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LUCKNOW, SATURDAY JANUARY 18, 2025; PAGES 12 ₹3

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PUBLISHED FROM: DELHI | LUCKNOW | BHOPAL | BHUBANESWAR | RANCHI | RAIPUR | CHANDIGARH | DEHRADUN | HYDERABAD | VIJAYWADA

FREEFALL OF FREEBIES

SAUMYA SHUKLA ■ NEW DELHI

The BJP on Friday launched the first part of its 'Sankalp Patra' for the upcoming Delhi assembly elections, surpassing all 'freebies' expectations with the announcement of six poll promises, including Rs 21,000 for pregnant women, Rs 2,500 under the 'Mahila Samridhhi Yojana', LPG cylinders at Rs 500, and Rs 3,000 pension for senior citizens aged over 70 years. However, shortly after the announcement, AAP chief Arvind Kejriwal sharply reacted to the BJP's manifesto, calling it a 'Kejriwal Patra' instead of 'Sankalp Patra'. He accused the BJP of 'copying' his party for announcing several 'reversis' (freebies) in its 'Sankalp Patra', stating that Prime Minister Narendra Modi won't approve of the "freebies" promised by the BJP. "The BJP has repeatedly said that Kejriwal gives away free handouts, but today the BJP's national president announced that they too will provide free handouts to the people of Delhi," Kejriwal said. "I want to tell them that they should acknowledge that Prime Minister Modi was wrong when he said the things he did about us. They should also accept that free handouts are not wrong—they are a gift from God and good for the country. He should come forward and assure that he consents to these (BJP) promises. He should tell us that I was right in providing free handouts," Kejriwal added. Releasing the first part of the manifesto, BJP President Nadda said that women's empowerment has been a priority area for Prime Minister Narendra Modi. He added that BJP-ruled states, including Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, and Haryana, are already providing financial aid to women. The second promise of the BJP is to provide LPG cylinders for Rs 500 to women from poor families and one free cylinder each on the occasions of



BJP National President JP Nadda along with Delhi BJP President Virendra Sachdeva and others leaders during addresses the media during the launch of 'BJP Sankalp Patra Part-I' for Delhi Assembly elections, in New Delhi

AAP promises, BJP dismisses

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

In another move to target youth voters, former Chief Minister and AAP chief Arvind Kejriwal, seeking re-election in the assembly polls, announced a major guarantee providing free bus travel to all school and college students in Delhi. Additionally, Kejriwal proposed a 50 percent concession on metro fares for students, urging the Central government to collaborate with the Delhi government in sharing the cost of this initiative. Terming it an irresponsible move, Congress leader Sandeep Dikshit slammed Kejriwal's proposal, saying that the AAP promises what it cannot deliver financially and would eventually accuse the national authorities of obstruction. In his letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the AAP convenor



said, "Delhi's students rely on the Delhi Metro for commuting to schools and colleges to a large extent. To reduce the financial burden on them, I propose a 50 percent concession to students in Delhi Metro. Delhi Metro is a joint venture between the Central and Delhi governments. The expenditure on this scheme will have to be borne by both." Kejriwal's request to Prime Minister Modi came on the day ahead of the

release of the BJP's 'Sankalp Patra' manifesto for the Delhi elections 2025. Notably, Delhi Metro is operated in collaboration between the Delhi and Central governments. The announcement, however, cannot be implemented immediately due to the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) currently in place in Delhi. Kejriwal assured that the scheme would be a priority for his government if re-elected. "The metro fares are expensive for students. I have requested PM Modi to introduce this scheme, and we are ready to bear half the cost," Kejriwal said at the press conference, adding that the initiative could be rolled out after the elections. **Continued on page 8**

Holi and Diwali. Nadda added that the subsidy of Rs 300 on cylinders has already been implemented in Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan under the 'Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana' since 2016. The manifesto also included a promise to provide six nutritional kits and an assistance of Rs 2,000 to every pregnant woman under the 'Chief Minister Matritiva Suraksha Yojana.' Calling the ruling party 'AAP-da', the BJP President said that AAP has brought disaster to Delhi and slammed the party for not being able to provide women with Rs 1,000 despite promising it in Delhi and Punjab. He also called AAP a 'Jan Virodhi' (against people) and 'Delhi Virodhi' (against Delhi) government. Hitting out at the BJP soon after the release of the party's manifesto, former Delhi Chief Minister and AAP supremo Arvind Kejriwal said that the BJP's promises were mere copies of what AAP has already implemented. Moreover, Nadda also announced that in its first cabinet meeting, soon after being voted to power, the BJP will implement the central government's 'Ayushman Bharat Yojana' to provide free treatment up to Rs 5 lakh. The state government will provide an additional Rs 5 lakh cover for all poor families, while calling the Mohalla Clinics a 'den of corruption.' "As a Health Minister, I am telling you that the Mohalla clinics of the AAP government are a den of corruption and inefficiency. Fraudulent lab tests have been conducted in their clinics, and there has been a scam of about Rs 300 crore. When our government comes, all of this will be thoroughly investigated. 'Dudh ka dudh, pani ka pani ho jayega' (the truth will come out)," he claimed. **Continued on page 8**



Mystery deepens in Saif Ali assault

TN RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

More than 40 hours after a gruesome attack on Bollywood actor Saif Ali Khan, the Mumbai police had not achieved any breakthrough in the sensational case as of late Friday evening. Meanwhile, the actor was making a rapid recovery from the grievous wounds he sustained in the knife attack by an intruder early Thursday. On Friday, Saif, 54, was moved from the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) to a special room at Lilavati Hospital. The police detained one suspect in connection with the attack, but released him after questioning, finding that he had no connection to the case. "The person who was brought to the Bandra police station is not related to the Saif Ali Khan case. We released him after questioning. No one has yet been arrested in connection with yesterday's incident," a senior police officer said. Meanwhile, doctors attending to Saif at Lilavati Hospital expressed satisfaction with his progress. "Saif Ali Khan is doing excellently. We made him walk, and he can walk well. There is no problem and not much pain," said Dr. Nitin Dange of Lilavati Hospital. The actor had sustained six stab wounds, including one to his spine, while grappling with an intruder who had broken into his 12th-floor apartment in the posh "Satguru Sharan" building located at the junction of 29th and 24th Roads in Bandra (W), northwest Mumbai. The knife attack occurred between 2 a.m. and 2:30 a.m. Thursday, following a failed burglary attempt by the yet-to-be-identified intruder. After his admission to Lilavati Hospital, Saif underwent surgery to remove a knife lodged in his spine and to seal a spinal fluid leakage. "The actor was brought to our hospital with six injuries, two of which were deep. We carried out a surgery near his spine and removed a 2.5-inch piece of knife from the spine," said Dr. Niraj Uttamani, Chief Operating Officer of Lilavati Hospital, on Thursday. **Continued on page 8**

Imran Khan convicted



PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

A Pakistani court on Friday sentenced jailed former prime minister Imran Khan and his wife Bushra Bibi to 14 and seven years in prison respectively after finding them guilty of corruption in the 190 million pounds al-Qadir Trust case. Judge Nasir Javed Rana of the anti-corruption court announced the verdict in a makeshift court set up in Adila jail where Khan is currently lodged. Khan is facing dozens of cases after he lost a trust vote in Parliament in 2022. Khan has been convicted for "corrupt practices" and "misuse of authority," while his wife has been convicted for "involvement in illegal activities." Khan, who has been jailed since August 2023, was also fined Rs 1 million and Bibi half a million rupees. Failure to pay the fine will entail an additional six months of

imprisonment for Khan and three months for Bibi. The court also ordered the confiscation of the land of Al-Qadir University set up by them. Bibi was arrested from the court after the sentencing. Supporters and leaders of Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party staged a protest outside Parliament House, held placards, and chanted slogans, demanding his release. "Today's verdict has tarnished the reputation of the judiciary. In this case, neither I benefited nor the government lost. I don't want any relief and will face all cases," Khan was quoted as saying by his party. "A dictator is doing all this," he said. PTI leaders strongly denounced the verdict, terming it "unjust," "shameful," and a case of "political victimisation." PTI chairman Gohar Khan said, "The behaviour of the court has been unjust. Khan sahib has not benefitted from a single rupee from this matter." PTI lawyer Faisal Chaudhry termed the decision "political use of the National Accountability Bureau." Another party leader, Shibli Faraz, argued that Khan and Bibi were not beneficiaries of the alleged transactions. He contended that they were being punished for founding the Al-Qadir University, which aimed to promote the teachings of the Prophet. "Those who looted the country walk free, while sincere leaders face jail," said Faraz, while reaffirming to challenge the verdict. Khan can appeal against the judgment in the High Court and if needed in the Supreme Court. **Continued on page 8**



Israel-Hamas limp towards normalcy

PTI ■ JERUSALEM

Israel's security Cabinet on Friday recommended approval of a ceasefire deal after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu confirmed an agreement had been reached that would pause the 15-month war with Hamas in Gaza and release dozens of hostages held by militants there. Mediators Qatar and the US announced the ceasefire on Wednesday, but the deal hung in limbo for more than a day as Netanyahu insisted there were last-minute snags he blamed on Hamas. The militants maintained they were "committed" to the deal, while residents of Gaza and families of the hostages anxiously waited to see if it would materialise. The deal now goes to the full Cabinet of ministers for final sign-off. It is expected to 'OK' the ceasefire, which could start as soon as Sunday, even though it has drawn fierce resistance from Netanyahu's far-right coalition partners. Their objections could destabilise his government, however. Hamas triggered the war with its October 7, 2023, cross-border attack into Israel that killed some 1,200 people and left some 250 others captive. **Continued on page 8**

Bharat on Auto Mobility

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

India has emerged as a major automobile hub in the world and number of cars sold in the country annually surpasses the population of many countries, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said here on Friday. Underlining this, he also said future of mobility belongs to India that saw an unprecedented sale of 2.5 crore vehicles a year, and attracted USD 36 billion foreign direct investment in just four years. Addressing a gathering after inaugurating the Bharat Mobility Global Expo 2025 at Bharat Mandapam, the prime minister also emphasised that India stands as an outstanding destination for every investor looking to shape one's future in



Prime Minister Narendra Modi during the Bharat Mobility Global Expo 2025 at Bharat Mandapam, in New Delhi

chain of the mobility ecosystem — from automobile manufacturers to components, electronics parts, tyre and energy storage makers, and automotive software firms and material recyclers — under a single umbrella. Modi said the automotive industry was driven by innovation and technology and stressed that the future belongs to the East, Asia, and India. "India is an excellent destination for every investor looking to see their future in mobility," he said while reassuring everyone that the government is fully supportive and encouraged everyone to continue advancing with the mantra of 'Make in India, Make for the World'. **Continued on page 8**

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UP STF busts multi-crore mobile tower fraud gang

5 members arrested

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

The Uttar Pradesh Special Task Force arrested five active members, including the kingpin of the gang, who had defrauded crores of rupees in the name of installing mobile/Wi-Fi towers for various companies from Lucknow, officials said here on Friday.

had been receiving information about an active gang duping village heads and respectable people using forged documents, claiming to be arranging the installation of mobile and Wi-Fi towers for various mobile companies.

offering Rs 25,000 per month for one member of the family, and Rs 25,000 per month as rent for the place. When the person agrees, they instruct them to pay a Rs 780 registration fee and Rs 15,000-20,000 as processing charges.

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UP to be honoured with PM Award

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

Uttar Pradesh, under the dynamic leadership of Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, has added another feather to its cap by securing a prestigious national recognition.

gy in the Jal Jeevan Mission but has also provided a permanent solution to the drinking water problems in rural and backward areas. Under this project, the installation of solar panels has not only resulted in energy savings but also ensured an uninterrupted water supply.

Solar panels with a capacity of approximately 900 MW have been installed to operate these schemes. This innovation has been recognised as a best practice by the Central government.

exceptional contributions to the use of solar power in the Jal Jeevan Mission. In another significant achievement, District Magistrate Monica Rani will be honoured with the Prime Minister Award for effectively implementing developmental and public welfare schemes in Bahraich.

This honour highlights the impactful work done at the district level, where the Yogi government's policies have been successfully executed. Both awards will be presented to Uttar Pradesh in a ceremony to be held in Delhi in April.

LMC to spread awareness about tuberculosis

Lucknow (PNS): The Lucknow Municipal Corporation, in collaboration with the Health department, is launching an awareness campaign on tuberculosis across city wards.

the 'TB-Free India' campaign, urging that it must be completed swiftly to protect future generations from the disease. Municipal Commissioner Inderjit Singh spoke about the vital role of the municipal corporation in implementing these schemes, calling for cooperation from all citizens.

Stress on importance of AI knowledge

Lucknow (PNS): Deputy Chief Minister Brajesh Pathak on Friday emphasised the importance of preparing children with knowledge of artificial intelligence (AI) for its optimal use in the future.

country's success in various scientific fields. He noted India's prominence in global software engineering, contributing significantly to the progress of developed nations.

Chandigarh University Chancellor Satnam Singh Sandhu highlighted Prime Minister Narendra Modi's mission to make India an AI hub and mentioned the Uttar Pradesh government's efforts, including the planned AI city in Lucknow.

LU signs MoUs with Tajikistan univs

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

Lucknow University has signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the International University of Tourism and Entrepreneurship of Tajikistan. This collaboration aims to foster academic cooperation, research, and cultural exchange between the two institutions, officials said here.

expressed his enthusiasm: "We are delighted to establish a strong partnership with Lucknow University, one of India's premier institutions. This collaboration will allow us to exchange knowledge, expertise, and best practices in tourism and entrepreneurship, benefiting students and faculty from both institutions."

international collaboration, Lucknow University has also signed an MoU with Tajik Agrarian University. This partnership aims to promote academic cooperation, research, and cultural exchange in agricultural sciences, green economy, and related fields.

strengthening the ties between India and Tajikistan. INNOVATIVE INITIATIVES Navankur Foundation - Incubation Cell at the University of Lucknow has introduced two innovative initiatives: AARAMBH Internship Program and UDAAN Cohort Program 1.0, as part of National Startup Week.

LDA to make formation of RWAs mandatory

Lucknow (PNS): The Lucknow Development Authority on Friday decided to make the formation of Residents Welfare Associations (RWAs) compulsory once approved at its board meeting, which is scheduled to take place by the end of this month. Secretary Vivek Srivastava disclosed this while speaking to mediapersons.

CBMR study shows how listening to Sanskrit shlokas enhances brain functioning

SHARMILA KRISHNA ■ LUCKNOW

For the first time ever, scientists have uncovered how listening to Sanskrit verses, or shlokas, affects the brain. This study shows how these ancient verses activate specific areas of the brain, helping us understand their effects on memory, focus, and emotions.

2 bikers crushed to death by truck

Saharanpur (PTI): Two persons died here when two motorcycles collided head-on, hurling all four on the bikes onto the road, some of who came under an oncoming truck, police said on Friday.

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Vishak G to assume charge as DM of Lucknow tomorrow

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

Vishak G, a 2011 batch IAS officer, has been appointed as the District Magistrate of Lucknow. He was given this important responsibility in the administrative reshuffle that took place late on Thursday night. He will assume the charge on Sunday.



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Maha Kumbh a global celebration of unity, equality, harmony

PNS ■ MAHAKUMBH NAGAR

Under the leadership of Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, the Maha Kumbh is being organised at the holy Sangam in Prayagraj. This grand celebration of unity, equality, and harmony serves as the largest platform for the timeless values of Sanatan Dharma.

Recognised by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, the Maha Kumbh is a spiritual confluence that transcends barriers of language, caste, creed and sect. Pilgrims from every corner of the country are gathering at the Triveni Sangam to take a holy dip, embracing the spirit of humanity. Devotees are seeking blessings from sages and ascetics, visiting temples for darshan, and sharing meals together in community kitchens (bhandaras), symbolising unity and equality.

The Maha Kumbh is a remarkable showcase of the unity and equality embedded in India's cultural diversity. Visitors and journalists from around the world are often left in awe as they witness people from different languages, lifestyles and traditions coming together at the Sangam for a holy dip.

Whether it is the processions of sages and ascetics, the temples, or the ghats of Prayagraj, devotees freely visit, worship and seek blessings without any barriers. Numerous community kitchens in the Sangam area remain open day and night, offering food and prasad to everyone. People sit together, regardless of differences, to share meals in a spirit of harmony. Sages and saints from various sects, including Shaivism, Shaktism, Vaishnavism, Udasin, Nath, Kabirpanthi, Raidas, Bharshiv, Aghori and Kapalik, come together to perform their rituals, offer prayers, and take holy dips in the Ganga.

At the Sangam, crores of pilgrims from across the country, representing different castes, classes and languages, are participating in the age-old tradition of Kalpavas. Rich or poor, traders or officials, men, women or transgender individuals, everyone forgets their differences and unites in the spirit of devotion, taking a holy dip at the confluence.



(Top) A worker sprays medicine near tents during the Maha Kumbh Mela at Sangam in Prayagraj on Friday. (Above) Sadhus during the grand event at Sangam

classes and languages, are participating in the age-old tradition of Kalpavas. Rich or poor, traders or officials, men, women or transgender individuals, everyone forgets their differences and unites in the spirit of devotion, taking a holy dip at the confluence.

Maa Ganga and the Maha Kumbh make no distinctions - welcoming all, from urban dwellers to rural pilgrims and people from Gujarat, Rajasthan, Kashmir, Kerala, and beyond. For ages, this tradition of unity and equality has been upheld on the banks of the Sangam,

symbolising the timeless essence of Sanatan Dharma. The Prayagraj Maha Kumbh stands as the ultimate example of a festival that embodies unity, equality and harmony, showcasing the spirit of inclusion and oneness in its purest form.

ICCC playing vital role in handling crowds during main snan festivals

PNS ■ MAHAKUMBH NAGAR

In just six days of the Maha Kumbh, over seven crore devotees, kalpavasis and saints have taken a holy dip at the Triveni Sangam. The Yogi Adityanath government estimates that this time, more than 45 crore people will attend the Maha Kumbh.

With such a massive influx of devotees, the security of the crowd is a major challenge for the Mahakumbh Police. However, the Integrated Command and Control Centre (ICCC), set up in the mela area, is proving to be a boon in managing the crowd. It not only helps in controlling the huge influx of devotees but also plays a key role in various types of surveillance.

The ICCC played an important role in managing the massive crowd during the first day of the Maha Kumbh, specifically during the Paush Purnima snan and the Amrit Snan on Makar Sankranti. Superintendent of Police Amit Kumar, the in-charge of ICCC, shared that 2,750 cameras have been installed, which monitor not only the fair area but also the entire city. Surveillance is conducted from three angles: security, crowd management and crime prevention.

He explained, "With the cameras, we can monitor aspects like crowd flow, surveillance and fire safety. For crowd management, we track the flow of people, where the crowd is concentrated, and how to regulate it. This technique helps us to direct the crowd to areas with less congestion." In addition to crowd management, the cameras also aid in fire surveillance. "We monitor

for any signs of smoke or flames," Amit Kumar said. "Parking areas are also under constant surveillance. Cameras installed in each parking lot indicate whether they are full or empty. When a parking lot reaches its capacity, we close it and direct vehicles to the next available lot. The nearest parking is filled first to minimise walking distance for the bathers," he added.

He further explained that there are seven main routes connecting Prayagraj to other cities. With this in mind, parking arrangements have been strategically made in all directions to ensure smooth traffic flow and accommodate the influx of visitors during the events. Amit Kumar emphasised the significant role of artificial intelligence-based AI cameras, which help in decision-making, though he clarified that they are not completely relied upon. "AI cameras increase our capacity to manage crowd control, which is unprecedented at such a large scale. Our forces are trained institutionally, but having data-based evidence helps further enhance our skills," said.

He further mentioned that cameras have been installed at all critical and sensitive locations within the fair area, including ghats, major roads, and bridges. "These cameras provide us with real-time information on crowd movement and help assess the crowd density at key locations like the Sangam. The cameras help us understand how people gather during such events, and we can monitor areas with higher crowd densities, such as at the ghats, while other areas remain less crowded," he said.

MAHA KUMBH SNIPPETS

THOUGHT-PROVOKING LECTURE

A thought-provoking lecture titled 'Bharat ki gaurav gatha banam atmahinta ki bhavna' (India's glorious legacy vs. the spirit of inferiority) was organised by the Divya Prem Seva Mission, Haridwar, at Maha Kumbh in Prayagraj on Friday. The event witnessed widespread praise for the divine organisation of Maha Kumbh and the dedicated efforts of Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath. Presiding over the programme, Asim Arun, a minister in the Uttar Pradesh government, underscored the significance of self-confidence and pride in India's rich heritage. He remarked, "For centuries, our inferiority complex has been our greatest obstacle. India once led the world in both spirituality and economics because of its steadfast self-belief." He added: "The primary reason for our historical success was our strong self-confidence. For centuries, India was technologically advanced and ahead of the world. Goods manufactured in India, such as textiles, spices, sugar, diamonds and jewels, were highly sought after and traded globally." Recalling India's golden era, he said, "India was known as the golden bird for a reason. The trade surplus was always in our favour, with traders from Central Asia and Europe eagerly engaging in commerce with us." However, he highlighted how invasions and slavery created a psychological barrier that stifled innovation and growth.

