Arvind Kumar Singh praising this commendable work said, "This stone plaque is a tearful tribute to those martyrs, whose martyrdom is still lost in the darkness of anonymity." By revealing the truth on the land of Tathagata, the ASI has honoured all the guides of Kashi.

Patron of Varanasi Guide Association Ashok Anand said that in this case, the

guides of Varanasi had continuously written to the department regarding the amendment to the wrong facts. He termed this action of the ASI as a milestone. On the basis of the authentic documents obtained by the research committee, a book—'Babu Jagat Singh, the forgotten leader of Banaras: 1799, the untold story of Indian independence' written in English and Hindi by Dr HA Qureshi and Dr Shreya Pathak. Additionally in October the Shaheed Babu Jagat Singh Dwar was inaugurated at Jagatganj by Uttar Pradesh Minister of State (Independent Charge) for Stamp, Court Fees and Registration Ravindra Jaiswal.

NCR GM inaugurates renovated control room

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ PRAYAGRAJ

General Manager of North Central Railway (NCR) Upendra Chandra Joshi inaugurated the renovated control room on Monday.

On the occasion Principal Chief Operating Manager (PCOM) Sharat Chandrayan and others were present. With the construction of the renovated control room, all the employees of the control room associated with the operation of trains in Maha Kumbh-2025 will be benefited. The general manager appreciated the renovated control room and also mentioned the facilities provided to the employees and emphasised on working attentively and with full concentration.



2 killed as DCM rams into truck

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ KANPUR

Two people died when their speeding DCM carrying parcels collided with a truck on Naubasta highway on Monday morning. The deceased were identified as Brijesh Pandey of Hisawa, Mangalpur and Ranjit of Akbarpur in Kanpur Dehat who were en route to Fatehpur. The DCM driver fled leaving the vehicle on the spot. Police sent the bodies for autopsy. ADCP (South) Mahesh Kumar said the speeding DCM ramed into the truck on the flyover in Naubasta around 8.30. This killed two people sitting on the front seat of the DCM. On getting information about

the incident, the Hanuman Vihar police rushed to spot. Both the bodies were sent to LLR (Hallet) Hospital mortuary. The damaged vehicle was towed to the Hanuman Vihar police station. The traffic remained disrupted for about two hours after the incident. Police got the damaged vehicle removed and restored the normal traffic movement.

In another incident, a van driver was seriously injured when his uncontrolled vehicle suddenly overturned on the roadside near Ramganga canal in Vidhnu police station area on Monday morning. All the eight students of BSc (first year) present in the van had a narrowly escape.

SDC BHU conducts interactive session for library staff



An interactive session for library staff being held at BHU in Varanasi on Monday.

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ VARANASI

The Staff Development Cell (SDC), Banaras Hindu University (BHU) conducted an

engaging interaction and feedback session for its library staff, including professional assistants (PAs), semi-professional assistants (SPAs) and library assistants (LAs). The

interactive session was conducted by SDC coordinator Prof Sujit Kumar Dubey along with members RP Mehrotra and Assistant Registrar Raj Kumar Soni. The par-

ticipants actively engaged in discussions covering key topics such as the clarity of work roles and expected outcomes, their perception of being adequately qualified for their positions, the frequency of communication with senior staff and the level of support received from co-workers. Additionally, feedback was sought on the adequacy of workplace facilities, the overall work environment at BHU, their sense of belonging within the university community and the need for self-development programmes. Staff members also reflected on instances where they supported colleagues and proposed suggestions for new initiatives under the SDC. The session witnessed enthusiastic participation, with staff expressing

strong interest in attending development programmes designed to enhance their professional skills and support their daily work. This initiative reflects BHU's ongoing commitment to fostering a supportive and growth-oriented work environment for all its employees.

CELEBRATED: The local Congress workers celebrated the birthday of All India Congress Committee (AICC) general secretary and Wayanad MP Priyanka Gandhi by distributing copies, pencils, pens, chocolates, fruits and sweets among orphans in Kashi Anathalay (orphanage) Lahurabir on Sunday under the joint leadership of district president Rajeshwar Patel and city chief Raghavendra Choubey.

