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WORLD 9
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CITIZENSHIP IN FEDERAL COURT

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BJP CMs CORNER KEJRIWAL

SAUMYA SHUKLA ■ NEW DELHI

The star campaigners of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have descended in the national Capital going full throttle against the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) ahead of the high-octane Delhi Assembly elections with its prominent leaders including party president and Union Minister Jagat Prakash Nadda, and three chief ministers-Uttar Pradesh (UP) Chief Minister (CM) Yogi Adityanath, Madhya Pradesh CM Mohanlal Yadav, and Uttarakhand CM Pushkar Singh Dhami-holding multiple rallies, road shows and public meetings across the length and breadth of the city. In his maiden speech ahead of the polls, Adityanath accused the AAP of settling Bangladeshi and Rohingya nationals in Delhi and compromising national security while hitting out at the ruling party for being involved in the riots that took place in the national Capital in 2020. Sounding the poll bugle, the senior BJP leader launched a scathing attack on the AAP and its supreme Arvind Kejriwal. "There is an Okhla industrial area in Delhi but there has been no trade there for the past 10 years. While the AAP took no interest in setting up industries there, they have undoubtedly settled Rohingyas and Bangladeshis there," he said. Yogi claimed that AAP leaders are distributing Aadhar cards at homes to Rohingyas and Bangladeshis



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

Rahul Gandhi cancels two rallies on consecutive days

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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

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India-China continue border talks

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri will travel to Beijing on a two-day visit starting Sunday to discuss next steps in improving ties between the two nations. This comes after armies of India and China in October last year agreed to disengage from friction points at Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Eastern Ladakh. High level talks between the two countries gathered momentum following the pact. It will be the second top level meeting in the last one and half months between the two neighbours. National Security Advisor (NSA) Ajit Doval travelled to Beijing and held talks with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang under the framework of Special Representatives (SR) dialogue on the boundary dispute. "Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri will be visiting Beijing on January 26 and 27 for a meeting of the Foreign Secretary-Vice Minister mechanism between India and China," Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said on Thursday.



The resumption of this bilateral mechanism flows from the agreement at the leadership level to discuss the next steps for India-China relations, including in the political, economic, and people-to-people domains," it said in a brief statement. The decision to revive the SR dialogue mechanism and other such formats was taken at a meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping in Kazan on October 23. In the nearly 50-minute meeting, Modi underscored

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

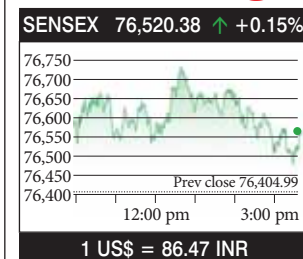
MEA Jaishankar talks deportation of Indians in US

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

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

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MARKETS



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NRAI calls for CCI probe into Zomato, Swiggy

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

The National Restaurant Association of India (NRAI), which represents half a million eateries nationwide, said it will approach Competition Commission of India over "private labelling" by Zomato and Swiggy and their foray into quick commerce food delivery via Bisto by Blinkit and Snacc, respectively. In an interview, NRAI President Sagar Daryani raised concerns over "anti-competitive" practices of food delivery aggregators, "data masking" and "deep discounting". "We will be adding to our petition in CCI about them (Zomato, Swiggy) doing private labels through Bisto and Snacc," Daryani shared. He said NRAI will also request CCI to investigate complaints received from its member restaurants that Zomato and Swiggy were procuring from third party commercial kitchens for Zomato Everyday and Swiggy Daily. Queries sent to Swiggy and Zomato remained unanswered. Daryani said NRAI was "very concerned" as many restaurants were already shutting down with several workers losing their livelihoods. Addressing an NRAI townhall with restaurant industry stakeholders on Wednesday, Daryani suggested that restaurants need to look at a "third alternative" like ONDC and could replicate the success achieved through a pilot in Bengaluru, throughout India. During the townhall, top restaurateurs raised concerns over the entry of food delivery aggregators like Zomato and Swiggy into private labelling and dining-in, and stressed the need for alternatives in the market.

Differential pricing: Uber, Ola, Apple under scanner

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

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



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

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Food, garlands rates set by EC for Delhi polls

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

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



Photo: Ranjan Dimri/The Pioneer

for vehicles. The rates for vehicles like Tata Sumo, Toyota Innova, and Mahindra Scorpio, among others, are Rs 2,421 per day per vehicle. For a normal car, the limit is Rs 1,499 per day. The maximum cost for a two-wheeler is Rs 84 per day. The rate list also specifies the maximum expenditure limit for tents, chairs, tables, podiums, and generators. For gatherings of up to 2,000 people, for example, the maximum rate, including all related expenses, is set at Rs 30,000 per event. For smaller gatherings of fewer than 250 people, the staging rate is Rs 6,150. A broom, the party symbol of the

ruling Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), used for maintaining party offices, event venues, or during campaigning, cannot cost more than Rs 25 each. There are also price limits for flags, posters, hoardings, cut-outs, and stickers. Pens used in party election offices cannot exceed Rs 6 each. Among the musical instruments used at campaign events, drums are priced at Rs 500 per day. According to officials, each returning officer prepares the rate list of services and materials used by the candidates. Officials said the itemized rate list is finalized by a committee, which includes

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

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Doubts raised in Saif Ali attack case

TN RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

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



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

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

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INDONESIA IN INDIA



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

Maha Kumbh: 10 crore devotees take holy dip at Sangam

PNS ■ MAHAKUMBH NAGAR

The Maha Kumbh in Prayagraj has witnessed an unprecedented turnout of devotees, with over 10 crore people taking a holy dip in the sacred confluence of Ganga, Yamuna and the mystical Saraswati rivers.

crore devotees taking the Amrit Snan on Makar Sankranti and 1.7 crore participating on Paush Purnima. The vibrant confluence area showcases India's diverse cultural tapestry as devotees from different castes, creeds and countries unite in faith, embodying Maha Kumbh's theme of unity.

GUV TAKES HOLY DIP

Uttar Pradesh Governor Anandiben Patel took the holy dip in the Triveni Sangam on Thursday.



Sadhus take part in a procession during the Maha Kumbh Mela 2025 in Prayagraj on Thursday

Niketan camp where Manas Katha is being narrated by Morari Babu. He heard the discourse in the presence of Parmarth Niketan president Rajendra Das Maharaj, Swami Chidananda Saraswati, Santoshdas (Satua Baba), Sadhi Bhagwati Saraswati. UP Minister Nand Gopal Gupta 'Nandi'.