RAVI KISHAN TAKES HOLY DIP

Ravi Kishan, the Member of Parliament from Gorakhpur and a Bollywood superstar, took a holy dip at the Triveni Sangam on Friday. Speaking on the occasion, he expressed his joy, saying, "This Maha Kumbh, which has arrived after 144 years, is a great blessing. To make this grand and divine event possible, Maharaj Yogiji has initiated significant development works." He further added, "This is indeed a divine Maha Kumbh, and I feel privileged to experience this sacred bath. Those who have not come to this Maha Kumbh on this auspicious occasion, who have not taken a holy dip at the Sangam, it feels as though their life is incomplete." He appealed to all citizens of the country to visit Prayagraj and take part in the holy bath at the Sangam. Responding to the questions raised by opposition parties about the seven crore devotees taking a dip in just six days at the Maha Kumbh, Ravi Kishan said, "Those who are going to face defeat in 2027 are the ones raising fingers at this grand event. This is an insult to the pilgrims coming for the Maha Kumbh and to Sanatan Dharma."

GROWING SKILL POTENTIAL OF NEW UP

As part of the grand celebration of Maha Kumbh 2025 held on the sacred banks of Triveni, the Uttar Pradesh Skill Development Mission (UPSDM), under the leadership of Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, has set up a special exhibition in Sector-1 of the fairgrounds, adjacent to the Ganga Pandal. This initiative aims to provide a global platform for the state's talent and skill potential, positioning Uttar Pradesh as a major sourcing hub. Under the guidance of the Minister of State for Vocational Education, Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (Independent Charge) Kapil Dev Aggarwal, the UPSDM pavilion has become a major draw at the fair. The pavilion showcases live demonstrations of vocational skills acquired by the youth of Uttar Pradesh, offering visitors an up-close view of the state's diverse talent pool.

BJP distributes copies of Constitution to Maha Kumbh sanitation staff

Parties try to woo Dalits

Mahakumbh Nagar (PTI): The BJP's Uttar Pradesh unit leaders distributed copies of the Constitution to the sanitation workers at the Maha Kumbh Mela in Prayagraj. They said the religious congregation at Prayagraj is a great celebration of unity, which the Constitution guarantees. The BJP, which has launched "Samvidhan Gaurav Abhiyan" -- a nationwide campaign to celebrate 75 years of the Indian Constitution -- is felicitating Dalits across the state as part of this initiative.

After felicitating sanitation workers at the Maha Kumbh Mela by garlanding them and giving them copies of the Constitution on Thursday, Uttar Pradesh BJP secretary Abhijit Mishra said, "We came here to honour those who had been reduced to mere vote bank by non-BJP parties and governments. Now, with a strong, sensitive leader helming the nation, the change is evi-

dent." Talking to PTI, he claimed that other parties see Dalits and OBCs as vote banks. "Our party reveres them. The Maha Kumbh is also a great celebration of unity, something that the Constitution guarantees. That is why we came with copies of the Constitution to reinforce the idea of unity that our Constitution makers had and which our political opponents want to negate," he said. In the hustings during the Lok Sabha polls, the opposition had repeatedly targeted the BJP over its "400 paar" slogan, claiming that it wanted the massive mandate to change the Constitution, a charge rejected by the ruling party. The BJP, however, failed to reach the target it had set for itself and had to form a government with the support of regional parties. On the other hand, the opposition INDIA bloc had a surprising success, significantly bolstering their presence in the Lok Sabha. The BJP's move coincided with the Samajwadi Party deciding to put up a bust of its founder late Mulayam Singh Yadav, a

prominent OBC leader, at the Maha Kumbh. The Congress has announced the 'Jai Babu, Jai Bhim, Jai Samvidhan' rally on January 27 to corner the BJP. BSP chief Mayawati, who faced a series of electoral reverses, too is engaging in posturing on the issue of alleged denigration of Constitution framer and Dalit icon BR Ambedkar by the BJP. In 2019, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath ran schools for the sanitation workers at the Kumbh Mela while Prime Minister Narendra Modi washed the feet of Dalit sanitation workers during his visit to the Kumbh Mela that year. Days before this year's Maha Kumbh, Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Prayagraj and described the congregation as "Ekta ka Mahakumbh (a Maha Kumbh of unity)". Besides, Adityanath has described the congregation as "Samajik Samta Ka Mahapary (a magical festival of social equality)". The state government's publicity blitz for the event included a giant-sized statue of Lord Ram and Nishad Raj (king of the riverine commu-

nity) in an embrace at Shringverpur's Nishad Raj Park recently unveiled by the prime minister. Nishads are a politically influential OBC riverine community pushing for inclusion among SCs and all the parties are keen to woo them. Commenting on the political posturing at the Maha Kumbh a senior RSS leader said, "You can draw your own political narratives but we stand for unity and Maha Kumbh is a classic example of caste harmony as differences of all kinds are bridged here. That is the unity the prime minister must have been referring to." Political observer Sudhir Panwar, who once contested polls as SP candidate, said, "The opposition parties and many of the BJP's OBC allies are united on the issue of caste census. The BJP faces a big dilemma on this issue."

"Though it has won by-polls, it is yet to recover from the shock loss of Faizabad Lok Sabha seat and is now looking to mobilise public opinion through community outreach measures like the one at Maha Kumbh."

UP gov ensures better facilities in old-age homes

Lucknow (PNS): Committed to the welfare and dignity of senior citizens, the Yogi Adityanath government in Uttar Pradesh has implemented various measures to ensure their comfort and well-being during the severe winter. Extensive arrangements have been made in old-age homes across the state to protect the elderly from the biting cold. The state government has allocated significant funds for the sustenance and care of senior citizens. Additionally, district-level implementation committees have been formed to oversee and enhance the management of old-age homes, ensuring efficient operations and improved facilities.

The Social Welfare Department is operating old-age homes with a capacity of 150 in every district of Uttar Pradesh. These homes not only provide accommodation but also ensure proper care and social security for the elderly. Special committees have been formed at the district level to manage these homes efficiently. Additionally, welfare officers have been appointed to address the concerns of the elderly and actively contribute to their care.

To further support senior citizens, the government has established a conciliation officer panel, ensuring transparency and effectiveness in the process. Clear guidelines have been issued to streamline the admission and management of old-age homes, ensuring timely availability of all necessary facilities.

Sambhal man under police radar for consulting Pak scholar on martyrdom

Sambhal (PTI): Police here are looking for a man who allegedly sought advice from a Pakistani scholar on Sambhal violence. The man, identified as Mohammad Akil, was captured conversing with the supposed scholar in a video which showed up on social media.

According to police, Akil, a Sambhal native, was seen asking the supposed scholar whether the ones who died in the November violence should be considered "martyrs." Four people were killed in a confrontation between police and the people protesting the survey of the local Shahi Jama Masjid in Sambhal on November 24. Superintendent of Police Krishna Kumar Vishnoi said police have formed two teams to track Akil and the platform used to connect with the supposed scholar.

Akhilesh slams BJP leader's remark during TV debate

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

Samajwadi Party president Sakhilesh Yadav, on Friday, slammed Bharatiya Janata Party spokesperson Shehzad Poonawalla over his "extremely objectionable language" for an Aam Aadmi Party lawmaker during a TV debate. Poonawalla, in a heated discussion on a news channel on Wednesday, made a derisive riff on AAP MLA Rituraj Jha's surname.

"It is not only unfortunate but also highly condemnable that a national spokesperson of BJP distorted the surname of an elected MLA of Aam Aadmi Party, Delhi on a national news channel and used a highly offensive and abusive word for that surname," Akhilesh Yadav said in a post on X. "This statement reflects the BJP's narrow-minded attitude towards people from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and

Purvanchal, which has always been negative. This is not a matter that can be resolved with an apology. Those from Purvanchal who were insulted by this 'verbal arrow' will never forget it. UP-Bihar say today, we don't need BJP!" he added. The comment by the BJP's spokesman, seen by many rival politicians as a new low in TV debates, came after Jha took a dig at Poonawalla's surname. Akhilesh Yadav said Poonawalla's remark had hurt the people inhabiting a large swathe of northern India. BJP ally Janata Dal (United) also called for disciplinary action against Poonawalla. "Poonawalla has made a mistake. His comments have caused deep displeasure among people from Purvanchal. The JD(U) seeks action from the BJP's leadership against Poonawalla for his comments," a JD(U) leader said.

In Delhi, Purvanchal is loosely referred to as eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. People from the region living in the national capital have over the years become influential electorally. Assembly polls are scheduled to be held in Delhi on February 5 and votes will be counted on February 8. In another statement on Friday Akhilesh Yadav alleged that as many as 50,000 cows are being slaughtered in Uttar Pradesh every day. "The BJP government is maintaining conspicuous silence over the issue of cow slaughter. The BJP leaders are aware of the reality. The cow sheds opened by the government across the state have failed to achieve the desired objective," SP chief said, and added, "The people are closely watching the failure of the BJP government on all front and the ruling party will be voted out in the 2027 UP assembly elections."

IDFC FIRST Bank Limited
(erstwhile Capital First Limited and amalgamated with IDFC Bank Limited)
CIN : L65110TN2014PLC097792
Registered Office: KRM Towers, 8 Floor, Harrington Road, Chetpet, Chennai - 600031.
TEL: +91 44 4564 4000 | FAX: +91 44 4564 4022.

PUBLIC NOTICE
GOLD AUCTION CUM INVITATION NOTICE
The Below mentioned borrower has been issued notices to pay the outstanding amount towards the credit facility against Gold ornament savailed by him from IDFC FIRST Bank Limited. Since the borrower has failed to repay the dues under the facility. We are constrained to conduct an auction of the pledged Gold ornaments on 28/01/2025. In the event any surplus amount is realized from this auction, the same will be returned to the concerned borrower and if there is any deficit post the auction, the balance amount shall be recovered from the borrower through appropriate legal proceedings. IDFC FIRST Bank has the authority to remove the following account from the auction without prior intimation. Further IDFC FIRST Bank reserves the right to change the Auction Date without any prior notice.

Loan Account Number	Customer Name	Branch Name
130093851	RAM SINGAR	AYODHYA MBL
143543030	RAJEEV KUMAR VERMA	ALIGANJ LUCKNOW BRANCH

Auction will be conducted online through <https://egold.auctiontiger.net> on 28/01/2025 from 12:00 pm to 3:00 pm. By way of this publication the concerned borrower are hereby given final notice and last opportunity to pay the facility recalled amount, with all interest and charges before the schedule auction date failing which the jewellery will be auctioned. Please note that, if the auction does not get completed on the same day due to time limit the bank will re auction the pledged gold ornaments within next 7 days on the same terms and conditions. If the customer is deceased all the conditions pertaining to auction will be applicable to his legal heirs.
Date:18.01.2025 Place: UTTAR PRADESH

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Loan Account Number	Customer Name	Branch Name
129073704	SATISH KUMAR	PRAYAGRAJ BRANCH
153900156	NILESH KUMAR TIWARI	PRAYAGRAJ BRANCH

Auction will be conducted online through <https://egold.auctiontiger.net> on 28/01/2025 from 12:00 pm to 3:00 pm. By way of this publication the concerned borrower are hereby given final notice and last opportunity to pay the facility recalled amount, with all interest and charges before the schedule auction date failing which the jewellery will be auctioned. Please note that, if the auction does not get completed on the same day due to time limit the bank will re auction the pledged gold ornaments within next 7 days on the same terms and conditions. If the customer is deceased all the conditions pertaining to auction will be applicable to his legal heirs.
Date:18.01.2025 Place: UTTAR PRADESH

बैंक ऑफ इंडिया Bank of India BOI Zonal Office: "Star House" Vibhuti Khand, Gomti Nagar, Lucknow-226010, Ph.: 0522-2721512 **POSSESSION NOTICE**

Whereas, The undersigned being the Authorised Officer of the Bank of India, under the Securitization and Reconstruction of Financial Assets and Enforcement of Security Interest, Act 2002 and in exercise of powers conferred under section 13 (2) read the Rule 3 of the Security Interest (Enforcement) Rules 2002, had issued a Demand Notice, calling borrower to repay the amount within 60 days from the date of receipt of same. The borrower having failed to repay the amount, notice is hereby given to the borrower and the public in general that the undersigned has taken possession of the property/ies described herein below in exercise of powers conferred on him under sub-section 13(4) of the Act read with rule 8 of the Security Interest Enforcement Rules, 2002 on the dates mentioned hereunder. The borrower in particular and the public in general is hereby cautioned not to deal with the property/ies and any dealings with the property/ies will be subject to the charge of the Bank of India for mentioned amount and interest thereon. **The borrower's attention is invited to provisions of sub-section (8) of section 13 of the Act, in respect of time available, to redeem the secured assets.**

S. No.	Name & Address of the Borrower & Guarantor	Description of Immovable property mortgaged / Owner of the property	Amount o/s as mentioned in the Notice u/s 13(2) Date of Demand & Possession Notice
Branch: Terhi Pulia			
1	Borrower : (1) Mr. Santosh Kumar Dubey 4/103-O, Sector 4, Gomti Nagar Extension Scheme, Lucknow- 226010 (2) Mrs. Vibha Dubey W/o Santosh Kumar Dubey 4/103-O, Sector 4, Gomti Nagar Extension Scheme, Lucknow- 226010	Land and Building situated at Lucknow : Address - Plot no. 4/103-O, Type-C, Sector 4, Gomti Nagar Extension Scheme, Lucknow, Mortgagee by : Mrs. Vibha Dubey w/o Mr. Santosh Kumar Dubey, Area -290.00 Sqmt. Boundaries of property as mentioned above : East : Premises no. 4/103N & 9 MTR wide road, West : Commercial Plot, North : Commercial Plot, South : Plot no. 4/103P	₹ 74,87,236.52 + interest & other charges Demand Notice dt. 29.10.2024 Possession Notice dt. 16.01.2025

Date : 18.01.2025, Place : Lucknow Authorised Officer, Bank of India

Zakeri: BLW's contribution an inspiration for global railways

6-MEMBER DELEGATION FROM IRAN RAILWAYS ACCORDED WARM WELCOME

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ VARANASI

The Banaras Locomotive Works (BLW) warmly welcomed a six-member high-level delegation from Iran Railways here on Friday. The delegation was led by Deputy Minister and CEO of Iran Railways Jabbar Ali Zakeri. He was accompanied by Majid Khan Abadi (Director General of Fleet Engineering and Supervision office), Alireza Nasrabadi, (Director General of Procurement and Support of JA Iran railway company), Seyed Ebrahim Fazli Zanouz (Deputy Director General of the International Affairs office of JA.) Iran railway company, Dr Iraj Elahi (Ambassador of Iran in India) and Hosseini (Deputy Ambassador). Jabbar Ali Zakeri commended BLW's production capacity, technical excellence and operational efficiency. He said that BLW's contribution is not only significant for Indian Railways but also serves as an inspiration for the global railways. As a gesture



Iranian delegation visiting BLW workshop in Varanasi on Friday.

of goodwill, GM presented the delegation with a beautifully crafted locomotive model. Earlier upon their arrival, BLW General Manager (GM) Naresh Pal Singh extended a warm welcome to the delegation with a floral bouquet. The delegation was then taken on a comprehensive tour of BLW's state-of-the-art workshops, including the Engine Assembly Shop, Light Machine Shop, Engine Testing Shop, Loco Assembly Shop, Loco Test Shop and

Turbo Assembly Shop. The delegation observed the manufacturing processes of diesel and electric locomotives, appreciating BLW's technological advancements and production capabilities. During the tour, Principal Chief Electrical Engineer (PCEE) Sushil Kumar Srivastava provided a detailed presentation on BLW's production processes, infrastructure, ongoing projects, and technical expertise. He highlighted BLW's history,

workforce efficiency and locomotive manufacturing capacity. The delegation also visited the welcome hall, where they viewed the models of export locomotives and the creative 'Waste to Art' projects crafted by BLW employees, which was highly praised by the delegation.

In the Hall of Fame, a formal meeting was held, during which the BLW GM welcomed the delegation and expressed his optimism for stronger partnerships between the railway networks of India and Iran and he remarked, "This visit will pave the way for a new and robust collaboration between the rail networks of our two nations." The meeting included meaningful discussions between the delegation and BLW officials. It was attended by BLW's senior officials and heads of various departments. Chief Mechanical Engineer (Production and Marketing) Suneel Kumar conducted the meeting.

Photography exhibition organised

Varanasi (PNS): Under the National Youth Day-2025 programme, Wellbeing Services Cell (WBSC) in association with Obscura-The Photography Art Club, BHU, organised a photography exhibition at Ahiwasi Kala Dirgha (art gallery) in Faculty of Visual Arts here on Thursday. The theme of this exhibition was 'Capturing the Spirit of Youth'. The programme was inaugurated by chief guest and Director of Institute of Environment and Sustainable Development Prof AS Raghuvanshi, while the special guests were Dr Nishat Afroz (Associate Dean of Students) and Dr Uttam Dixit by lighting the lamp and garlanding the statue of Mahamana Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya

CM inspects shelter homes

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ VARANASI

Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath inspected the shelter homes built at Varanasi Junction (Cantt) station premises and Town Hall on Thursday night during his two-day visit. He gave necessary instructions to the officials. Along with lighting a bonfire in the shelter home, he directed to ensure proper arrangements of toilets, cleanliness, beds and blankets etc for the people living there. The CM especially emphasised that no one should sleep on the roadside in the open sky during the cold. Arrangements for such destitute people to stay in the shelter homes should be ensured in every condition. He asked about the well-being of the people living in the shelter homes. People expressed hap-



CM Yogi Adityanath talking to some Maha Kumbh pilgrims at Varanasi Cantt station shelter home on Thursday night.

pineness over the proper arrangements. Besides, Yogi also visited Kal Bhairav and Kashi Vishwanath temples and offered prayers. In Kashi Vishwanath Temple, he directed that such arrangements

should be ensured in the temple so that the devotees and bathers coming to Kashi during Maha Kumbh can get better facilities during the darshan puja and should not face any problem.

'Efforts will be made to further improve services, facilities of BSNL'

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ VARANASI

This year efforts will be made to further improve the services and facilities of Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL) by expanding 4G and Bharat Fibre services, said Principal General Manager (PGM) Anil Kumar Gupta while addressing a press conference here on Friday. "The year 2024 brought new hopes for BSNL and its esteemed customers. From the year 2024 itself, the work of installation of 4G towers made with technology developed in the country started", he said. Gupta said in the same year, BSNL started the work of installing fibre internet connection in government offices in rural areas with the cooperation of the state government. National roaming facility of Bharat Fibre was started by BSNL. "With the launch of 4G services, 504 towers have been upgraded to 4G in the Varanasi business area so far. As many as 206 towers in Varanasi district, 41 in Bhadohi, 53 in Chandauli,



125 in Ghazipur, 44 in Mirzapur and 22 in Sonbhadra have been upgraded to 4G", he said, adding that under the saturation project of the Government of India, five new 4G towers have been started in Chandauli, seven in Mirzapur and 28 in Sonbhadra. Three towers have also been upgraded to 4G in Naxal-affected areas. "With the installation of 4G towers, the total mobile data traffic of Varanasi Business Area has more than doubled in the last six months to more than 65 TB per day", he said, and added that more than 2.5 lakh new customers joined BSNL in Varanasi Business Area from July to December, in which more than 50,000 customers left

other companies and ported to BSNL. "The BSNL has given relief to the consumers by not increasing the tariff. The increase in traffic and the increase in the number of customers is a symbol of the trust of the consumers in BSNL", the PGM said. According to him, under the Special Assistance Scheme, more than 1,400 connections have been given in 360 gram panchayats of 15 development blocks in the first phase in Varanasi Business Area. Besides, 811 connections have been opened in Varanasi, 118 in Chandauli, 192 in Bhadohi, 184 in Ghazipur, 120 in Mirzapur and 14 in Sonbhadra district so

far. "Any needy person who has passed 10th standard can earn an additional income of ₹6,000 to ₹15,000 per month by joining BSNL as a direct selling agent. For this, he/she will have to add 20 to 50 new fibre consumers to BSNL", he added. Gupta said to strengthen the optical fibre backbone, 100G capacity MAAN network has been established and work is going on to gradually bring various services on this network. "With the commissioning of MAAN network, the capacity of the access network has increased from 10G to 100G. This year, about 130 kilometres of optical fibre is being laid and the damaged area of fibres is being replaced. To connect the 4G towers, about 100 km of fibre will be laid so that about 100 towers can be connected to fibre. After the permission of the Forest department to connect the saturation towers, the work of laying 65 km fibre in the remote areas of Chandauli and Sonbhadra will be completed by April-May", he said.