Auto, taxi drivers postpone strike

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ VARANASI

The decision of auto and taxi drivers to go on a strike on the issue of prepaid receipt at Varanasi Junction (Cantt) railway station has been postponed for 10 more days. In a meeting of RTO and district administration here on Monday on the issue of prepaid receipt of auto and taxi stand at Cantt railway station, Varanasi RTO Shikhar Ojha spoke to divisional railway manager DRM/NR, Lucknow, and got Auto Drivers' Union President Bhagwan Singh to talk to him.

The auto and taxi drivers had decided to go on an indefinite strike from January 14 over prepaid receipt of auto and taxi stand at Cantt Railway Station. However, after the meeting,

this decision was deferred in view of DRM's assurance and Maha Kumbh.

Auto Union chief said the strike has been postponed for 10 days to save pilgrims from any kind of trouble during Maha Kumbh, the biggest pilgrimage of Sanatan Dharma, and on the assurance of divisional railway manager, Lucknow. It was decided in the meeting that if prepaid receipt is not arranged at Cantt railway station in the next 10 days, then we will be forced to go on strike.

The drivers made it clear that if their demands are not heard, they are ready to go on an indefinite strike and during this period the station administration will be responsible for any inconvenience caused to passengers.

Situation along LAC 'sensitive but stable': Army Chief

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

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

the Army chief said on the overall LAC situation. He said there is still a "degree" of standoff between the Indian and Chinese militaries along the LAC in eastern Ladakh and both sides need to sit down and firm up a broader understanding on how to calm down the situation. General Dwivedi, describing the situation in the region as "sensitive but stable", said the corps commanders have now been delegated powers to resolve "trivial" matters or "minor frictions" relating to patrolling and grazing so that they do not become "big" issues later. The Army chief also said there was no such thing called buffer zones as a temporary moratorium was put on patrolling in certain areas to avoid chances of violence. Delving into changes witnessing the region since the face-off began in April 2020, General Dwivedi said both sides "documented" the terrain, carried out

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



meetings," he said. Following an understanding reached on October 21 last year, the two sides completed the disengagement of troops at the two remaining friction points of Demchok and Depsang. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping held talks on the margins of the BRICS Summit in Russia on October 23 and agreed to revive various bilateral dialogue mechanisms, signalling an intention to normalise the relations. Last month, National Security Advisor(NSA)Ajit Doval travelled to Beijing and held Special Representatives talks with Chinese Foreign Minister

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

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

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

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



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

Dhankhar lauds EC for conducting polls that earned global accolades

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

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

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



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

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

GMDA Enforcement Wing acts heavily on encroachment at SPR

STAFF REPORTER ■ GURUGRAM

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



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

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

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

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



"A writ has just been filed in the Supreme Court challenging the recent amendments to the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961," he had said earlier in a post on X. Ramesh had said the Election Commission, a Constitutional body charged with the conduct of free and fair elections cannot be allowed to unilaterally, and without public consultation, amend such a vital law in such a brazen manner. "This is especially true when that amendment does away with public access to essential information that makes the electoral process more transparent and accountable," he had said. Based on the recommendation of the Election Commission of India, the Union law ministry in December amended Rule 93(2)(a) of the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961, to restrict the type of "papers" or documents open to public inspection.

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



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Confluence of faith

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

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



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

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

PICTALK



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

The calculus behind global invitations

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



BHOPIINDER SINGH

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

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

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



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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

DECODING ANCIENT LANGUAGES

Madam — The Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu MK Stalin has announced a prize of \$1 million for deciphering the script of the Indus Valley Civilisation (IVC), or Harappan Civilisation, aka Dravidian Civilisation, the Bronze Age culture that originated in the Indus River valley around 6000 BCE. For over a century, "the pictographic and logo-syllabic script, probably standing for one or two languages, has been the most vexing problem for epigraphists and archaeologists. However, "Indus script scholars John Marshall, Yuri Knorozov, Nikita Gurov, Kamil Zvebil, Asko Parpola, Iravatham Mahadevan and Bryan Wells agree that the language underlying the Indus script is Dravidian." A science paper pointed out that the Indus Valley people spoke a Dravidian language, while the Vedic people spoke an Indo-European language, Sanskrit.