UNFORGETTABLE EXPERIENCE

The Maha Kumbh in Prayagraj stands as a profound spiritual

and cultural phenomenon. It encapsulates elements of faith, karma, devotion, meditation and philosophy, offering a mesmerising experience of Sanatan traditions and the universal principle of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (The World is One Family).

With an emphasis on digital technology, enhanced safety measures and cleanliness, the Yogi government has infused modernity into this ancient

tradition. Extensive arrangements for accommodation, dining and sanitation have been made to ensure a seamless experience for millions of visitors. The illuminated tents on the riverbanks at night create a mesmerising spectacle, while the serene environment fosters a sense of peace and spiritual solace.

MAHA KUMBH SNIPPETS

DRAFT CONSTITUTION OF SANATAN BOARD TO BE ANNOUNCED ON JAN 27 DHARM SABHA: SEERS

Various akharas at the ongoing Maha Kumbh announced on Thursday that a constitution draft of a 'Sanatan Board' will be released during a religious gathering here on January 27 to 'free' the Sanatan Dharma from the 'control' of the government.

FREE RO WATER FOR DEVOTEES

In a significant initiative to support devotees and tourists, the Uttar Pradesh Jal Nigam (Urban) has installed 200 water ATMs across the Maha Kumbh Mela grounds, providing pure RO drinking water completely free of cost.

Congress alleges corruption, mismanagement in Kumbh

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

Uttar Pradesh Congress president Ajay Rai and Congress MP for Prayagraj Ujjwal Raman Singh, on Thursday charged the Yogi Adityanath government with corruption in the budget allocation for Maha Kumbh and questioned the government for its indifference in the arrangements for the devotees and saints and the half-hearted preparations for the historic event.

Addressing the media at a press conference, Ujjwal Raman Singh, accused the government and officials of ignoring the saints and devotees. He said that the government and the entire official system was only engaged in hosting VIPs and taking photographs, due to which the common devotees were facing great inconvenience.

had turned Maha Kumbh into a political event. He said the government had changed the traditions of Maha Kumbh. "In the name of arrangements in Maha Kumbh, only corruption is happening by giving contracts to Gujarati companies.

Ujjwal Raman Singh said that during the Kumbh Mela in 2019, the Bharatiya Janata Party government had said that the metro rail would start operating in Prayagraj by Maha Kumbh 2025, but there was no trace of the metro.

quer when a steel bridge was constructed at a cost of Rs 60 crore, at the same place, for only 60 days. "Who is responsible for this loss and who is accountable for it?" he asked. While raising questions on the preparations for the Maha Kumbh, the MP said that road construction also fell prey to corruption.

Walkathon raises awareness about voting

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

Uttar Pradesh Chief Election Officer Navdeep Rinwa flagged off the state-level walkathon organised at KD Singh 'Babu' Stadium on Thursday. The objective of this walkathon was to raise awareness among citizens about the importance of voting and ensure 100 per cent voter participation in the upcoming elections.

only our right, but it is also a means to give direction to our future. The aim of this awareness campaign is to ensure that every citizen exercises their franchise and strengthens democracy," he said.

other discriminations. Youths who have completed 18 years and those who have been left out should register their names in the voter list. Now citizens get a chance to become voters four times a year (January 1, April 1, July 1, and October 1). For these dates, people can become voters by filling out Form-6 in advance," he said.

grammes will be organised to increase voter awareness in the upcoming elections, which will include digital campaigns, workshops in schools and colleges, and awareness activities, especially focused on women and divyang voters.

ments democratically without any discrimination or fear. We all have to maintain this system together," he said. The chief electoral officer administered the oath to all the participants. About 1,500 participants, including District Election Officer/District Magistrate Visakh G, Additional Chief Officer Chandshekhar, Chief Development Officer Ajay Jain, and senior officers of the Chief Election Officer's office, along with youth from NSS, NYK, Bharat Scout Guide, social organisations, government personnel, and students, participated.

CPI (ML) to back SP in Milkipur

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

The Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) has announced to support the candidate of INDIA bloc constituent Samajwadi Party in the Milkipur assembly by-election in Ayodhya district. Giving this information on Thursday, CPI (ML) state secretary Sudhakar Yadav said that to defeat the Bharatiya Janata Party's communal politics and Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath's bulldozer justice and to protect the Constitution, his party workers were working to make SP candidate Ajit Prasad win the Milkipur assembly seat in the bypoll.

He said that in the last Lok Sabha election, the people of the state had rejected the BJP and gave a strong mandate in favour of the INDIA bloc. "Instead of learning a lesson from this and making pro-people changes in its policies, the BJP is showing aggressive communalism. Anti-Muslim violence took place under the supervision of the administration in Bahraich and Sambhal. The government is busy finding and digging shrines in Muslim localities and thereby increasing tension. The encounter rule continues unabated. The poor are being evicted. Oppression of Dalits and women has increased," he said.

Dhankhar to participate in UP Diwas celebrations

Lucknow (PNS): Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar will participate in the UP Diwas celebrations on Friday. Governor Anandiben Patel and Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath will also be present on the occasion. Addressing mediapersons on Thursday, Tourism Minister Jaiveer Singh said that the main programme will be organised at Avadh Shilp Gram. He added that programmes will also be held at Maha Kumbh in Prayagraj, Noida Shilp Gram, and in all district headquarters across the state.

award for their respective contributions to the state. These include scientist Krishna Kani Shukla from Varanasi, industrialist Himanshu Gupta from the USA, industrialist Manish Verma from Kanpur, Krishna Yadav, industrialist from Bulandshahr, Colonel Subhash Deshwal, industrialist from Bulandshahr, and Dr Jai Singh, a banana producer from Bahraich. He mentioned that exhibitions, seminars, conferences, cultural programmes, competitions, and roadshows will be organised by all departments on the theme starting Friday. "Apart from this, for the general public, an exhibition based on former PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee's Centenary Year by the Higher Education Department, an exhibition based on the 150th birth anniversary of Bhagwan Birsa Munda by the Social Welfare Department, and an exhibition based on Iron Man Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel by the National Integration Department will be organised," he said.

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APPENDIX- IV-A [See proviso to rule 8 (6)& 9 (1)] SALE NOTICE FOR SALE OF IMMOVABLE PROPERTIES. E-Auction Sale Notice for Sale of Immovable Assets under the Securitisation and Reconstruction of Financial Assets and Enforcement of Security Interest Act, 2002 read with proviso to Rule 8 (6) & 9 (1) of the Security Interest (Enforcement) Rules, 2002

यूनियन बैंक Union Bank of India POSSESSION NOTICE (For Immovable Property) Branch: Jhansi Main, Jhansi. Whereas the undersigned being the authorized officer of Union Bank of India, under the Securitisation and Reconstruction of Financial Assets and Enforcement Security Interest Act, 2002 and in exercise of powers conferred under Section 13 (12) read with rule 3 of the Security Interest (Enforcement) Rules, 2002 issued a demand notice calling upon borrowers/guarantors/mortgagors of account to repay the amount mentioned in the notice being of dues with contractual rate of interest within 60 days from the date of receipt of the said notice.