Sankat Ganesh Chaturthi celebrated

Varanasi (PNS): Thousands of devotees visited the Bada Ganesh Temple in Lohatia here on Friday to have darshan of Lord Ganesh on the auspicious occasion of Sankat Ganesh Chaturthi, also known as Lambodar Sankashti Chaturthi braving chilly and foggy weather. Elaborate security arrangements have been made in and around the temple to ensure peaceful and smooth darshan and puja. The barricading was done at Lohatia tri-junction and Maidagan crossing to stop the vehicles, even two-wheelers. The cops deployed both at tri-junction and cross-

ing did not allow any vehicle to ply on Maidagan- Lohatia route for the convenience of the devotees. Security arrangements have also been made at other Ganesh temples. Right from wee hours, the devotees started thronging the temple to offer prayers and the rush of devotees continued till late night. Long queues of devotees were seen outside the temple and the police had a tough time to maintain the queues, especially in the narrow lane which approaches the temple. The women devotees were seen in large numbers to perform puja. The

devotees also reached other Ganesh temples of the city, including Chintamani Ganesh (Sonarpura), Durg Vinayak (near Kashi Vishwanath Temple), Sakshi Vinayak (Vishwanath Gali) etc in large numbers on this auspicious occasion. The activists of Namami Gange also offered prayers at Bada Ganesh Temple for the welfare, happiness and prosperity for all. In coordination with Namami Gange Kashi region coordinator and Municipal Corporation's Swachhata Brand Ambassador Rajesh Shukla, aarti of Lord Ganesh,

the protector of nature and symbol of divine knowledge, was performed with the wish of environmental protection. With the wish of public welfare, Laddus, Modaks and Tilkut were offered to Lord Ganesh. The temple premises were filled with bhajans. An appeal was also made to maintain cleanliness in the ancient temples. Shukla that the form of Lord Ganesh described in the Puranas is such a great metaphor that awakens our sensitivity towards nature and environment and makes us aware of our responsibilities towards them.

PCPO motivates employees to innovate, think creatively

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ PRAYAGRAJ

The Best Employee and Best Section Award Distribution Programme for the month of December-January-2025 was organised on Friday at North Central Railway (NCR), Personnel department headquarters here. The chief guest in the programme was Principal Chief Personnel Officer (PCPO) Anurag Tripathi. In the award ceremony, the Best Employee Award for the month of December-January was given to Kumari Neha Awasthi, Office Superintendent/General Admin Cadre, Gazetted Section, Personnel department, head office for her commendable work. Neha Awasthi, Office Superintendent, Gazetted Section is looking after all the establishment matters related to General Admin Cadre and miscellaneous cadre. All the work related to selection of APHO, ANO, ACMT, principal and AHO is handled by Awasthi. She regularly prepares the positions of PF with-



drawal, monthly positions like rotational transfer, cadre position, Group 'B' selection, HRMIS, MIS and various types of posts related to gazetted section demanded by Railway Board and sends them to Railway Board. As per the instructions of Railway Board, various Google sheets are also regularly filled by her. In this series, the award for the best section of the month of December-January-2025 was given to General Section, Railway Recruitment Cell. All the letters received through single window system by Railway Recruitment Cell, General Section were disposed

of within the stipulated time. In the competition organised to increase reading and intellectual awareness among the employees, the PCPO motivated all the employees for innovation and creative thinking. The cultural presentation was performed by Satpal, Dharendra Tiwari, Richa Pandey and Arvind Kumar Pandey. Other employees also participated in it enthusiastically. The programme was organised with the aim of increasing the self-confidence, creativity and curiosity of all the employees of Personnel department, Headquarters. All the officers and employees of Personnel department were present.

Mission Parivar Vikas campaign from today

Varanasi (PNS): Under the Family Planning Programme, Mission Parivar Vikas (MPV) campaign will be conducted from January 18 to 31. Giving this information here on Friday, Chief Medical Officer (CMO) Dr Sandeep Chaudhary said that the MPV campaign had been earlier conducted during the World Population Day fortnight in July and Male Sterilisation Fortnight in November last year. The objective of the MPV campaign is to benefit as many beneficiaries as possible from family planning services by disseminating family planning messages in remote areas of the district during the fortnight. The CMO said all the district units and CHCs and PHCs under the district have been directed to spread awareness about this campaign and to give necessary information to the beneficiaries. By making the community aware through the mobile vans (SAARTHI), men and women will be motivated for sterilisation. Saas Beta Bahu Sammelans will be organised at all Arogya Ayushman centres and during it Mr Smart

Sammelan will also be organised. Deputy Chief Medical Officer and nodal officer of the programme Dr HC Murya said that during the campaign, along with establishing communication among the community by talking, sterilisation champions will be identified by spreading maximum publicity for male sterilisation and they will be presented as ideal couples among the community. During the campaign, Shagun Kits will be distributed to the newly married couples by visiting homes through ASHA workers. During the family planning service campaign, services will be provided to interested couples focusing on sterilisation service. Besides this, services of other contraceptive methods of family planning programme like IUCD (interval and postpartum), Antara, Chaya and condom will also be provided. He said community level workers, including ANMs, ASHA Sanitis, ASHA workers and staff of health units will provide counselling to couples regarding various available methods and means (basket of choice) of family welfare.

Many important development-related decisions taken in Cantt Board meet

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ KANPUR



Many important decisions about the development of Cantonment Board area were taken in the Cantonment Board meeting held under the chairmanship of Brig Shabbarul Hasan on Thursday. The members approved the proposal for constructing a sports complex-cum-community centre by converting the landuse of garbage collection centre at old octroi post. The proposal will be sent to the union government. Discussions were held about issuing NOC for carrying out construction of five roads, drains and other developmental works from the discretionary fund of the MLA

Mohd Hasan Roomi. The members also agreed to increase the salary of the security guard to ₹40,010 and construction of roads in the area with an investment of ₹39.80 lakh. The officers informed that in the last Board meeting NOC had been given to remove sewer, water and KESCO line obstructing the construction of Jaipuria crossing flyover. All these works had been done. The Board also approved the expenditure of ₹18.54 lakh for laying thermoplastic strip on roads, street light maintenance and purchasing a small sky lift vehicle. City MP Ramesh Awasthi, CEO Stephen PD, MLA Mohammad Hasan Roomi and

nominated member Lakhman Omar were present at the Board meeting. MEETING HELD: Chief Development Officer (CDO) Diksha Jain addressed a meeting related to the Prime Minister Free Solar Home Electricity Scheme on Thursday. Representatives from Tata Solar Power, RMI, UPNE-DA project officer and UPNE-DA-registered vendors were present on the occasion. She stressed on maintaining coordination to enhance progress of scheme implementation, tackle KESCO DISCOM coordination challenges and address consumer and supplier concerns. The key issues discussed in the meeting included testing laboratory delays, plant inspection holdups etc. She directed the project officer, UPNE-DA, to organise meeting of registered vendor representatives with bank managers to ascertain status of pending applications and progress in the matter. She asked him to conduct regular fortnightly review meeting with them for timely settlement of all grievances.

Cash prize distribution programme held for kids



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ PRAYAGRAJ

Cash prize distribution programme for the children selected in the Essay and Drawing and Painting Competition-2024 was organised by North Central Railway Women Welfare Organisation (NCRWFO) headquarters, at Spandan Adhikari Club, Subedarganj, here on Friday. It may be recalled here that the organisation had organised an essay competition on September 15, 2024 and drawing and painting competition on September 22 last year in three groups for the children of all non-gazetted employees of

NCR headquarters. The children selected at the headquarters level were awarded the first, second, third and consolation cash prizes in each group by the president of the organisation, Chetna Joshi. Certificates were also given to the children on the occasion. Secretary Richa Verma and other office-bearers, including Supriya Sinha, Madhuri Singh, Neelam Kumar, Rakhi Jain, Charu Gupta, Barnali Mandal, Alka Garg, Rajeni Chandrayan, Sadhana Kumar, Sunita Bharti, Dr. Manju Lata Handu, Vasudha Gupta, Yusra Yusuf along with other members were present.

Cash, jewellery stolen from house

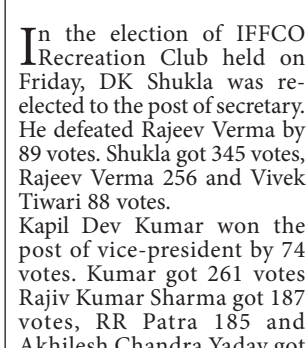
PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ KANPUR

Miscreants stole ₹40,000 cash and jewellery worth lakhs of rupees from a house in Sen Pashchimpara police station area. Police have also recovered the ambulance used in committing the crime from them. It may be recalled that on November 17, 2024, Suraj Tewari of Swaruppur was called by the accused on pretext of paying off ₹40,000 loan to him. He was held hostage in an ambulance and killed. Thereafter, after looting his cash and wrist watch, the accused had dumped the body in Sen Pashchimpara police station area. His brother had lodged a missing person report. After the body was found the report was converted into a murder case and on November 27, police recovered the scooter of the deceased by arresting Ashish alias Raj, his maternal uncle Sanjay Parihar of Sirauli Bujurg, Hamirpur, and Kallou alias Rakesh Gupta of Amauli Jafarganj police station, Fatehpur, near a biryani shop in Bara (Kanpur Dehat). During interrogation, names of Alok, Anuj, Devesh and Changu of Hamirpur had

also come to fore. Since then police were conducting raiding to nail these accused. On Thursday on a tip off, Akbarpur Kotwali in charge Satish Kumar Singh arrested Devesh, son of Ragharam alias Raju and Anuj Singh alias Baba of Tikrauli Sandaradanda, Hamirpur. Police also recovered the ambulance used by them in the kidnapping and killing from the accused. SUICIDE: A man allegedly committed suicide by hanging from the ceiling fan in Tilsahari Khurd village under Maharajpur police station area on Friday morning. He was identified as Ravi Kumar (30), son of Kalidini. The PRV and Dial 112 teams rushed to the spot and informed the thana police. After panchnama, the body was sent for an autopsy. Station House Officer (SHO) Sanjay Kumar Pandey said prima facie it appeared to be a case of suicide. On the basis of complaint and autopsy report, further action will be initiated in the matter. There was mourning among the family members after the incident. However, a probe was on in the matter, SHO said.

IFFCO Recreation Club poll: DK Shukla re-elected secy

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ PRAYAGRAJ



In the election of IFFCO Recreation Club held on Friday, DK Shukla was re-elected to the post of secretary. He defeated Rajeev Verma by 89 votes. Shukla got 345 votes, Rajeev Verma 256 and Vivek Tiwari 88 votes. Kapil Dev Kumar won the post of vice-president by 74 votes. Kumar got 261 votes, Rajiv Kumar Sharma got 187 votes, RR Patra 185 and Akhilesh Chandra Yadav got 55 votes. In the post of Joint Secretary, Balwant Krishna Yadav won by 84 votes. Balwant Krishna Yadav got 386 votes and Sushil Kumar Pandey got 302 votes. For the post of Joint treasurer Manik Chandra defeated Vineet Kumar Dubey by 52 votes. Manik got 370 votes and Vineet Kumar Dubey 318. Satendra Yadav, Shishi Kant Mishra and Rambabu Jaiswal were elected to the post exec-

utive members. Election Officer AK Srivastava praised all the employees for the peaceful completion of the election. IFFCO Phulpur Senior Executive Director (Unit Head) Sanjay Kudesia, HOD Human Resources Shambhu Shekhar, IFFCO Officers' Association President Anurag Tiwari and General Secretary Swayam Prakash, IFFCO Employees' Sangh President Pankaj Pandey

and general secretary Vijay Kumar Yadav congratulated and wished all the winning candidates. WOMAN ENDS LIFE: A 25-year-old married woman identified as Neetu committed allegedly suicide by hanging herself from a fan in Kheruwa Nevada under Saidabad outpost area. The deceased was married to Guddu Prajapati in 2019, who works as a gas welder.

Rajnath underlines need to strengthen India's offensive and defensive responses

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh on Friday here underlined the need to strengthen India's offensive and defensive responses in view of the turmoil being witnessed in the rules-based international order. Addressing an event, organised to commemorate 2024 as the Year of Naval Civilians, he highlighted the increasing complexities for the Armed Forces due to the tense geopolitical security scenario and pitched to increase the critical capability of the country at the earliest.

"If we assess the entire decade from a defence and security perspective, we can say that it has been a volatile decade. We are witnessing conflicts and wars in different regions across

the world. Keeping these things in mind, we need planning, resourcing and budgeting for our security. There is a need to adopt a consultative approach. We need to take inputs from all the stakeholders on how to face future challenges. Our forces should be equipped and ready according to the changing times," Rajnath Singh said emphasising that the civilian workforce, an integral part of the Armed Forces, will play a crucial role in the planning process. He stressed that the military is surging forward with a big mandate and complex structure and the civilian workforce "soldiers without uniforms" play a pivotal role as they work behind-the-scenes to provide significant strength to the troops. In view of India's strategic



location and its geopolitical situation in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), defence minister reiterated the resolve of the Government to strengthen the Navy, terming it as a necessity in today's times. He termed the ships as a symbol of India's empowerment.

"India's economic prosperity is linked to maritime security. It is, therefore, necessary to protect our territorial waters, ensure freedom of navigation, and keep sea routes, which are our maritime highways, safe. In recent years, major naval powers have reduced their presence in IOR, while the Indian Navy has increased it. There is a possibility of increase in threats in the Gulf of Aden, Red Sea and the sea areas adjacent to East African countries. In view of this, the Indian Navy is working towards increasing its pres-

ence further," he said. Rajnath Singh described cyber security as an important aspect of maritime security in today's times, stating that ignoring cyber attacks can prove to be detrimental/fatal. He laid stress on the need to run a special awareness campaign on cyber security in the Armed Forces. In his welcome address, Navy chief Admiral Dinesh K Tripathi acknowledged the critical role that the Naval Civilians play in supporting various facets of the Indian Navy's operations including technical assistance, administrative management and logistics support. Their support is essential to the Navy's combat readiness and operational success, he said. The event commenced with a special photo and painting exhibition that displayed the artistic talents and achieve-

ments of Naval Civilians. The artworks depicted scenes of life at workplace and various contributions of civilians in the operational support of the Navy. A special moment of the ceremony was the introduction of the recipients of Prime Minister's Shram Awards to the defence minister. The Shram Awards are presented annually to the individuals who have shown extraordinary devotion and outstanding contributions in their respective roles. In recognition of exemplary service and contributions, Rajnath Singh presented nine meritorious awards and 16 cash awards to Naval Civilians who have demonstrated outstanding dedication and professionalism in their line of duty.

Private bodies providing essential public services have to be under RTI Act, says CIC

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Advising the Delhi government to stop ex post facto renewal of licences of private hospitals, the CIC has said private entities providing essential public services have to be brought under RTI Act in a state-specific amendment of the transparency law. Information Commissioner Vinod Kumar Tiwari made these observations while hearing the case of an RTI applicant who was allegedly given "exorbitant bills" by a private hospital for the treatment of his wife in 2023.

RTI applicant Sanjeev Kumar had approached Delhi government's Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) seeking details of licence issued to Artemis Hospital, where his wife underwent treatment, among other information in a 12-pointer application. Not getting satisfactory response, he approached the Central Information Commission with his case. "...Core contention of the appellant in the instant appeal was non-receipt of correct and accurate information from the PIO and also arbitrary practice adopted by the Artemis Hospital in raising unjustified demands/ bills during hospitalisation which gets facilitated by respondent's (DGHS) clandestine practice of renewing the licence with retrospective effect as a matter of routine," Tiwari noted.

Artemis being a private hospital is not covered under the provisions of the RTI Act. "Entities providing Public Services being essential for the citizens have to be included in the definition of the 'Public Authority' by bringing in a state-specific amendment of the RTI Act which is a concurrent list subject," Tiwari said. During the hearing, Kumar had alleged that the recognition certificate dated August 01, 2023 of Artemis Hospital provided to him by DGHS, in response to his RTI application shows that the hospital had no valid license on dates of hospitalization of his wife on April 07-08, 2023. "...It is noted from the oral submission of the respondent (DGHS) that registration of hospitals is being renewed retrospectively, which essen-



tially means that private hospitals have an option to withdraw renewal requests should they get caught in malpractices," Tiwari pointed out. He said despite repeated directions from the Commission during pendency of this case, DGHS has not uploaded the relevant legal/executive order authorizing such a back dated/ex post facto issuance. "... The fact remains that allegation of appellant regarding exorbitant prices/bills raised by the Artemis Hospital cannot be ruled out in entirety as the respondent as well as the third party i.e. Artemis Lite Hospital have failed to file any counter submission to buttress the arguments of the appellant, therefore, the balance of convenience favours the appellant," Tiwari said. The DGHS claimed that the plea that Artemis Hospital did not possess valid registration certificate at the relevant time is not acceptable since as per their normal practice the registration certificate under process is "deemed to be considered as a fact that registration of Hospital is still valid". "The Commission considering the submission of the parties concluded that the reply furnished by the PIO in the first instance and the submission given during the course of hearing are contradictory. This casual conduct of the PIO causes unwarranted obstructions to the appellant's right to information and is a grave violation to the provisions of the RTI Act," the CIC noted while issuing a show cause notice to the PIO. The CIC imposed a penalty of

Rs 15000 on the CPIO Sandeep Kumar Agarwal and awarded a compensation of Rs 45000 to Kumar for the hardships to be paid by DGHS. Tiwari said Kumar was made to suffer mental and financial harassment by making him to run from pillar to post at this very old age for the treatment of his wife by imposing exorbitant medical bills merely for the purpose of generation of profits. "In view of the above, an advisory under Section 25(5) of the RTI Act is issued to the Respondent Public Authority (DGHS) to amend the applicable regulations governing renewal of licenses of private hospitals so as to afford an opportunity of hearing to the citizens affected by the deeds of the hospitals besides stopping the practice of issuing ex post facto renewal of license," Tiwari said in the order, a copy of which was also marked to Delhi Health Secretary. He said many state governments are bringing the Right to (Public) Services Act to ensure delivery of public services to ensure entities providing services are held accountable for deficiencies. "Such legislations are complementarity to the Right to Information Act because they rely on flow of information to determine deficiencies," Tiwari said. He said, in contrast to it, DGHS by declaring hospital running under them as private entities and hence, being outside the purview of the RTI Act has defeated the very purpose of such social welfare arrangement and the Act.

PM Modi to distribute more than 65 lakh SVAMITVA property cards today

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will on Saturday distribute more than 65 lakh property cards under the SVAMITVA Scheme, the Panchayati Raj Ministry said. According to senior officials of the ministry, beneficiaries from more than 50,000 villages in 10 states -- Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Mizoram, Odisha, Punjab, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh -- and two Union Territories -- Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh -- will receive the cards. SVAMITVA, a scheme of the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, provides a 'Record of Rights' to village household owners with the issuance of legal ownership cards to the property owners by mapping land parcels using drone technology, it said. The prime minister will preside over the event through video-conferencing, where he will interact with selected beneficiaries and also deliver a nationwide address, the ministry said in a statement.



This event will mark a major milestone of crossing more than 2.24 crore property cards preparation and distribution under the Survey of Villages and Mapping with Improved Technology in Village Areas (SVAMITVA) scheme and distribution of about 65 lakh property cards in a day. Union Minister of Panchayati Raj Rajiv Ranjan Singh 'Lalan,' Union Minister of State for Panchayati Raj S P Singh Baghel, and Secretary, Ministry of Panchayati Raj Vivek

Bharadwaj will be present at the event. It will be attended virtually by several chief ministers, Union ministers, ministers in the concerned states, and Panchayat representatives, the ministry said. Events are also being organised in more than 230 districts for the physical distribution of property cards. It is expected that around 13 Union ministers will physically join from designated locations to oversee the distribution ceremonies. Training-cum-orientation programmes and distribution pro-

grammes will also be conducted in more than 25,000 Gram Panchayats across these 12 states and Union Territories, highlighting the scheme's impact and reinforcing its role in empowering rural communities. Ministry officials said under the scheme, over 90 per cent of the drone mapping has been done, covering around 3.17 lakh of the over 3.44 lakh villages that were the target. This includes full saturation in the Union Territories of Lakshadweep, Ladakh, Delhi, Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu, as well as the states of Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh. In addition, property cards have been generated for all inhabited villages in Haryana, Uttarakhand, Puducherry, Tripura, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Goa, and Tripura, highlighting significant advancements in implementation. The scheme's targets are likely to be achieved by 2026. A survey of rural land in India

for Settlement and record of rights had last been completed many decades back. Moreover, 'abadi' (inhabited) areas of villages were not surveyed in many states. Hence, no 'Record of Rights' could be created for the village 'abadi' areas. The scheme aims to provide an integrated property validation solution for rural India. The demarcation of inhabited land in rural areas would be done by the use of drone technology with the collaborative efforts of the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, State Revenue Department, State Panchayati Raj Department, and Survey of India. The outcome would include creating and updating the 'Record of Rights' in the revenue registers and issuance of property cards to the owners. So far, 31 states and Union Territories have joined the scheme. Of these, Sikkim, Telangana and Tamil Nadu had participated only in the pilot phase. West Bengal, Bihar, Nagaland, and Meghalaya have not joined the scheme.