The paper argues, "A possible scenario combining genetic data with archaeology and linguistics is that proto-Dravidian was spread by people of the Indus Valley Civilisation." At an event in Chennai to mark the centenary of the IVC, Stalin said that the discovery of Sir John Marshall, the then Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India, completely changed the understanding of India's past. Stalin added that the discovery debunked the claim that Aryans and Sanskrit originated in India. Marshall's argument that the IVC predated Aryan (Vedic) civilisation and that the language in the Indus Valley could be Dravidian was a turning point in history. Ironically, his statue is being installed in Tamil Nadu, though he is credited with discovering IVC through excavations in Harappa and Mohenjodaro, now in Pakistan.

Haridasan Rajan | Kozhikode

END POST-RETIREMENT POSTINGS

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

India a developed nation by 2047



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

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

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

Vishal Mayur | Tumakuru

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

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

searching for fuel sticks in a desert land.

A G Rajmohan | Anantapur

EMPOWERING WOMEN INVESTORS

Madam — The participation of women in India's equity markets is steadily growing, marking a significant shift in financial dynamics. Factors like increased financial independence, digital accessibility through investment platforms, and rising financial literacy have empowered women to actively invest in stocks. Women are adopting a research-driven, long-term approach, contributing to a more balanced and stable market environment.

Despite challenges like cultural biases and limited confidence in some cases, the trend is gaining momentum. This rise not only promotes gender inclusivity but also strengthens retail participation in India's equity landscape, heralding a more diverse financial future.

Anushka Bohra | Ujjain

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

How to give a golden touch to the silver years

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

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

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



chance to drink life to the lees. Health issues have started giving me early warnings. And every time I travel to the West and see people older than me by a few decades living with independence, engagement, and joy, I am overcome not with envy but with wonder—and a quiet determination.

Why do we, in India, not envision such a golden old age for ourselves? Why do we resign ourselves so early to physical decline, social withdrawal, and the weight of ailments? Somewhere along the way, we have been conditioned to expect aging as a slow retreat from life rather than an opportunity for a second bloom. Part of it lies in our cultural mindset, perhaps where old age is often equated with quietude,

dependence, and spiritual pursuits. In contrast, many Western cultures emphasise personal fulfillment and activity well into the later years of life. Retirees continue to travel, explore hobbies, and stay physically active, seeing old age as a continuation of life rather than its decline. We Indians often embrace a more sedentary old age, citing health issues, familial obligations, or even spirituality as reasons to wind down. But does spirituality have to mean withdrawal?

The narrative around aging needs to shift—from enduring to embracing, from retiring to thriving. Perhaps, if we break free from the cultural mould of passive aging and take cues from people like John and Hazel, we can look forward to a life where the sunset years are not just endured but truly, deeply lived. To achieve this, we must adopt a proactive approach. Regular physical activity tailored to our abilities can significantly enhance mobility and reduce age-related health issues. Prioritising balanced nutrition with a focus on protein intake and essential

vitamins is key to maintaining strength and mental clarity. Beyond physical wellness, fostering emotional well-being by staying connected with friends, family, and community can counter isolation and loneliness, which often accompany aging. Moreover, financial planning cannot be overlooked. A secure financial base can empower older adults to pursue passions, travel, and stay engaged in life. Ultimately, aging is a privilege—a phase of life that can be as vibrant and fulfilling as any other if approached with the right mindset.

Let us not merely aspire for longer lives but richer ones, where we continue to explore, learn, and inspire generations that follow. The golden years can truly be golden if we choose to make them so. To John, Hazel and dozens others that I come across on my jaunts to the other side of the globe, thank you. For making me see life in a whole new perspective.

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



FIRST COLUMN

AN ODE TO MY MOTHER

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



RAVI VALLURI

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

Deciphering the concerns in State of Forests Report 2023



V K BAHUGUNA

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



The Forest Survey of India (FSI) has a few weeks ago released its 2023 state of Forest report which shows an increasing trend in forest and tree cover in the country. The current assessment has shown a very meagre increase in forest cover by 156.41 sq km compared to the past assessment of 2021. However, the total forest and tree cover of the country has increased by 1445.81 sq km compared to the last assessment of 2021.

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

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



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

overall scenario demand a serious rethink on the way we manage our forest bio-diversity, even though India is ranked 3rd in top ten countries for an average net gain in the forest area. Let us discuss some of the points for action by the professionals/ administrators as well as the political leaders.