इंडियन बैंक Indian Bank (A Govt. of India Undertaking) POSSESSION NOTICE (for Immovable Property) [Under Rule-8 (1) of Security Interest (Enforcement) Rules, 2002]. Whereas, the undersigned being the authorised officer of the Indian Bank under the Securitisation and Reconstruction of Financial Assets and Enforcement of Security Interest Act 2002, (Act 54 of 2002) and in exercise of powers conferred under section 13(12) read with rule 3, 8 and 9 of the Security Interest (Enforcement) Rules, 2002 issued a demand notice as detailed here in below calling upon the borrower to repay the amount mentioned in the notice within 60 days from the date of receipt of the said notice.

CEC sounds note of caution against fake narratives

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

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



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

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

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

Egyptian Foreign Minister to visit India

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

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



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

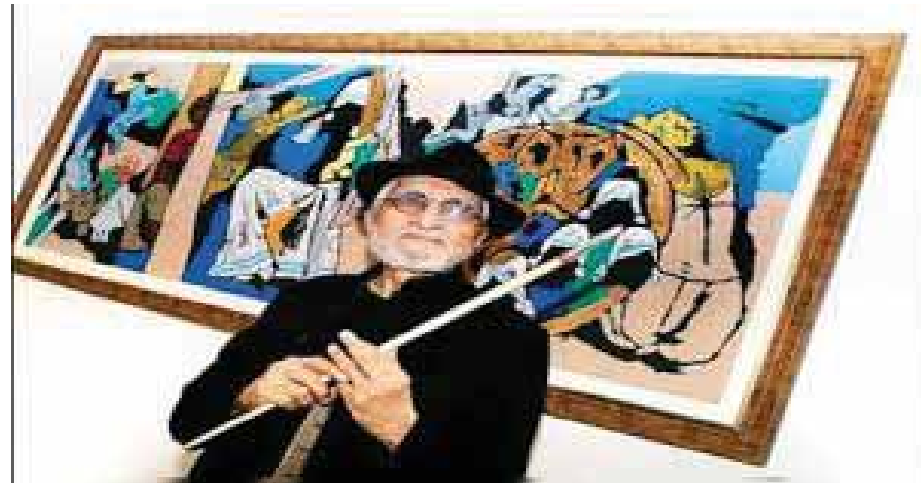
Egypt has traditionally been one of India's most important trading partners in the African continent. The India-Egypt bilateral trade agreement has been in operation since March 1978. The bilateral trade has increased more than five times in last 10 years. Around 50 Indian companies have invested in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

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

Court refuses FIR over M F Husain paintings

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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



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

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

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

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

CBI closes case against DHFL in 'fake accounts' case

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

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



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

CBI chargesheets Oxfam

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

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



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

In an earlier statement, Oxfam India had said it is fully compliant with Indian laws. "Oxfam India is fully compliant with Indian laws and has filed all its statutory compliances, including Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) returns, in a timely manner since its inception. Oxfam India has been cooperating with all government agencies since its FCRA registration wasn't renewed in December 2021," the NGO had said.

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

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

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



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

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



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Trump's ultimatum

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

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



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

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PICTALK



Tourists pose for pictures at the Taj Mahal, in Agra

Can suspending commodity derivatives rein in food price



SANJAY RAWAL

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

While there are several concerns in India and across Asia, certain policy and key opinion circles that food price inflation is catalysed or influenced somehow by speculative trading in the futures commodity markets. Even while opinions are divided in policy circles and among economists who have studied and examined the nature of the relationship between food inflation and commodity and derivative futures trading contracts, and no empirical evidence hitherto seems to have been found despite numerous studies undertaken in India.

It would be worth mentioning that a detailed empirical research study conducted by leading researchers from the Indian Institute of Management Udaipur specifically studied three suspension events in India of futures traded commodities, which led the researchers to firmly state that the counterfactual for each of the examined episodes confirms that even in the absence of trading suspensions, food prices or inflationary trends would have followed their dynamic path.

Any upward price volatility could ostensibly be the effects or countereffects of various extraneous domestic or global (especially geopolitical) factors. It is also equally understandable and natural for any governing policy institution to be both fully cognisant and mindful of food price inflationary trends, and the fact that rising food prices can have a cataclysmic effect on food security and thus, by extension could have substantive socio-economic impact.

Successful policy establishments and ecosystems have always been overly cautious, ever since futures trading commodity derivatives exchanges were established in the early 2000s. Despite the mandate of such commodity exchanges that futures trading contracts encourage effective and fair price discovery and risk hedging, which consequently safeguards the commodity value chain from price risk which is a result of a fundamental play between demand and supply the apprehensions



concerning these market-driven tools continued to remain, manifesting itself the way of multiple instances of suspensions on certain commodity derivative contracts.

While trading suspensions have been a constant feature since 2007-2008, under the advisement of the price monitoring mechanisms and agencies within the government policy ecosystem, there never has been an occasion when suspensions of commodity trading exceeded more than a year in a single stretch, barring the odd 'sensitive' food commodity. So as a commodity markets expert, with a domestic and world view of ongoing trading in global commodity markets, one begs to specifically ask - Do derivatives trading suspensions really rein in food price inflation? Researchers have constantly alluded to synthetic control methodologies to apply to their studies for studying specific suspensions, their findings fairly and comprehensively conclude and determine that there is no empirical evidence that derivatives suspension had any impact whatsoever on food prices.

On the contrary, from specific instances studied, such as those of Bengal Gram (Chana)



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

in August 2021 and Mustard Seed Derivatives in October 2021, analysis from the said report from IIM Udaipur shows that prices of both commodities, Chana and mustard oil, would have continued on the same price trend path even without the suspension. To specifically quote a potent segment of the said study - it clearly articulates that the conducted research does not find any role of futures market trading on price changes, nor does it find any empirical evidence of the impact of suspension of trade on price behaviour in the period after suspension. Rather, the analysis shows that prices of commodities such as mustard oil would have had a similar trend even without the suspension. Furthermore, the study finds that before the suspension futures market had a dominant share of 64 per cent in discovering the true and fair price of the mustard seed commodity derivative.