Wildlife Department to serve notices to illegal constructions surrounding Sultanpur Bird Sanctuary

PARVESH SHARMA ■
GURUGRAM

The Wildlife Department will soon serve notices to over 100 illegal construction owners who built illegal structures in the restricted area of Sultanpur Bird Sanctuary in Gurugram. For this, the department has written a letter to the Tehsildar and sought information about all the people doing illegal construction. After getting the information, notices will be issued to everyone to remove the illegal construction within 15 days. After this, a demolition drive will be conducted. Notably, any kind of construction work is banned within a 5 km radius of Sultanpur Bird Sanctuary located on Jhajar-Farrukhnagar Road. Despite this, builders and dealers have illegally built over 100 illegal constructions farmhouses and societies. Last year, a survey was conducted by the Department. It was revealed that over 100 constructions have been done without the permission of the Ministry of Environment within the 5 km restricted area of Sultanpur Bird Sanctuary. These include nine societies



mos, most of the farmhouses and a school. The central government has declared Sultanpur Bird Sanctuary as an Eco-Sensitive Zone-1 (environmentally sensitive area). In such a situation, construction within a radius of 5 km has been completely banned. The Town and Country Planning (TCP) Department has issued licenses to nine builders to build group housing societies. The license has a condition that they have to obtain a no objection certificate (NOC) from the Ministry of Environment. But without taking prior permission few builders made construction in the restricted zone. The survey has also revealed

the collusion of the officials of the concerned department. Nine societies have been built within this area. It is being said that the TCP Department approved the maps of these societies without checking the NOC. Occupancy certificates were even issued to most of the societies. Now about 7,000 families have started living in the flats built in these societies. However, After the survey conducted by the Wildlife Department, the construction work of the two societies has been stopped. These societies are being built under the Affordable Housing Policy, which has about 1500 flats. These societies have been built in villages Dhorka, Wazirpur and Gopalpur.

Law officer censures ED for 'half-baked' reply, says miscommunication later in SC

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

In an unusual turn of events in the Supreme Court, a law officer criticised the ED for filing a "half-baked" reply in a bail matter and later termed it a miscommunication while urging the court to proceed with the hearing. A bench of Justices Abhay S Oka and Ujjal Bhuyan was hearing an appeal of Arun Pati Tripathi, an Indian Telecom Services officer, challenging the October 25, 2024 order of the Chhattisgarh High Court denying him bail in connection with the high-profile Chhattisgarh liquor scam. Additional solicitor general SV Raju, appearing for the Enforcement Directorate (ED), said, "There is something hanky-panky as far as my department is concerned. Without consultation, a half-baked affidavit has been filed even before we made an appearance." Taking note of the shocking submission, the bench expressed dissatisfaction on the situation, calling it a "serious matter" questioning the accountability of ED and the agency's advocate-on-record (AoR).



"The counter must have been filed by your AoR," Justice Oka said to which Raju said the AoR could not be blamed for the oversight. Subsequently when the matter was taken up for hearing, the bench asked Raju, "You (ED) have filed a counter affidavit. Can you disown it now? What is going on?" He responded, "I am not disowning. I am only saying it was filed without proper vetting so I will have to verify." The bench termed it a "sad thing" and said it was like casting an aspersion on the AoR. "I am not casting any aspersion. Some miscommunication has happened," said the law officer, insisting the AoR was not to be blamed. Raju then requested the bench to proceed with the matter, but the court posted the hearing on February 5.

Political parties give multitude of reasons for selecting candidates with criminal records: ADR data

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■
NEW DELHI

Political parties have given reasons, such as "strong administrative capacity", "commitment to public service" and claims of cases being "politically motivated", for selecting candidates with criminal records in the 2024 Maharashtra and Jharkhand Assembly elections, poll rights body Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) said on Friday. In many cases, the parties dismissed alternative candidates as lacking experience or the ability to connect with voters, using these explanations to side-step questions about their choices, ADR said. It has analysed the Form C7 of 1,286 candidates, who contested the Maharashtra and Jharkhand Assembly polls.

Form C7 requires candidates to declare their criminal antecedents, if any. An ADR report revealed that such reasoning often failed to meet the Supreme Court's directive requiring detailed, merit-based justifications for selecting candidates with criminal backgrounds. Instead, statements like "the candidate is young and energetic" or "cases were filed due to public agitation" were repeatedly used. Despite these assertions, 29 per cent candidates in Maharashtra and 20 per cent in Jharkhand had no justification published for their selection, a direct violation of the Supreme Court's orders. For instance, in Maharashtra, Digamber Rohidas Aagwane of the Rashtriya Samaj Paksha, facing 35 criminal cases, was described as an "influential



leader" dedicated to the poor, with no viable explanation for bypassing candidates without criminal records. Similarly, the selection of Congress's Sanjay Chandukaka Jagtap and Bunty Baba Shelke, facing 27 and 26 cases respectively, as candidates was justified on grounds of administrative experience and alleged political victimisation. The report also highlighted non-compliance with mandatory disclosures. In Maharashtra, the NCP-Sharadchandra Pawar faction and the Shiv Sena (Uddhav Balasaheb Thackeray) failed to provide justifications for any of their candidates with criminal cases. Similar lapses were noted in Jharkhand, where the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) did not disclose reasons

for selecting any of its candidates with criminal records. The ADR has called for urgent reforms, including deregistration of the non-compliant parties, disqualification of candidates with serious criminal charges and stricter monitoring by the Election Commission (EC). In Maharashtra, 48 per cent of the analysed candidates (503 out of 1,052) declared criminal cases, with 32 per cent facing serious charges. In Jharkhand, 45 per cent candidates (105 out of 234) declared criminal cases, with 35 per cent facing serious charges. Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) candidate Babulal Marandi, facing 15 cases, was praised for his social service credentials and allegations against him were dismissed as politically driven.

The report criticised political parties for prioritising "winnability" over integrity and accused the EC of failing to enforce compliance effectively. The ADR report also revealed significant non-compliance with disclosure requirements. It pointed out that in Maharashtra, 83 per cent of such candidates were crorepatris, including the BJP's Prashant Ramsheth Thakur, who declared assets worth Rs 475 crore. In Jharkhand, Congress candidates dominated the list of the wealthiest, led by Krishna Nand Tripathi, who declared assets of Rs 70 crore. The ADR emphasised that systemic reforms are essential to address the deep-rooted nexus between money, muscle power and politics.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Bonanza before budget

The Cabinet has greenlit the 8th Pay Commission, setting the stage for a revision of salaries of central govt employees

The Union Cabinet's approval of the 8th Pay Commission ahead of the budget marks a significant step toward revising the salary and pension structure for over 49 lakh central government employees and nearly 65 lakh pensioners. Chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the decision emphasises improving quality of life and stimulating economic activity through enhanced consumption. The 8th Pay Commission will be tasked with revising salaries, allowances and pensions for central government employees and pensioners. Consultations will be held with central and state governments and other stakeholders before finalising its recommendations. The Commission's chairman and two members are to be appointed shortly, and its findings will replace the existing 7th Pay Commission framework, whose term ends in 2026. Historically, pay commissions are constituted every decade to address inflation, economic growth and employees' changing financial needs.



Prime Minister Modi underscored that the revised pay structure will boost consumption by increasing disposable incomes. Higher salaries and pensions are expected to lead to increased spending on goods and services, driving demand in sectors such as retail, real estate, and automobiles.

This consumption surge could further stimulate production and employment, creating a positive feedback loop in the economy. The Commission's recommendations are expected to address the rising cost of living and improve the financial wellbeing of central government employees and pensioners. While the revisions will inject liquidity into the econ-

omy, they will also impose a significant financial burden on the exchequer. Increased salary outlays may necessitate budgetary adjustments, potentially impacting allocations for other sectors like infrastructure and welfare. Although PSU and state government employees are outside the direct purview of central pay commissions, the 8th Pay Commission's recommendations often set a benchmark. Many state governments and PSUs align their pay scales with central government standards, amplifying the financial impact across the broader public sector. This could also have adverse effect on the economy. Higher disposable incomes could lead to demand-pull inflation, particularly in essential goods and services. Managing inflation will require a balanced monetary policy. Besides, the exclusion of PSU employees and 'gramin dak sevaks' from central pay commission benefits may intensify demands for similar revisions, potentially leading to unrest and political pressure. Increased spending on salaries and pensions may constrain the government's ability to invest in capital-intensive projects, potentially slowing long-term economic growth. Despite challenges, it can serve as a catalyst for the economy by generating demand and boosting production.

PICTALK



Tourists at Mall Road amid snowfall, in Manali

A spectacle of faith, unity and cosmic significance

The Kumbh Mela highlights the blend of tradition and modernity. It links cosmic phenomena with earthly rituals while fostering community feeling



RAJDEEP PATHAK

The grand Maha Kumbh Mela, one of the most magnificent spiritual gatherings in the world, is here. The Uttar Pradesh government has meticulously prepared to host this sacred festival – happening once every 12 years – with Prime Minister Narendra Modi personally monitoring the developments. Began on January 13, 2025, the Maha Kumbh is anticipated to draw an awe-inspiring congregation of over 45 crores – a footfall of around 450 million pilgrims, saints, ascetics and tourists – devotees.

At the heart of this divine celebration, is the (coming together) 'Sangam' – the sacred confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna, and the mystical Saraswati rivers. Millions of devotees will come together to take a holy dip, seeking spiritual cleansing and blessings. The Maha Kumbh is a timeless testament to faith, unity, and the eternal connection between humanity and the divine, that owes its origins to mythology and history. Devotees believe that a dip during the auspicious planetary alignments cleanses sins and paves the way for Moksha (liberation). Swami Sivananda, the Yoga Guru, and a proponent of Vedanta, rightly pointed out that "The holy dip at the Kumbh Mela is not just a ritual; it is a profound surrender to the divine." Mythologically connected, the legend of 'Samudra Manthan', or the Churning of the Ocean, is the cornerstone of its mythological significance. According to ancient scriptures, gods and demons churned the ocean to obtain the nectar of immortality (Amrit). As the Gods carried away the nectar, a few drops fell at four locations – Haridwar, Prayagraj, Nashik and Ujjain – and these places became sacred. Thus began the tradition of the Kumbh Mela. Scholar Diana Eck, professor of Comparative Religion and Indian Studies at Harvard University notes that "The Kumbh Mela reflects the Indian ethos of integrating mythology with geography, turning the mundane into the sacred." References to Kumbha appear in Vedic texts like the Rigveda,



Yajurveda, Samaveda, and Atharvaveda. It is also linked to the zodiac sign Aquarius, an astrological interpretation influenced by Greek ideas in the late 1st millennium CE. 'Mela' means "assembly" or "gathering" and signifies fairs or communal celebrations, as found in ancient Hindu texts. Together, Kumbha Mela refers to a "gathering centered around water or the nectar of immortality." Historically, the first recorded mention of the Kumbh Mela can be traced back to the writings of the Chinese traveller Hiuen Tsang in the 7th century CE. Hiuen Tsang documented several key events during Harsha's (Harshavardhana ruled over much of northern India from 606 to 647 AD and his reign is regarded as one of relative peace and prosperity) reign. Tsang also documented the Kumbh Mela festival in Prayag which Harsha attended. Over centuries, the festival evolved from a modest gathering of ascetics to a colossal event that attracts millions. The historical transformation of the Kumbh Mela underscores its resilience and adaptability, blending spiritual fervour with societal changes. A defining feature of the Kumbh Mela is the presence of saints, seers, and spiritual leaders



REFERENCES TO KUMBH APPEAR IN VEDIC TEXTS LIKE THE RIGVEDA, YAJURVEDA, SAMAVEDA, AND ATHARVAVEDA. IT IS ALSO LINKED TO THE ZODIAC SIGN AQUARIUS, AN ASTROLOGICAL INTERPRETATION INFLUENCED BY GREEK IDEAS IN THE LATE 1ST MILLENNIUM CE

who guide the masses. Various 'Akharas' (monastic orders) play a pivotal role in preserving and propagating Sanatan Dharma. The ascetics, often clad in saffron robes or ash, symbolise the renunciation of worldly desires. The ritual bath in the rivers further holds deep symbolic meaning. It signifies the washing away of one's ego and sins, allowing a fresh spiritual beginning. Historian William Dalrymple observes, "The saints at the Kumbh Mela are the custodians of India's timeless spiritual heritage." The Kumbh Mela beautifully embodies the fusion of religion and science. Its timing, rooted in precise astronomical calculations, reflects the profound significance of Hindu cosmology. When Jupiter enters Aquarius and the Sun moves into Aries, planetary alignments create an auspicious period for spiritual connection. This sacred festival links cosmic phenomena with earthly rituals, highlighting the deep interconnection between the universe and human spirituality. Aryabhata's pioneering work in celestial phenomena, including planetary motion and eclipses, continues to influence the Kumbh's timing. The Kumbh Mela is also a melting pot of cultures,

philosophies, and humanity. Participants range from reclusive ascetics to common people and even international visitors. This diversity underscores the universality of the quest for spiritual enlightenment. Sociologist Sudhir Kakar once wrote that the "Kumbh Mela is not merely a religious event but a grand celebration of human interconnectedness." The exchange of ideas, rituals, and philosophies at the Mela fosters a unique sense of global unity. Hosting millions of pilgrims at the Kumbh Mela demands meticulous planning, leveraging cutting-edge technologies like AI-powered crowd management systems, drone surveillance for security, and mobile health clinics to handle medical emergencies. Mobile apps and live-streaming services ensured smooth communication and global accessibility for devotees. The 2025 Kumbh will span an expanded area of 800 hectares, featuring 1.8 lakh tents and 101 smart parking facilities for five lakh vehicles daily. Despite the challenges, the event seamlessly blends tradition and modernity. (The writer is Programme Executive, Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti; views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

ISRO'S DOCKING MISSION SUCCESSFUL

Madam — ISRO docking two fast-moving spacecraft in space is a highly complex operation with numerous benefits. Docking enables the assembly of modular space stations, telescopes, or other large structures in orbit that cannot be launched in one piece. Example: Docking was essential in constructing the International Space Station (ISS). Docking allows for the transfer of astronauts and cargo between spacecraft or from a spacecraft to a space station. This supports long-term missions, resupply and the exchange of crew. This extends the operational life of expensive assets like communication or scientific satellites. Docking technology allows spacecraft to refuel in space, enabling longer missions or supporting reusable spacecraft. This is crucial for deep space exploration missions.

Docking is a critical step for assembling spacecraft or transferring crew for missions to the Moon, Mars, or beyond. Modular spacecraft for such missions often require multiple launches and dockings to combine their components. Docking facilitates international cooperation, as different countries can launch modules or experiments that dock with a shared platform, like a space station. Docking provides a means for evacuation or rescue in case of emergencies aboard a spacecraft or space station. Spacecraft like crew capsules (e.g., SpaceX Dragon, ISRO's Gaganyaan) rely on docking to connect with orbital stations, making them reusable and cost-effective. Successfully executing docking operations demonstrates technological prowess, boosts national pride, and establishes the country as a leader in space exploration. Docking operations are a cornerstone of space exploration and mission sustainability, enabling long-term presence and work in space. This achievement has placed India in the exclusive and elite league of the US, Russia, and China! This docking was successful on January 16, 2025!

Gopalaswamy J | Chennai

India strengthens its naval fleet



Wednesday. It is for the first time that all three frontline platforms have been indigenously developed in the country. The simultaneous commissioning of these vessels is a shot in the arm for the Indian Navy, which is preparing itself to challenge China's hegemony in the Indo-Pacific region. Equipped with the advanced technology, all three vessels have boosted the Indian Navy's capabilities to respond to various maritime challenges more effectively. In fact, public sector shipyards such as GRSE Kolkata, MDL Mazgaon, CSL Kochi, GSL Goa and HSL Vizag Besides immense contributions to defence preparation, the Indian Navy has contributed immensely to boosting operational preparedness of the Indian Navy by completing various shipbuilding projects in a very efficient and time-bound manner.

Manoj Parashar | Ghaziabad

ACTOR SAIF ALI KHAN ATTACKED

Madam — Bollywood actor Saif Ali Khan was stabbed six times after confronting an intruder, who had a confrontation with Khan's maid before the actor intervened, resulting in a physical struggle, in his Bandra residence early Thursday morning. The intruder fled after a violent altercation, and Khan was rushed to Lilavati Hospital by his son, Ibrahim and a caretaker, where he has successfully emerged from surgery and is now out of danger. The actor is currently recovering, with doctors closely monitoring his condition. People wonder how an intruder can enter the building and reach the 11th floor in a high-profile building that is well guarded and then escape also. Moreover, all in Bandra. An area that has the highest concentration of celebrities, which is supposed to have adequate security. No doubt 54-year-old Saif is a fit person, so he could face the intruder. Wishing Saif Ali Khan a speedy recovery, trusting that the law will take its course and those responsible will be held accountable.

Bidyut Kumar Chatterjee | Faridabad

HAMAS-ISRAEL TRUCE DECLARED

Madam — The ceasefire accord emerged after mediation by Qatar, Egypt and the US to stop the war that began with deadly Hamas attacks on Israel and saw Israeli forces kill tens of thousands of Palestinians and devastate Gaza. It is a welcome move. As per the deal, Israel and Hamas have agreed to halt the war in Gaza and see the release of Israeli hostages and Palestinian prisoners. It is the most significant breakthrough in 15 months of war that began in October 2023. Firstly, hostages in Gaza and Palestinian prisoners in Israel would be freed, and Gazans who have been displaced would be allowed to start returning home. During this period, Israeli troops would pull out of all populated areas in Gaza while the Palestinians would also return to their neighbourhoods in all the areas of Gaza. The second stage would be a permanent end to the war, according to Biden.

P Victor Selvaraj | Tirunelveli

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

The silent struggles of a daughter-in-law: A call to change



RACHNA LAKHPATRI

Allowing a daughter-in-law to flourish in her own right doesn't diminish the family's unity—it strengthens it

Living in a joint family is rarely simple, but for a daughter-in-law, it may be a delicate balancing act filled with judgement and criticism. In many households, the role of a daughter-in-law is laden with unspoken expectations, leaving little room for her individuality. It's time we acknowledge these silent struggles and push for a more inclusive and empathetic family dynamic. A daughter-in-law often steps into a household as an outsider, expected to adapt seamlessly to a new way of life. From changing her surname to understanding the intricacies of family traditions, she embarks on a journey of transformation.



whether it's about your outfit or your manner of speaking." These tales are not one of a kind. Across the nation, countless women grapple with the challenge of fulfilling the expectations of others while striving to maintain their sense of self. Some of my friends and cousins have admitted to bending the truth just to carve out a little time for themselves—a brief coffee catch-up or a quick getaway to relax with friends. Some even refer to it as a means of 'escaping' the steadfast pressures of family life. But why should it come to this? Why must a daughter-in-law justify her need for a breather?

The narrative that has been perpetuated for generations—that she must be the glue holding the family together—needs an overhaul. Living in a joint family should not mean sacrificing one's freedom or sense of self. It's high time families rethink the dynamics and extend the same courtesy of individuality and space to their daughters-in-law that they offer their sons.

Empathy and equality within a household aren't luxuries; they are necessities for harmony. Allowing a daughter-in-law to flourish in her own right doesn't diminish the family's unity—it strengthens it. Moreover, it sets an exam-

ple for future generations, teaching them to prioritise respect over rigid roles. Transformation begins with dialogue. It is essential for families to recognise the contributions a daughter-in-law makes and to foster open communication regarding shared responsibilities. Partners also hold a crucial position in connecting their spouses with their families, making certain that everyone feels appreciated and heard. At its core, a family is about mutual love, respect, and support. Let's replace the stifling word "in-law" with something more inclusive—perhaps "in-love," symbolising acceptance and belonging. After all, isn't that what a family should truly be about? For daughters-in-law across the world, the message is clear: You are not alone in your struggle. For families, the challenge is to listen, adapt, and foster a space where everyone, regardless of their title, feels at home. It's not just about rewriting roles—it's about rewriting the narrative for a more equitable tomorrow. (The writer is a freelance writer; views are personal)



FIRST COLUMN

OUR ACTIONS
SHAPE OUR LIVES

Karmaphalas—the results of our actions—are an undeniable force shaping our lives



AJIT KUMAR BISHNOI

We all should know about karmaphalas. These are the results of both good and bad karma (acts) done by us in the past with our minds, words and bodies. I have mentioned minds separately from bodies because karmas done by the mind are subtle. And they can be quite lethal. What is a mental disease? You have guessed right; it is caused by our minds.

Similarly, words are no less dangerous. Yes, words can be very deadly, as experienced by all of us, when we choose to speak foolishly. And these bad karmaphalas can manifest at any age but they hurt the most in old age when we are weak and not left with many options.

This is when a person laments about his bad luck and there are not many sympathisers. Aren't we written off as we age? This article describes what we can do about it. We are not so helpless after all. The first step is to stop doing all bad acts right from this moment. And we know what these are. Goodness has to increase in us by doing all acts of goodness.

We must speak pleasantly; we should see goodness programmes; we should stick to foods in goodness; and so on. What this will do is protect us from the ill effects of our present acts, to begin with. Controller mental must be curbed; one must become realistic because there is only one controller and that is God. If it wasn't so we will obtain whatever we desire, which hardly even hap-



pens. The ego must be curbed because there is only one superior entity, which is God. All our lives we try to prove our superiority and what happens? We become very unpopular with others, especially with our family members, whom we desperately need in our old age. Spiritual practices must be started in the right earnest. They will make a lot of sense if we realise that we are souls, parts of God.