Before I flag the issues let us accept the fact that Trees outside the recorded forests are to the tune of 30.7 million ha which is 37.11 per cent of the total forest and tree cover of the country. All kinds of plantations like rubber, coconut, palm, areca nut etc are also included in it have saved the foresters from criticism with around 1289.40 sq km increase in tree cover between 2021 and 2023 and 20,286.57 sq km almost a 20 per cent increase since 2013.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

India and Afghanistan: Navigating a complex diplomatic landscape

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

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



K S TOMAR

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

region. **India's Diplomatic and Developmental Footprint** India's involvement with Afghanistan extends beyond diplomatic posturing and is driven by long-term strategic and developmental goals. Through substantial investments in infrastructure, education, and humanitarian aid, India has positioned itself as an important partner to

Afghanistan. Projects such as the construction of the Afghan Parliament, the Salma Dam, and educational scholarships for Afghan students have significantly enhanced Afghanistan's infrastructure while fostering goodwill between the two nations. India's developmental efforts have had a direct positive impact on Afghanistan's stability and growth, providing a counterbalance to Pakistan's attempts to exert control over Afghan affairs. Strengthening ties with Afghanistan offers India significant strategic benefits, including access to Central Asia.

By bypassing Pakistan, India secures a direct route to Central Asia's markets and resources, reducing Pakistan's monopoly over Afghanistan's

trade routes. This economic advantage is coupled with enhanced counterterrorism cooperation, as both nations share concerns about the proliferation of extremist groups. This collaboration not only bolsters India's position as a responsible regional power but also contributes to regional stability.

Pakistan's Strategic Setback: India's strengthened relationship with Afghanistan poses a significant challenge to Pakistan's strategic objectives. Historically, Pakistan has viewed Afghanistan as a strategic depth, crucial for its security and regional influence. Any shift in Afghanistan's alliances toward India directly undermines this narrative. The development of an India-Afghanistan trade corridor,



particularly through Iran's Chabahar Port, bypasses Pakistan entirely, diminishing its leverage over Afghanistan's trade routes. This economic shift erodes Pakistan's ability to influence Afghan policy, further isolating it in the region. Security concerns compound Pakistan's challenges. The increasing Indian presence in Afghanistan is perceived as a potential avenue for intelligence-gathering and support

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

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

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

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

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

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

PM Modi inaugurates Z-Morh Tunnel

MOHIT KANDHARI ■ JAMMU

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

the pipeline across Jammu and Kashmir.

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

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

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

ensuring year-round connectivity to Sonamarg.

Emphasising the extensive infrastructure development from Jammu and Kashmir to Arunachal Pradesh, the Prime Minister remarked that Jammu and Kashmir is becoming a hub of tunnels, high bridges, and ropeways, with some of the world's highest tunnels and highest rail-road bridges being constructed here.

The Prime Minister noted the engineering marvel of the Chenab Bridge, where a passenger train trial was recently completed. He mentioned several key projects, including the cable bridge enhancing Kashmir's railway connectivity, the Zojila, Chenani Nashri, and Sonamarg tunnel projects, and the Udhampur-Srinagar-Baramulla rail link project. The Prime Minister also mentioned the schemes for the Shankaracharya Temple, Shivkhori, and Baltal-Amarnath ropeways, as well as the Katra-Delhi expressway. He emphasized that over ₹42,000 crore worth of road

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha also lauded Prime Minister Narendra Modi for transforming Jammu and Kashmir into a "real paradise" and eradicating terrorism from the region.

Speaking at the inaugural ceremony of the 6.5-km-long Z-Morh tunnel in Central Kashmir, LG Sinha, highlighted the developmental strides J&K has achieved under PM Modi's leadership.

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

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

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



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

PM Modi to launch Mission Mausam

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Meteorological Department, the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology, and the National Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasting. Mission Mausam will directly benefit numerous sectors, such as agriculture, disaster management, defence, environment, aviation, water resources, power, tourism, shipping, transport, energy, and health, the communique said, adding that it would also enhance data-driven decision-making in areas such as urban planning, road and rail transport, offshore operations, and environmental monitoring.