The study goes on further to articulate that commodity derivative suspensions hurt genuine participants discourage the growth of domestic agri-derivatives markets and resultantly impact the growth of price hedging prospects of the commodity value chain

including CBBOs (Cluster Business Organisations) and FPOs (Farmer Producer Organisations), while consequently hurting the value realisation and income levels of farmers.

It also adversely impacts India's position in providing a global price benchmark, despite the country being a major producer and consumer of several agricultural commodities. Needless to say, as an active observer of the Indian agri-based commodity trading ecosystem, it behove advocacy and argument that summary commodity suspensions as a method to arrest or contain food price inflation should not be adopted and further the suspension of futures trading contracts of agricultural commodity derivatives must be revoked. In closure, one must say emphatically that the development of the agri-derivatives market is supported in India, which in turn will lead to fair price discovery and transparent hedging of price risks, eventually creating a positive socio-economic impact for farmers and the agri-ecosystem in India.

(The writer is national president of Commodity Participants Association of India; views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

PANIC KILLS PASSENGERS

Madam — Twelve passengers on the Pushpak Express were killed and 55 injured after jumping from the tight-packed unreserved coaches onto the track in panic, fearing a fire (they don't even notice or hear approaching trains), only to be run over by the Karnataka Express near Pachora railway station in Jalgaon district of Maharashtra. Unable to understand when the public will get some sense. Why do they need to wander on tracks even if they had jumped out of a train that they thought was on fire?

Though for this sad mishap we definitely cannot blame the railways from any angle. Even though people may have agreed with me that Indians have lost trust and faith in the railway administration to such an extent that without verifying the rumour, they believe it (smoke that perhaps sparked rumours of a fire) and act accordingly. This shows total distrust of the railways. This is not the first instance; the Jalgaon tragedy revives the painful memory of a similar accident in which 21 women and a boy lost their lives in Mumbai's Goregaon.

On October 13, 1993, passengers on Western Railway's 'ladies special' local between Borivali and Kandivali jumped off a first-class compartment onto the tracks after seeing smoke rise from the undercarriage of their stationary train. Whatever, we all know how our system works. It's the responsibility of people who travel to take care of themselves, not the railway. Yes, it is really tragic for people to lose their lives. It is a big loss to their families. A moment of profound grief and sorrow. May God give strength to all the deceased family members at this difficult time. May their souls rest in peace. Om Shanti.

Bidyut Kumar Chatterjee | Faridabad

FREEBIES HURT ECONOMY

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

US withdraws from WHO



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

sequence to him now. He has washed his hands of international collaboration to combat any future pandemic. Trump also signed America's withdrawal from the Paris climate agreement, whose main goal is to limit global warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels.

Last year ended as the planet's hottest on record, and the target looks even more improbable now with the US jumping ship. In an irrational way, the President pardoned 1,500-odd protesters who stormed the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, in a bid to prevent lawmakers from certifying his election defeat. The incident was a big blow to American democracy. In stark contrast, there is bad news for those desperate to sneak into the US, as Trump has declared illegal immigration at the US-Mexico border a "national emergency." It's America First for him—and the world must brace itself for the worst.

N Sathasiva Reddy | Bengaluru

strain public finances, divert resources from critical sectors, and create an unsustainable dependency culture.

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

Gopalswamy J | Chennai

RUPEE'S FURTHER DECLINE EXPECTED

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

Market and on Companies with Large USD Borrowings and other relevant issues. Rupee's further decline cannot be avoided. RBI's own calculations indicate a large overvaluation of the rupee, so a lot more decline of the rupee against the dollar must happen, especially if the US imposes tariffs.

In case of a large and rapid rupee decline, the economy and stock markets could be disrupted. Therefore, economic turmoil is unavoidable. If the rupee becomes significantly weaker against the dollar, the debt and interest repayment burden of these Indian companies will go up. If the rupee is strong, then dollar debt becomes cheaper. So, nobody gained from this RBI pivot of 2022. Short-term strategies can sometimes have long-term consequences. India got into this mess by betting on high GDP growth, which can be the only saviour in this situation. But now the GDP growth itself has slowed.

Jayanthi Subramaniam | Mumbai

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

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

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

Cross-border terrorism and geopolitical tensions, such as the Russia-Ukraine conflict and Israel-Iran hostilities, have driven unprecedented defence spending since World War II. To counter these threats, nations are leveraging artificial intelligence (AI) to build resilient defence systems. AI enhances national security by enabling robust decision-making to detect, analyse, and address complex threats across multiple fronts.

The Shift Towards AI in Defence

AI is transforming defence strategies, reducing reliance on human personnel. The US military's active-duty personnel are at their lowest levels in eight decades, while the UK has seen a 30 per cent reduction since 2000, largely due to AI-driven tools replacing soldiers in high-risk operations. With advancements in IoT and data analytics, experts predict a significant increase in AI-based defence systems globally. India's AI-Driven Defence Evolution



India, a leading G20 nation, is actively integrating AI into its defence framework to counter internal and external threats. Initiatives like the 2022 launch of 75 AI-enabled defence products highlight India's focus on cybersecurity, automation, and autonomous systems. The Ministry of Defence (MoD) allocates \$12.6 million annually for AI projects, including the establishment of an AI center at the Military College of Telecommunication

Engineering (MCTE). Additionally, the 2024 launch of India's first AI Data Bank aims to enhance national security through real-time analytics and predictive capabilities. AI in Security and Surveillance AI aids investigation agencies in video surveillance and threat detection, analysing behaviour, communications and psychological patterns to identify risks. Using both Strong AI (mimicking human cognition) and Weak AI

(focused tasks), intelligence agencies enhance security, mitigate breaches and safeguard civilians and public institutions.

Challenges and Future Prospects

Despite promising advancements, AI adoption in India's defence faces challenges, including data privacy, cybersecurity and ethical concerns surrounding autonomous systems. To remain competitive, India must increase investments in research, collaborate internationally and address accountability issues tied to AI-driven military operations.

Conclusion

By adopting a risk-based regulatory framework, India can ensure the ethical and effective deployment of AI in defence. While challenges persist, the ongoing innovations and strategic initiatives signal a future where India's defence capabilities transcend traditional methods, embracing AI as a cornerstone of national security.