Shouldn't parts be dependent on the whole? Should we not be respectful towards God, just like a son is supposed to be towards his father? Don't we thank others when they do us some favour? God is forever doing us many favours. To begin with, He has provided all essentials free like the light of the sun, water, air containing oxygen, etc. God has to help ultimately because fate cannot be changed by anyone else. He also doesn't, but helps to deal with bad karmaphalas; we won't end up badly. (9.31) This is a very big 'kripa' but more important is His mercy in protecting us from our good karmaphalas, when we are most likely to hurt ourselves badly. Because it is hard to tolerate good times. And God and only God can help in improving our nature, which is also part of our fate. Doesn't our nature let us down time and again? We see people destroying themselves by angry acts, lusty behaviour, envious attitudes, etc. God protects us from foolish acts, if we remain in His shelter. I am very scared about the prospect of ill fate in my old age when I am already weak. God has to protect me.

I am not taking any chances; I have taken God's shelter. Only God is the one who can help, being the owner and controller. God can intervene and God does for His devotees. (The Bhagavad-Geeta 18.58) Wouldn't this make us peaceful? It has made me gradually as my connection with God is getting strengthened by my spiritual practices. Please don't take chances.

(The writer is a spiritual teacher; views are personal)

Reverse brain drain: A game-changer for growth



WASEEM JAVED

By harnessing the knowledge, networks and expertise of these returnees, India is laying the foundation for a resilient and competitive economy

India has witnessed a mass exodus of talent for decades, as highly skilled professionals and students left the country in search of better opportunities abroad. This phenomenon, known as 'brain drain', has historically deprived the country of its brightest minds. However, the tide is reversing, with individuals returning to their home country, as seen in the recent past. With acquired skills and rich experience, the 'reverse brain drain' is increasingly becoming a powerful force in India's economic growth and development. This comes against the backdrop of India's fast-paced economic growth, combined with government initiatives and an evolving entrepreneurial ecosystem that has made the country an attractive destination for global talent, including those who once left its shores. This shift is not about just people coming back; it's about knowledge transfer, innovation, and global networks essential to building a competitive and resilient economy.

Economic and Entrepreneurial Opportunities Driving Return

In most cases, what has caused this reverse brain drain is the prospect of available opportunities in India. The growth pattern of India as a country with an upward economic trajectory brings with it demand for science, technology, and innovation skills from professionals in their fields.

Returnees easily get absorbed in suitable roles since their international experience puts them on top of the sought-after candidates at startups, large multinational companies, and research centres. Government initiatives like Make in India, Startup India, and Atmanirbhar Bharat have further made India more attractive. These initiatives encourage entrepreneurship, self-reliance, and innovation by offering financial incentives, regulatory support, and access to infrastructure. Thus, many Indian professionals who had earlier worked in global hubs such as Silicon Valley are returning to start their startups or take up leadership roles in Indian enterprises.

For example, several Indian entrepreneurs who have returned from the United States or the United Kingdom are at the helm of billion-dollar startups in India today.

They cut across fintech, e-commerce, health tech, and renewable energy among other sectors that create jobs and spur economic growth. Their global networks and access to venture capital give them a competitive edge that will allow them to scale their businesses quickly and effectively.

The Role of Overseas Education in Shaping Talent

Education in foreign lands serves as the core of the reverse brain drain. In 2024, more than 13.35 lakh students from India pursued education abroad, of which the USA, Canada, the UK, Australia, and Germany were among the top destinations. In general, courses in engineering, business management, medicine, and technology attract Indian students with promising career avenues. This international education equips students with advanced knowledge, technical skills, and a global perspective. Many also gain valuable work experience abroad before deciding to return to India.

A key facilitator in this journey has been the rise of AI-powered consultancy plat-



GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES LIKE MAKE IN INDIA, STARTUP INDIA, AND ATMANIRBHAR BHARAT HAVE FURTHER MADE INDIA MORE ATTRACTIVE. THESE INITIATIVES ENCOURAGE ENTREPRENEURSHIP, SELF-RELIANCE, AND INNOVATION BY OFFERING FINANCIAL INCENTIVES, REGULATORY SUPPORT AND ACCESS TO INFRASTRUCTURE

forms that streamline the process of studying abroad. These platforms help students identify the best courses, universities, and countries based on their aspirations and career goals.

They also help with visa processes, and education loans, and even offer post-admission help, so everything goes off smoothly. These consultancies not only empower students in terms of succeeding abroad but also lay the groundwork for their potential contributions upon returning to India while bridging the gap between students and global education systems.

Benefits of Reverse Brain Drain for India

The reverse brain drain is an economy-changing force for India, bringing skilled professionals back to drive progress across sectors. In the case of technology, returnees provide cutting-edge expertise in areas like artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and clean energy, which ensure that India is not left behind globally.

The knowledge that these returnees provide creates technological advances that benefit both industries and society. Entrepreneurship and innovation also pick up pace as returnees start new ventures, create jobs, and develop innovative products and services that address local and global challenges. This not only increases employment but also makes India a creative solutions hub.

Furthermore, these professionals enhance scientific collaboration by connecting Indian institutions with international research networks, thereby facilitating the exchange of ideas and resources in areas such as healthcare and renewable energy. The economic impact is equally strong as the

reverse brain drain strengthens productivity, draws in foreign investment, and propels GDP growth.

Key Challenges and the Way Forward

Although reverse brain drain promises to boost Indian growth immensely, bureaucratic red tape, infrastructural inadequacies, and differing work environments in India versus the developed world will still prevent most professionals from coming back. This will only come true when registration procedures, tax regimes, and the regime for intellectual property become more simplified, paving the way for returnees to establish enterprises or meaningfully contribute to organizations.

To tap into returning talent effectively, India must improve its infrastructure: world-class research facilities, modern educational institutions, and strong health care. More competitive incentives to attract international talent include tax breaks, grants for research, and easier access to funding. Only then will the reverse brain drain convert into practical input toward the nation's economic growth and innovation.

Government Initiatives and Policy Support

The Indian government has been proactively capitalising on reverse brain drain. By setting up innovation hubs, funding startup companies, and collaborating with world-class research institutes, the country is attracting much-needed talent as well as fostering innovation. Many countries have implemented policies and incentives to encourage skilled professionals to return to their home countries. For example, Taiwan created the Hsinchu Science Park and offered tax cuts to encourage the development of high-tech industries. Such poli-

cies not only encourage the return of skilled professionals but also provide them with a platform to flourish.

The Global Context and Its Implications

Interestingly, reverse brain drain is not an Indian phenomenon alone. Developed countries like the United States and the United Kingdom are losing talent due to restrictive immigration policies and limited opportunities for career advancement. For example, America's flawed immigration policies have inadvertently driven away skilled professionals who are now contributing to India's growth.

This shift points to a wider paradigm wherein developing countries are transformational centres of innovation and economic activity. It could also help India emerge as a global leader in sectors ranging from technology to healthcare.

A Bright Future for Reverse Brain Drain

The reverse brain drain represents a new paradigm in India's journey to become a global economic superpower. In this new scenario, talent can be an asset to the country by nurturing innovation and fostering collaboration.

With government support, private sector participation, and an emphasis on developing world-class infrastructure, the country is poised to turn reverse brain drain into a sustained growth driver.

In doing so, this movement is not only for India but reshapes the global talent landscape with a new reality of importance— inclusive and dynamic economies in a more integrated and interconnected world.

(The writer is the founder and CEO of EduVib; views are personal)

Andhra Pradesh's journey towards zero hunger and inclusive education

The Dokka Seethamma Mid-Day Meal scheme is a testament to the State's commitment to inclusivity and reforming the education system

Since Independence, food security has been a significant concern in India. Despite notable progress toward achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2: Zero Hunger, India still grapples with the challenge of undernutrition.

According to a United Nations report, the country accounts for nearly 195 million undernourished individuals, with children constituting 43 per cent of this population. Various initiatives, such as the Public Distribution System (PDS) and the PM Poshan Mid-Day Meal scheme, have been implemented to address this pressing issue.

Historical Roots of Mid-Day Meal Schemes

The origins of the Mid-Day Meal scheme in India can be

traced back to the colonial era. In 1925, the Madras Presidency proposed the first-ever Mid-Day Meal initiative for underprivileged children. Tamil Nadu became the first state to implement this idea, with Sourashtra Boys Higher Secondary School in Madurai serving meals to children in 1955.

By the 1980s, this programme gained widespread acceptance, particularly with the introduction of the "Nutritious Noon Meal Scheme" by Tamil Nadu's then Chief Minister, M G Ramachandran. This initiative aimed to provide food to 6.8 million malnourished children in the state. Over the years, the programme has demonstrated the strong correlation between nutritious meals and improved educa-



T V KATTIMANI

tion. For children in tribal and socio-economically disadvantaged communities, the scheme has proven to be a lifeline. Many of these children, previously engaged in household activities or income generation due to food insecurity, could now attend school and pursue their right to education. The programme also had a transformative impact on children from Socio-

Economic Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs), including Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, De-notified Tribes, Nomadic Tribes, and girl children.

Dokka Seethamma Mid-Day Meal Scheme

A significant step forward, the Andhra Pradesh government recently launched the "Dokka Seethamma Mid-Day Meal Scheme." This initiative, named after Dokka Seethamma—revered as Aparna Annapurna—provides free meals to students in junior colleges across the state. Seethamma, born in 1841 in Mandapet village, was renowned for her compassion and dedication to serving the needy. Despite limited formal education, she imbibed strong moral values through



stories and songs from her childhood. Along with her husband, Dokka Joganna, she provided food and shelter to travelers and disaster-stricken communities near the Godavari River. Her legacy of humanitarian service remains a beacon of inclusivity and maternal love. The Dokka Seethamma scheme is the first of its kind in India, targeting intermediate students. Benefiting 148,419 students across 475 government junior colleges in Andhra Pradesh, the pro-

gramme aims to reduce dropout rates, enhance academic focus, and improve overall student health. By lessening the financial burden on low-income families, the initiative also promotes greater equity in education. It sets a model for other states to emulate, addressing hunger while fostering a nurturing environment for academic and personal growth.

Complementary Initiatives for Inclusivity

In addition to the Dokka Seethamma scheme, Andhra Pradesh has revived the "Anna Canteens" initiative. This program offers wholesome meals at just Rs 5 to economically disadvantaged individuals, significantly alleviating hunger and improving living standards. By ensuring affordable

access to food, the state aims to bridge socioeconomic disparities and support marginalised communities.

For tribal students, particularly girls, the Dokka Seethamma scheme has been a game-changer. Tribal communities often face acute food insecurity due to geographical remoteness and limited resources. Free nutritious meals enable tribal children to focus on their education instead of household chores or income generation. The scheme also addresses educational inequity by encouraging families to prioritise their children's schooling. For tribal girls, the program has a transformative impact. Social and financial pressures often force girls to leave school prematurely, but free meals reduce fam-

ily burdens and promote their continued education.

A Vision for a Better Future

The Mid-Day Meal scheme and similar initiatives signify more than just food distribution—they represent a commitment to empowering the marginalised and uplifting the underprivileged. These programs not only ensure access to nutritious meals but also encourage higher education, better living standards, and healthier lifestyles. By fostering cooperation among teachers, students, and staff, the scheme revives the ancient "Gurukula" system of holistic education, emphasising both mental and physical wellbeing.

(The writer is Vice Chancellor of Central Tribal University of Andhra Pradesh; views are personal)

Cable network rules changed: Online registration for LCOs

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The government on Friday relaxed the rules governing cable television networks by making the registration process for Local Cable Operators (LCOs) fully online, with the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting designated as the registering authority. The amended Cable Television Network Rules of 1994 came into effect on Friday, and the government announced that the Local Cable Operators registration certificate would be issued in real-time after the successful verification of applicant details, including Aadhaar, PAN, CIN, and DIN, among other documents. Previously, the LCO

registration process was conducted offline at the local head post office in the area where the LCO's office was situated, with the head postmaster serving as the registering authority. Under the new rules, LCOs will apply for new registrations or renewals online via the Broadcast Seva Portal of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. The registration certificate will also be issued online. LCO registrations will be granted or renewed for a period of five years, with a processing fee of Rs 5,000. The registration will be valid for operations across India. Renewal applications must be made at least 90 days before the registration's expiry.

LCOs may appeal to the Appellate Authority, i.e., the Under Secretary (DAS), if their registration or renewal is denied by the registering authority (Designated Section Officer). The appeal must be filed within 30 days of the denial. Existing LCO registrations will remain valid until the period mentioned in the registration certificate. However, if the existing registration is valid for less than 90 days, LCOs must immediately apply for renewal via the portal. Applications for registration or renewal made to post offices that are currently pending must be withdrawn, and new applications must be submitted via the portal.

Supreme Court directs UP, Haryana to impose firecracker ban in NCR

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Termining the rising air pollution a "drastic" problem, the Supreme Court on Friday stated that the measures needed to tackle it should also be "drastic." The Court directed the Uttar Pradesh and Haryana governments to impose a complete ban on firecrackers in their areas falling under the National Capital Region (NCR). A bench of Justices A S Oka and Ujjal Bhuyan noted that, like Delhi, the Rajasthan government has already imposed a perpetual and complete ban on the sale and bursting of firecrackers in the NCR areas of the state. The Court asked Uttar Pradesh and Haryana to adopt similar measures.

The bench stated that until these two states pass their own orders, its previous direction banning firecrackers would remain in effect until the next hearing scheduled for March 24. "The environmental problems are drastic, and so drastic measures are needed," the bench remarked, emphasizing that the Court must take action and issue harsher orders, given that other arms of the government have not effectively addressed the issue. The bench also mentioned it would hear pleas challenging the ban on firecracker-manufacturing firms during the next hearing. When a lawyer requested the Court to lift the complete ban due to its impact on the manufacturers' fundamental

rights, the bench stated that environmental concerns take precedence over such issues. The lawyer then urged the Court to at least allow the sale of "green crackers." "We have to examine how green are green crackers," the bench responded. Additionally, the Court asked the Centre to respond to the petitions filed by firecracker-manufacturing firms. The Court had earlier directed the Uttar Pradesh and Haryana governments to enforce a complete ban on firecrackers until further orders. It also noted that the Delhi government had imposed a year-round ban on the manufacture, storage, sale, and delivery of firecrackers, including online marketing. "We are of the view that this ban will only be effective

when other states forming part of the NCR also impose similar measures. Even the state of Rajasthan has implemented a similar ban in the NCR areas of Rajasthan. For the time being, we direct the states of Uttar Pradesh and Haryana to impose a similar ban," the bench had said. Expressing serious concern over high pollution levels in Delhi during Diwali, the Supreme Court had previously criticized the poor implementation of its orders, stating that its directives on the firecracker ban were "hardly implemented." The bench was hearing a plea filed by environmentalist M.C. Mehta in 1985, which seeks directions to curb air pollution in the national capital and surrounding areas.

MEA, Army align on LAC standoff

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

There is no contradiction of position on the situation along the Line of Actual Control in eastern Ladakh, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) asserted on Friday, days after Army Chief Gen Upendra Dwivedi said a "degree" of standoff exists between Indian and Chinese militaries in the region. "We do not see any contradiction between what the Army Chief has said and the position we have taken," MEA spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said. Following an understanding reached on October 21, the Indian and Chinese militaries 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, NSA Ajit Doval travelled to Beijing and held Special Representatives talks with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi on the boundary dispute. At a press conference this week, Gen Dwivedi said there is still a "degree" of standoff between the Indian and Chinese militaries.

Air quality improves, restrictions lifted

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM) on Friday revoked the actions under Stage III ('Severe' Air Quality) of the Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP) following an improvement in the national Capital's Air Quality Index (AQI) after it reached 302 a day before. "The Sub-Committee, accordingly, decided to revoke its order dated 15.01.2025, for invoking actions under Stage-

III ('Severe' Air quality) of the extant Schedule of GRAP, with immediate effect," the official order said. The revocation of Stage III actions, which had been implemented on January 15 when the AQI exceeded 350, comes in response to the positive trend in air quality levels. "Despite this improvement, actions under Stage I and II of GRAP will continue to be enforced across the NCR," an order said. The Sub-Committee on GRAP, which is responsible

for monitoring the air quality, met to review the current scenario. They noted that the AQI in Delhi is now in the 'Very Poor' category, and with favorable weather conditions predicted by the Indian Meteorological Department (IMD) and the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology (IITM), the air quality is expected to remain stable. However, as a precaution, the situation will be closely monitored to ensure AQI levels do not deteriorate further.

Kharge accuses BJP of misleading youth on job crisis

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge accused the BJP-led Centre on Friday of duping the country's youngsters on employment generation by making false claims and coming up with false data on jobs. He alleged that the government has only given paper leaks to youngsters and snatched their jobs with its bad policies. "False claims, falsification of data and covering up the truth of declining jobs have become a habit of the Modi government. 82

per cent youth are looking for a job this year, 55 per cent said it became difficult to find a job last year. 37 per cent say they have given up hope of finding a new job in 2025," Kharge claimed in a post on X. He further claimed that according to a separate survey, 69 per cent of Indian human resources (HR) professionals feel that finding qualified talent for a role has become more challenging now. "Without conducting a census, by estimating and extrapolating old surveys using government data, the Modi

government is misleading crores of youth in the name of generating employment. By converting unpaid labour into jobs and counting even one-hour work per week as jobs, it is deceiving the country. "The government has duped the youth with lies like paper leaks by the Mafia Raj, stampede for a few jobs, snatching jobs by shutting down MSME through bad policies like demonetisation, usurping the right to reservation, keeping government job posts vacant for years and promising two crore jobs annually," Kharge said.

Mystery deepens in Saif Ali assault

From page 1

Contrary to earlier reports suggesting that Saif's elder son, Ibrahim (23), had rushed his bleeding father to the hospital, it has now emerged that Saif himself took an autorickshaw to Lilavati Hospital. His eight-year-old son, Taimur, accompanied him in the rickshaw. Confirming how Saif reached the hospital, autorickshaw driver Bhajan Singh Rana (47) told a television channel: "I was passing by the building when I suddenly heard a cry for help from a lady (apparently Saif's housemaid) standing near the main gate asking me to stop the vehicle." "When I stopped the vehicle, the actor, whom I did not recognize at first, walked up to my autorickshaw and sat down. There was a small child (Taimur) and one more person with him at that time. He (Saif) appeared calm and

collected throughout our journey to the hospital. The only thing he asked me during the ride was, 'Kitna time lagega?' (How long will it take to reach the hospital?)," Rana said. Doctors at Lilavati Hospital have hailed Saif as a "real-life hero," noting that despite being in deep pain and covered in blood, he managed to reach the hospital on his own in an autorickshaw, barely an hour after the attack. The incident took place sometime after 2 a.m. on Thursday in the 12th-floor flat of Saif's "Satguru Sharan" building. A housemaid at Saif's residence, identified as Eliyama Phillipias alias Lima, was the first to see the intruder and raised an alarm, prompting Saif to rush out to his bedroom to investigate. Seeing Saif, the knife-wielding intruder, suspected to have broken into the actor's home for a burglary, attacked him.

During the ensuing struggle, the actor was stabbed multiple times before the assailant fled the flat. Following the attack, the Bandra Police and Crime Branch set up 10 investigative teams to track down the assailant. Speaking to the media, Maharashtra's Minister of State for Home, Yogesh Kadam, said: "There is no involvement of any criminal gang in the attack on Saif Ali Khan. The preliminary probe suggests that robbery was the motive behind the incident." "The police have identified one person from the CCTV footage. A suspect was detained for questioning today. We suspect the involvement of others, and the police are searching for them," Kadam said. The suspect detained by the Bandra police was later released, as he had no connection to the incident.

Israel-Hamas limp towards normalcy

From page 1

Israel responded with a devastating offensive that has killed over 46,000 Palestinians, according to local health officials, who do not distinguish between civilians and militants but say women and children make up more than half of those killed. Beyond the death and destruction in Gaza, the conflict has also destabilised the Middle East and sparked worldwide protests. On Thursday, Israeli strikes killed at least 72 people in Gaza. In previous conflicts, both sides stepped up military operations in the final hours before ceasefires as a way to project strength. A three-phase deal Netanyahu instructed a special task force to prepare to receive the hostages returning from Gaza, and said their families were informed a deal had been reached. The prime minister's office said if the deal passes,

the ceasefire could start Sunday when the first hostages could be freed. Under the deal, 33 of some 100 hostages who remain in Gaza are set to be released over six weeks in exchange for hundreds of Palestinians imprisoned by Israel. Israeli forces will pull back from many areas, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians would be able to return to what's left of their homes, and there would be a surge of humanitarian assistance. The remainder of the hostages, including male soldiers, are to be released in a second -- and much more difficult -- phase that will be negotiated during the first. Hamas has said it will not release the remaining captives without a lasting ceasefire and a full Israeli withdrawal, while Israel has vowed to keep fighting until it dismantles the group and to maintain open-ended security control over the territory. Jaher Jabareen, head of

Hamas' office responsible for prisoners, said on Friday that the names of those expected to be released from Israeli jails will be published, but didn't say when. Longer-term questions about post-war Gaza remain, including who will rule the territory or oversee the daunting task of reconstruction. An Egyptian official and a Hamas official confirmed that the last-minute issues were over the list of Palestinian prisoners to be released from Israeli jails during the first phase of the deal, but those have now been resolved. Both officials spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the private negotiations. The Hamas official said mediators showed the group Israel's approval. The Egyptian official added that an Israeli delegation from the military and Israel's Shin Bet internal security agency arrived in Cairo on Friday to

discuss the reopening of the Rafah crossing, a key link between the Gaza Strip and Egypt. An Israeli official, who also spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the negotiations, confirmed a delegation was going to Cairo to discuss the crossing. Objections to the deal in Israel. On Thursday, Israel's hard-line national security minister, Itamar Ben-Gvir, threatened to quit the government if Israel approved the ceasefire. He reiterated his stand on Friday, writing on X, "If the deal passes, we will leave the government with a heavy heart." While Ben-Gvir's resignation would not bring down the government or derail the ceasefire deal, the move would destabilise the government at a delicate moment and could eventually lead to its collapse if Ben-Gvir were joined by other key Netanyahu allies.