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

Soldiers at Siachen glacier now have high-speed internet

PTI ■ SRINAGAR

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CBI get approval to prosecute AAP leader Satyendar Jain

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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

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

The court had noted the CBI's sanction request and asked it to "personally monitor the matter" for the completion of the process in reasonable time. Observing the agency did not maintain the case diary according to the rules, the judge sought a status report from the CBI's deputy inspector general concerned on November 5, 2024.

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

BSF shoots Bangladeshi smuggler

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

Amid ongoing unease over the Indian efforts to build fence along the international border with Bangladesh the Border Security Force had to open fire reportedly injuring one Bangladeshi cattle-smuggler near the Mathabhanga outpost.

The incident took place late on Sunday night. According to Bangladesh newspaper, "Shahidul Islam, 44, has been injured in firing by the BSF in Patgram.

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

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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

demanding crores of rupees.

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

The gang relied on SIM cards and phones sourced from abroad to avoid detection and ensure anonymity, he said. The gang's activities were coordinated by Ajay and Kumar, who received instructions from associates based in foreign countries, including jailed members of the Gogi-Dinesh Karalia gang. Kumar told the interrogators that Ajay had persuaded him into joining the gang and expanding its extortion operations.

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

The Gogi-Dinesh Karalia gang has a

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

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

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

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

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

Vaishnav opted for Meta's



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

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

"From free food for 800 million, 2.2 billion free

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

TN RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Growing complexity widening cyber inequity: World Economic Forum report

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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



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

or intellectual property theft as their top concern. The WEF report said that the rising complexity in cyber space arises from the rapid growth of emerging technologies, prevailing geopolitical uncertainty, the evolution of threats, regulatory challenges,

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

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

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



PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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

The inflation based on Consumer Price Index (CPI) was 5.48 per cent in November and 5.69 per cent in December 2023. According to CPI data released by the National Statistics Office (NSO), the inflation in the food basket reduced to 8.39 per cent in December. It was 9.04 per

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

Infra development imperative to achieve Viksit Bharat goal: Gadkari



PTI ■ SONAMARG

Union Minister Nitin Gadkari on Monday said infrastructure development is imperative to achieve the goal of Viksit Bharat, as the economy depends on good transport and communication facilities.

"The Prime Minister has given us a mission of developed and prosperous India. If we have to achieve a Viksit Bharat, we will have to improve the country's infrastructure. "Until water, power, and

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

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

previously known as the Z-Morh tunnel, was historic and would provide all-weather connectivity to the tourist resort town. "Today is a historic day that the Sonamarg tunnel is being inaugurated by the Prime Minister. Due to the closure of this road (due to heavy snowfall), some areas remained closed for five to six months per year. "It was started in 2012, but there were several difficulties. Today, I am happy that the work has been completed. By the opening of this tunnel -- Srinagar to Ladakh, Leh highway will especially be connected, which used to remain shut for 5-6 months," he noted. He said the work on the nearby Zojila tunnel was going on and once open, it will reduce the travel time from Srinagar to Leh by 3.5 hours and keep the road open throughout the year.

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



PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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

appreciated Rs 1,660, or 2.1 per cent, to Rs 80,660 per 10 grams. The price of gold of 99.5 per cent purity rose Rs 110 to Rs 80,260 per 10 grams against the previous close of Rs 80,150 per 10 grams on Friday. "Gold prices advanced as the rupee weakened by touching 86.61, driven by elevated crude oil prices. The rise in crude prices came on the back of fresh sanctions imposed on Russia by US President Joe Biden, escalating geopolitical tensions," Jateen Trivedi, VP Research Analyst of Commodity and Currency at LKP Securities, said. The rupee logged its steepest single-day fall in nearly two years and ended the session 58 paise down at its historic low of 86.62 (provisional) against the US dollar on Monday, weighed down by a stronger American currency and surging crude oil prices. "This rupee depreciation supported gold prices in the domestic market, amplifying the impact of global cues," Trivedi added. However, silver traded flat in the second straight session at Rs 93,000 per kg on Monday. Meanwhile, gold contracts for February delivery on the MCX increased Rs 227, or 0.29 per cent, to Rs 78,650 per 10 grams in futures trade on Monday.