(The writer is Co-founder & CEO, Innefu Labs; views are personal)



TARUN VIG



FIRST COLUMN

INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY: CHAMPIONING THE GLOBAL SOUTH

India's approach balances national priorities with global responsibilities



KUMARDEEP BANERJEE

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

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



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

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

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

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

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



A S MITTAL

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

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

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

1. Boost Agriculture Budget and Research

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

2. Provide Legal Backing to MSP

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

3. Enhance PM-KISAN Support

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



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

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

4. Transform the Kisan Credit Card (KCC)

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

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

5. Introduce a Pension Scheme for Small Farmers

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

6. Strengthen Animal Husbandry and Dairy Sectors:

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

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

7. Reform Fertiliser Subsidy Policies

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

8. Simplify Crop Insurance

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

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

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

9. Reassess Inflation Control Policies

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

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

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

Pioneering community-led groundwater management for a sustainable future

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

The Atal Bhujal Yojana, or Atal Jal, is a pioneering government initiative spearheaded by the Ministry of Jal Shakti, in collaboration with the World Bank. This innovative program marks a significant departure from traditional top-down approaches to water management, instead empowering communities to take the lead in sustainable groundwater management.

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



SHANTANU GARG

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

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

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

Empowering Communities

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



programmes, the scheme empowers them to play a crucial role in sustainable water use.

Women are encouraged to participate in meetings, training and leadership roles, ensuring that their perspectives and needs are

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

ter issues and promotes sustainable practices. The programme also recognises the importance of educating the next generation and conducts essay and drawing competitions in schools.

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

A Sustainable Future

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

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

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

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



NEW LAUNCH



STRENGTH OF POETRY

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

"A book is a doorway to countless worlds, and poetry is the rhythm that brings those worlds to life." This sentiment was at the heart of an event at the India International Centre in New Delhi, where Padamjit Sehrawat's poetry collection, Udaan, was launched. Former Indian cricket captain and World Cup winner Kapil Dev unveiled the book, sharing profound thoughts on passion and success. "When passion becomes your profession, the concept of struggle disappears. Passion brings joy, not hardship," said Kapil Dev at the event. He emphasised the importance of self-awareness, adding, "True success lies in recognising yourself before seeking to impress others." His remarks captured the essence of the evening, celebrating the resilience and inspiration found in poetry. The title Udaan, meaning "flight," beautifully encapsulates the core message of Sehrawat's poetry. It urges readers to rise above challenges, embrace courage, and view life with optimism. The collection consists of poems that delve into themes of hope, personal growth, and inner strength. Each verse offers a fresh perspective, guiding readers to see struggles not as obstacles but as stepping stones toward self-discovery. Sharing his inspiration, Sehrawat said, "My poems reflect the lessons life teaches us. They aim to guide readers toward resilience and optimism, no matter the circumstances." His words reflect the essence of Udaan, making it more than a collection of poems, it becomes a companion for those navigating life's uncertainties. Padamjit Sehrawat is a man of many talents, which enriches his work. A former cricketer who competed in prestigious tournaments like the Ranji Trophy and Deodhar Trophy, he has also built a reputation as a cricket commentator for international sports



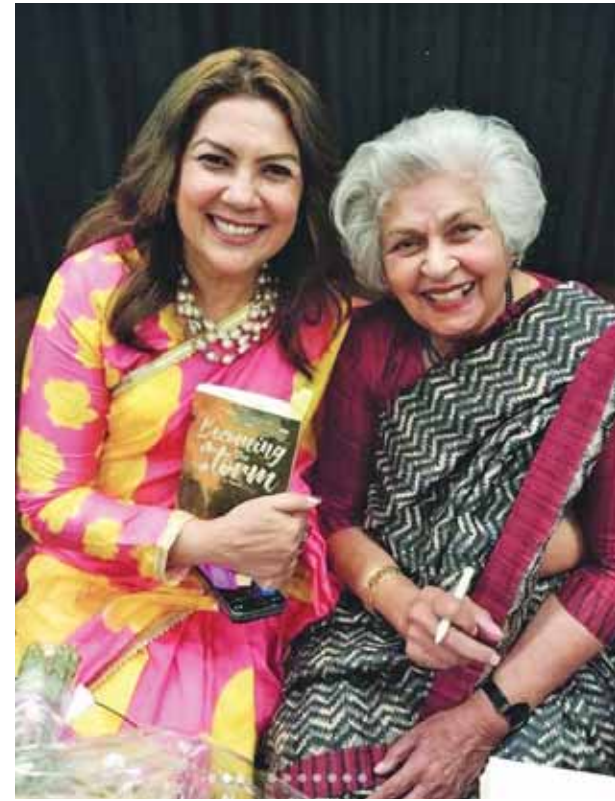
ABOUT THE BOOK
Book: Udaan
Author: Padamjit Sehrawat

channels. Beyond sports, he is a singer, musician, and motivational speaker. These diverse experiences infuse his poetry with unique perspectives, blending creativity and depth to connect with readers on a personal level. Kapil Dev brought his characteristic humour to the launch, remarking, "There's no bigger thief than a cricketer, they steal runs! But even this is a positive theft." He compared this light-hearted analogy to the uplifting nature of Sehrawat's poetry, which encourages readers to focus on life's brighter side. Udaan offers readers a chance to rise beyond obstacles and discover strength within themselves. The book reminds us that challenges can be transformed into opportunities for growth and hope. The collection is a journey of reflection and empowerment, making it a must-read for those seeking positivity and motivation.

WOMEN'S FIGHT FOR IDENTITY

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

At the age of 86 years, veteran journalist Rami Chhabra made a debut in novel writing with her book 'Becoming the Storm'. She had been India's one of the first few women journalists who broke the glass ceiling to straddle the media space in the national capital. Chhabra had also been a prominent face in women's movements. She also led South Asian women's movements. Her reports also formed the basis for some of the measures of the government for empowerment of women. Having spent decades in the women's movements in South Asia, Chhabra aptly has given centre stage to a woman's tryst with modernity. With Indu as the protagonist of the novel, Chhabra takes readers on a journey that saw women of India battling conflicts of traditions with modernity. Chhabra headed an NGO Streebal which worked against early marriages and dowry. In the 1970s, several women organisations had come together to fight against dowry. Her campaigns for empowerment of women find resonance in her fictional accounts of the conflicts between modernity and tradition. Importantly, Chhabra's accounts of Indu's fight for identity are set in the backdrop of India also gaining strength in the early years since Independence. Yet, the backdrop to Indu's tales is also set by India's three wars in quick succession - 1962 with China, 1965 with Pakistan, and the 1971 War of Independence of Bangladesh. Chhabra takes readers through the sombre mood in Delhi in the wake of the All India radio breaking the news that China attacked in NEFA (North East Frontier Area). The NEFA is now called Arunachal Pradesh. The author brings back memories of the outpouring of emotions all across the country in the wake of China attacking India. She states in the book that the people voluntarily flocked to the railway stations to offer their moral support to the personnel of the Indian army who were transiting to the eastern and the western sectors of the border with China. The first moments of India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru also find rich mention in the book. Having witnessed history from the close quarters, Chhabra gives accounts of the



passing away of Nehru and the subsequent scenes at his residence as the people queued up to pay their last respects to the departed leader. Chhabra recalls in the book Indira Gandhi "holding herself steadily while her eyes had turned red as she stood in one corner when the people paid their respects to the late Nehru". The author's accounts of Indu also essay India's transformation in the 1960s and the 1970s. The industrialisation of India is also set in the backdrop as Indu deals with her marriage and new home where she suffers setbacks from her expectations through her in-laws. The people also rushed to partake in the industrialisation of India with the stock market tales also