Imran Khan convicted

From page 1

The National Accountability Bureau (NAB) in December 2023 filed the case against Khan (72), Bibi (50) and six others, accusing them of causing a loss to the tune of 190 million pounds (PRs 50 billion) to the national kitty. Only Khan and Bibi have been prosecuted in the case as all others, including a property tycoon, were out of the country. The case revolves around allegations that an amount of PRs 50 billion, returned to Pakistan by the UK's National Crime Agency as part of a settlement with the property tycoon, was misused. The funds were reportedly intended for the national treasury but were allegedly redirected for the personal benefit of the businessman who helped Bibi and Khan to set up a university. Bibi, as a trustee of the Al-Qadir Trust, is accused of benefiting from this settlement, including acquiring 458 kanals of land for Al-Qadir University in Jhelum. Judge Rana concluded the hearing in the case on December 18 but reserved the judgment until December 23. Later, he fixed January 6 as the date for announcing the verdict, Geo News reported. He was on leave on January 6 so the verdict was postponed until January 13. But the verdict was once again deferred as the accused and their lawyers were not present in the court on January 13. The judgment comes amidst the ongoing negotiation between the government and Khan's PTI to address the political instability in the country due to the imprisonment of Khan and several other leaders of his party. Pakistan has been in the grip of political turmoil since the elections were held on February 8 last year when the PTI refused to accept the result and held several protests over alleged rigging of polls, and Khan's detention. So far three rounds of talks have been held between the government and the PTI and the opposition party has presented its charter of demands in writing to the government. Khan claims all cases against him were "politically motivated". Last year, he was acquitted in the cipher case for disclosing official secrets and the Iddat case for violating marriage laws but was charged in the Toshakhana 2 corruption case.

Bharat on Auto Mobility

From page 1

Modi said the 'Make in India' initiative has played an important role in unleashing the growth potential of India's auto industry. The performance linked incentive (PLI) schemes, he said, have given new momentum to the 'Make in India' campaign, aiding sales of over Rs 2.25 lakh crore and creation of more than 1.5 lakh direct jobs in the sector. "Driven by the aspirations of the people and energy of the youth, India's automobile sector is witnessing a u n p r e c e d e n t e d transformation," he said, and added that in the past year, the Indian auto industry has

grown by nearly 12 per cent and exports rose. Modi remarked that the number of cars sold annually in India surpasses the population of many countries. The sale of approximately 2.5 crore cars in a year demonstrates the continuously growing demand in India, he added. India is currently the world's fifth-largest economy and the third-largest passenger vehicle market. The prime minister further said as India ascends to become one of the top three economies globally, the country's auto market will witness unprecedented transformation and expansion.

Several factors drive the future of mobility in India, including the country's large youth population, the expanding middle class, rapid urbanisation, modern infrastructure development, and affordable vehicles through the 'Make in India' initiative, he said. He pointed out a major customer base is India's middle class and over the past decade, 25 crore Indians have risen out of poverty, forming a neo-middle class that is purchasing their first vehicles. Modi said India is building a mobility system that supports both the economy and ecology, reducing the import bill for fossil fuels. The country, he said, is focusing

on the development of green technology, EVs, hydrogen fuel and biofuels. Underlining the comprehensive support provided by the government to the auto sector at every level, Modi remarked that over the past decade, new avenues for FDI, technology transfer, and global partnerships were established in the industry. He informed that in the last four years alone, the sector has attracted over USD 36 billion in Foreign Direct Investment. He noted that this figure was expected to multiply in the coming years. The Prime Minister reiterated the government's commitment to developing a

complete ecosystem for auto manufacturing within India. Modi also talked about the rapid growth of electric mobility in India over the past few years and remarked that the sale of electric vehicles has increased 640 times in the past decade. He said while only around 2,600 electric vehicles were sold annually ten years ago, over 16.8 lakh electric vehicles were sold in 2024. The prime minister projected that the number of electric vehicles in India could increase eight-fold by the end of this decade, showcasing the immense potential in this segment. He also asked the manufacturers to take

advantage of the vehicle scrapping policy and suggested that companies could introduce their own incentive schemes to encourage more people to scrap their old vehicles. The prime minister reminisced Ratan Tata and Osamu Suzuki. He said that the contributions of both the stalwarts were immense into the growth of the Indian auto sector as well as towards fulfilling the dreams of middle-class families of India. Modi expressed confidence that their legacy will continue to inspire the entire mobility sector of India. Speaking on the occasion, Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal said

Bharat Mobility 2025 presents the India story to the world and that it will augment investments and boost trade for the country. Auto industry has emerged as a symbol for Atmanirbhar Bharat and Make in India and startups are also participating in the event, he said. The minister informed that India has become the largest manufacturer of three-wheelers and tractors in the world and also holds the top spot as a two-wheeler market in the world. Union ministers Nitin Gadkari, Manohar Lal, H D Kumaraswamy, Jitan Ram Manjhi, and Hardeep Singh Puri too were present among other dignitaries at the event.

FREEFALL OF FREEBIES

From page 1

Nadda also added that the BJP will increase the senior citizen pension for people aged between 60 and 70 from Rs 2,000 to Rs 2,500 and for senior citizens, widows, divyang (differently-abled) individuals, and the destitute aged over 70 from Rs 2,500 to Rs 3,000. In a bid to woo slum dwellers, the party will launch 'Atal Canteens' in JJ clusters to provide nutritious meals at Rs 5. Nadda also assured that all the schemes currently running in Delhi will continue. Meanwhile, AAP chief Kejriwal asked, "Why should people vote for them?" adding that the BJP manifesto only

promises what the ruling party is already offering. He criticized the BJP for failing to include any promise in their manifesto regarding improvements in law and order, calling their poll document a 'bundle of lies'. On Nadda's claim that they will investigate the scam in Mohalla clinics, Kejriwal alleged that the BJP has only promised the same old schemes, which they have failed to deliver on. Kejriwal also claimed that the BJP manifesto mentions that Mohalla Clinics will be closed. "The AAP will go across Delhi to ask people if they want these clinics or not," the former Chief Minister said.

AAP promises, BJP dismisses

From page 1

"Delhi Metro is a 50:50 joint project between the Delhi Government and the Central Government. Therefore, the expenditure on this should be borne equally by both governments," the letter read. "To reduce the financial burden on students, I propose to give a 50 per cent concession to students in Delhi Metro," the letter continued. Kejriwal said that students in Delhi are dependent on the Metro for commuting to schools and colleges, and thus, the financial burden on them must be reduced. "I am writing this letter to draw your attention to an

important matter concerning the school and college students of Delhi. The students of Delhi depend largely on the Metro to commute to their school or college," the letter stated. He also took to X to share the announcement: "The expense of bus and metro fares will no longer be a hindrance to education. Once our government is formed, we will start free bus travel for school and college students and will also provide concessions in metro fares. Every penny spent on students is an investment in the future of the country." Speaking at the press conference, Kejriwal

announced free bus rides for male students if his party is re-elected in the February 5 polls. The AAP government already provides free bus travel to women in the city. Explaining the rationale, Kejriwal reasoned that these measures are designed to remove a significant financial burden on students, ensuring that access to education remains uninterrupted by economic barriers. "Women in Delhi are already enjoying free bus rides. Now, we will extend the same benefit to male students to ease their financial burden and promote education accessibility," Kejriwal said. Responding to a media

query, Arvind Kejriwal said, "We are saying that students' metro fares should be reduced by half. Does the BJP agree to this, and will they include it in their manifesto? If the BJP does not include this in their manifesto, why should students vote for them?" Meanwhile, Congress leader Sandeep Dikshit publicly criticized Kejriwal's 50% metro fare concession proposal, labeling it as 'irresponsible.' He questioned why the AAP had not previously implemented similar pledges, suggesting duplicity in their promises. Dikshit further accused the AAP of attempting to mislead the

public by shifting blame to the central government. He claimed that AAP promises what it cannot deliver financially and would eventually accuse the national authorities of obstruction. The upcoming Delhi Assembly elections are set to witness a triangular contest between the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and Congress. The Arvind Kejriwal-led AAP will aim for its third consecutive term, riding on its previous electoral successes. Meanwhile, the BJP and Congress are preparing to challenge AAP's dominance in the capital.

How long will it take and how much will it cost to rebuild Gaza?

AP ■ GAZA CITY

Palestinians in the Gaza Strip are eager to leave miserable tent camps and return to their homes if a long-awaited ceasefire agreement halts the Israel-Hamas war, but many will find there is nothing left and no way to rebuild. Israeli bombardment and ground operations have transformed entire neighbourhoods in several cities into rubble-strewn wastelands, with blackened shells of buildings and mounds of debris stretching away in all directions. Major roads have been plowed up. Critical water and electricity infrastructure is in ruins. Most hospitals no longer function. The agreement for a phased ceasefire and the release of hostages held by Hamas-led militants does not say who will govern Gaza after the war, or whether Israel and Egypt will lift a blockade limiting

the movement of people and goods that they imposed when Hamas seized power in 2007. The United Nations says it could take more than 350 years to rebuild if the blockade remains. The full extent of the damage will only be known when the fighting ends and inspectors have full access to the territory. The most heavily destroyed part of Gaza, in the north, has been sealed off and largely depopulated by Israeli forces in an operation that began early October. Using satellite data, the United Nations estimated last month that 69 per cent of the structures in Gaza have been damaged or destroyed, including over 245,000 homes. The World Bank estimated USD 18.5 billion in damage — nearly the combined economic output of the West Bank and Gaza in 2022 — from just the first four

months of the war. Israel blames the destruction on Hamas, which ignited the war with its October 7, 2023, attack into Israel, killing some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and abducting another 250. Israel's retaliatory offensive has killed over 46,000 Palestinians, more than half of them women and children, according to Gaza's health ministry, which does not say how many of the dead were fighters. Israel claims it has killed over 17,000 militants, without providing evidence. The military has released photos and video footage showing that Hamas built tunnels and rocket launchers in residential areas, and often operated in and around homes, schools and mosques. Before anything can be rebuilt, the rubble must be removed — a staggering task in itself. The UN estimates that the war has littered Gaza with over 50 million tonnes of rubble — roughly 12 times



the size of the Great Pyramid of Giza. With over 100 trucks working full time, it would take over 15 years to clear the rubble

away, and there is little open space in the narrow coastal territory that is home to some 2.3 million Palestinians. Carting the debris away will

also be complicated by the fact that it contains huge amounts of unexploded ordnance and other harmful materials, as well as human

remains. Gaza's health ministry says thousands of people killed in airstrikes are still buried under the rubble. The rubble clearance and eventual rebuilding of homes will require billions of dollars and the ability to bring construction materials and heavy equipment into the territory — neither of which is assured. The ceasefire agreement calls for a three to five-year reconstruction project to begin in its final phase, after all the remaining 100 hostages have been released, and Israeli troops have withdrawn from the territory. But getting to that point will require agreement on the second and most difficult phase of the deal, which still must be negotiated. Even then, the ability to rebuild will depend on the blockade, which critics have long decried as a form of collective punishment. Israel says it is needed to prevent Hamas from

rebuilding its military capabilities, noting that cement and metal pipes can also be used for tunnels and rockets. Israel might be more inclined to lift the blockade if Hamas were no longer in power, but there are no plans for an alternative government. The US and much of the international community want a revitalised Palestinian Authority to govern the West Bank and Gaza with the support of Arab countries ahead of eventual statehood. But that's a nonstarter for Israel's government, which is opposed to a Palestinian state and has ruled out any role in Gaza for the Western-backed authority. International donors are unlikely to invest in an ungoverned territory that has seen five wars in less than two decades, which means the sprawling tent camps along the coast could become a permanent feature of life in Gaza.

'Elon Musk's support for European far-right completely unacceptable'

AP ■ BERLIN

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said Friday that Elon Musk's support for the far-right in Europe is "completely unacceptable", adding to his previous criticism of Musk's interventions in the German election campaign. Musk has said over the past month that only the far-right party Alternative for Germany, or AfD, can "save Germany". Last week, the tech billionaire livestreamed on his social media platform X a chat with Alice Weidel, the party's candidate for chancellor in Germany's February 23 election, amplifying its message ahead of the vote. His interest in Germany and politics elsewhere in Europe, after he poured money and energy into helping Donald Trump win the US election, has set off alarm bells among politicians across the continent. The Tesla and SpaceX chief executive has also demanded the release of jailed UK anti-



Islam extremist Tommy Robinson and called British Prime Minister Keir Starmer's government "tyrannical", claiming Starmer should be in prison. Scholz has said it's important to "stay cool" over personal attacks, but that Germany's way forward "will not be decided by the owners of social media channels" but by German voters. Asked on Friday about Musk's interventions, he said it's important to "criticise the

right thing". "What we must criticise is not that a billionaire, or a billionaire from other countries in a global world, expresses his opinion — but what he says," Scholz said at a news conference. "He supports the extreme right throughout Europe, in Britain, in Germany, in many, many other countries, and that is something that is completely unacceptable." "This endangers the democratic development of Europe, it endangers our community, and that must be criticised," Scholz said. Polls show AfD in second place ahead of the election, with support of about 20 per cent, but Weidel has no realistic chance of becoming chancellor because other parties refuse to work with the party. Centre-right opposition leader Friedrich Merz has also criticised Musk's endorsement of AfD. Merz's Union bloc leads polls and he is the favourite to become Germany's next leader.

3 lawyers for late Russian opp leader Navalny jailed by court

AP ■ PETUSKI

Three lawyers who once represented the late Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny were convicted by a court Friday as part of the Kremlin's crackdown on dissent that has reached levels unseen since Soviet times. Vadim Kobzev, Igor Sergunin and Alexei Liptser were already in custody and were given sentences from 3 1/2 to five years by a court in the town of Petushki, about 100 km east of Moscow. They were arrested in October 2023 on charges of involvement with extremist groups, as Navalny's networks were deemed by authorities. The case was widely seen as a way to increase pressure on the opposition to discourage defence lawyers from taking political cases. At the time, Navalny was serving a 19-year prison term on several criminal convictions, including extremism.

He died in a Russian prison camp in February 2023. The independent Russian newspaper Novaya Gazeta reported that Kobzev said in his final statement in court on Jan 10 that "we are being tried for transmitting Navalny's thoughts to other people". The independent Russian news outlet Mediazona reported three journalists attending the sentencing were detained and taken to a police station. Navalny's networks were deemed extremist following a 2021 ruling that outlawed his organisations — the Foundation for Fighting Corruption and a network of regional offices — as extremist groups. That ruling, which exposed anyone involved with the organisations to prosecution, was condemned by Kremlin critics as politically motivated and designed to stifle Navalny's activities. According to Navalny's allies, authorities accused the

lawyers of using their position to pass information from him to his team. Navalny, an anti-corruption campaigner and outspoken opponent of President Vladimir Putin, was arrested in 2021 upon his return from Germany, where he was recuperating from a nerve agent poisoning he blamed on the Kremlin. He was ordered to serve 2 1/2 years in prison. After two more trials, his sentence was extended to 19 years. He and his allies said the charges were politically motivated and accused the Kremlin of seeking to jail him for life. In December 2023, Navalny was moved from a penal colony in the Vladimir region east of Moscow to one above the Arctic Circle, where he died in February at the age of 47 under still-unexplained circumstances. His widow, Yulia Navalnaya, and members of his team alleged he was killed on orders from the Kremlin. Officials have

rejected the accusation. Two other Navalny lawyers, Olga Mikhailova and Alexander Fedulov, are on a wanted list but no longer live in Russia. Mikhailova, who defended Navalny for a decade, said she was charged in absentia with extremism. Kobzev, Liptser and Sergunin have been deemed to be political prisoners, according to human rights advocates from Memorial, Russia's most prominent rights group that won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2022. The group demands their immediate release. Independent Russian media reported Friday that Konstantin Kotov, an activist accused of donating to Navalny's organisation, left Russia before he was due to appear in a Moscow court Friday. He told Mediazona he decided to leave after a heart surgeon, Ivan Tishchenko, was jailed for four years for donating around \$34 to Navalny's organisation.

Pence calls on Trump to renew US support for Taiwan

Taipei (AP): Former US vice president Mike Pence called on President-elect Donald Trump to renew his pledge to support Taiwan in the event of a Chinese invasion. Speaking during a visit to Taipei on Friday, Pence said China's annexation of the island would impact global trade, technology and nuclear proliferation. "The fall of Taiwan would likely spark a new nuclear arms race," he said. "Smaller Asian nations concerned about Chinese aggression would no longer be confident of American deterrence. American security commitments would be viewed as empty promises, destabilising not only this region, but the wider world." He added that nations would feel "they had no choice but to develop their own nuclear arsenal," which would increase the risk of global nuclear confrontation. Pence, who served as vice president during Trump's first term but had a falling out with his former boss over Trump's refusal to concede the 2020 election, sought to reassure Taiwanese people of Washington's continued support. The US is Taiwan's main arms provider and favours maintaining the status quo between Taipei and Beijing, which has threatened to annex the self-ruled island, by force if necessary. On his campaign trail last year, Trump cast doubt over the US' continued backing of Taiwan, accusing the island of stealing the chip industry from the US and saying Taiwan should pay the US for protection against China. Pence, speaking at an educational forum in Taiwan's capital, said he was convinced the US would never "abandon" its allies across the Pacific Ocean. "I call on the new administration in Washington, and freedom loving nations around the world to urgently renew our commitment for providing Taiwan with the support it needs to defend itself and its freedom," he said. Pence also called on Trump's incoming administration to start negotiations for a free trade agreement with Taiwan, a development that's long been floated by various US and Taiwanese politicians and that would be sure to anger China.

Lloyd Austin ends his term marred by Afghanistan but buoyed by Ukraine

AP ■ WASHINGTON

Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin will bid farewell Friday to the forces and personnel he has led through a tumultuous term that had three major military crises, a global pandemic and a personal brush with cancer that became a flashpoint for the way it was mishandled. Austin, 71, spent 41 years of his life in a military uniform. He retired as a highly decorated four-star general who earned a Silver Star — an award given for gallantry in action — for leading troops from the front in the initial 2003 invasion of Iraq. He is one of the many Pentagon leaders who have served in combat and has "dust on his boots" — something President-elect Donald Trump's choice for defence secretary, Pete Hegseth, has falsely claimed is his distinction and why he is needed to restore a military

hollowed out by "woke" diversity initiatives. "There have been a lot of narratives out there about how capable, how weak our military is," Austin said in an interview with The Associated Press. "You've just got to look at the things we have done, that we continue to do, at a moment's notice." Austin retired from the Army in 2016 only to be asked to return to the Pentagon by President Joe Biden in 2021, making history as the nation's first Black defence secretary. He took the helm of the Pentagon at the height of COVID-19 and just weeks after the January 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol by a mob of Trump's supporters. His early months saw the department working through a divisive COVID-19 vaccine mandate for the force and a deep dive to determine whether there was a wider extremism problem

in the ranks. More than 230 people with a military background were arrested in connection with the deadly January 6 insurrection. Austin repeatedly said he believed extremism was not a problem. Indeed, service members and veterans who radicalise make up a tiny fraction of a percentage point of the millions who have honourably served, though an Associated Press investigation last year found it was on the rise. But it would be the shocking collapse of the Afghan government to the Taliban that would forever mar Austin's tenure. The US withdrawal had been previously negotiated by Trump, and, because of that, there were only 2,500 US forces in Afghanistan when Biden took office. To this day, there's a deep sense of betrayal among some veterans over the loss of Afghanistan, which became a key part of

Trump's return to office. Biden's decision to move forward with the withdrawal led to a chaotic two weeks in August 2021, when the Air Force evacuated more than 124,000 people from Afghanistan in just 17 days. Air Force C-17s and chartered aircraft landed at Kabul airport in a non-stop operation, but then 13 US service members and 170 Afghans were killed by a suicide bomber just days before the last US service member left. All the hard-won gains by women and for democracy began being dismantled by the Taliban. "There was a lot of speculation on what would happen if we left Afghanistan. The world was going to come to an end. We were going to get attacked every day, and that just hasn't happened," Austin said. "Some horrible things have happened in terms of women's rights. We'll just have to continue to work on those things."