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



PTI ■ MUMBAI

The rupee logged its steepest single-day fall in nearly two years and ended the session 58 paise down at its historic low of 86.62 (provisional) against the US dollar on Monday, weighed down by a stronger American currency and surging crude oil prices. At the interbank foreign exchange, the rupee opened at 86.12, and moved 1 paise during intraday to 86.11 before closing the session with a loss of a staggering 58 paise at its lowest-ever level of 86.62 (provisional) against the greenback. The fall of 58 paise, or 0.67 per cent, in one session was the steepest since February 6, 2023 when the unit had lost 68 paise. The Indian currency has witnessed the deepest plunge of more than Re 1 in the past two weeks from the closing level of 85.52 on December 30. Rupee had breached the 85-per-dollar mark for the first time on December 19, 2024. On Friday, the local currency had declined 18 paise to settle at 86.04 against the US dollar, a day after registering a marginal gain of 5 paise. In the

preceding back-to-back sessions on Tuesday and Wednesday, it had plunged 6 paise and 17 paise, respectively. The unprecedented fall was attributed to the relentless chase of the US dollar by investors, which also led to a massive withdrawal of foreign capital from Indian equities. Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth Rs 2,254.68 crore on Friday. So far this month foreign investors have withdrawn Rs 22,194 crore from Indian equities, according to exchange data. According to analysts, the Reserve Bank of India has allowed the fall in rupee's exchange rate versus US dollar amid dwindling forex reserves and declining emerging market currencies. "RBI will allow the weakness as demand keeps moving up and supplies dwindle," said Anil Kumar Bhansali, Head of Treasury and Executive Director, Finrex Treasury Advisors LLP. The Reserve Bank of India on Friday said the country's forex reserves dropped by USD 5.693 billion to USD 634.585 billion in the week ended January 3.

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

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Asset management companies launched 239 new fund offerings (NFOs) mobilising Rs 1.18 lakh crore in 2024, with sectoral or thematic equity funds emerging as the top choice of investors, according to a report by Germinate Investor Services Research. This was higher than 212 NFOs collecting Rs 63,854 crore in 2023 and 228 NFOs garnering Rs 62,187 crore in 2022. The NFO landscape expanded from 81 offerings in 2020 to 239 in 2024, besides, the funds raised through the space more



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

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

were floated to capitalise on the mood of investors and attract their investment as they were willing to invest at that time. Industry experts said the stock market performance along with the positive investor sentiments led to higher fund mobilisation through NFOs in 2024. In the entire 2024, Sensex jumped 5,898.75 points or 8.16 per cent, and the Nifty surged 1,913.4 points or 8.80 per cent. Overall, thematic/sectoral funds, index funds and exchange traded funds (ETFs) captured significant investor interest. "With 53 NFOs raising Rs 79,109 crore, these funds

emerged as the top choice for investors," the report said. Tailored to specific sectors or themes, sectoral or thematic equity funds resonated with investors for their focused approach and alignment with market trends. Notable examples include funds targeting sectors like manufacturing, technology, and ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) themes. Individually, HDFC Manufacturing Fund NFO led the pack, with a record inflow of Rs 12,500 crore in April 2024. In terms of month, the highest number of NFO launches was recorded in December,

marking a strong year-end momentum. Going ahead, the report said the mutual fund industry is likely to face a recalibration in 2025 after the strong gains of recent years. "While extraordinary returns may not sustain, the focus will shift to ensuring stability, maintaining liquidity, and achieving reasonable returns in line with market trends. Investors must adapt to a more balanced approach, safeguarding capital while managing expectations. This calls for strategies that align with changing market dynamics and ensure a steady performance even in uncertain times," it added.

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

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India ranked third globally in terms of funding received in the fintech segment despite a decline of 33 per cent on a year-over-year basis to USD 1.9 billion in 2024, market intelligence firm Tracxn said in a report on Monday. The sector witnessed a decline in funding, driven by a broader slowdown in demand and geopolitical headwinds, Tracxn's Annual India fintech report 2024 said. "The fintech sector experienced a notable decline in funding in 2024, with a total of USD 1.9 billion raised. This represents a 33 per cent decrease from the USD 2.8 billion secured in 2023. The Indian fintech ecosystem has solidified its position as one of the top three globally funded fintech ecosystems in 2024, trailing only the US and the UK," the report said. The sector had raised USD 5.6 billion in 2022. The highest funding of USD 805 during 2024