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

finding space in the novels of the veteran journalist. In essence, the conflict between tradition and modernity has never ceased. The book spotlights a woman's perspective on the issue. It is indeed true that the women have a lot more to gain to claim their rightful places in all walks of life. The fact that crimes against women still remain at worrisome levels testify to the concerns of Chhabra expressed in her debut novel. It's indeed creditworthy that Chhabra made a debut into novel writing at an age of 86 years. The book brings alive the charm of Delhi in decades after India's Independence. Chhabra has given vivid descriptions of the Delhi cantonment area where the protagonists lived and also of Chandni Chowk. Connoisseurs of Delhi's history will find the book valuable, for it brings authentic first hand accounts of the national capital from decades when the city went into transformation in major ways. Besides, the book, which has been published by BluOne Ink, also sensitise readers to concerns of women. True, intra-family conflicts have several dimensions. A balance in tradition and modernity will be sane advice for one embarking on a married life. "Becoming the Storm" is, thus, a story that is still playing out in the lives of many people.

JANUARY READS

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

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

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

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

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

INDIA'S SPIRITUAL ICONS

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



It was during the 2020-2021 hospitalisation due to the Covid-19 pandemic I read Death - An Inside Story, authored by Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev of Isha Foundation. I was in the ICU of Kochi Medical College and had the unfortunate experience of watching other patients being rolled out after they succumbed to the pandemic. The book by Sadhguru helped me to get rid of whatever apprehension I had about death. Sadhguru, in his characteristic style, convinced the readers that death too is a beautiful experience as birth. This time around during my sojourn in hospital, I had two books with me, both authored by Swami Mukundananda. The books were Nourish Your Soul and Spiritual Secrets from Hinduism (both published by Rupa Publications) and gave me good company even as the nurses were struggling to find the veins in my body to jab the high-power antibiotics into the system every six hours or so. Mukundananda (64) holds a B.Tech degree from IIT-Delhi and an MBA from IIM Calcutta and had worked

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

as a corporate chieftain for a few years before renouncing materialistic life to become a disciple of Jagadguru Kripaluji Maharaj, a renowned spiritual leader. What makes Swami Mukundananda different from other authors is the ease and élan with which he communicates his thoughts to the readers without hurting anybody and taunting any religions. While evangelists and preachers proselytise people by addressing them as sinners and kafirs, Mukundananda does not discriminate against people based on their religion or ideology. For him, all are equal and his mission is to spread the real Good Word. The book Nourishing Your Soul is about the life and times of 11 great Indian sages and the sufferings undertaken by them in their journey while crossing the ocean of life. All of them are enslaved to the Supreme Being and never dreamt of any luxury or well-being for themselves

other than peace and prosperity throughout the universe. He has carefully selected the sages and monks who attained spirituality through their prayers, deeds, words and commitment. The chances of the present generation of Indians having heard about them are quite remote, as our 'ace' historians successfully succeeded in wiping out even the last vestiges of these great men and women from our academic curricula for obvious reasons like national integration and communal harmony. Meerabai, Adi Shankaracharya, Soordas, Tukaram, Kabirdas, Ravidas, Andal, Ramanujacharya, Purandara Dasa, Vallabhacharya and Tyagaraja are the sages and seers who have been featured in this collection. The author has presented a crisp and sharp account of these persons and the readers are moved to tears when they come across the sufferings and dedication experienced by

them in their path to eternal sainthood. According to Mukundananda, saints are the embodiment of purity and goodness, being endowed with God's infinite love and grace. "Their mere presence makes a place holy. Elevated devotees transform wherever they go into a pilgrimage site, for they hold God in their heart," says the author in the introduction to the book. "Eleven remarkable God-centred saints who graced the land of Bharat," is how Mukundananda describes the characters he has selected to feature in this parade. The book begins with the life story of Meerabai, the bhakti-saint who lived in the 16th century. For our generation, Radha and Meera were the embodiment and epitomisation of love, dedication and devotion. Meera, popularly known as Meerabai, is unique in all respects as her love for her Giridhar Gopal is filled with selflessness. She knew very well that she would never be able to serve her

master and lover in human form. Despite this truth, she was committed in her devotion and love and she wrote hundreds of poems like Payo Ji Maine Ram Ratan Dhan Payo... a bhajan/hymn which retains its charm and lyrical beauty even today. Adi Shankaracharya, the Kaladi-born monk who held the famous Shankara Diggvijaya Yatra along the length and breadth of the subcontinent and unified Bharat society through his teachings and lyrical compositions, should be a source of enlightenment and inspiration to ordinary mortals. Shankara taught the world that the science of mind management was the most useful skill in life. The Kanakadhara Stotra, composed by Acharya in praise of Goddess Lakshmi, and the Ganesha Pancharatnam Stotra, penned by the saint philosopher way back in the 8th century, remain unparalleled and take

listeners on a one-way flight to heaven. The lyrics by the mystic get life and emotion when they are rendered by the likes of M.S. Subbulakshmi and M.L. Vasanthakumari. The debate between Shankaracharya and Mandan Misra on the relative merits of Mimamsa and Advaita viewpoints, in which the former demolished the concept of the so-called Dravidian philosophy, is enthralling. Bhaja Govindam - described as a wake-up call to a soul in slumber. The exotic poetic beauty and perfection of composition elevate Bhaja Govindam to a state of devotional bliss. Space constraints prevent me from elaborating about all the saints who feature in this collection. But if I fail to mention Saint Tyagaraja (1767-1847), one of the Trinity of Carnatic Music, it would be an unconscionable sin. Tyagaraja, the saint and composer of Carnatic hymns and kritis (poems), a proof of his adoration and salutation to Lord Rama, should be heard to enjoy them. Born at Tiruvaiyaru on the banks of the River Kaveri, Tyagaraja is described as the most famous son of this landscape. His parents were Rama Brahmmam and Sitamma. When Tyagaraja wrote and sang Sitamma Mayamma, Sri Ramudu Matandri, he was celebrating his earthly parents as well as proclaiming Sita and Rama to be his parents (It Happened Along the Kaveri by Padma Seshadri and Padma Malini Sundararaghavan - Niyogi Books). One gets the feeling that this world is a beautiful place because of the hymns and bhajans composed by the likes of Meera Bai and Saint Tyagaraja. Nourishing Your Soul is not an ordinary work; it is the much-needed energiser and nourisher of the mind and shows to the world that Bharat was a Vishva Guru even before the advent of AI, satellites and the internet.