Graffiti on Assad's prison walls express Syrians' fears and loves

Damascus (AP): Languishing in a dungeon cell of Syria's then-ruler Bashar Assad, an unknown prisoner scrawled a verse of Arabic poetry on his cell wall — an expression of pain and love amid his torment. "My country, even if it oppresses me, is dear. My people, even if uncharitable to me, are generous," he wrote. It's a well-known verse, composed 800 years ago by a poet defying a tyrannical caliph. As you walk through the cold, dark cells of Assad's prisons, the graffiti on the walls cry out. They plead to God and yearn for loved ones. Often mysterious, they preserve fragments of what anonymous men were thinking as they faced torture and death. "Trust no one, not even your brother," someone darkly warns on a cell wall in Damascus' notorious Palestine Branch detention facility.

Since 2011, tens of thousands of Syrians vanished inside the network of prisons and detention facilities run by Assad's security forces as they tried to crush his opposition. Inmates went for years without contact with the outside world, living in overcrowded, windowless cells where their cellmates died around them. Torture and beatings were inflicted daily. Mass executions were frequent. Most inmates would have fully expected to die. They had no reason to believe anyone would ever see the messages they scratched into the walls except future prisoners. One wrote a single word in Arabic, "ashtaqtik" — "I miss you" — a love letter that could never be sent to a beloved whose name only the writer need know. More than a month after the prisons were opened by insur-

gents who ousted Assad in December, The Associated Press toured several facilities to view the graffiti left behind. Nothing can be known about the men who drew and wrote them. Only a few bear names, and few are dated. It's impossible to know who of them lived or died. Some walls have layers of graffiti on top of each other, marking generations of suffering. "Don't be sad, mother. This is my fate," reads one, dated Jan 1, 2024. Underneath it are traces of an older text, so faded that only a few words are legible: "... except for you" — a hint of longing for a loved one. Many of the writings and drawings are cries to parents or loved ones. Someone drew a heart broken in two, with "mother" written in one side, "father" in the other.



Firefighters watch a helicopter drop water on the Palisades Fire in Mandeville Canyon in Los Angeles, on Saturday. AP/PTI

UK orders 'rapid audit' of ethnicity in child sexual abuse

PTI ■ LONDON

The UK government has ordered a "rapid audit" of the scale and nature of grooming gangs based child sexual exploitation, including an examination of ethnicity data to determine "cultural and societal drivers" behind the crimes. UK Home Secretary Yvette Cooper laid out the plans in a statement in the House of Commons on Thursday, also noting that many major investigations into the issue have involved "Pakistani heritage gangs". Amid growing demands for a national inquiry into the scandal since Tesla CEO Elon Musk attacked the UK's handling of the historic scandal on his X platform, the minister told Parliament that the Child Sexual Exploitation Taskforce will immediately expand the ethnicity data it collects and

publishes. "Many major investigations have involved Pakistani heritage gangs and the police taskforce evidence also shows exploitation and abuse taking place across many different communities and ethnicities. But the data on ethnicity of both perpetrators and victims is still inadequate," Yvette Cooper told MPs. "In order to go much further, I have asked Baroness Louise Casey to oversee a rapid audit of the current scale and nature of gang-based exploitation across the country and to make recommendations on the further work that is needed... It will properly examine ethnicity data and the demographics of the gangs involved and their victims and it will look at the cultural and societal drivers for this type of offending including amongst different ethnic groups," she said.

The shadow home secretary, Conservative MP Chris Philp, responded to stress that the authorities had historically ignored or covered up ethnicity related data surrounding child sexual exploitation. "Thousands of young girls, often in their early teens, were systematically raped by gangs of men, predominantly of Pakistani heritage. Those in positions of authority — the police, local councils and the Crown Prosecution Service — ignored them and, in some cases, even covered up these horrendous crimes because of absurd concerns about so-called cultural sensitivity," said Philp. "Ten days ago, the Prime Minister [Keir Starmer] compounded this by saying that it was a 'far-right bandwagon' to raise these issues and call for a proper inquiry.

Let me say this: it is not far right to stand up for rape victims, and smearing those who raised this issue is exactly what led to the victims being ignored and the crimes covered up in the first place," he told the Commons. Cooper reiterated that the actions the government has announced this week covers the duty to report child abuse, proper penalties for any cover-ups, stronger sentences for grooming gangs, new rights for victims to get an independent review on reopening their case and new action to reopen historical police investigations. The Home Office said the rapid national audit will begin soon and last three months. It will be supported by an expert advisory board and draw on the views of victims and survivors. This work,

including the new Victims and Survivors Panel, will be backed by GBP 2.5 million in funding. According to official estimates, of the 115,000 child sexual exploitation and abuse offences recorded in 2023 by police, over 4,000 of them were group-based offending. Of those, around 1,100 involved abuse within the family, and over 300 involved abuse in institutions, whilst over 700 of them were group-based grooming gang offences. "We are also urging police forces to look again at closed and unsolved cases on their files, to ensure they pursue criminals and put them behind bars so they cannot hurt anyone else," added Jess Phillips, Minister for Safeguarding and Violence Against Women and Girls in the Home Office.

Union Cabinet approves ₹11,440 Crore revival plan for Rashtriya Ispat Nigam Ltd

PTI ■ NEW DELHI



The Union Cabinet has approved a Rs 11,440 crore revival plan for debt-laden Rashtriya Ispat Nigam Ltd (RINL), according to a statement released on Friday. The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA), chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has approved the revival plan for RINL for Rs 11,440 crore, it added. The infusion includes Rs 10,300 crore as equity capital into RINL and conversion of Rs 1,140 crore working capital loan as 7 per cent non-cumulative preference share capital redeemable after 10 years to keep RINL as a going concern, the official statement said. With this revival package, many of the legacy problems that RINL used to face will be resolved, Information and

Broadcasting Minister Ashwini Vaishnav said. The equity infusion of Rs 10,300 crore into RINL will help it overcome the operational problems related to raising working capital and start blast furnace operations in the most productive way, the statement said. The revival package would allow the company to gradually reach its full production capacity, which is critical and is in the national interest to have stability in the Indian steel market by augmenting steel production and also save the livelihoods of employees (regular and

contractual) and those dependent on the operations of the steel plant. The revival plan envisages that RINI will start full production with two blast furnaces in January 2025 and with three blast furnaces by August 2025. Under the Ministry of Steel, RINL operates the Visakhapatnam Steel Plant (VSP), the only offshore steel plant in Andhra Pradesh. It has an installed capacity of 7.3 Mtpa of liquid steel. As per the statement, the financial condition of RINL is critical. RINL has exhausted the sanctioned borrowing limits from banks for working capital and was not in a position to get further loans from banks. RINL also defaulted on the capex loan repayments and interest payments in June 2024.

Eight former, current Paytm officials pay ₹3.32 Crore to settle case with Sebi

PTI ■ NEW DELHI



As many as eight current and former officials of One97 Communications, which owns and operates Paytm, have collectively paid Rs 3.32 crore to markets regulator Sebi to settle allegations of flouting securities market norms. Those who have settled the case are the company's former compliance officer and company secretary Amit Khara; Ashit Ranjit Lilani, Neeraj Arora, Mark Schwartz and Pallavi Shardul Shroff, who were holding the positions of independent directors; and ten non-executive nominee directors - Douglas Feagin, Munish Varma and Ravi Chandra Adusumalli, according to a Sebi order. The order came after these officials proposed to settle the proceedings initiated against them through a show cause notice issued on May 17

“without admitting or denying of the findings.” In view of the receipt of settlement amount by Sebi, the instant adjudication proceedings initiated against the noticees vide show cause notice...Dated May 17, 2024, are hereby disposed of,” Sebi said in its settlement order. The Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) initiated adjudication proceedings in the matter of One97 Communications for the alleged violations of

provisions of LODR (Listing Obligations and Disclosure Requirements) norms and ICDR (Issue of Capital and Disclosure Requirements) Regulations. It was alleged that independent directors being part of NRC (Nomination and Remuneration Committee) failed to discharge duties with unbiased and independent approach while decision-making with respect to matters involving benefits to

the company's MD and CEO Vijay Shekhar Sharma and his relatives, in violation of LODR Regulations, 2015. These directors allegedly approved and signed offer documents containing incorrect statements and incomplete disclosures, in violation of ICDR rules. Besides, other directors signed offer documents containing incorrect statements and incomplete disclosures with respect to the company, being a professionally managed firm having no identifiable promoter whereas the company having promoter Sharma, in violation of ICDR Regulations rules. These individuals settled the allegations by paying a settlement amount to Sebi. Individually, Lilani and Arora paid Rs 53.62 lakh each, Adusumalli, Schwartz, Shroff, Feagin and Varma remitted Rs 42.9 lakh each and Khara settled out Rs 11.05 lakh.

India's economic growth poised to rebound, says RBI Bulletin

PTI ■ MUMBAI



India's economic growth is poised to rebound as domestic demand regains strength, though the stickiness in food inflation warrants careful monitoring, the latest RBI Bulletin released on Friday said. An article on the 'State of the Economy' published in the January Bulletin also noted that the economic outlook for 2025 is divergent across countries with some loss of speed in the US; weak-to-moderate recoveries in Europe and Japan; more moderate growth profiles in emerging and developing countries alongside a more gradual disinflation relative to advanced economies. "In India, there is a conducive quickening of high-frequency indicators of economic activity in the second half of 2024-25, bearing out the implicit pick-up in real GDP growth for this period in the annual first advance estimates of the NSO," it said. It further said, the headline

inflation eased for the second successive month in December, although the stickiness in food inflation warrants careful monitoring of second order effects. The article has been authored by a team lead by Michael Patra, who demitted the office of RBI Deputy Governor earlier this month. "India's economic growth is poised to rebound as domestic demand regains strength. Rural demand continues to gain momentum, reflecting a resilience in consumption, supported by brighter

India's forex reserves drop by USD 8.714 Billion to USD 625.871 Billion

PTI ■ MUMBAI



India's forex reserves dropped by USD 8.714 billion to USD 625.871 billion in the week ended January 10, the RBI said on Friday. Earlier, the overall kitty dropped by USD 5.693 billion to USD 634.585 billion in the week ended January 3, the Reserve Bank of India said. The reserves have been on a declining trend for the last few weeks, and the drop has been attributed to revaluation along with forex market interventions by RBI to help reduce volatilities in the rupee. The forex reserves had increased to an all-time high of USD 704.885 billion in end-September. For the week ended January 10, foreign currency assets, a major component of the reserves, decreased by USD 9.469 billion to USD 536.011 billion, the data released on Friday showed.

Expressed in dollar terms, the foreign currency assets include the effect of appreciation or depreciation of non-US units like the euro, pound and yen held in the foreign exchange reserves. Gold reserves increased by USD 792 million to USD 67.883 billion during the week, the RBI said. The Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) were down by USD 33 million to USD 17.781 billion, the apex bank said. India's reserve position with the IMF was down by USD 4 million to USD 4.195 billion in the reporting week, the apex bank data showed.

Gold jumps ₹700 to ₹82K per 10 gms

PTI ■ NEW DELHI



Rising for the third consecutive day, gold prices on Friday surged Rs 700 to trade near a record high at Rs 82,000 per 10 grams in the national capital due to persistent buying in the local markets, according to the All India Sarafa Association. The precious metal had settled at Rs 81,300 per 10 grams on Thursday. The price of gold of 99.5 per cent purity continued to shine for the third straight day by jumping Rs 700 to Rs 81,600 per 10 grams against Rs 80,900 per 10 grams in the previous close. However, silver prices declined Rs 500 to Rs 93,500 per kg on Friday. The metal had ended at Rs 94,000 per kg in the previous trading session. On October 31 last year, gold of 99.9 per cent purity and 99.5 per cent purity hit a record high of Rs 82,400 and Rs 82,000 per 10 grams, respectively, in the local markets. Despite a weak trend in the international markets, the precious metal gained in the

domestic market, mainly due to higher demand from jewellers, traders said. Meanwhile, in futures trade on the Multi Commodity Exchange (MCX), gold contracts for February delivery declined Rs 424 or 0.54 per cent to Rs 78,802 per 10 grams. "Gold witnessed minor profit booking from higher zones on MCX, retreating towards Rs 78,800," Jateen Trivedi, VP Research Analyst of Commodity and Currency at LKP Securities, said. The decline comes as white flags emerge in the Middle East, signalling easing tensions, and the recent positive data from the US, including CPI, retail sales, and the Federal Reserve's dovish outlook, appear to have been largely priced in, Trivedi

Cabinet approves refarming of 687 Mhz of spectrum, more to come: Scindia

PTI ■ NEW DELHI



The Union Cabinet has approved the refarming of 687 Mhz spectrum for mobile services and more will be done based on the study by a committee of secretaries put in place by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Telecom Minister Jyotiraditya Scindia said on Friday. Speaking at an event of industry body COAI, the minister said mobile services need 2,000 Mhz of spectrum by 2030 and the Cabinet decision takes the total quantum of radiowaves to 1,587 Mhz. "Yesterday's Cabinet approved the refarming of 687 Mhz. This means this takes us from 900 Mhz to 1,587 Mhz. (of

which) 320 (Mhz) will be released immediately, some by the end of next year and some by the end of 2028-29, which makes us ready for 2030," Scindia said at Digicom Summit 2025. The government, through refarming, earmarks or arranges spectrum of services based on the demand and where the radiowaves can be used efficiently.

The telecom industry has been demanding to make available 2000 megahertz of radiowaves available for mobile services in mid-bands, which are frequencies in the range of 1000 Mhz to 6000 Mhz. Scindia said the government will ensure that the requirement of the industry is met and there are no hurdles in the digital telecom landscape of the country. "That still leaves a gap of roughly 300 (Mhz). So, the ask is not over. The second round of this, the Committee of Secretaries, is working on it. The report will come by mid of this year. We will take that step to ensure that there are no bottlenecks for our digital telecom landscape to grow in India," Scindia said.

He said that telecom services are empowering people, and farmers, supporting several economic engines like digital payments and a backbone for the digital economy. Scindia said that it is his dream that India by 2030, transpounds herself into a telecom product nation. "I am in conversation, as we speak, with our telecom majors and OEMs (original equipment makers) to see if there are possibilities to set up telecom manufacturing zones (TMZ). I think that time for TMZs has come," he said. The minister said that transformations in the sector are based on five key pillars, including policy level, technology, and ease of doing business.

Rupee ends one paisa down at 86.62 against US dollar

PTI ■ MUMBAI



The rupee traded in a tight range and settled 1 paisa lower at 86.62 (provisional) against the US dollar on Friday, as massive outflow of foreign funds and falling domestic equity markets dented investors' sentiment. A firm American currency and higher crude oil prices also weighed on the domestic unit, forex traders said. At the interbank foreign exchange, the rupee opened at 86.60, stayed range-bound between the high of 86.55 and low of 86.62 throughout the day and ended at 86.62 (provisional) against the greenback, 1 paisa down from its previous closing level. On Thursday, the rupee depreciated 21 paisa to close at 86.61 against the US dollar.

In two back-to-back sessions, on Tuesday and Wednesday, the local unit had gained 30 paisa from its lowest-ever closing level of 86.70 against the dollar. Anuj Choudhary, Research Analyst at Mirae Asset Sharekhan, said the rupee weakened on a negative tone

in the domestic markets and a surge in crude oil prices. "Importer demand may also pressurise the rupee. However, any selling of dollars by the Reserve bank of India (RBI) may support the rupee at lower levels. Traders may take cues from industrial production and

housing market data from the US," he said and projected the USD-INR spot price to trade in the range of 86.55 to 86.95. Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading 0.09 per cent higher at 108.91. Brent crude, the global oil benchmark, rose 0.36 per cent to USD 81.58 per barrel in futures trade. In the domestic equity market, the 30-share BSE Sensex fell 423.49 points, or 0.55 per cent, to settle at 76,619.33 points, while the Nifty declined 108.60 points, or 0.47 per cent, to 23,203.20 points. Foreign institutional investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth Rs 4,341.95 crore on Thursday.

Rail operators likely to post double-digit growth in FY25: India Ratings

PTI ■ MUMBAI



Rail operators' revenue is expected to grow into double-digit, while warehousing sector is projected to log a 3-5 per cent year-on-year growth in organic rentals this fiscal even as the demand for Grade-A space may remain intact, ratings agency India Ratings said on Friday. For sea transport, the ratings agency said, it is expecting port volumes will be supported by the coastal movement of goods and global container freight, with the easing of geopolitical tensions, including the Red Sea crisis and the normalisation of US-bound traffic. EBITDA (Earnings Before Interest, Taxes, Depreciation, and Amortization) for container freight stations is expected to remain range-bound due to the increase in

the proportion of direct port delivery and high competition intensity at large ports, according to Ind-Ra (India Ratings). Ind-Ra has also assigned an improving outlook for the logistics industry for FY26 and said that macro-tailwinds arising from the government's multipolar investments across ports, rail, road, and air transport are expected to bode well for the industry. Sustained investments and the resultant increased scale of operations are expected to improve cost efficiency and operational flexibility which could lead to higher profitability for Ind-Ra-rated integrated logistics companies, said Pratik Mundhada, Associate Director, Corporates, Ind-Ra. "In Ind-Ra's base case, we see double-digit revenue growth for rail operators in FY26, supported by huge private investments in rakes and dry

terminals in 2024. For warehousing entities, we project organic rental growth of 3-5 per cent year-on-year while demand for Grade-A spaces is expected to remain intact in FY26," he stated. Container freight stations' profitability, according to Mundhada, is likely to remain subdued in this fiscal due to intense competition. "Lastly, for freight forwarders, revenue growth and EBITDA

are likely to be impacted by a moderation in the global freight rates," he added. The ratings agency noted that initiatives such as the National Logistics Policy and the PM Gati Shakti National Master Plan aim to enhance multimodal connectivity and foster interdisciplinary coordination. Further, it stated that public-private partnerships are expected to be scaled up the ports portfolio. Also, increased private capital expenditure towards the network expansion of trains, dry terminals, and warehousing will support the growth of the logistics market in India, it said and added that India's Logistics Performance Index ranking improved to 38 in 2023 from 44 in 2018, with an aspiration to break into the top 25 by 2030 as part of Maritime Vision 2030. This will necessitate a reasonable budgetary allocation towards logistics infrastructure in the upcoming budget, it said. Ind-Ra said it believes the full commissioning of the Western Dedicated Freight Corridor will improve the utilisation of rakes and terminals, thereby enhancing the operating profitability of container train operators. On the flip side, increased competition and revisions of

haulage charges will remain key monitorable. The Eastern Dedicated Freight Corridor is likely to improve supply chain efficiency for thermal plants, led by increased speed and scheduled train operations, it said. Ratings on logistics and supply chain companies are mostly on a "Stable Outlook", given the sustenance of operational performance, while maintaining a comfortable leverage profile, Ind-Ra said. "While we see capital investments by logistics infrastructure companies including warehousing, rail and dry terminals, their ability to raise long-term debt at a competitive pricing and Ind-Ra's expectation that these companies will be able to optimise the asset utilisation are supporting their credit profile and thereby the Stable rating Outlook," it said.

INBRIEF

NRDC SIGNS MOA WITH IISc TO DRIVE TECHNOLOGY COMMERCIALISATION

BENGALURU: The National Research Development Corporation (NRDC), a Government of India enterprise under the Ministry of Science and Technology, and the Indian Institute of Science (IISc), India's premier institution for advanced scientific research and education, have signed a landmark Memorandum of Agreement (MoA) to accelerate the commercialisation of IISc-developed technologies. The MoA was signed and exchanged today at IISc by Cmde Amit Rastogi (Retd.), CMD, NRDC and Prof. Govindan Rangarajan, Director, IISc in the august presence of key officials from NRDC and IISc.

GREAT PLACE TO WORK HONOURS BSES: A CULTURE OF TRUST AND INCLUSIVITY

BSES Rajdhani Power Limited (BRPL) and BSES Yamuna Power Limited (BYPL) have been awarded the highly coveted "Great Place to Work" Certification, a globally recognised benchmark for workplace excellence. This certification underscores BSES' commitment to fostering a workplace culture rooted in trust, respect, and inclusivity. The recognition reflects the organisation's focus on creating an environment where employees feel valued, empowered, and inspired to excel.





CLAY SHAPED EMOTIONS



gestures, evoke narratives that are both universal and deeply personal. The exhibition showcases *Reghu's* mastery of terracotta as a medium, bringing his forms to life with an emotional resonance that remains long after one leaves the gallery. The contours and expressions of his sculptures suggest movement and thought, compelling the audience to engage with the works on a deeper level. Whether through the tension in a figure's posture or the serenity of a tilted head, each piece carries an emotional weight that connects with the viewer.

Touchable Emotions celebrates clay as a material with both historical significance and contemporary relevance. *Reghu's* work honours ancient traditions while pushing their boundaries, demonstrating the enduring power of this medium to express complex themes. Through his art, he creates a bridge between the past and the present, showing how heritage and innovation can coexist.