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

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

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

such rounds in 2023. The digital lending solutions dominated the funding received by accounting for 64 per cent of the total funding raised during the year. The notable deals in 2024 included DMI Finance raising USD 334 million funding led by MUFNG and Credit Saison raising USD 144 million during the year. The late-stage rounds are the most affected. Late-stage funding amounted to USD 1.1

billion, marking a 42 per cent reduction compared to the USD 1.9 billion raised in 2023, the report said. The late-stage funding was USD 3.1 billion in 2022. Early-stage funding rounds recorded a 16 per cent Y-o-Y drop to USD 562 million in 2024 from USD 667 million raised in 2023 and a 70 per cent decline compared to USD 1.9 billion in 2022. Seed-stage funding declined 19 per cent Y-o-Y to USD 178 million in 2024 from USD 219 million in 2023 and 66 per cent from USD 529 million in 2022. "Mergers and acquisition activity saw a slight dip, with 26 acquisitions recorded in 2024, down 16 per cent from 31 in 2023. Notable transactions included the USD 94.5 million acquisition of PureSoftware by Happiest Minds, and the USD 44 million acquisition of ET Money by 360 One," the report said. The sector recorded eight IPOs in 2024 which was a 300 per cent increase compared

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

IN BRIEF

SURJIT PATAR MEMORIAL FUNCTION-2025 ON 14TH JANUARY

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

PVUNL HOSTS FIRST ASH USER MEET 2025 AT RANCHI

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

PONGAL FESTIVAL OBSERVED AT NARUVI HOSPITALS

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

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

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

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

PTI ■ MADRID

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

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



a nice run in the 22nd and Lewandowski, who scored twice in the earlier clasico,

put the Catalans ahead in the 36th. Raphinha added goals in the

39th and 48th minutes, while Balde scored in first-half stoppage time.

Rodrygo scored from a free kick in the 60th after Szczesny was sent off for a

foul outside the area to stop a breakthrough. Lewandowski has 26 goals in 27 appearances across all competitions for Barcelona, while Raphinha has scored 19 times and Yamal eight. Barcelona was able to count on Spain midfielder Dani Olmo after the Spanish government stepped in to provisionally allow the club to register him with the league. The final came after Mallorca fans said they were harassed by local men who support Madrid after Thursday's semifinal. Two wives of Mallorca players said they were groped. The Spanish Super Cup has become a moneymaker for the federation and competing clubs since the federation struck a deal in 2019 to hold it in Saudi Arabia. **ATLETICO'S RECORD** Atletico Madrid set a club

all-time record of 14 straight victories with a 1-0 win over Osasuna on Sunday and went top of the Spanish league at the halfway stage. Julián Alvarez scored in the 55th minute at the Metropolitan stadium to give Atletico the milestone victory and a one-point lead over second-place Madrid. Diego Simeone's team has a six-point gap to third-place Barcelona. Atletico has won all of its matches across all competitions since October. Its last setback was a 1-0 loss at Real Betis in the Spanish league on Oct. 27. Eight of the victories have come in the league. "It's an important streak to show the growth of this club," Simeone said. "We have been working really hard." It was the seventh consecutive league game without a win for Osasuna, which is in 11th place.



Cummins, Hazlewood in Australia CT squad despite injury concerns

PTI ■ SYDNEY

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

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

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

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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



more than 150 overs and emerged the highest wicket-taker on both sides with 32 scalps. "Please don't compare. You cannot compare one generation with another. That is not required. Today, players are scoring 300 runs in a day. It didn't happen during our time. So don't compare the two (generations)," said Kapil during an event hosted by the Professional Golf Tour of India (PGTI) of which he is

the president. The 1983 World Cup-winning skipper also added that one should not question the judgement of the selectors as they would have arrived at the decision to not play Jaiswal and Pant after giving it a thought. The two cricketers played all five Tests during the gruelling Australia series, with Jaiswal (391) emerging the second-highest run-getter, second only to Travis Head (448).

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



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

PTI ■ MELBOURNE

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

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

SA include Ngidi, Nortje in CT squad

PTI ■ JOHANNESBURG

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



rubber against Pakistan. Pacer Nandre Burger, who suffered a a lumbar stress reaction, ahead of the ODI series against Ireland in early October too was not considered for selection. However, the Proteas trusted the improving fitness of all-rounder Wiaan Mulder, who broke his middle finger in the series against Sri Lanka, but he played in the second Test against Pakistan after the physios gave the green signal.