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

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

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



Norway's Magnus Carlsen continues to be the undisputed world No.1 with 2832.5 points, followed by United States' Grandmaster Hikaru Nakamura (2802) and country-mate Fabiano Caruana (2798). Gukesh has been in sublime form ever since he beat China's Ding Liren to clinch

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

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

game in Wijk Aan Zee. He has two victories and three draws so far in the tournament with eight rounds still to go. Erigaisi had become India's top-rated player in September last year and in December achieved his peak rating of 2801, which had made him the 15th-highest rated player in history and only the second Indian after five-time world champion Viswanathan Anand to breach the 2800 threshold. Erigaisi, who was a part of India's triumphant journey in the Chess Olympiad in Budapest last year, had gone to the World Rapid and Blitz Championship in New York hoping to secure a Candidates berth but returned home disappointed. The 21 year old is struggling in the ongoing Tata Steel Tournament, having garnered just one point so far, while Gukesh has 3.5.

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

PTI ■ KUALA LUMPUR

Opener G Trisha's composed 49 and pacers' excellent new ball spell fashioned India's lopsided 60-run win over Sri Lanka and their entry into the Super Six of the ICC U19 T20 Women's World Cup as Group A toppers here on Thursday. On a spiteful pitch, Trisha's 44-ball knock (5x4, 1x6) was worth its weight in gold as it guided India to a competitive 118 for nine. Pacers VJ Joshitha and Shabnam then tore through the Lankan top-order to reduce them to nine for four in 3.2 overs, and run out of skipper Manudi Nanayakkara an over later had them reeling at 12 for five. Sri Lanka were eventually restricted to 58 for nine in 20 overs as India finished the group engagements with all-win record in three matches. There was not much life left



in Sri Lanka's chase once the spinners were introduced, and India's assortment of left-arm orthodox tweakers did the mopping up job to perfection. Rashmika Sewwandi (15, 12b, 2x4) looked in good touch for the while she lasted, but mounting asking rate forced her to take chances against Parunika Sisodia, and got caught in the deep. It was also the only double digit score in the Lankan

innings. Sisodia (2/7) was the pick among spinners as she and her colleagues Ayushi Shukla and Vaishnavi Sharma, who picked up stunning figures of 5/5 against Malaysia in the previous match, dismantled the lower order without much ado. Earlier, India's batting too went through stormy seas but Player of the Match Trisha held together the defending champions with exemplary maturity.

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



PTI ■ KOLKATA

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

India's playing XI for the first T20I against England here on Wednesday, despite proving his fitness in practice sessions and domestic cricket for Bengal. All eyes were on Shami's return after a 14-month injury lay-off, but India opted for a three-pronged spin attack instead, a decision that paid off as they bowled out England for a

meagre 132 before cruising to the target in 12.5 overs with seven wickets in hand. Irfan said Shami is experienced enough to take an honest assessment of his body. "When you've been such a seasoned campaigner and are among India's top 10 bowlers, you understand your body's limits well," said Irfan at a promotional event here. "Shami always provides honest feedback to the team management, and decisions are made through mutual communication. Recovery at the highest level takes time, especially after playing consistently. I believe he and the team management will make the right call at the right time." Having undergone surgery and rehab following an ankle injury sustained during the 2023 ODI World Cup, where he finished as India's top wicket-taker, Shami had made an impressive

return in domestic cricket, representing Bengal across all three formats. Shami has been chosen in India's white-ball rubber squad against England consisting five T20Is and three ODIs which will act as a build up to the Champions Trophy next month, where the team's pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah's inclusion is subject to fitness. Bumrah suffered a back niggle in the gruelling five-match Test series in Australia and could not bowl in the second innings of the fifth Test in Sydney, and in this context Shami's availability for the Champions Trophy is crucial to India's prospects. Irfan also expressed concerns over the lack of a pace-bowling backup in the Champions Trophy-bound squad, suggesting that Mohammed Siraj could have been included given Bumrah's uncertain fitness.

Young guns prove PSG can deliver in Champions League without Mbappé

PTI ■ PARIS

Paris Saint-Germain finally showed it can shine in the Champions League without star Kylian Mbappé, rallying from 2-0 down in the second half to beat Manchester City 4-2 for a crucial victory Wednesday. The win moved PSG out of the elimination zone in the competition's new-look format and dumped City in it with one game to play. PSG needs only a draw at Stuttgart next week to advance. "I feel pride this evening, against such a team, against such good players," PSG coach Luis Enrique said. "It was a complete performance today." PSG's re-designed attack finally clicked with four different scorers rather than relying too heavily on one to make the difference. Bradley Barcola, a 22-year-old winger, scored one goal and set up another for France

teammate Ousmane Dembélé, and 20-year-old midfielder Joao Neves headed in the third before striker Gonçalo Ramos rammed in the fourth in stoppage time. "The more competition we have, the happier I am," Enrique said. "That means that no player can think of their position as untouchable." A far cry from the Galacticos era when PSG was top-heavy with stars like Neymar, Lionel Messi and Mbappé but still fell short on the big stage. Still, the French team has struggled for goals in the competition since Mbappé's offseason departure for Real Madrid, netting just six in six games before City's visit and being blanked in defeats to Arsenal and Bayern Munich. Enrique said before facing City that the solution up front would come from more teamwork rather than hoping another player can emulate Mbappé, who scored 44 goals last season and helped PSG

reach the Champions League semifinals. City manager Pep Guardiola acknowledged his team was outplayed. "We have to accept it. In transitions we could not cope with them, they were faster," he said. "I give credit to PSG. When one team is better I have no problem to accept it. All of them they played really good. It's not a specific (player)." Mbappé's move to Madrid forced Enrique to improvise with his lineups all season. This time, 19-year-old winger Désiré Doué played as a makeshift striker even though center forward Ramos was available for this game where both wealthy state-backed teams - the United Arab Emirates (City) and Qatar (PSG) - were at risk of failing to advance to the knockout stage. City led 2-0 after 53 minutes but PSG were level by the hour mark after some inspirational play down the left from Barcola.