This exhibition is an invitation to reflect on universal themes of life and emotion. *Reghu's* terracotta sculptures serve as a poignant reminder of art's ability to connect us to shared experiences. The world of *G. Reghu's* evocative terracotta sculptures, on display until **February 15, 2025, at Art Magnum Gallery, New Delhi.** Don't miss the chance to connect with his transformative journey from traditional pottery to emotionally powerful human forms.



connection. The earthy textures and intricate details of the terracotta forms draw viewers into an intimate engagement with the art. *Reghu's* ability to blend *Dravidian* and *African* features results in works that feel rooted in tradition while addressing contemporary sensibilities. The energy within the sculptures invites viewers to pause and reflect, creating a quiet dialogue between art and audience. *Reghu* draws inspiration from ancient traditions, including the art of the *Indus Valley* and *Harappan* civilisations. His sculptures are not replicas of the past; they reinterpret these influences to explore identity and human emotion in a modern context. His figures, with their expressive stances and thoughtful

Art has the power to transform the ordinary into the extraordinary, offering a language beyond words. *Rainer Maria Rilke's* observation, "The purpose of art is to lay bare the questions that have been hidden for a long time," resonates deeply when considering the process of sculpting with clay. This medium, both humble and evocative, captures human emotions in their rawest form, narrating stories that connect with the core of our shared experiences.

The *Touchable Emotions* exhibition at *Art Magnum Gallery* features the terracotta sculptures of renowned sculptor *G. Reghu*. Curated by *Jyotirmoy Bhattacharya*, the exhibition rummages into themes of life, heritage and emotion. *Reghu's* relationship with clay is deeply personal, as he shapes it to express stories that reflect universal human experiences. Each sculpture explores facets of existence, joy, introspection and

An exploration of life and emotion through *G. Reghu's* evocative terracotta sculptures at *Art Magnum Gallery*, says **SAKSHI PRIYA**



PHOTOS: PANKAJ KUMAR

Classical Singing at its Best

By **SAKSHI PRIYA**
What is it about music and dance that can stir our hearts and minds in ways words never could?

The Power of Classical Music: The 26th *Swami Haridas-Tansen Sangeet Nritya Mahotsav* curated by *Padma Bhushan Dr. Uma Sharma*. The Festival opened with a captivating *Dhrupad* performance by *Ustad F. Wasifuddin Dagar*, whose renditions of *Raag Kambhoji* and *Raag Adana* drew listeners into a peaceful space. The stillness in the room was striking, as *Dagar's* music seemed to speak directly to the heart, offering a rare moment of calm in an otherwise busy world. His mastery of the *Dhrupad* tradition set a perfect tone for the evening, allowing the audience to experience the beauty of classical music in its purest form.

The night took on new energy when *Ustad Shujaat Khan* stepped on stage. His sitar playing was truly magical. The audience, enraptured by the fluidity of his performance, responded with a standing ovation. The smooth flow of notes and the intricate patterns he created with his strings left a lasting impression on everyone present. His performance was an experience that pulled the listener into the depths of



his artistry. Following this, the *legendary Pt. Hariprasad Chaurasia* brought a sense of serenity to the evening with his flute recital. His ability to draw emotion from the *bansuri* (flute) was clear as he moved through ragas with ease. The sound of his flute seemed to fill the room, evoking a wide array of emotions, from joy to contemplation, as he effortlessly navigated complex melodies. Each note he played invited the audience to listen closely and reflect on the feelings embedded in his music.

The Fusion of Traditions: Day two



of the festival continued to impress, with *Pt. Vishwamohan Bhatt* and his son, *Pt. Salil Bhatt*, bringing a unique touch to the proceedings. Their performance on the *Mohan Veena* and *Satvik Veena* captivated with its fusion of classical and folk traditions. The melodies were rich and moving, connecting deeply with the audience. Along with the *Manganiyars* from Rajasthan, their performance was a journey through the cultural heart of India, showcasing the diversity and vibrancy of its musical heritage.

A standout moment on day two was the collaboration between *Pt. Shubhendra Rao* on the sitar and *Smt. Saskia Rao* on the cello. Their performance merged Eastern and

Western classical music with remarkable ease. The fusion of sitar and cello was both unexpected and beautiful, offering a fresh perspective on the possibilities of musical collaboration.

Smt. Shubha Mudgal's vocal performance rounded off the evening, showcasing her remarkable ability to convey emotion through song. Her renditions in *Raag Kedar* and *Raag Megh* captured the essence of Indian classical music, leaving the audience in wonders of her vocal range and depth.

Kathak and the Divine Connection: The final evening was a celebration of Kathak, with *Padma Bhushan Dr. Uma Sharma* presenting a moving performance, despite health challenges. Her seated portrayal of *Kathak Bhav* in '*Maiyaa Mori Mein Nahi Maakhan Khayo*' showcased the grace and power of the dance form. Accompanied by her disciples, *Sharma's* performance took the audience through a spiritual journey, demonstrating the depth and beauty of Kathak.

The festival closed with a powerful performance by *Begum Parween Sultana*, whose voice filled the space with an intensity that left the audience in standing ovation. Her final rendition was the perfect conclusion to a festival that had showcased the very best of India's classical music and dance. It was a celebration of tradition, passion and artistry, an event that will remain etched in the hearts of all who were fortunate enough to witness it.



KALP: Experience Life in Art

By **TEAM VIVA**
KALP (Phases), is an exhibition of exquisite artworks by artist *Poornima Dayal* from Mumbai. This exhibition is taking place at *The Lalit Kala Akademi*, 35, *Rabindra Bhavan, Ferozshah Road, New Delhi* from 15th January 2025 to 21 January 2025. It was inaugurated on 15th January by *Padam Shri Dr. Shovana Narayan, Amita Sarabhai, Joint secretary, Ministry of Culture, Nidhi Kulkarni, M.D Ndv. Poornima Dayal* is an internationally acclaimed, award winning artist who has exhibited extensively across the globe.

She is the recipient of the Winner prize Award by *The Golden Duck Gallery, Hungary, Budapest* in early 2024. She also has received the *Honorable Awards and Talent Prize awards from Teravarna Art Gallery, Los Angeles. Poornima* had the privilege of representing India at *The Venice International Art Fair in 2023.*

Her artworks have also been displayed several times at the prestigious *Jehangir Art Gallery, Mumbai, Telangana Art Gallery, Hyderabad, The Bombay Art Society, Mumbai, The Nehru Centre Art Gallery, Mumbai, Amethyst and Jadoka Art Galleries, Chennai.* The '*Vishwarang*' program by the Government of India, *The Rabindranath Tagore University of Art, Kolkata, The Peak Galleria, Hong Kong, The Holy Art Gallery, Athens and Paris respectively and The Line Contemporary, London.* Having had the opportunity to exhibit at *The Vienna Biennale*, she has been painting since 33 years.



'Abstract conceptual' is how she describes her style of art. 'I use alot of textures and colors in my style of painting', continues *Poornima*. *KALP*, her latest Solo Exhibition at *The Lalit Kala Akademi* is a depiction of life's journey through the various phases of life. In this exhibition, true to its name are exhibited different series of her Acrylics on Canvas, each representing a different phase.

'*KALP*' signifies the importance of living a life in reverence loving and accepting life. Of being grateful for everything has a Divine purpose.

"For me Art is very precious. It's something I respect. It is a way of self expression for me and I am grateful for it", quotes *Poornima*. A treat for Art Lovers the exhibition is on from 11 am to 7pm at *The Lalit Kala Akademi* from 15 to 21 January 2025.

Australian Open: Naomi Osaka stops playing because of injury against Belinda Bencic

PTI ■ MELBOURNE
Two-time Australian Open champion Naomi Osaka stopped playing because of a strained abdominal muscle after dropping the opening set of her third-round match against Belinda Bencic on Friday.

"I kind of have a history of it, since I was a teenager. At least once a year, I'd get an ab strain. For me, I want to say it's more the way my serve is — it's quite explosive," Osaka said, explaining that she got hurt at a tournament in Beijing, where she retired from a match against Coco Gauff on Oct. 1. "Unfortunately, it carried on over to the beginning of this season." This was Osaka's first run to the third round at a major tournament since 2022. She missed time in recent seasons because of mental-health breaks, then was off the tour while pregnant. Her daughter, Shai, was born in July 2023. Osaka began 2025 by making it to the final of a tournament at Auckland, New Zealand, on Jan. 5, but she stopped playing in the title match there because of the abdominal injury. Then, she said, the problem got "way worse" after her second-round win in Melbourne on Wednesday against 2023 French Open finalist Karolina Muchova. "It was, I guess, a little inevitable, but I think the competitor in me just wanted to see it through to the end," Osaka said. "I just hope that I can figure it out and figure out how to get healthy in time" before the tour heads to events at Indian Wells and Miami in March, she added.



On Friday, Osaka — a former No. 1-ranked player who owns a total of four Grand Slam titles — was visited by a trainer during the changeover while she led 6-5. The trainer examined Osaka's abdominal area and gave her a pill to take, and play resumed. Just before the tiebreaker began, Osaka went over to her court-side coaches' box and chatted briefly with Patrick Mouratoglou. After Bencic claimed that set in a tiebreaker by a 7-6 (3) score, taking four of the last five points via unforced errors by Osaka, the chair umpire announced that the match was over after 57 minutes, "due to injury." The two players hugged on the sideline, and Osaka left the court. She won the Australian Open in 2019 and 2021, and the U.S. Open in 2018 and 2020.

"Hopefully she'll be fine soon and be able to play the rest of the season," said Bencic, who won a singles gold medal for Switzerland at the Tokyo Olympics in 2021. Bencic, who is also a mother, drew a heart on the lens of a court-side TV camera and wrote: "Get well soon Mama." Next for Bencic will be a fourth-round matchup against 2023 U.S. Open champion Coco Gauff or 2021 U.S. Open runner-up Leylah Fernandez, who were scheduled to face each other on Friday night. "I'll watch a bit, if I can," Bencic said, "but I think I'll do my cooldown and try to focus on my recovery." Bencic, who returned to action last October after having her first baby, has never been past the fourth round in 11 past appearances at Melbourne Park.



Ranji Trophy: Kohli named in 22-member provisional squad for Delhi's next game

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Star batter Virat Kohli has been named in Delhi's 22-member provisional squad for their next Ranji Trophy game against Saurashtra in Rajkot but doubts remain about his participation after it came to light that he is nursing a niggle. It is learnt that Kohli has intimated the Delhi and Districts Cricket Association (DDCA) top brass that he has a neck niggle that he sustained in Sydney during the final Border-Gavaskar Trophy Test against Australia. He was treated by the physio there and as of now, there is no clarity on availability for the Ranji match starting January 23. Whether he will play or just fly down to Rajkot for a couple of days' training will be clear only after he details



his position to DDCA president Rohan Jain. Kohli had last played a red-ball game for Delhi back in 2012 against Uttar Pradesh in Ghaziabad. A year after that, the legendary Sachin Tendulkar played his last Ranji Trophy match against Haryana at Lathi. Talismanic wicketkeeper-batter Rishabh Pant will feature in a Ranji Trophy game after nearly seven years although it has been learnt that he has declined captaincy, which means Ayush Badoni will continue in the role. "Rishabh felt the existing captain (Badoni) should continue to lead the side. He feels that since he is not available consistently, one shouldn't tinker with leadership," a member of the DDCA apex council told PTI on conditions of anonymity. "When he was offered captaincy, he said that he is

D Gukesh to take on Anish Giri in Tata Steel opener

PTI ■ WIJK AAN ZEE
World champion D Gukesh will take on local star Anish Giri in the opening round of the 87th Tata Steel Chess tournament here on Saturday, marking his first competitive outing since claiming the coveted crown last month. Giri, the 2023 winner, holds the reputation of being a tough cookie thanks to his impeccable theoretical knowledge and research that has been the Dutchman's forte for many years now. However, 18-year-old Gukesh, who likes to go with a no-draw approach in every game he plays, is in great form and can look forward to a solid campaign after the World Championship triumph over Chinese Ding Liren in Singapore. Gukesh received India's highest sporting honour, the Major Dhyan Chand Khel Ratna, in Delhi this morning from President Droupadi Murmu and left for the Dutch city immediately after the ceremony. The five-player Indian contingent will see an all-Indian duel as early as round one as Arjun Erigaisi will face last-minute-replacement Pentala Harikrishna in the opener. Arjun, known for his ability to complicate any position, will have an arduous task against Harikrishna who is super-solid with white pieces. Interestingly, Harikrishna came in the mix of things as another Indian Vidit Gujrathi withdrew due to personal reasons. The most interesting battle of the first round is likely to be between R Praggnanandhaa who takes on Nodirbek Abdusattorov of Uzbekistan. Praggnanandhaa did not have a great 2024 and would like to make amends by starting the year on a positive note. The fifth Indian in the fray made it to the elite group after winning the challengers in 2024. Leon Luke Mendonca may not have the credentials of other four compatriots in fray but the youngster is certainly the dark horse, who can put anyone in a difficult position on his day.

Dream is still alive to play for India: Karun Nair

PTI ■ BENGALURU
After a prolonged wait on the sidelines and a melancholic social media post nearly three years back, Karun Nair has made a sensational reunion with cricket, scoring five hundreds in the ongoing Vijay Hazare Trophy and he is now cautiously optimistic about wearing the Indian jersey after eight years. Karun, who has scored 752 runs at a mind-blowing average of 75.2 for Vidarbha, now looks hungry for runs, and is a far cry from the forlorn player who scribbled: "Dear Cricket, please give me another chance." Will that opportunity come his way when the selectors announce India's ODI squads for the home one-dayers against England and the ICC Champions Trophy? Only time will tell, but he has good reasons to "dream." "The dream is always to play for the country. So, yes, the dream is still alive. That's the reason we play this game, to play for your country. So, the one and only goal was to play for the country," Karun told PTI. But as someone who has endured massive setbacks and near-misses in his career, Karun does not want to think too far ahead. "I think this is my third comeback (laughs). And I need to keep doing what I am doing at the moment. Keep scoring runs whenever I can in every single game that I play. That's the most that I can do. Everything else is not in my control. "But till it (selection)

happens, it's just a dream. It's still not there yet. But again, like I said, I would like to focus on one innings at a time," the 33-year-old said. So, what has he done differently from the past to get back to his run-making ways? "I've not done anything differently. There is no secret. I think it's just years of hard work and persistence, you know, the coming together of all of it. And probably you can say, taking each day as a new one and making sure that I respect every single innings that I play." But there were days when the 33-year-old was apprehensive about his cricketing future, when runs totally dried up in domestic matches and in the IPL. "I will be lying if I say I was not afraid. I think anyone would have those feelings. But I never had the thought that my career would end. I just had the thought of where it is going? What am I doing? How has this happened?" "It takes a while for you to come out of that phase and to understand what is happening and then what you are supposed to do. So, I told myself that I need to start from zero again. "And give myself a few years and see where it goes. And then I can decide what to do. So, that was my thought process," he explained. But the tough passage made him more aware about himself and his game. "It was a tough situation to be in. Emotionally, mentally. But yeah, it really taught me

a lot of things about myself as a person and about my cricket. So, I am really grateful for those learnings. Without that, I don't think I would be in this situation at the moment." **Shifting to Vidarbha was a good move** The first hint of change in his fortunes came along with a shift to Vidarbha from Karnataka ahead of the 2023-24 season. "I am really grateful that I got this opportunity from Vidarbha Cricket Association to play First-Class cricket. First of all, without which, you know, I wouldn't be here. And for the platform they have provided and the environment they have created to, you know, welcome me. "They treat me as a family and make me feel like I have been playing with them for many years. "And I never got the feeling that I am a professional or an outsider. So, it was really comfortable. And very humble people. So, they all helped me get through each and every game with a smile and a positive environment," he said. The right-handed batter also thanked former India pacer Abey Kuruvilla for facilitating his entry into Vidarbha squad. "Abey Kuruvilla was the person I spoke to first. I just spoke to him saying that I just need a team to play. And he is the one who spoke to Vidarbha Cricket Association and put me in touch with them," he added. Since then the runs began to steadily increase.

Bengaluru FC aim to revive campaign against bottom-placed Hyderabad FC

PTI ■ HYDERABAD
Slipped to third on the table, former Champions Bengaluru FC will look to reignite their campaign when they meet bottom-placed Hyderabad FC in the ISL here on Saturday. After a blistering start to the season, Bengaluru FC have faltered recently, suffering two consecutive losses, including a 0-1 defeat to debutants Mohammedan SC. With 27 points from 15 matches, the Blues, who have nine games in hand, need a win to keep pace with league leaders Mohun Bagan and stay in contention for the Winners Shield. Languishing at the bottom with nine points from 15 matches, the Nizams have struggled to score and defend consistently. However, they will aim to leverage their home advantage, having remained unbeaten in their last three encounters here against Bengaluru FC. Bengaluru went scoreless in their last match, which was a 0-1 loss to Mohammedan SC. The previous time they went consecutive games without finding the back of the net were the last two matches before Gerard Zaragoza took over as the head coach in



meetings. They'll need to sharpen their attack to exploit Bengaluru's recent struggles on the road. Four of Hyderabad FC's 11 goals this season have come in their last five matches, where they have drawn twice and lost thrice. A victory here will see Hyderabad FC extend their unbeaten home stretch against the Blues to four matches. Bengaluru FC, on the other hand, are looking to avoid a third consecutive loss, in order to sustain pressure at their opponents in the upper half of the points table. Veteran striker Sunil Chhetri with nine goals this season, will be eyeing double digits. He has a stellar record against Hyderabad, including two goals in the reverse fixture. Despite not scoring, Hyderabad's Abdul Raheem has created 13 goal-scoring chances and dominated opposition boxes, highlighting his influence. Hyderabad's interim coach Shameel Chembakath urged his team to focus on their own game rather than the opponents, while Bengaluru FC's Zaragoza emphasised playing entertaining football to delight their supporters.

Para-athletes take centre stage as President Murmu gives away National Sports Awards

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Manu Bhaker and D Gukesh provided a sprinkling of stardust but it was India's perseverant para-athletes who walked away with the most boisterous applause when President Droupadi Murmu bestowed the National Sports Awards in a regal ceremony at the Rashtrapati Bhavan here on Friday. Double Olympic-medallist Bhaker, 18-year-old chess world champion Gukesh, men's hockey captain Harmanpreet Singh and Paralympic gold-winning high jumper Praveen Kumar were presented the country's highest sporting honour — the Major Dhyan Chand Khel

Ratna. The 22-year-old Bhaker became independent India's first athlete to win two medals in a single edition of the Olympics with her bronze-winning show in the 10m air pistol individual and 10m air pistol mixed team events in August last year. "Slow and steady wins the race, and I firmly believe that. Khel Ratna is one of the most prestigious awards in our country. I am grateful to everyone who supported me," Bhaker said after the ceremony. Harmanpreet was a part of the national sides that won bronze medals in the Tokyo as well as Paris Olympics. Praveen, on the other hand, upgraded his silver at the

Japanese capital to a gold in Paris. He was born with a short left leg. The 18-year-old Gukesh was crowned the youngest ever chess world champion after he beat China's Ding Liren last month. He is only the second Indian after the great Viswanathan Anand to achieve this title. He was also a crucial factor in India winning the men's gold in the Chess Olympiad in September last. Thirty-two athletes were honoured with the Arjuna Award out of which an unprecedented 17 were para-athletes. The athletes selected for the Arjuna award included Paris Olympics bronze medal-winning group of wrestler



Aman Sehrawat, shooters Swapnil Kusale and Sarabjot Singh (Bhaker's partner in the 10m air pistol mixed competition of Olympics) and the men's hockey team players Jarmanpreet Singh, Sukhjeet

Singh, Sanjay and Abhishek. The para-athletes outnumbered the able-bodied ones in the list this time due to the magnificent Paris Paralympics performance in which they returned with 29

medals, including seven gold and nine silver. President Murmu repeatedly broke from tradition to receive some wheelchair-bound athletes such as Pranav Soorma, who got the Arjuna for his Paralympic silver in club throw. Petkar draws loudest applause The most heartwarming moment of the ceremony was when India's first Paralympic gold-medallist Murlikant Petkar walked up to the President on crutches to receive the Arjuna award (lifetime). Murmu met the 80-year-old war hero half way to present him the award. Petkar was disabled waist down due to bullet wounds sustained during the 1965

battle against Pakistan. He was originally a boxer but turned to para-swimming due to the multiple injuries. He fought the adversity to win a historic gold medal in the 1972 Paralympics in Heidelberg. The veteran was welcomed with a rapturous applause that did not stop till he was seated back after collecting the award from the President. One among those clapping for him at the Durbar Hall was actor Kartik Aryan, who played Petkar in a recent biopic titled 'Chandu Champion'. Dignitaries, including sports minister Mansukh Mandaviya, parliamentary and minority affairs minister Kiren Rijiju, sports secretary

Sujata Chaturvedi, were among those who attended the ceremony that lasted a little over an hour. While the Khel Ratna comes with a cash prize of Rs 25 lakh, the Arjuna and Dronacharya awards include a cash prize of Rs 15 lakh. Among the most prominent Dronacharya winners this year was shooting coach Deepali Deshpande, who mentored Kusale, and former national football manager Armando Colaco. The Arjuna Awards are given to sportspersons who have demonstrated good performance over the past four years and have shown qualities of leadership, sportsmanship, and discipline.

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