Keshav Maharaj and Tabraiz Shamsi are the specialist spinners, who will be assisted by Aiden Markram's part-time off-spin. South Africa squad: Temba Bavuma (captain), Tony de Zorzi, Marco Jansen, Heinrich Klaesen, Keshav Maharaj, Aiden Markram, David Miller, Wiaan Mulder, Lungi Ngidi, Anrich Nortje, Kagiso Rabada, Ryan Rickelton, Tabraiz Shamsi, Tristan Stubbs, Rassie van der Dussen.

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

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The focus is the biggest ever but focus would be on a handful of tried-and-tested names, especially the men's doubles team of Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty, when Indian shuttlers go up against a world-class field in the India Open Super 750 tournament beginning here on Tuesday. Despite the name, Indian success at the tournament hasn't been particularly regular with none from the host nation winning any title in the past two editions. The 21-strong group that will take the court this week would be desperate to change that statistic and make some amends after an ordinary Olympic campaign six months ago. The expectations would be especially high from Satwik and Chirag, who claimed the doubles title in 2022, the same year in which the currently erratic Lakshya Sen notched the men's singles top honour. The tournament will

feature 18 of the world's top-20 men's singles players and 14 of the top-20 women's singles shuttlers. Chirag and Satwik, who are former world number ones, have made a good start to the season by reaching the semifinals of the Malaysia Super 1000 last week. Despite the Paris Games disappointment, they have emerged as India's most reliable performers over the last two years by regularly making the deep end of the draws. They would be expected to do the same in the USD 950,000 event to be held at the KD Jadhav Indoor Stadium here. Satwik and Chirag, semifinalists at the 2024 China Masters, will face Malaysia's Wei Chong Man and Kai Wun Tee in their opening round. While the Indians have shown impressive form, they will be seeking improvement in quick rallies and service variations in a bid to better their runners-up position in the tournament last year. However, the Indian pair will face stiff competition from top names such as



China's Olympic silver-medallists Liang Weikeng and Wang Chang. Also there in the field are Paris bronze-medallists Aaron Chia and Soh Wooi Yik of Malaysia, Denmark's Kim Astrup and Anders Rasmussen, and the

Indonesian combination of Fajar Alfian and Muhammad Rian Ardianto. Sindhu back in action Despite an underwhelming 2024, one can never discount two-time Olympic medallist PV Sindhu, who would be

back in action after missing the season-opener in Kuala Lumpur due to her wedding. The 29-year-old Hyderabad returned to winning ways, lifting the Syed Modi International title, although it was against a predominantly Indian field. Sindhu will begin her campaign against compatriot Anupama Upadhyaya and is drawn to face Japan's rising star Tomoka Miyazaki in a potentially intriguing second round. MKiyazaki is a 2022 world junior champion and Sindhu's conqueror at last year's Swiss Open. Sindhu last won this event in 2017. The very exciting but equally inconsistent Lakshya Sen would be aiming to replicate his 2022 success at the event. He can draw confidence from his Syed Modi title win and a third-place finish at the Kings Cup a few days ago. He faces a tough opening test against Chinese left-hander Hong Yang Weng. HS Prannoy, returning after a five-month break following a pre-quarterfinal exit at the Paris Olympics, stumbled in the second round in

Malaysia last week. However, the 32-year-old veteran showed signs of his vintage form during the short campaign. He will look to build on that when he faces Chinese Taipei's Li Yang Su in the first round. A victory could set up a showdown with second seed Jonatan Christie of Indonesia. With marquee players like Olympic champions Viktor Axelsen (men) and An Se Young (women), and world No. 1 Shi Yuqi leading the competition, it would be no stroll in the park for the Indians in fray. But being on home turf could prove to be the morale-booster that helps them go over the line in difficult situations. Young names eye glory Some promising youngsters will also be eager to make a mark. Among them is Priyanshu Rajawat, who faces a tough challenge in his opening round against sixth-seeded Japanese Kodai Naraoka. Malvika Bansod will take on third seed Chinese Yue Han, and Aakarshi Kashyap will face eighth-seeded Thai Pornpawee Chochuwong.

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