Champions League: Ban on Feyenoord fans in France

PTI ■ PARIS

Feyenoord supporters have been banned by French authorities from traveling to Lille for next week's final Champions League group game between the two clubs. In an order published Wednesday, France's interior ministry said there was a "real and serious risk of confrontation" between fans of the two teams. Lille hosts Feyenoord on January 29 at the Stade Pierre-Mauroy. The French authorities said Feyenoord's travels are often marred by "public order disturbances due to the violent behavior of certain supporters or individuals claiming to be supporters of this team," and they cited several examples of fan violence. Justifying its decision, the ministry added that 3,600 fans - 500 of whom were identified as being dangerous - had planned to travel to Lille, although only 2,600 seats had been allocated to the Dutch club. "Of the 1,000 supporters who have nevertheless planned to travel without a stadium admission ticket, it is feared that some will try to force their way into the stadium," it said. Later Wednesday, Feyenoord's match against Bayern Munich was stopped for seven minutes after kickoff because of poor visibility from clouds of smoke after fans lit flares and fireworks behind one of the goals. In May 2022, there were violent clashes in France between Marseille and Feyenoord fans outside the Stade Velodrome stadium before the return leg of their Europa Conference League semifinal. One video showed a Marseille supporter apparently unconscious on the ground as he was helped by fellow fans, while another showed two groups charging at each other shortly before kickoff just outside the stadium.

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

PTI ■ MUMBAI

The high-profile return of India's stars in Ranji Trophy ended up as a damp squib with the likes of Rohit Sharma, Rishabh Pant and Shubman Gill falling cheaply at the BKC ground here. Going for his trademark pull off Umar Nazir, Rohit (3) got a leading edge which was caught by J&K skipper Paras Dogra at mid-off. Veteran all-rounder Ravindra Jadeja was the only one who stood out among the battery of Indian stars as he took a five-wicket haul for Saurashtra to dismiss Pant's Delhi for 188 on a Rajkot turner. However, it was a forgettable outing for the rest as they made the slow walk back to the hut following early dismissals. Following a dismal run in Australia, Rohit returned to Ranji Trophy for defending champions Mumbai after a

decade, hoping to get some runs under his belt ahead of next month's Champions Trophy. But it was not to be at least in Mumbai's first innings against Jammu and Kashmir at the BKC ground here. Going for his trademark pull off Umar Nazir, Rohit (3) got a leading edge which was caught by J&K skipper Paras Dogra at mid-off. Veteran all-rounder Ravindra Jadeja was the only one who stood out among the battery of Indian stars as he took a five-wicket haul for Saurashtra to dismiss Pant's Delhi for 188 on a Rajkot turner. However, it was a forgettable outing for the rest as they made the slow walk back to the hut following early dismissals. Following a dismal run in Australia, Rohit returned to Ranji Trophy for defending champions Mumbai after a



were watching the action from their office floors, returned to work soon after the 37-year-old Rohit was dismissed. Anticipating fan interest, the Mumbai Cricket Association had made temporary seating

arrangements for about 500 people at the BKC. The turnout, however, was not too high and some empty chairs could be seen. Mumbai were eventually bowled out for a paltry 120 in 33.2 overs. The team left

out their in-form teenage opener Ayush Mhatre to accommodate the stars. The 17-year-old Mhatre has struck two hundreds and a half century this season, including a 93-ball 148 in their previous game against

Saurashtra which Mumbai won by five wickets earlier this month. This is the only Ranji game that Rohit, Jaiswal and Iyer are expected to play given the game against Karnataka is due to start early next month and they would be joining the Indian ranks for it. Pant fizzles; Jadeja shines In Rajkot, Pant showed up for Delhi in a first-class game for the first time since the 2017-2018 season and his stay in the middle did not last long. The flamboyant left-hander was dismissed for 1 off 10 balls by veteran Saurashtra left-arm spinner Dharmendrasingh Jadeja. He attempted a sweep only to be caught at deep square leg. India all-rounder Jadeja took no time to be in thick of things as he accounted for five of Delhi's batters in his

first Ranji game since 2023. No fireworks from Gill either In Bengaluru, Punjab captain Shubman Gill (4) was caught behind in the game against Karnataka. The team was skittled out for a mere 55 with the pace duo of Abhilash Shetty and Vasuki Koushik sharing seven wickets between them to destroy the visitors. Gill fell to Shetty in the fourth over of the innings. The India stars made themselves available for Ranji Trophy after the BCCI made the contracted players' participation in domestic cricket mandatory, following the 1-3 series loss in Australia that opened a debate on the players' conduct and commitment to red-ball cricket. The Board had to issue a 10-point disciplinary diktat, urging all cricketers to spare time for domestic cricket.

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

PTI ■ MANCHESTER

Reeling from a damaging loss in the Champions League, Manchester City took its spending this week to around \$150 million by signing Egypt forward Omar Marmoush from Eintracht Frankfurt on Thursday in a move that provides some belated back-up to star striker Erling Haaland. The 25-year-old Marmoush joined City for a reported 70 million euros (\$73 million), following the arrivals of young defenders Abdou Diallo from Lens and Vitor Reis from Palmeiras for a combined \$77 million. City will hope the new signings can ignite its season, which was thrown

back into turmoil when the team collapsed to a 4-2 loss at Paris Saint-Germain in the Champions League on Wednesday to plunge to the brink of elimination with one game left in the revamped first stage. Marmoush is second to Bayern Munich's Harry Kane in the list of top scorers in the German league this season, with 15 goals from 17 games for Frankfurt. He was not in the squad for the 2-0 win over Borussia Dortmund amid negotiations with City, and went on the field after the game for an apparent farewell in front of Frankfurt's fans. The move to City caps a rapid rise to stardom for



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

Wolfsburg, where he'd only

scored five goals the season before.

It's not yet clear how Marmoush would fit into Pep Guardiola's tactics. His best performances this season have come as part of a two-striker formation alongside former Paris Saint-Germain forward Hugo Ekitike, but Guardiola prefers a lone striker in Haaland. Marmoush can play in wide roles and has generally done so for Egypt's national team, but less successfully than in a central role. He has six goals and three assists in 35 games for his country. In that sense, Marmoush seems a like-for-like replacement for Julian Alvarez, the versatile Argentina forward who left City for Atletico Madrid in

August in a deal reportedly worth more than 103 million dollar after largely being in the shadow of Haaland over the last two years. Marmoush is the latest in a string of Frankfurt strikers to make lucrative moves to top European clubs, but they haven't always settled. Frankfurt sold Luka Jovic to Real Madrid in 2019 but he was back on loan just 18 months later and is now at Milan. Randal Kolo Muani left Frankfurt in 2023 for PSG, where he is mostly a bench player and might move this month. Guardiola has said the club is looking to bring forward future signings to this current transfer window because of injury problems

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

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